

*An interview used in "Attacking the Heart of Apartheid: The ANC's MK Special Operations Unit" (Penguin, 2025), Yunus Carrim*

## **MK Special Operations Unit Project**

### **Interviews**

**Siphiwe Nyanda**

**25 April 2017**

**Johannesburg**

**I know that you were not directly involved in Special Ops, but you assisted them initially and maybe at other times. What's your understanding of why Special Ops was formed?**

I understood and took up with the idea of Special Ops. First of all, strategically it would be located under Joe Slovo, who was a member of the Revolutionary Council and later on a member of the National Executive Committee of the ANC. We had at the operational level at that time military machineries, like the one that I commanded, the Transvaal Urban Machinery, and we also had the Transvaal Rural and Natal Urban Machineries. And other machineries based in other forward areas like in Zimbabwe, Botswana and Lesotho.

So, these machineries, which were operational, were commanded under the so-called Central Command of the Umkhonto we Sizwe, and had capacity, of course, and we conducted operations, but the Central Organ, the Central Command, was based in Lusaka and Angola. And the Central Command was actually Joe Slovo and other comrades. The machineries were operational and sometimes effective, but in most instances had deficiencies.

They were run from the forward areas of Maputo and Swaziland. And part of the reason for this was that there were second tier operational commands. So, from the National Executive Committee or the Revolutionary Council there were instructions to the Central Command as to strategy and then of course from Central Headquarters to regional commands.

In fact, those regional commands were themselves differentiated between Transvaal Rural, Transvaal Urban, Natal and so on. And many of the people who were commanding the machineries were new to the ANC and the MK. People who had left the country in 1976 didn't have the gravitas of people like Slovo. These comrades were not at that centre as Joe Slovo was; and wouldn't

have an overall overview or perspective as wide as Joe Slovo or as much influence in the decision-making process as he would have. These machineries were restricted to their areas of operation whereas Special Operations would have a wide area of operation; and because of the nature of the leadership of Special Operations, would also be invested with greater resources and greater freedom within those resources on what to do. So, it was a good idea and we all, or most of us, supported it.

And, of course, we trusted Joe Slovo; he was also part of the Military Command, the Central Command. So, it was a machinery that was well-resourced; and they could pick on the cadres of Umkhonto we Sizwe in accordance with their requirements better than we could. Joe Slovo was known that to be running this machinery at Headquarters and people could identify for him the cadres who had the requisite training for whatever mission he was planning.

This was unlike us, who had to go to the camps once in a while and pick comrades. We had to contend with things like where were these comrades going to be based in the Transvaal Urban areas and how to infiltrate the materiel and so on? So, they were at an advantage and it was a good strategic consideration from the ANC to set up this Special Operations, because those people could then use even our own resources to assist them in a particular operation, as we did, for instance, in the Sasol operation.

So, I think it was a brilliant idea and it worked very well. That those comrades could operate anywhere in the country, with specific targets with a national impact to generally strengthen the propaganda exercise that we were all involved in, and also drive fear into the enemy that we were capable of doing things that they never thought we would be able to.

**The focus was on key economic and military installations, big installations as part of armed propaganda?**

Yes. All of us were involved in armed propaganda in one way or the other because, at the beginning, it was very difficult for us to infiltrate units into the country and enable them to survive for any measure of time. You know, people like Solomon Mahlangu who infiltrated very early on in our post-76 campaign, they didn't even last a week, and they were confronted – and what happened is now history. And then most of the MK cadres we infiltrated into the country, belonged to the student generation. They had no experience or had no mileage, in fact even in just the experience in surviving in the townships. Some of us who had left the country had worked, and we had moved around in the country; we knew places in the country.

Whereas these people were really locally based. Some of them were students having lived in one township, schooled in that township, knew nothing else and perhaps went to town a few times. So, in terms of exposure to even the area of operation that was defined as Transvaal Urban, they had very little. So, you found somebody who came from Soweto who had never moved outside Soweto except to the city centre of Johannesburg. This person had never been to Pretoria, to the East Rand, to the West Rand. So, these people had very limited exposure to even that urban area, let alone other areas of the country. So, in terms of their own ability to survive, they had very limited capacity.

When I came into the country I was sent to the urban areas of the Transvaal, I was able to go and survive in Pretoria. I could do this because I had friends there and I had exposure to a lot of the country. And even if I'd been asked to go to Polokwane, I would've been able to go there because I had people that I knew there. But most of these young people had limitations insofar as that was concerned. So, we had those difficulties of utilising comrades. Generally, the ANC itself and the underground had been smashed after the Rivonia debacle; the ANC and most of its leaders were in jail, and some of them were beginning to trickle back from jail. They were beginning to have some operation of a leadership underground, but of course these were people who were watched.

And it was very difficult to send comrades inside the country, in that climate where families were generally harassed. And most of these young people who came from those families were watched because police would knock on their doors, where is your son or daughter? – and these people had left the country. So, you had to be very careful where you sent MK comrades inside the country.

What we engaged in at that time was actually armed propaganda. We could not say we are confronting the enemy in order to start the process of gradually defeating them over the years. We really wanted to announce our presence in the country, to give confidence to our people, perhaps to realise a sustainment of the conditions then of struggle in the country.

But, most importantly, the people who had the wherewithal to try to begin to harbour guerrillas in the country, the older people who had homes, we would also begin to inspire them to think that there's MK, it's present, and in fact it's able to strike, disappear and not get arrested; that there was this movement of the Mandela's and the Tambo's that was still alive and working. So, it was really just armed propaganda or more propaganda than anything. Apart from, of course, increasing the confidence of even our own cadres in the camps and boosting them to see that MK is present in South Africa.

Now operations like Sasol were even internal boosters, great morale boosters - and if those comrades could strike at such a target as Sasol, and be able to

retreat, it provided immense propaganda for the movement. And it provided significant morale for our comrades in the camps, who had problems - because all those comrades wanted to go into the country. We were grappling with trying to create conditions for them to go into the country – and it was not easy.

They themselves, you could see, many of them were going to get arrested as soon as they get into the country because of their limited exposure and the lack of the kind of sustenance in the country that people needed to provide. But comrades in the camps were impatient because they'd trained and everybody feels in a certain way they have to go back and fight. And our country was not like many others where we could send these people to some *Sierra Maestra* (mountains in Cuba which provided a base for the Cuban guerillas) or some forest and then they could locate there and strike fear at the enemy.



Sphiwe Nyanda in MK uniform

**Which operations of Special Ops do you think were most successful and why?**

Well, I think the attack on the Voortrekkerhoogte base definitely. Sasol stands out as most important because at a later stage you begin to see, like with these Dolphin operations and others, but now Special Ops wasn't really doing Special Ops. But Voortrekkerhoogte and Sasol, those stood out. And, of course, there was an attempt, I think, on a bridge in Uppington where a guy, who comes from my own township, was involved, and he got killed

**On Voortrekkerhoogte, the target wasn't quite achieved. But at least it was symbolic to show the apartheid state that their military was vulnerable?**

Yes. Well, I, for one, don't know the extent of the hiding of fact of the damage by the regime, but for us the fact that you can take a Grad-P and fire shells into Voortrekkerhoogte was major propaganda.

And then of course there was that Pretoria bomb - the Air Force. Incidentally an Afrikaner friend of mine, he used to be in military, he escaped that one. I'm happy for that.

He worked for Denel and we are friends up to today as well. He's one of my best friends. He was a Captain in the Air Force.

**Talking of the Pretoria operation, why were car bombs not used more in South Africa? Why so few of them? It's a general point about MK, not Special Ops specifically.**

In the first place, we didn't have such resources. We used in our machinery a car bomb at Johannesburg Magistrates' Court where we detonated a small bomb just to attract the police to come there and then when they were there with their dogs and so on - because we knew their modus operandi - the car bomb went off. But it was a more complex operation. You had to get a vehicle that would be untraceable at least to the people who took part in the operation. So, in many instances it meant vehicles that were taken.

**Stolen?**

Yes, so that was the case. But where we could, we did. But also the devices only came later in the eighties.

**You spoke a lot about Special Ops value, what were some of the weaknesses?**

The main weakness was that it became part of routine operations whereas they had the capacity to really focus on strategic targets.

**Why do you think that happened?**

Well, that is a question that perhaps is better directed at them because I don't know why.

**Do you have no views on this at all? Or you don't want to say?**

It's a criticism that we were levelling at some point to say that these are the people who had a better strategic overview...and better training than the average MK cadre

**Was there specific training for Special Ops comrades distinct from the training of other MK comrades?**

Well, most of those they chose were among the the best in the camps. They didn't always send those people for specific training. We could also choose from the same pool, except that later on when they chose the op, they then prepared them and, in some instances, sent them for specialised training. I don't have an insight into that.

But I think generally it's a criticism we ourselves raised, that the Special Ops people were operating from the advantages of the direct support of the President and Joe Slovo, and yet they were beginning to do the ordinary things that other MK units were doing and we didn't understand that. Sometimes, obviously, it takes time to prepare for these major operations and if you have now started recruiting people inside the country you also want to keep them going.

**You assisted Special Ops with DLBs (Dead Letter Boxes) for their Sasol and other operations.**

Yes. Joe Slovo knew about our capacity to infiltrate hardware into the country, and about that advantage. And when Sasol was about to take place, I knew the Special Ops Commander Obadi as he had also been at Central Headquarters and he also asked me to help. Actually, I took Obadi out of the country.

**Did he leave with you in 1975?**

Yes. Central Headquarters made Obadi the Commander of Special Operations.

**So, what assistance did you provide Special Ops?**

Obadi and Slovo asked that I infiltrate the hardware into the country and set up the DLBs where these guys would find them. That's basically what I did. So, we took all their hardware, put it at a place which Obadi had designated; my people did that and came back.

**Did you have any idea that they were going to target Sasol?**

Well, because of the proximity of the place where the DLBs were, I knew.

**Did Obadi actually tell you that?**

Yes (laughter).

**But Special Ops comrades claim you didn't know....**

They claimed I didn't know (laughter)?...

**When the Sasol operation occurred, do you remember where you were? How you felt?**

Elated, obviously! I think I was in Swaziland and went to Maputo with Obadi.

**How did you get to know about it? News over the radio?**

Yes.

**Do you have any views about any of the other operations of Special Ops? Koeberg, and the others, apart from those you've already mentioned?**

No.

**What's your response to the criticism that Special Ops certainly served to boost morale, but it didn't really contribute to stimulating mass struggles, that it was somewhat elitist and isolated?**

I wouldn't agree with the view because everything we were doing was actually armed propaganda and the kind of impact that Special Operations targets had were a multiplier for effectiveness as armed propaganda - and Special Ops played a significant role in that. Of course, we had units based inside the country, like the G5 units, which were operating amongst the people - and we began to see from as early as the first Sasol operation, an increase in the participation of the masses in the struggle. We also saw Cosatu, and organisations of the people forming up in communities and other mass organisations.

We began to see the beginning of a defiance also where people began to believe in their capacity partly because of our armed activities. They began to see the possibility of them liberating themselves. So, I don't buy that view that the Special Ops or the armed struggle generally was remote from the mass struggles. I think all of us were involved in mass mobilisation. There was never, apart from small events like in Ingavuma, where people began to have some form of attempts at classical guerilla activity. Very little of that. And because of the particular nature of the conditions in South Africa, even along the border areas it was highly militarised, with the farms mobilised along military lines - every farmer had a communication system that was linked to some commando. There was very little possibility of a classical type guerilla warfare in South Africa. So, everything that we were going to do was to be by way of trying to inspire insurrection.



Siphwe Nyanda at Chris Hani's funeral,  
19 April 1993, City Press/News24

Rocky Williams (MK Military intelligence operative) says of Special Ops that *'the effects of the strategy of Special Ops were twofold. On the one hand it resulted in a situation where the Special Ops 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've done....On the other, the*

*preferential location of Special Ops under the Command of Tambo, created a degree of resentment and mistrust amongst the MK ranks...'* And he says that it *'strained relations between the division and the Army Commander Joe Modise, a phenomenon not unusual within those armed forces be they regular or irregular that maintained specialist operation capabilities.'* And he also says that *'Criticisms moreover of the operations from the left so to speak, however, maintained that spectacular military operations of the Voortrekkerhoogte type were no substitute for the task of rooting the military underground in the local population. There were definite reasons for a shift to the special operations-type activities, however, and this was reflected in the fact that Special Operations, initially under the Command of the late Joe Slovo, was placed under the direct Command of Oliver Tambo, with the Commander Joe Modise retaining only nominal oversight of this division.'* You have actually already responded to some of the issues Comrade Rocky raises, but do you want to add anything?

Well, because of their location in the first place, Special Ops, as I said, had advantages – because Joe Slovo could pop into Angola at any time and because OR Tambo could order anything, which we couldn't do. We couldn't just go there and say we want that and that fellow. And I'm not saying it in a negative way because we co-operated very well with Special Ops from the time they started.

**So you weren't irritated or felt hard done by?**

No, not at all.

**So, you had units based inside the country, unlike the 'hit-and-run' approach of Special Ops?**

Yes. We even infiltrated our own Command from 1979 inside the country, the Transvaal Urban Command. So, we were preparing for missions, and one of the areas where we really felt a bit hard done by was we agreed with Central Headquarters and Military we wanted to base inside the country - because the lines of communication were very long and sometimes we would suffer casualties because of sending people inside to DLBs and the communications were wrong or not conveyed. Whereas if we as a Command structure were based inside the country, we could lessen the lines of communication and perhaps we could then send people outside from time to time to report to the Command, instead of basing in Lusaka or Maputo and going through Swaziland all the time.

And two members of our Command got arrested inside the country. One of them, Thabo Motaung, was hanged in Pretoria. George Molebatsi was sentenced to prison. Len Rasegatle survived from the '80s into '89 until he emerged from the underground. He was subsequently a Commissioner in the Police Service. He's there now in our MK Veteran's Council, in the Steering Committee. He survived for over ten years underground. He got married while underground. He was my deputy, my comrade. We resented the fact that throughout Headquarters knew about these things. And these men were inside the country trying to create conditions for escalating the armed struggle, yet, I think we gave Len something like R20 000. He was sent to build an underground structure where we could operate from.

These comrades were going to acquire a house and we were going to build something underneath. But the funds dried up and we thought, no man, here are people in Special Ops getting a lot of funds, and we can't even get funds to continue the work of our units inside the country. In fact, all those things dried up, and, in fact, suspicions arose about that comrade inside whereas this thing was explained to Headquarters long ago, that this is what we want to do. Until of course I came through and even then, I didn't have contact with him. We only had contact with him when the ANC was unbanned.

**But doesn't this imply that you did experience frustrations?**

Yes, of course, there were frustrations in the military. The capacity with which we took Special Operations' hardware into the country was created because we at times decided that we were not going to be told by Headquarters what to do. They had restrictions about what kind of and size of the materiel we could bring into the country. But these were people who left the country ages ago! Who said I can't take an AK into the country?? And I took an AK - and then they were surprised when we hit Moroko Police Station - and they asked us but how do you have the capacity to do this (laughter)??

### **You hit Booyens and other police stations?**

Yes, with an RPG bazooka. But then they also asked how do you do these things (laughter)? We had those frustrations and we had restrictions. They said you must use the guidelines, you can only take these things in – only take explosives and Scorpions (semi-automatic machine pistols) into the country. That was the restriction. But we had created the capacity to take in bigger things.

We were told you can infiltrate people into the country, but you can't go into the country yourselves as Commanders. So, all this! But these old people wanted to use us as a buffer, they wanted to use this as an excuse for why they can't even count to five (laughter).

So we said no, there's no way. And we argued very early, no, we want to continue. And in the end, because they saw we had the capacity to take bazookas, capacity to take even their own materiel, a lot of it, components of big weapons into the country, then they were able to at least relax a bit. And they couldn't justify why they were so cautious but we had to argue and then they had to agree after a very long time.

And, of course, it was because of experiences that were happening on the ground, of people getting arrested - and we would say, but these people got arrested because we sent somebody into the country and this led to the arrests, so we must be based inside. That's when they agreed for Comrade Len to go into the country. We could go and live there as units that were based in the country ourselves.

### **Which year did you first base inside the country?**

From 1979-80.

### **You've dealt with this a bit already but do you want to say anything further about why you think you were so successful?**

In the first place, I think the profile of the people, the kind of people we had, we were lucky because from the word go, the people that were appointed in my unit were in large measure trustworthy. Not being infiltrated was one of the most important things. There was infiltration much later, but we were not infiltrated as a Command structure. So, there was that sort of insulation.

### **Who was in that Command structure?**

It was me; it was the Comrade that I'm telling you about, Len, the one who survived inside the country for more than ten years. It was the present Chief of the SANDF, General Shoke, but he got in later. In fact, the person who was in the Command structure was his buddy, Thabo Motaung. Also, there were George Molebatsi and Teddy Sikakana, who's still alive. He's Joyce's younger brother.

Now those people unit were...could I say, streetwise? They didn't have the profile that I described to you earlier of the '76 students.

### **So they were pre-1976?**

Yes. Most of them were born in the 50s, so had completed school. then worked. They were more mature – in fact the first Commander was Selaelo Ramusi of that machinery, but he didn't last for long as he got arrested and died in Swaziland.

We were more experienced and could read the situation fairly well. The first group of people that we had infiltrated were mature adults and we had people in the country that were helping us. Because of their streetwiseness, Jabu Moleketi, Kehla Dlamini, the intelligence guy, he died, they could survive inside.

But Jabu Moleketi and Dlamini – soon after they were in Maputo, they were going towards Angola, and we said, no, does anybody know that you are here, we asked? No, nobody knows that. And so, we sent them back into the country – because we realised that too many people were leaving the country and if we'd sent them to Angola, it would have been difficult for them to go back into the country because the enemy would've been aware. So, because of our own experiences of how very soon comrades we sent in got exposed and arrested or died, we decided they shouldn't go to Angola and get exposed.

We sent them back as we had infrastructure in the country, like support they could work with. They were inside – Jabu was inside the country until the mid eighties. After we sent him back into the country in 1977, he was studying while we were training him. And we sent Len also to give him training while he was inside. And they knew he was our Commander, he was the second in Command, but he was inside the country.

**Now while you must have had a very good team of comrades in your machinery, there must be things about you and your leadership that explain your unit's successes. Anyway, what made you decide to leave the country and join MK in 1975, in the first place? Why MK? Why not get involved in the emerging trade unions or NGOs or any**

**other progressive organisations that were legal? Why did you join the armed struggle specifically?**

We had gone in 1973; already we were searching for MK. I'd gone with George Nene to Botswana.

**What political activity were you involved in before leaving the country?**

Well, we were in Saso (South African Students' Organisation).

**So, why did you leave it?**

But we didn't believe in Saso, we were just there as a step.

**You were at university at the time?**

University of Zululand, but I was expelled in the second year.

**For what?**

Well, the students were protesting over the smelly plastic cups which were used to drink tea until the cup was soaked. And George Nene, Willy Nhlapo and I were sitting outside during this protest. I was doing maths actually, a science degree, so I took a pair of dividers and gave it to them and we punched these things. And some worker there was peeping and out of everybody he saw me - and I got expelled. And then of course I worked, and when I left the country, I was working as a journalist at the *World*.

**The three of you went to join MK?**

No, we didn't join them, we heard Thabo (Mbeki) was going to attend (assassinated Saso leader Abraham) Tiro's funeral. So, we went there to Gaborone to look for Thabo, that was '73. We didn't get to meet him. Just the Black Consciousness guys.

And then, of course, in '75 I went to Maputo to look for the ANC. In fact, early '75, during the transition period of Mozambique, because I heard also Thabo was there with the Chissanos and others. And then somebody was sent by Tokyo, who was in Swaziland, to say they want to see me in Swaziland, Thabo and them.

**But when you got to Maputo who did you connect with?**

I had a cousin who was living there, married to a guy, whom we were with at school with.

**So, was that your ANC connection?**

No, that was not my ANC connection. I wanted him to take me to the ANC. But that didn't happen.

**Then you went to Swaziland?**

Yes.

**How did Thabo know you?**

Tokyo and him were there and I was recruiting for MK. When we left, I left with Obadi on the same day after an instruction from the ANC.

**About your personal role. Ultimately, class and other social forces shape history, but individuals are also crucial... You loom quite large in the armed struggle in the post-1976 period. You seem to have been quite determined, driven, brave. Any comment?**

Yes, of course, there was that – being driven. But I think it was there in many of us. But one of the things that I would say about why many of the people in our machinery believed in my leadership was because they knew that there's no way I would send them any place that I myself wouldn't go. So, they had that complete trust.

**It's claimed that one of your units also had its own internal Special Operations unit in Natal – is that true?**

No.

**Know anything about Operation Green Vegetables which Mac was spearheading? A possible attack on a train transporting recruits into the SADF?**

I don't know much.

**Why were you not recruited into Special Ops do you think?**

Because, I mean, why weaken something that is working? I'm referring to our machinery.

**Is it true that in the camps, once Special Ops got going with the Sasol and other big operations, many ordinary MK comrades were wanting to join it?**

Sure. I would think that would be a natural thing because those people in Special Ops were moving, I mean, the others could see this.

**Special Ops begins to ebb and slow down from around 1984-85 onwards. Now, Rashid takes over after Obadi is killed and then he goes to Ordnance and it seems to peter out. Was Rashid moved to Ordnance because Special Ops was petering out anyway or is it that when he moved out, Special Ops begin to wane? Anyway, why does Special Ops wane?**

Well, I haven't thought about it. I just thought that they ran out of steam basically and began to do the routine stuff because they could do it.

Remember, that as you cover the major propaganda targets, effective targets, the enemy also strengthens its defences. As you become successful the enemy targets you, targets the people who are involved in those machineries; that is why we also got targeted at some point.

You will recall that I said one of the reasons why our own units succeeded was that at the early stages we were not infiltrated, but at some point there was infiltration. And when that begins to happen, you begin to suffocate and suffer casualties and your capacity to act is severely restricted.

Post-Nkomati we took a decision that we were not going to retreat, the President called us to a meeting in Luanda where this question was posed because it was not just Mozambique, Lesotho and all other countries contiguous to South Africa were pressured by South Africa to act against us. And I think I, more than anybody else, motivated that we had sufficient capacity to continue to operate in the forward areas and that even though we were taken out of Mozambique, we had such fantastic support networks in Swaziland and also inside the country that we could still sustain our operations. Remember, we had our own Command structures inside the country and we had other operatives based inside the country.

We had very strong networks in Swaziland, especially my machinery. And to an extent in Transvaal and the then Natal, we were strong. We had to motivate that against the other views of people who were not agreeing. At that time we were no longer the Transvaal Urban, we were the Transvaal Command. Commander Keith (Mokoape) and them, their views were that we retreat to Tanzania. I said no, because they didn't even have as much of a footprint as I

did although they were put in command of the machinery and those structures in 1983. I said no, and Central Command agreed with me. So, we moved into Swaziland. And also, Special Ops – Rashid was very much in support of that.

Now unfortunately again, for Special Operations, when we got to Swaziland, they suffered the most casualties. There were even skirmishes between Special Operations people and the Swazis so they suffered heavy casualties so that their capacity in Swaziland was diminished. I don't know whether it explains why they lost steam as well.



Siphwe Nyanda in the SANDF

**The post-Nkomati period – hadn't Swaziland quietly signed a similar deal, and was hounding ANC comrades there?**

Yes. But we were still able to operate.

**Coming now to the Matola raid, how do you think the regime found out that Obadi and others were behind the Sasol operation?**

I did answer that question earlier on to say that the more successful you are, the more targeted you become and I was answering it in relation to ourselves, how we were infiltrated. They didn't only target Special Ops; they got lost coming to our place in Liberdade. So, there was September's operation; there was the Transvaal Urban; there was Special Operations and the Natal and the Transvaal Rural based in Matola. Now because our place where our guerillas stayed was more distant than all of them, the police tried but they they got lost on their way to us. Later on, they tried also tried bombing aerially. The Natal Urban Machinery had also become a menace to them, the bombings there. My brother, Zwelakhe, was in that mission.

So they targeted not just Special Operations. That was meant to be a general swoop on MK, meaning they wanted to deal one demoralising blow to Umkhonto we Sizwe.

**One of the reasons, I'm told, that Special Ops began to wane was that Rashid took some of its best people when he went to Ordnance. Do you know anything about that? I've also been told that there was a sense of rivalry between MK Commanders of different machineries, not just competing for resources and recruits, but also working in silos even though there was cooperation, as you have already said, for example between your machinery and Special Ops. To what extent do you think that's true? It's not said in a negative way necessarily; in fact it's suggested that you had to have some sort of**

**competitiveness, some sort of entrepreneurship to succeed in the armed struggle. Your comments?**

Yes. It's natural and you can't have it any other way. It's healthy rivalry. We also, if we could have hit Sasol, and if we had the resources, we would have done so, and why not? And that is why I'm saying that when Special Operations began to do the mundane things that other machineries were doing we looked at them askance, and said now what is this, because these are people who are supposed to be focusing on strategic targets? Anyway, it's a normal healthy thing to have some rivalry. You want to succeed. When the Natal Urban Machinery got going, they were proud of that and you wanted to outdo them as the Transvaal Urban.

Now the issue of taking the best or moving with them when you move, it happened to me too. When I came into the country I wanted the people that I trust, the people that I know, I mean, how do you then go for people that you don't know? It's a normal thing. I was not happy with P – Botswana was called P, Zimbabwe VZ, Swaziland Q – as not much was happening there. In VZ not much was happening. And at one point they took one of the people who was in my Command to Botswana to go and help General Moloi and them there with the experience that we had gathered.

And later on, that comrade was taken back to Angola because they thought he wasn't behaving well. He was taken back to the camps in Angola, retrained and came back. I wanted him because I knew him, I could deal with him, and I knew he had some propensity to misbehave. Many people think life in exile was only about snakes and mosquitos and all that, whereas we also partied and had fun. And, of course, when you party, some people behave badly.

I remember the same guy we took, I had to take him on as he was at a place not far from the border where he was drinking with some people and then I was confronted by the police, and then we had to run, and he was arrested by the police. At one point I had asked him to do something and he didn't and yet I'd sent him into the country to go and deliver this thing. So, how people work with one another and how people understand one another is also important because not everybody is perfect. And you could find good comrades, but on a bad day they would do some things that you wouldn't agree with. But how you dealt with that depends on your leadership style as well.

**Talking of the healthy rivalry, somebody in Special Ops told me that after the first Sasol and other big operations, he bumped into you, and you said, wait for it, the Transvaal Urban Machinery is going to do bigger things?**

Yes (laughter).

**Coming back to Matola, one of the reasons why the regime hit hard and knew what it was hitting at, was, I'm told, partly because the comrades involved in that operation spoke too freely about their role in it when they got back to Maputo in the euphoria afterwards. Your comment on that, if any?**

Yes, there was a sense of this bravado and it was dangerous of course. I'm not sure whether this was exhibited in the Transvaal Urban Machinery; I don't think so.

**You've repeatedly said you got infiltrated much later. Maybe it's partly because of the discipline of the comrades in your machinery?**

Yes, I think so.

**Your machinery was quite active from the late '70s, those major attacks on the police stations and so on. You got away with much and, very importantly, you had comrades based inside?**

Ja. As I said, that strike in Matola was intended for MK as a whole. Special Operations suffered, but the Natal Machinery also, maybe more. The whole Command structure was wiped out. The people who survived, were my brother, Cyril and Brazo – that's Raymond Lalla.

**Do you want to say anything about the Special Ops Commanders you knew?**

Obadi in the first place was my friend and, as I said, we left the country on the same day. I knew the family, the mother, the sister. He went to train in the Soviet Union, I went to the German Democratic Republic. We came back at almost the same time. He was in Central Headquarters, and so he used to come to Maputo. We used to go along together, train together, go to restaurants, also with Sue (Rabkin). George Nene, by the way, was a Special Operations Commander. Central Headquarters decided to make Obadi the Special Ops Commander and he was moved from Central Headquarters. Relations with Special Ops was very good also because Obadi and I were friends, we were comrades; the cooperation between us was excellent.

And he had also this advantage that he had been at Central Headquarters so he knew about us and the kind of assistance that we could give. And then he

died. I too was devastated – and I had to explain to the family, and the mother used to be very suspicious of me when I used to come to visit her all the time.

And of course, Rashid became the Commander. Obadi was a fantastic guy and he was very clever, very knowledgeable in what he used to do, very outgoing. He had very good relations with the people that he worked with because he, as a Commander in Central Headquarters and in Angola, used to know comrades and so he had this advantage.

And then Rashid also, well trained. We had excellent relations with Rashid. and we cooperated very freely, and also we would sit and socialise, apart from just looking at politics together. I would say generally the community in Maputo and in Swaziland was tight knit. You spoke about silos - yes there were silos and the silos were necessary because if you don't have silos you can compromise security. You had silos even in your own machinery for security reasons. So that, if something happens to one section of your organisation, it does not affect the others. So, silos were necessary and silos themselves were in competition, and even within the same machinery you had a sort of healthy competition, that you were referring to.

I was friends with Rashid as well and those in the Natal Machinery. I was friends with Thami Zulu, Brazo (Raymond Lalla), I was friends with Cyril, the guy who it was later discovered was the one who had led to the death of Zwelakhe, my brother. He was arrested by the ANC and he took rat poison while he was in detention in Lusaka.

So, we were close to a point where sometimes we would know where the other comrade would be or where his girlfriend was, and where you could go if you didn't know where he stayed, but at least you could go to the girlfriend or another person that was close to him, the contact point, to say can I see my brother, or Thami or Ralph?

It was a sort of link between machineries. I would go to Ralph's place and the the Natal people and say I wanted to see the Commander of the Natal Machinery or Thami or Raymond. And he would facilitate that. And there were social places where we would go and sometimes people knew that if they wanted me they would ask Victor Ramotse. He's a local there, but he's known with connections with us and he could come to me and say somebody's looking for you. And with Rashid also, we had that kind of cooperation and that kind of working relationship.

**What, if any, differences did you see in the way Special Ops was commanded by Obadi and Rashid?**

Well, they're different people, different personalities, and, as I said, Obadi was easy-going. Rashid was different. Maybe he had a sort of aloofness, but that wasn't exhibited to me because he had respect, but he didn't socialise very well with most people. Obadi could sit with even his own comrades, he could talk to them, etc.

**Why was George removed from Special Ops?**

Because of relations with Rashid. George was unhappy.

**About what?**

Well, I think you'll ask him. I really don't know much because George also wouldn't say much except that he's not happy.

**Of course, you played a key role in *Operation Vula*? What was the relationship between *Vula* and Special Ops?**

The only thing that I know is that *Vula* related to Special Ops with respect to the hardware, the materiel. The fact that a lot of the materiel came through Rashid's operation.

**But that wasn't through Special Ops, it was through Ordnance, which he was heading then?**

Yes.

**So, now the roles are reversed somewhat – he's helping you with sending materiel in?**

Especially the materiel that was sent to Geraldine (Fraser-Moleketi) and Charles (Nqakula) in Cape Town. I had taken three comrades who had put in lots of materiel in Botswana so that when we were in the country we fetched that materiel. A lot of it came out of that. There were many people who were going to be related to *Vula* like Chris (Hani) who were going to be coming in, but I didn't know much, that was at the level of Mac (Maharaj) and them.

But what I was informed was that there would be other materiel coming through Ordnance. That's the only relation, except, of course. there's the personal relationship, that Joe Slovo was the person who was put in by Tambo to be actually in charge of the *Operation Vula*, in the preparatory stages. So the same persona are involved, OR and Slovo with *Operation Vula* at the highest level, just as with Special Operations.

**Were you a member of the SACP?**

Yes, I was.

**When did your membership lapse?**

When we came into the country.

**Why, if I may ask?**

It just lapsed. I don't know. I didn't consider it; it lapsed. And then I got into the SANDF (South African National Defence Force).

**To what extent do you think the *Green Book* provided a framework for *Special Ops* on the one hand and *Vula* on the other hand?**

I think the Green Book provided a framework for Transvaal Urban a lot because immediately after the return of the ANC leadership from their visit to Vietnam, we were encouraged to look at other means of survival of cadres inside the country, and we then begin to look at the mine dumps and so on. It's where General Shoke survived and the G5 unit, and that's why most of the operations were in the urban areas because we took those people there. In our house in Liberdade - the one I said the enemy got lost trying to get at - we even dug, we created this model for survival which went into my bedroom and we had a trapdoor there. So, the Green Book did serve as a guide; and also in *Operation Vula* as well in relation to where we hid materiel and how we infiltrated materiel.

But *Operation Vula* was inspired more by the idea that we had mooted a long time ago and that we emphasised at Kabwe, that it really detracts from leadership in the climate that had evolved where the masses of our people were up in arms; where there were signs of an incipient mass insurrection. Where we had leadership, open leadership, inside the country advocating for the policies of the ANC. And there was open defiance, where from time to time, very frequently, you saw flare ups in areas where you didn't expect it.

And the flare ups were becoming national in character. And they (the ANC leaders) would say really? And we'd been putting this from time immemorial, even with (ANC and SACP veteran) Moses Mabhida, that we are just marking time; that we need to get closer in terms of leadership to the conflicts of the revolution, which are inside the country, among the people. The longer the leaders delay in going inside, we are postponing the day of our own freedom. Everything needed to be dealt with by way of forays or tricks by leaders to meet with people like (Cosatu Deputy General Secretary) Sydney (Mufamadi)

from inside the country in far off countries, like Geneva. Sydney and them used to go to see the leadership of the country and it had to be through elaborate special arrangements.

But if we had leadership inside the country, just as we had in Transvaal Urban where our own units related to people who were their Commanders inside, that would take things forward. So, *Vula* actually arises from decisions of Kabwe that we had to have a leadership close to our people, especially since the conditions had developed quite favourably for this.



Siphwe Nyanda, in recent years

**Was it an insurrectionary or semi-insurrectionary situation in the mid-80s onwards or was it not that advanced? But whatever, it doesn't detract from your argument that more leaders needed to be based in the country...**

Yes, exactly...

**Now, wasn't *Vula* also meant to create a strong political underground that would stimulate mass struggle and the armed struggle entering a new phase of a People's War with more people taking up arms as part of an escalation in mass struggles, rather than an armed propaganda approach through comrades infiltrated from outside? Maybe I'm putting it a bit mechanistically, but I think you get the drift?...**

No, it's not mechanistic, that's right. I write about that. But of course the thing is, we went inside too late - because the convergence of that nascent expression of armed insurrection, of People's Power, and mass struggle was supposed to take place through *Vula* coordinating. The underground activities were meant to give leadership to the mass activities and the mass mobilisation itself was meant to lead to the potential for recruiting people to participate in a sort of heightened armed activity.

I agree with you that it was not an insurrectionary situation, but there were signs that insurrection was coming. But there were also other developments when we came into the country for *Vula*. Already Thabo in 1985 was beginning to negotiate, the President had already indicated the pressure that arose out of the international community for the ANC to begin to engage and negotiate. People were putting pressure on the ANC and the apartheid government to do so.

So, by the time we had the opportunity to bring the leadership into the country to begin to push for insurrectionary conditions, already other things were happening. The regime was beginning to talk to Mandela and other people were making forays to the ANC in exile to talk to them, whether it was business people, influential Afrikaners, etc. As there was a growing momentum for the intensification of insurrectionary conditions there were also counter-movements to say let us begin to negotiate.

**On reflection now, from hindsight, do you think that if the ANC had stalled the negotiations that it could have overthrown the apartheid state through an insurrection or do you think it had no choice but to negotiate? Do you think the armed struggle could have developed into a full insurrection?**

I would hazard that it was always going to be to be a contest between insurrection and the movement towards negotiations. And the pressure would've come from all fronts, as it did, including from the very leadership of the movement. Remember there four pillars of the struggle, not just armed struggle. And look at the resolution of the conflict in Namibia – what it resulted in is the ANC's out of Angola as a condition. So, there was pressure on the ANC as well - because we relied also on the important pillar of international mobilisation, but that was declining in Southern Africa, and it was not inconceivable that that pressure would have gone to Uganda. You know that the Americans have got a strong input into countries like Uganda, Tanzania.

So, there was always going to be a contestation. And also you had to consider those who wanted a scorched earth approach where the regime would've increased the activities of the 'third force' and reliance on surrogate forces. They would have used their military even more - even though their own military institutions were advocating a negotiated settlement. So, I think there would have been a stalemate in any event because we ourselves would have been engaged in war of attrition not only with that military and the security apparatus, but also with our own people in this black-on-black violence that was inspired by the state.

So, I think there was always going to be somehow a stalemate induced by the untenability of a situation where we were fighting against each other as black people and there wasn't going to be a winner. And in any event, it's a moot question whether in most revolutions you actually achieve a physical defeat of an enemy who is armed to the tee. I think most times you get to a stage where you have to negotiate.

**To turn to something else. It's been said that while you were very committed and driven and brave, you could also be oblivious to**

**danger, even reckless; that there was a sense of bravado in your activities? You want to respond?**

Never reckless. We were so very careful. I think that's one of the reasons why we survived for so long, actually. We were very calculating in what we did. Perhaps there could have been some bravado of some sort, I don't know, but very little recklessness. One act of bravado, I don't know whether this is what you might be referring to, because I did in fact speak about it recently, is that at one point the house where we were living in was raided - but my response was calculated. But, of course, it didn't work in my favour because in Swaziland I was on bail then. You see, I had gone there earlier to bail out a comrade and we were in a car with Ayanda Dlodlo and Susan Shabalala - she was with us at *Vula*. We'd gone to bail this comrade out who had been arrested coming from Mozambique. And then we were driving this car, and so I get charged for possession of a stolen vehicle.

And after some time I get released on bail. It was said that I must appear in the Supreme Court because this guy's bail is more than R10,000. When we get released we're invited somewhere. So, on that night we are not there, his wife is there, I think Sheila, my wife, was there, and a few other comrades. So, they raid this house where we lived together but we are not there that evening, we had gone for supper somewhere.

When we return in the morning, we see these cars, so we decide to divert to some other house. Police vans with a lot of dust following are going towards Mbabane. So, we enquire and discover that indeed there's been a raid. After sometime we go to the house. They've taken some stuff including some cherished albums. Because I'm on bail, I mean, I'm there legally, I decide to go to the police station to go to this Msibi guy who's the head of Intel. I said: tell me now you arrest people but what have the albums done? He says, oh, they're here. Please, straight to the cells! (laughter). But it was not bravado!...

**It's said that you lack self-doubt and somebody who's an MK Commander has to have some sort of doubt because of the consequences of your action on your unit and your goals. So, it was put to me that your weakness is you lack self-doubt. Your comment?**

Yes. I know it's from Mac (laughter).

**Why do you think it's him? And if it's him, why do you think it's only him?**

Well, that's exactly what Mac said to me, we were sitting in his house in Durban, I can't remember what we were discussing and I gave my views. This

is my view, this is what happened. And he asked me that. Yes, and he said do you ever consider that you might be wrong (laughter).

**Haven't we all been asked that question at some stage whether in MK or not (laughter)?**

Yes (laughter). So I told Mac, yes, but in this instance I don't think so. The other incident was of course we had to rescue a comrade. Policemen we knew were sitting in this house, set themselves in. It was a printing establishment we used in Durban. And a comrade, now he's a doctor, I stayed at his house the first time I went to Durban, Dr Rajen Pillay. So, he was renting this house which was raided and we got information from Mo's (Shaikh's) people inside the police that the police had discovered this place.

So, Mac came to me and Mo and said, guys, what can we do? And I offered a military option; this is what we can do because he asked me how can we hit this. And Mac said you're an attacking dog because they were sitting ducks (laughter). The police were waiting for somebody, they didn't know that we knew that they were there, so I was just offering an option. And Mo said, hey guys no, you can't do that because if we do that then the danger is on our necks - Dr. Pillay will get exposed. The police are going to go for him.

We offered the solution that actually Rajen should be the one who goes there and gets arrested and denies all this. Then there was this option of a guy called Ashwin who was working in our machinery and he was from exile. I can't remember why he was suggested, but the idea was that Ashwin would be the one to go to the police, I think it was because he was not known. He'd be interrogated for sometime but if they discover that he knows nothing, that he hired this house but he didn't know what it was used for, they'd have to let him go. And that's the option that we actually chose. So, if this incident has got anything to do with bravado or recklessness then I don't agree.