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MK Special Operations Unit Project

Interviews

Sue Rabkin

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Comrade Sue, can you just provide a quick overview of your political background? You were a British citizen, but you joined the ANC underground. How did that come to be?

As a teenager I was already involved politically in the left in Britain, when I met my future husband, David Rabkin, a South African recently arrived in Britain. His family had left South Africa for political reasons primarily because David was beginning to get involved politically against the apartheid government.

We were both in a British political organisation called the International Socialists. David was recruited to the communist movement when he was at Leeds University by a Syrian communist, who claimed to be on the Politbureau of the Syrian Communist Party and was in exile in Britain. He was a physicist and a post-graduate student.

David then recruited me firstly to the communist movement, which was an effort and a half. He even had to use the Syrian's Algerian cousin to help him recruit me! We were actually recruited in Paris by Algerian communists. The Communist Party in Britain at that stage was not great and I was very unimpressed with them, so they were having a hard time recruiting me. I had a lot of political problems like the Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia, etc. During this period of being exposed to a communist outlook and politics, David started to simultaneously recruit me into the SACP. He then said to me that he wanted to go to South Africa, be part of the underground. At that stage I only knew the underground as the tube station! David made it clear that he wouldn't go to South Africa without me, so if I didn't want to go we wouldn't go! I then underwent quite a lengthy politicisation process in terms of South Africa. During this process of recruitment, I started asking questions about South Africa and the SACP. David introduced me to Ronnie, who I knew as Frank.

In 1972 we moved to Cape Town, where we operated as an underground SACP cell, and were later joined by Jeremy (Cronin). The three of us operated underground as a SACP propaganda unit until we were arrested on 28 July 1976. The only evidence they had against us at that stage was a prescription for explosives written in my handwriting. They did a deal with David and Jeremy that they would drop the treason charge against me, which carried the mandatory death sentence, if David and Jeremy would plead guilty. David and Jeremy very stupidly agreed – stupidly because there was no way they were going to hang me. I also served a sentence, during which time I gave birth to my second child, Franny, and I was then deported back to Britain and David and Jeremy served out their 10 and eight year sentences respectively in Pretoria Central.

Sue Rabkin at Heathrow Airport with Franny after her release from prison, October 1976, Facebook

We were prepared for the eventuality of being caught, and I was quite relieved it was all over. I hated South Africa, I hated apartheid and I hated being in the underground. It was very stressful and unpleasant, very unromantic, and very, very difficult. When my sentence was over, I and my 10-day old baby were escorted onto a plane for London, where my mother, my mother-in-law and my three year old were waiting for me. When the plane landed at Heathrow on 28 October 1976, and the door was opened, I turned to my mother, with this 10-day old baby in my arms and the three year old hanging onto my jeans, and said – I've changed my mind. And she said, 'I beg your pardon?' And I said I've changed my mind. I want to go back to South Africa. And she said, 'Susan, just get off this plane!' She'd just had enough.

That period of four years operating underground and of course the six years or so of political activity in the UK, leading up to our time underground in Cape Town, had left an indelible mark. There was no turning back. I wanted to continue working in the movement. I was very insistent. Because by then I was emotionally as well as politically completely immersed in South Africa, I wanted to continue what we had started. I continually asked to be given work. But the movement, being the movement, said, 'No, you have to look after your children.'

(ANC, SACP and MK leader) Mac (Maharaj) had just arrived from Robben Island and he had smuggled out the text of *No Easy Walk to Freedom* (Mandela's

autobiography). The work at that stage was secret. He needed a typist who was trustworthy, and Dr. (Yusuf) Dadoo (SACP Chairperson) suggested me – I knew very little about the ANC at this point. I had been recruited to the Communist Party. I was a member – for which I hasten to add they put me on a year's probation after I came back from South Africa for the honour of being arrested and not hanged – because I wasn't born in South Africa (laughter)! Mac needed a typist and he was referred to me. We then spent more than a year working on the book, with him transcribing the text that he had smuggled off the Island and me doing the typing. In the course of that work, Mac was called back to Lusaka and was made head of what was then called the Internal Reconstruction and Development Department. So as well as doing the Mandela book, he dictated and I typed the plans for how the movement should be constructed internally underground. When now we finished the work on the book and he was going to Lusaka as the new Secretary for Internal Reconstruction, I said, this is crazy, you think I'm staying in London when I've typed the plans for the reconstruction of the underground?

We then started a negotiating process to deploy me to the front. Poor Dr Dadoo was very reluctant to do this. A young woman with two babies, a husband in jail and difficult Jewish parents was not an easy situation to handle!

But the long and short of it was that I was deployed to Maputo in 1978 as part of the Internal Reconstruction unit. One of the reasons for this was that I was one of the few people that had had experience of underground work but was free to tell the tale, as it were. I had served my sentence and been released. That experience of being in the underground was very useful for the movement.

I was in the Internal Reconstruction unit with Sunny Singh (MK name Bobby) and Indres Naidoo – who were both recently released from Robben Island – operating alongside the Military Machineries who were quite intrigued. 'What is this Political Machinery? What's this *umlungu* (white person) doing here? What work are they doing?' Indres wasn't really well-suited to underground work. He wanted to build the ANC through networks. The result was that through Indres, we built up a hell of an infrastructure in Maputo of foreign comrades, who all were prepared to work for the ANC. Over time we built a steady supply of underground support functions, like couriers, safe houses and so on, so integral to underground work.

The Military Machineries also needed that support. Much to the consternation of the leadership in the area, the Political and Military machineries started to work together. What is most important to understand at this point is that there was a change in strategy and approach to underground work in the ANC.

The turning point was the trip the leadership took to Vietnam in 1978 and the emergence of a new strategy outlined in what is referred to as *The Green Book*. If I could put this in my own words – a small group of our top leaders, led by Tambo, went to Vietnam to study their struggle and exchange views. Our leadership told the Vietnamese that we were not making headway. And the Vietnamese said, 'Well of course you're not, because yours isn't a military struggle like ours against the USA. Yours is a political struggle and your militaries should be more focussed on armed propaganda to support the political struggle.' The emphasis up till then in the movement was on the military. After the trip to Vietnam, ANC strategy was turned on its head with the political leading the military. It was at about that point when I arrived in Maputo.

And from then on we battled with the Military for more resources to focus on mass struggle and the creation and sustainment of the political underground. Our guideline was what was called the four pillars, each one re-enforcing and supporting the other: mass mobilisation, the underground, the armed struggle and international work. Amongst other things the leadership learnt from the Vietnamese trip was that the Military and Political units should not mix – operationally that is. This was why, when the machineries started working together the leadership became unsettled. It eventually sorted itself out and it was agreed that strategic planning should be integrated but operational activity needed to be separated. This change in approach led to the dissolution of the Revolutionary Council (RC) and its regional bodies known as the Senior Organs. The RC was replaced by the Political Military Council (PMC) and Regional Political Military Councils (RMPC). Integrated strategic planning was done at PMC and RPMC level as opposed to the different components of the RC operating in silos.

We were aware that the enemy was infiltrating our ranks and it was therefore essential to work on a 'need to know' basis. It was important that the units inside the country did not know each other, let alone work together. Of course, this principle applied equally to the Forward Areas. It has become clear that we were much more infiltrated than I thought at the time. So what the military units did, who was in those units, etc., we in the Political Machineries weren't supposed to know, and they weren't supposed to know us. But because we were the Political Machinery, we had political classes and the military comrades were interested and came to our political classes, and that's how I got involved with the Military Machineries!

But of course networks are also based on personal relationships. For example Mohammed Timol and Indres' wife Saaeda were friends and comrades of Rashid's from inside the country. When Rashid came out of the country and went for military training he was very young. Saaeda was worried about him

being in a military residence and not knowing anybody, so she used to send through food and dried fruit and all sorts of things to him. So we got to know the houses of the Military Machineries and the comrades living in those houses. Our relationships were also personal, whichever Machinery one found oneself in.

We didn't know what the Military Machineries were doing or how they were doing it, but nevertheless there was interaction all the time because the shortage of resources meant those resources had to be shared. For example, when I arrived in Maputo the Military Machineries had one car, and the only car the Political Machineries had was the car I brought from London.

I was friends with and therefore saw (Joe) Slovo (SACP and MK leader) all the time. He was round at my flat nearly every day, one of the reasons being that I was his typist – yet again! He dictated and I typed most of his political writings during that period.

We used to try and politically influence the Military Machineries. For example, we would say why did you hit such and such a village in Venda when there's a rent strike three villages away from where you hit?. During the discussion it became apparent that the village where they hit was chosen because they had contacts there. We explained that we had contacts in the village where there was a rent strike. There was an ongoing effort to try and get the Military to understand that we were preparing the ground for MK to be hidden, protected and integrated into the communities. Close collaboration was essential but it was difficult to get the right balance operationally.

When appropriate and when we recruited good people, we passed them on to the Military. When the Military had people that they felt could be useful to the Political they would do the same. Despite the order that we weren't to mix, there was a lot of mixing.

On top of which, the Communist Party unit of which I was a member – and this is very secret but I suppose I can come out with it now, it's fifty years ago after all – was Ruth First (SACP leader), Obadi (Montso Mokgabudi), Rashid, Indres and me. So you can imagine what went on in that Party unit (laughter)! Ruth was very combative and very critical of what MK was doing, and poor old Obadi and Rashid were always trying to defend themselves. So, whilst I was involved with the military at a political level, I was not involved in their operations.

Having said that, I was of some use to them because on top of all these other things, I had a British passport and I'm white. So for me to go into Swaziland was dead easy. I used to drive through all the time carrying all sorts of

goodies, especially when the borders were closed or there were patrols and the comrades had to jump the fence.

One of the only times Zuma shouted at me and got really cross was when I went down to Swaziland on a mission for the Political Machinery. When I came back to Maputo I reported – very stupidly – that Rashid had asked me to do a favour. I noticed Zuma sort of stiffen and he said, 'What favour?' And I said, well, Special Ops were desperate. They needed these hand grenades in Swaziland. So I took the hand grenades in my right hand pocket and I put the detonators in my left hand pocket, just like Rashid had told me. I knew anyway that the grenades must be separated from the detonators so that they would not blow up. I thought Zuma was going to kill me! He was so livid with me and he was so livid with Rashid.

I knew very well that I was not to work with the Military Machineries, especially Special Ops, unless instructed to do so. Once, I had to take a very large amount of cash down to Swaziland for Special Ops. It was thousands of Rands. There was no other way to get the money through that day and it was urgent. We strapped the money all over my body, in the car, in my shoes, every little orifice we could find. Why I remember it so well was that I took my nine year old son with me as a cover. He knew I was on a secret mission. When we got to Swazi customs, the customs officer said I could not carry my empty basket into Swaziland from Mozambique because of foot and mouth disease. I was to go back to the Mozambican side and leave the basket there. I could hardly walk I had so much money in my shoes so I got into the car to drive back to the Mozambican side to leave the basket. The customs officer asked me what was wrong – why couldn't I walk as it was only a few metres away. So I walked – padded, more like. It was physically excruciating and I was dying of fright that I would trip and all those notes would come flying out of my shoes! The few metres felt like 20 kilometres.

I managed to pad to the Mozambican customs, leave my basket and pad back. I got back into the car and the Swazi customs officer waved me goodbye. Once one left the customs house, the sign that one was well and truly in Swaziland was a cattle grid over which one had to drive. The minute we passed that cattle grid, this little boy said, 'Sorry Suey, could you stop the car please? I'm going to be sick.' He vomited his lungs out. And I thought, you know Sue, you are going too far – this child's going to be traumatised. He was so petrified.

Those were the sort of things I did with the Military Machineries. When Special Ops blew up Sasol, Gebuza (real name, Siphiwe Nyanda) and Obadi came to fetch me to celebrate. You could almost see the flames from where we were! It was such a big thing.

But at the same time, I was critical of Special Ops. We in the Poltical Machineries were very serious about creating the equivalent of a Ho Chi Minh Trail from Mozambique through Swaziland into the heart of the country. The Ho Chi Minh Trail in Vietnam was personned by cadres every step of the way from the North to the South. Everything that needed to be transported, weapons, money, documents, whatever, was transported along this route. This was our aim – to create a route personned by cadres of MK right into the industrial heart of South Africa. Our goal was armed insurrection – we studied the Paris Commune in detail, by the way!

We struggled to get what we needed for this task. We needed money, cars, identity documents, communication equipment etc. It was very difficult to get trained comrades secretly into the country and we weren't making sufficient progress. Comrades were becoming demoralised and impatient. Special Ops was created to circumvent this problem. They immediately got cars and they got money. We couldn't even get a car in the Political Machinery. This is how bad it was. It was really very serious. And so we were very resentful, and one day I had a big go at Slovo that, you know, this concept of Special Ops is cheap, it is a shortcut, and this isn't going to make the revolution. What's going to make the seizure of power happen is having a solid base, an underground base and you're hindering us because you're taking all the resources. He replied, exhibiting a great deal of patience: 'Sue, you're completely right. I'm not criticising the work that you're doing. But, you know, it can take another fifty years, and the masses are ready and we have to show them that we are alive and kicking and that's why we're doing this.' I didn't have an answer. So, I backtracked after that.

This was after about a year of continually arguing with Rashid and Obadi about the importance of our political work and confronting the incorrectness of our emphasis on military work. I was very close to both of them and had an enormous amount of respect for them. We were big pals. When the Matola attack happened, I'd never seen a dead body ever. I'd never seen an open coffin. And those thirteen coffins laid out in a row – it was ghastly. It was very traumatic.

Sue Rabkin, funeral of the comrades killed in the Matola raid, 1981, Guido Van Hecken

Besides Obadi who did you know personally of those killed?

The Matola attack targeted the MK residences. I knew most of the comrades who were killed. Some better than others. I was in the Special Ops house on the day of the Matola attack. Obadi had

gone off to Angola, and had asked me before he left if I wanted anything from Angola. I asked him to bring me some coffee. The afternoon of the attack I found a note on my door saying 'I'm back, I've got your coffee, come and get it or I'll come in later'. So I drove over to Matola to the Special Ops house but he wasn't there. So I left a message telling him to come over for supper and bring the coffee.

I was just about to start making supper when Zuma called an emergency meeting. Comrades had come up from Swaziland and needed to brief us urgently on the anti-Republic Campaign. So I left a note on the door for Obadi to say that I'm in an emergency meeting at Zuma's flat. The meeting ended at about eleven. While we were sitting at the meeting a call came through from Obadi at the Special Ops house that there was activity around the house. Zuma immediately got hold of Mozambican security and our meeting continued. And as I left, I thought, you know, I'm too tired to drive to Matola. So I went home to bed. If I had gone to Matola I would have driven straight into that attack. Sometimes one's life hangs on a thread.

The next morning I went to collect Zuma as we had made arrangements to go to the dentist. We both had toothache and we decided to fortify each other and go to the dentist at the hospital together. When I arrive at Zuma's flat at about eight o'clock I found he wasn't there. I was confused because he had been complaining about his toothache! The comrades at the flat said, 'What is the matter with you; don't you know what's happened? There's been an attack.' And that was the Matola attack.

Slovo and I went to visit Obadi in the hospital. He was dying! Slovo saw Samora Machel (President of Mozambique). The Mozambican doctors said that Obadi's intestine had been perforated. I'm not sure if it was a dumdum bullet or what it was, but it was lethal. The machine for checking internal perforations at the Maputo General Hospital was broken and it's very difficult to see perforations with the naked eye. Obadi lived just a few days after the attack, but subsequently died.

Special Ops was equally successful under the later Commanders as it had been under Obadi. Some incredibly important targets were hit successfully. The unit was fabulous. They were very brave and they were very disciplined. We were doing our work in the Political Machinery and we weren't supposed to be involved with the Military Machineries, but we were involved because that's how it worked out.

When you work in the underground, you don't have plan A and B, you have plan A, B, C, D, E and F, and you usually end up with plan F if you're lucky – there's always something to disrupt the plan. Someone makes an inappropriate

call, someone's wife gets jealous…There's that case, for example, of the wife not understanding why he is always out and began to suspect her husband was having an affair. She goes to the drawer to see if there are any indications of an affair, she is looking for letters. She finds a gun in the drawer and she hands it over to the police. It's a Makarov – and the police immediately know he's MK.

Personal relationships interact with your political activity and they affect it, and not always for the better. If this was otherwise, you wouldn't be human. Who would you relate to? How would you ever recruit someone if you didn't act like a human being? So I'm not justifying. I'm not rationalising, I'm just saying it like it was. So that is the explanation of my involvement with Special Ops. It continued for many years because of the close relations we had, and because I was in a Party Unit with the two Commanders of Special Ops.

By the way, there's a lack of clarity. Who recruited Hélène and Klaas?

Hélène Pastoors and Klaas de Jonge were not recruited by Slovo, they were recruited by Bobby and Indres. But because they were prepared to take weapons into the country they ended in Special Ops.

When comrades left the country and crossed the border into Swaziland and Mozambique, the Political Machinery had the first bite of the cherry. We were the first to see the comrades because we needed fresh political information. What was going on in whichever area they'd come from? Which organisations were functioning? Who was playing a leadership role? And then if we needed them, they came over to us and if we didn't need them, they went over to the Military Machineries.

But the bias was towards the Military and the desire of young people was to be part of a fighting force. You get very different kinds of people in the Political Machinery. They're more mature and I don't mean that in a judgmental way. In fact, although all the units that we were involved with were ready to pick up arms at the drop of a hat, the comrades recruited into the Political Machinery understood the importance of political mobilisation.

And so it was give and take all the way, but the struggle for the Political Machineries to get resources and in addition for the Military to listen to what we felt should be done was huge. And it wasn't until we'd built strong links, especially through the trade union movement, through SACTU (South African Congress of Trade Unions) and with cadres that we recruited who were active in unions that we were more successfully able to put a view forward to the leadership about what should be done. The recommendation would then be

referred back to us, not as an instruction but guidance to the Machineries dealing with internal work.

I am of the view that there was real democracy in the underground structures of the movement because if you didn't pass onto the leadership the views of your underground unit, that unit wouldn't be interested in working with you. It was beholden on you to say that such and such a unit feels that we shouldn't do this or we should do that. And it went right up through the Revolutionary Council, later to become the PMC. And those views were discussed very seriously. I mean we listened to the people who we were dealing with very seriously and if they said 'This isn't the right thing to do,' we'd pass it on.

So that's why my name features, as you said, because of this interaction all the time, but I was not a member of Special Ops. I wasn't even a member of the Military, even though we worked with them occasionally.

I understand that the Transvaal Rural did not do well, but the Transvaal Urban seems to have done well? The police stations and other operations?

Yes, Gebuza and the Transvaal Urban machinery did do well, but it was hard work. I mean when they put the G5 into the country, which was the first time an MK unit was placed inside the country – JS was over the moon – G5 were in the country and they were surviving!

Our problem in the Political Machinery was that the unit was living in a sewage pipe. They weren't hidden and protected amongst the masses. This was the big battle and the extensive robust discussions about the document *Planning for People's War***.** There were huge, huge disagreements and arguments the whole time we were in Maputo and then later in Lusaka about what methods we needed to consider to lodge our MK cadres inside the country. And then, of course, what actions they were to embark upon. But why we ended up in a *Operation Vula*-type situation was partly because we were so badly infiltrated. (Operation Vula was an ANC political underground structure as part of basing senior ANC leaders inside South Africa to link the ANC outside more organically to the struggle inside). Work had to be really, really secret. The first step was to place our leadership inside the country. With regards to *Vula* both Mac and Ronnie therefore had to have really tight legends as to where they were. The story was that Mac had gone for some treatment in Moscow and Ronnie had broken his leg in Vietnam or something like that. The *Vula* operation was very secret because we had our own experience of being betrayed and being sold out.

I can tell you some very funny stories about Special Ops. One New Years' Day JS goes to the Special Ops house in Maputo to check on the comrades. He gets to the house and the comrades on guard duty have got the AKs over their laps and they are fast asleep, snoring. Out for the count!

So he wakes them up and says, 'What are you doing? What's going on here?' 'Oh, Comrade Slovo,' they say, and they come with what we used to call ANC stories – tall stories – about why they were asleep. Did they really think anyone would believe those stories when it was so obvious that New Year's Eve had just been celebrated? JS responds by telling a joke. JS frequently used to tell Jewish jokes. He was a great Jewish joke teller. The irony of course was that the two Jews in the ANC community in Maputo, Ronnie and I were the ones that really appreciated the humour. Much of the humour passed the comrades by. So he calls them all together and they're nervous and shaking in their boots…

Not just the guards, all the comrades in the house?

Yes, they're all asleep. The guards outside and everybody in the house. The Boers could've come in and wiped them out. So he calls them all to gather together. Now they're embarassed and ashamed. They're feeling bad and they're upset because, you know, Slovo was very highly respected and the comrades loved him. But they were nervous of him because they had let him down and shown a lack of discipline. How does he deal with the situation? He says that he wants to tell them a story. And the story was in the form of a joke. By telling this joke, what JS was saying was: 'Don't give me tall stories here. I don't want this to happen again. You know how important it is to be disciplined and vigilant.'

The comrades were very special, all the comrades were special, you know that! And you know why they were special? Because there was nothing special about them. You know I remember when David, Jeremy and I were operational underground in Cape Town. We were printing the second pamphlet we ever produced for the Party. I asked David why the pamphlets always referred to SACP, ANC and MK cadres as 'the finest sons and daughters of Africa'. What about the people who can't get involved, who've got children, elderly parents, are employed so that they could put food on the table? All the things that constrain people from getting involved in dangerous work. After all, the price for that involvement was incredibly high – sometimes even leading to death. And David said to me very quietly, 'That's why they're the finest sons and daughters.'

And this is it. You know, we had comrades who stole. We had comrades who got drunk. We had comrades who were never on time. We had comrades who

lied. But we held together because there was an ethic that bound us together. Our lives depended on each other. Ill-discipline was not tolerated. This was especially so in the Forward Areas. You were removed from the Forward Areas and sent to the 'rear' if your behaviour was not up to scratch.

I thought the ANC everywhere was like it was in Maputo so imagine my shock when I got to Lusaka and found a different situation. The ethic in the Forward Areas I discovered was different to the areas where security was more lax and the tempo was more relaxed. There wasn't the same pressure and urgency and tension. And of course there wasn't the same cooperation and collaboration. In the Forward Areas we continually helped each other otherwise work would not have been done.

We didn't have mobile phones, thank goodness. We didn't have satellite, we had, like, walkie-talkies, and that was Ronnie's idea. And we practised code names, and it was 'Hello Brown Bear, Brown Bear are you receiving me, this is Blue Dove, Blue Dove' (laughter)?' The next thing is they report to Ronnie – 'Chief, we've been infiltrated, there's a white woman on the phone' (laughter)! And he said, 'No, no, that's Sue!' 'Oh, of course,' they say. It was not successful and the practice was stopped.

The reason the comrades were special was that it was really difficult to live the way we were supposed to live. You've got to imagine a 22 year old who wants to go out singing and dancing and going out with girls. That doesn't go away because you're in the underground. Life is dangerous in the Forward Areas. You're not supposed to go out and especially not to socialise because it was dangerous. You don't look and talk like Mozambicans and that made you noticeable. You're in a house where there's no proper furniture so you're not exactly comfortable. The food's lousy – provisions were basic. It was really very, very difficult for everybody.

And I want to tell you something else: that the political consciousness of the comrades was high. You know, there was an incident that Gebuza referred to at Indres' funeral. He didn't actually describe the incident – you can ask him about it. We all remember the incident because it caused such a stir. The way he handled the situation was very impressive.

I was very surprised that at Indres' funeral he told this story, but he only told the end bit – the bit about how Indres handled the situation: 'I was called in front of a Disciplinary Committee. I'd done something terrible…' To me that showed such courage and political maturity.

Not that he or anyone else was a saint. Don't think that there were no pipeline cars parked in the parking lot of the block of flats that I lived in. Or that I didn't know about them. Or that I could've got killed. So there was also that side.

My kids said to me last year – I'm 70 now – 'Suey, when you used to look under the car every morning, and you used to tell us to stand over there and you used to look under the car every morning for explosives – did you know what you were looking for?' No, I said (laughter)! 'We didn't think so,' they said (laughter)! There was also a lot of honesty, which seems to have flown out of the window these days. There was no fear of saying what you thought or that you disagreed. When Slovo presented the *Planning for People's War* document, a comrade in the Political Machinery accused him to his face of lying.

Did he literally use the word 'lying'?

Almost. JS claimed that comrades who had been infiltrated into the country were living amongst the masses and were being hidden by them. We had a comrade in our Machinery who'd just returned from that area. He stood up and said, 'Comrade Joe, that's not true, what you're saying is not true. The comrades are not amongst the masses. We know because we are there and the comrades are not there.' I don't know where he found the courage to take on JS like that – he was very nervous. JS didn't take kindly to that, I can tell you.

There were a lot of debates and continual discussion – much of it heated. There were lots of verbal exchanges between the Military and the Political, but it was vibrant, and there were no repercussions when you said what you thought. Mzala (Nxumalo) was in our Machinery. 'We're cooking the porridge outside of the pot' – that was his big mantra. We used to tell it to the leadership, with OR present. I can't remember anyone holding back.

When OR dissolved the Intelligence Machinery, which by the way was rotten and corrupt, a big PMC meeting was held in Maputo and comrades were asked to come forward from the intelligence structures and to speak frankly. They said that they would be locked up if they told the truth! And Zuma said that nothing would happen to anyone but that the leadership needs to know what's going on. So there was a desire and a commitment to do the right thing. While there was wrong-doing – the ethic to which we aspired was constant – the ceiling was high.

And that's why what's happening in the ANC is so painful now. When I went to my first branch meeting in four years, it was convened for six o'clock and I get there at six, and the gardeners are there and domestic workers are there and at ten to seven we walk out because no one else had yet come. We met the

so-called branch leadership on the way out. We're so arrogant these days. I'm saying that the anger I feel is because of where I came from. Not that we'll ever go back there. Nor do I want to go back there – but can we move forward and just be a bit ethical? That's a political discussion for another day though.

Back to Special Ops – those comrades were very special. Did you know that they fought back in the Matola attack? One of them, Rashid will know who it is (Sipho Thobela), fought back with his AK. But when they came back from exile, no one knows them. I doubt they've got any money. They're unacknowledged. They're unrecognised. Mind you, that applies to the comrades in the underground as well. When we came home we had to fight to get our comrades a pension. Not that it's really enough to live on. That's why there's a lot of internal criticism about the Commanders of MK and the underground. It was and is their duty to see that their units have got what they need. We're still strying to get people onto the database of ANC Veterans 25b years on.

Whilst I can give you chapter and verse of every single unit that we dealt with in the underground, what their code names were – sometimes I'm not so good on the real names – what work they did, where they operated, it hasn't really helped. These comrades have been forgotten. They left the country to join MK abandoning their education. Most were literate but many didn't have matric, and many didn't have university degrees. Although government waved the qualifications necessary for public service employment, many comrades didn't have the necessary skills. It's terrible what has happened. It's painful because it's almost inexplicable really. It just seems so ruthless.

I really liked the way you've put it in your Special Ops project proposal – a reasonably balanced picture of MK that does not either dismiss it as being largely ineffective – which most people say, I think – and irrelevant to the overthrow of apartheid, or presented as the powerful effective fighting force it was sometimes romanticised to be. And that really sums it up.

We weren't as effective as we wanted to be, but without it we wouldn't have got to where we are today. It was a vital component of the struggle against the white minority regime.

Underground work is a series of screw-ups. I said before to you, you have plan A to F and you usually even go beyond F. And the work requires meticulous planning. Where do you learn to do that except on the job where you learn from your mistakes as you go along? It's just that the price paid for making mistakes is very high.

Where did we learn how to operate in the underground? David and I move to South Africa. We're producing leaflets secretly. We have to distribute the

leaflets by post, which means we've got to buy stamps, we've got to buy envelopes. But we're told not to get our fingerprints on the stamps or envelopes. It's summer and 30 degrees in the shade. We're told in our training, we have to wear gloves. But you can't wear gloves when it's 30 degrees! In addition, at that point in time, the Post Office had a white entrance and a black entrance. I hated going to the white entrance but, of course, I had to, otherwise our cover would be blown. So, you go into the post office and there's a queue of 35 people on the Black side and you walk into the White side and there's no one there and the one guy leaves the 35 people and comes and says, 'Yes what can I do for you, *mevrou*?' It was awful. And you have to look as if it's the most normal thing in the world to buy R100 worth of stamps with 35 people watching you and you're trying to pick up the stamps without getting your fingerprints on them!

How do you not get your fingerprints on anything? Yet we didn't get a fingerprint on a single thing. The police couldn't prove anything from fingerprints. The only proof they had was the prescription for explosives written in my handwriting, for which I could've been charged with treason. It would've been easier for them if they found a fingerprint on an envelope.

Underground work is frightening. The fear hangs over you because of what will happen when you get caught. The fear hampers and constricts your work.

And that's where Rashid as Commander of Special Ops came into his own. He's meticulous in the way he plans. The planning, the reference books, where you get them, the level of forgery, how you get people across the border etc. – I don't think he broke any rules of secrecy. Balance that up with the human factor. Balance that need for careful adherence to the rules of conspiracy with Obadi's story of how he insisted on crossing into South Africa illegally with his unit, which he wasn't supposed to.

He wanted to see them safely picked up. I can't remember what operation it was. The comrades jumped over the fence into South Africa and went to the rendezvous point. Obadi crossed with them and sat on a rock just a little way away to watch them drive off – the car had come to pick them up. Sometimes the pick up didn't materialise. And suddenly these three policemen come towards him. And he said he nearly died! He was so scared. He knew he shouldn't have crossed with them and that by doing so he had put the unit and the operation in danger. As he's sitting there watching the car pull away three policeman appear out of nowhere. He sat there as if sitting on this rock was just the most normal thing to do. The point was that the police didn't take any notice of him. But because he knew what he was doing there he was terrified.

And he said to me – this was just a discussion between the two of us – 'How do you deal with this kind of fear?' It was a very important conversation because he and I took that conversation back into the Political Machinery and into Special Ops. How do you deal with fear? How do you keep calm and not panic? And we worked out that there's only one way to deal with fear – and that is to look it in the face. Once you look fear in the face it diminishes.

So that admission by a young man – who's a Commander of Special Ops and held up as a gallant freedom fighter, ala Ché Guevara – that actually the reality is that they're shitting themselves with fear as they do that work. You must ask Rashid from me – Sue says that I must ask you to describe what it was like jumping the fence. The fence between Mozambique and Swaziland was very high. When you get to the top you are completely vulnerable. You either go one way or the other but you are totally vulnerable when you are there at the top, you can get shot – and people were shot. Some comrades had to have a drink to fortify themselves before jumping the fence.

The reality is that it's much easier to do daring things when you're young because although you do get scared you don't yet have the ability to rationalise or dissect. You're full of hormones and emotions. If you did start to think too much about it you may not do it. And I think that's where these units – and it wasn't just Special Ops – it was all our underground units – were brave. Was Special Ops braver than everybody else? Of course, they weren't. But they were very brave and courageous in the broadest sense of the word.

A comrade said something to the effect that it wasn't that they weren't afraid; it's that they had to control their fear…

Yes.

He certainly says they were afraid…

But they were. We were all terrified….

I want to tell you a story about Obadi because it summed him up as a character. Before he left South Africa to join MK he gets a job as a TV repair guy. Have you heard this story? He's the assistant. TV had just started in South Africa and Obadi was the 'boy' who was helping the White TV guy recently emigrated to South Africa from the UK. They go into this rich White house and they're busy setting up the TV. The maid comes in with a tray, and on the tray is cup and saucer with tea in it and a tin mug. And Obadi takes the cup and saucer and the white guy who doesn't know any different because he'd just arrived from the UK (laughter), takes the tin mug, at which point the madam comes in and freaks out of her mind (laughter)!

That was Obadi. One night Obadi, Gebuza and I went to JS' (Slovo's) place to celebrate the success of the Sasol operation. Ruth is there. It's just the five of us. Remember Ruth, Obadi and I are in the same SACP unit. We start talking about Zimbabwe. Democratic elections are about to take place. First one ever. 1980. There were two people in the whole of the ANC in Mozambique that said that ZANU (Zimbabwe African National Union), and not ZAPU (Zimbabwe African People's Union) was going to win the elections. One was Albie Sachs (ANC leader, lawyer) and the other was Ruth. Everybody else said ZAPU was going to win. Fast forward to the Internal House where we're sitting around the table listening to the BBC World Service announce the election results and the BBC says that ZANU's won the election. Indres turns off the radio, bangs his fist on the table and says the BBC are lying. That's how much the ANC in Maputo was convinced that ZAPU was going to win the elections.

Backtrack to the celebration at the Slovo flat and the discussion on Zimbabwe's forthcoming election. Obadi, he's, like, had two whiskeys, the operation was a great success and he's like 'I'm okay, man'. And he says, 'Oh, well I mean you know it's quite obvious that ZAPU's going to win the election.' And Ruth says 'Oh really, why?' Now, he's not quite sure why. So he says, 'Oh' – and he literally starts fidgeting casting around for an answer. 'Well,' he says, 'we're in alliance with ZAPU. Therefore…'.

But didn't they take into account the possible influence of the ethnic demographics of Zimbabwe on the results?

'No, we're in alliance with ZAPU.' That's what he says. So she replies very quiety, 'You know, comrade' – and she was at her most ferocious when she lowered the tone – 'Alliances change because organisations change.' And as she said it, the three of us – you know, like, boom! Never had it occurred to us that an organisation like ZAPU (or the ANC) could change, and that therefore alliances can change.

Politically then, in Maputo the standard was very high and our interactions with senior leaders like Ruth exposed us to a very sophisticated and high level of politics.

The comrades were thirsty to learn from the people who knew more than we did and who we could debate with and talk to on issues that we were trying to unpack and understand, for example, democratic centralism and the role of the peasantry. Ruth had been on a South African Communist Party delegation to China just after the revolution. She was on the Central Committee of the CPSA (Communist Party of South Africa, re-named the South Afican Communist Party after its banning in 1950). She and John Nkadimeng had gone to China in the

'50s. In one of our Party unit meetings she said that the attitude of the SACP towards the Chinese was absolutely ridiculous. 'We're throwing the baby out with the bath water. We do actually have some lessons to learn from China,' she said. We're all sitting there intrigued – like what? We didn't know because we didn't have literature. We didn't have books. This was the atmosphere that we operated in.

I used to visit all the different residences of the different Machineries because as the Political Machinery we had access virtually everywhere. One of the first houses I went into was the Northern Transvaal House. I found it very interesting because as Mac pointed out, the Transvaal Urban House, which was basically Soweto, was lively, lots of nice music playing, lots of interaction, a bit of drinking – I'm sure you've got the picture. How different from the Northern Transvaal House where everybody's out in the garden growing spinach and other vegetables. The difference was noticeable.

In the Northern Transvaal House, there was a comrade called Simon. Mac had sent me there to talk to him about what was going on in Sekhukhuneland and how we should operate there. I used to go there with Joby. And this little blonde used to be taken into the garden and given fresh spinach, and salad and they used to make up a big bag for me to take home to the Internal House.

The News Briefing that was produced by Gill Marcus and her group in London, published. on the back page of one of the editions, a picture of three comrades that had been sentenced to death. Above each of them was a hangman's noose. I see Joby picking up the News Briefing and recognising one of the comrades who used to give him salad at the Northern Transvaal house. 'What's that above his head, Suey?' I got so emotional I didn't know how to answer without totally freaking him out. He was very small then.

Coming back to the Sasol operation, did you have any inkling that it was going to happen?

No.

Who did you think had done it?

I knew Special Ops had done it.

How did you know?

After the op either Rashid or Obadi or JS , or all of them told me.

Shortly thereafter?

Yes. The Political Machinery was in contact with comrades inside the country. It was our lifeline – we had to know what was going on, in as detailed a way as possible. Sasol blew up and five minutes later there was a call from inside the country as to what had happened. I learnt a lot of things about the Sasol operation later. I learnt that Slovo went to see somebody who worked in an oil refinery or an oil rig in Scotland to get the details about how an oil refinery worked. This person had been referred to him by the Communist Party in the UK.

I also worked with Rocky Williams (ANC Military Inteligence) and later got to know him well when he came into the Department of Defence. But I knew him in exile because I de-briefed him a number of times in Lusaka on the political situation amongst the whites.

I certainly didn't know anything before an op. It wasn't good to be curious. It wasn't cool. Nobody even wanted to know that kind of information. You didn't want to know anything that didn't concern you because it was dangerous for everybody. You didn't ask questions. If you did ask questions it was considered suspicious. I never asked and no one ever told me. So, yes, Sasol I knew about but only after it happened.

We got many reports from inside the country about the Sasol operations and it was clear that it had achieved exactly what I told you JS wanted it to achieve. It told South Africa that the ANC is alive and operational. It lifted spirits and created optimism about the struggle .

When you say you got reports from inside the country on Sasol, from who and how?

We had comrades operating in many different areas and on many different fronts. In mass organisations, in trade unions, in universities etc. These comrades were excited about the operation. Sasol was a big target. The attack made it look like MK was a very huge and sophisticated military force. That it could hit anything, anywhere. But for us cadres, especially those in the Political Machineries, we had to deal with the fact that it wasn't a realistic expectation. The reality was that MK wasn't able to hit anything anywhere. It was proving to be extremely difficult to infiltrate comrades back into the country. All our efforts, our combined strength, all five components of the PMC dealing with internal work, were focussed on getting our leadership back into the country safely in order to give leadership on the ground. Real, effective, day to day leadership was proving very difficult to give from Lusaka and beyond. This was

the focus of *Operation Vula.* All efforts before then had not been successful, due in large part to the extent of enemy infiltration into the ANC.

Any other observations about Special Ops?

JS comes to the house and it's me and Archie (Whitehead). Now Archie was a big wheel in Swaziland, another character. Serious character, really fabulous guy. Archie and I were close. Well, I was very close to all of them. And JS comes and we're in the middle of looking at some papers. And we start on JS, telling him we're going to build the Ho Chi Minh trail, and we're going to do these routes into South Africa and they're going to be personned by the people; not comrades imposed on them. We're going to recruit the peasants on the borders and we're going to recruit people in all the villages and the guns are going to pass that way.

And JS listens – and he's got his cigar – and he says, 'Comrades, it's wonderful hearing you talk like this and you're quite right. But let me tell you something. Do you know how the revolution in Iran happened? How come the Shah got deposed? Some taxi driver got into a fight in a crowd and it blew up (laughter).'

And you know we never forgot it. I reminded Archie about it a couple of years ago when I saw him. Do you remember that discussion? He said, 'How can I forget?' Because if you understand the dialectic, which is a useful but complex tool, you can understand that, bang, something can happen just like that in history! Just a click – and the situation can change! And that's what JS wanted from Special Ops.

This story about the taxi driver, Ronnie told me a similar Slovo story….

You see one of the more endearing things about Slovo was that he brought into MK his sense of humour, I have to be frank. He saw the lighter side of things quickly so that everything was fun. Mac was like that but in a different way. Mac's heavy going because he's very serious and he's very intense. For us in the Political Machinery, Mac gave us the leadership. He came with the strategies. He came with the plans. He came with the concepts. He was clear. He took a really complicated situation and unpacked it and made it easier for us to understand. For example, there was a slogan that we used in the '80s that he said that Madiba had used. After time we realised that it wasn't Madiba, it was him (laughter)!

Like, as is said, Thabo Mbeki would quote Mandela from a speech that Thabo had drafted…

Yes, same thing. Which is better than blowing your own trumpet, I suppose. But it was inspiring and we subsequently used it on all our leaflets. *Between the anvil of mass action and the hammer of the armed struggle we will crush the apartheid*…. Now for us, it captured the relationship between the Military and the Political. You couldn't have the one without the other, which is what the Vietnamese were trying to tell us.

The Military were impatient with the Political. Our approach took too long. We're too finikety. We wanted to sit round discussing all the time.

But the fact was that when you came down to it – how do you recruit into an underground organisation? You start with a contact who is in a small residents association. You start to introduce an understanding of organisation: what is the agenda? How do you hold everybody together? How do you move the members forward beyond their immediate grievance? What should the ANC input be? How do you develop that contact into a comrade and then an ANC cadre? What route do you take? That requires a lot of thinking and a lot of discussion. The same process applies to military organisation. How do you develop a comrade to the point where he or she will hide and protect you, will hide your hardware etc.? And this was one of our problems with the Military. It was romanticised. The armed struggle was romanticised and in a way it had to be because Of course, the armed struggle was idealised, and, in a way, it had to be, because otherwise not so many comrades would want to do it. It was very dangerous …

That's a very interesting point, I think….

But it's true isn't it?

Yes, I think so….Okay, this issue of the relationship between the Political and the Military, it's a big overarching theme in the armed stuggle and comes up repeatedly in the interviews I've done in this project. But we can come back to it later, if necessary. Back to Sasol for now. Given the importance of the project, and the need for utmost security, why were all the Special Ops comrades on this operation housed in the same place? Especially after the operation? Wasn't it anticipated that the regime would target these operatives and hit back, as they did?

We weren't all housed in one place. The numerous Machineries were separate. For example, there was a Special Ops House, a Transvaal Urban House, etc. and the Internal Machinery was in the Internal House.

First of all, you must understand Maputo was like a different planet to Swaziland. That isn't what happened in Swaziland. We had freedom of movement in Maputo. And most importantly, we had such support from the Mozambican people. For example, when it was my turn to go and queue for milk or coffee, because I was white I was asked who I was. When I said I was ANC I was immediately sent to the front of the queue. There was tremendous support for the ANC and so we had a lot of places to hide people. But you know you've got to be realistic about being secret. Say I put a comrade in with a *cooperante* (a non-South African who supported the ANC or any other South African liberation movement – an internationalist), I've got to get him or her reading material, I've got to get him or her food, I've got to go and see he or she is all right. So there's activity and comings and goings. Mozambicans knew the ANC people. So, sometimes it was kind of cutting off your nose to spite your face.

The point was if you really wanted to be secret, you could be secret, but you're dealing with numbers here. You can't keep a whole Machinery secret. Moreover they have to be briefed collectively. They have to discuss collectively. They've got to bond. They've got to know each other's weaknesses. They have to know how they carry out the operation. It's easier to put them in one place. It's a hassle to have to collect them all individually. It's no safer to keep them apart. The point was we were infiltrated. I don't think we realised how infiltrated we were. Perhaps I just didn't want to believe it. I think that we spent maybe eighty percent of our time trying to avoid leaks and secrets getting out.

In Swaziland I don't think the comrades worked for more than five percent of the time. They were hiding for the other 95. Besides Swaziland's the size of a pocket handkerchief. It was very difficult to hide and very dangerous. And we didn't have the support we needed.

The infiltration from inside came from comrades who were captured and tortured and turned. We think it was (name withheld) that gave the information about the location of the military residences that were attacked in the Matola raid. But I don't know this as a fact. Sometimes information and explanations come long after the event.

For example, I started working in the newly formed Defence Secretariat of the Department of Defence (DoD) in 1994. The Defence Secretariat is a constitutional structure even though there were only three of us working there at the beginning. I, with the other two Secretariat members, are invited to the first banquet held by the newly formed SANDF. There are only two women in this huge banquet. I am seated next to an Air Force General who asks me if I am Mrs Rabkin and was I in Maputo. I am new in this game. I had been in the

DoD for about three weeks. I hated all these White Generals. I was so uncomfortable. I was nervous. I was aggressive and assertive all at the same time. I was being as difficult as I can be.

The General then says, 'Can I ask you something?' So not knowing what else to say, I say yes. And he says, 'Do you think the operation on the jam factory in Maputo was successful?' I cannot believe what he's saying. So I say, what? He says he is asking because Pretoria didn't think the operation was successful and he was demoted. So I said, well – you did manage to kill two people, so I would have said the operation was very successful! He said he was also involved in the Matola massacre. I found that very difficult to handle, both emotionally and politically. I was so traumatised, I can't remember his name!

Sue Rabkin Post-1994, X

Post Nkomati, things were even more difficult both in Mozambique and in Swaziland. The apartheid regime had FRELIMO on the back foot and were openly supporting RENAMO. You could feel the difference on the streets. One Sunday morning I was driving with Zuma down a very quiet Julius Nyerere Avenue when I see two people standing in the middle of the road facing us. I couldn't work out what they were doing until we got closer and I saw that they were filming us with a telephoto lens. When we were nearly on top of them they leapt into a car and drove off. We didn't have enough petrol to follow them. That's what I mean when I say everything always goes wrong with underground work.

From then we realised that something was going on – we could feel the enemy's presence on the streets albeit invisible. We started to patrol the city – three times eight-hour shifts. One comrade driving, the other with an AK on his/her lap. We did this for two weeks. It was exhausting and very scary. But then we felt it all loosen up. A week later Comrade OR (Oliver Tambo) flies into Maputo at the request of President Chissano. He is shown a letter from PW Botha saying they have evidence that the ANC is still operating in Maputo. If the ANC wasn't expelled from Maputo, the South Africans would bomb Mozambique. Chissano asked OR what he should do. OR told us to withdraw. We had a week to close down. And that's how we left Maputo.

Fast forward 25 years and I'm chatting to an Admiral in the DoD and he tells me about this book a colleague of his has written and in it is a description of how this special SADF force of some kind tried three times to land in Maputo, but the waves and the tides were against them. When they eventually did land

they couldn't operate because the city was being patrolled. The operation was too dangerous and they withdrew.

It's possible that the Security Police also got to know about who was behind the Sasol operations because the comrades who were involved – or those they told – spoke too freely in Maputo?

Comrades didn't speak openly about operations especially not about details. I don't think that we were too open. It's that we were too infiltrated.

It was an impossibly difficult situation to manage. You want and need to trust comrades. As a human being you need their warmth and friendship. But you know you can't be free and say what you like. You can't share your worries. It's an abnormal situation to be in especially for a young person. And some comrades used the sensitivity around security for personal gain or vindictiveness. There were continually rumours and whispers circulating about who was working with the enemy. Once an allegation of working with the enemy was made, it stuck to a person like glue. It was a horrible way to live.

The next operation was the attacks on the power stations. Any comments about that?

No.

And Voortrekkerhoogte?

I remember Voortrekkerhoogte was a big operation, but I can't tell you more than that.

Who did you think had done it when you heard about it?

Special Ops.

You just knew?

My understanding was that the Military Machineries did not have the capacity at that stage to hit such a huge complex target like Voortrekkerhoogte. It had to be Special Ops.

What about the Church Street South African Air Force operation?

Yes, that was a controversial operation.

Why?

Because civilians were killed and we weren't supposed to kill civilians. Our aim was to hit military targets. In my understanding, that target was chosen because military personnel frequented the area. It's important to understand that young people coming out of the country to join MK were not yet fully conversant with ANC policy. The bulk of our recruits came out of the country to learn military skills to go back and deal with the enemy – who was White. A very large part of military training in our camps was political training – familiarising and internalising the policies and strategies of the ANC.

And the fact that there were White, Indian and Coloured comrades in the ranks, even if they were few and far between, gave credence to the basic understanding of ANC politics that we were fighting a system and not a race. However, this did not mean that the hatred and loathing of apartheid went away. So, although the Church Street operation was not hailed as our crowning glory, and although it came under serious criticism from the leadership, for many of the cadres it was not a disaster.

We had a group of cadres in the political machinery who put forward a plan to blow up a bus of white schoolchildren. And this plan was put forward after – let me stress – they had been trained. We kept them for quite a long time in the Internal House in Maputo and engaged politically with them until we had successfully persuaded them that this approach was politically wrong. They went on to carry out important operations and eventually became part of our leadership in a free South Africa. They are well known in MK circles as the Warriors.

So Church Street had that connotation. It was not kosher because we all wanted to kill Whites, make no mistake, starting with me because I came from England, and from the day I arrived in South Africa I wanted to turn round and leave on the first plane out. I had never come across anything like apartheid in my life! I found it horrific from the day I arrived and put my foot put on that tarmac – and it never left me.

But I'm told that the car bomb in the Church Street operation went off several minutes earlier than planned…

But that's why you have to be careful about these operations with a potential loss of civilian life. You also need comrades fully trained….Think also of the Ahmed Timol (MK) unit and others, where comrades got killed because of faulty devices….

That's why we sent David for training….

How did David die in Angola? What was his role at the time?

David was fantastic. He came to join me in Maputo after his release from Pretoria Central. He was prepared to do anything. He did whatever he was asked to do. David was very brave.

After his years in prison he was still very energetic?

He was brave before he went to prison and he was brave when he came out. Jeremy will tell you that. He was killed on the last night of his military training at a military camp in Angola. The timing device on the explosive he was handling was faulty and it blew off his hands as he detonated it. He died on his way to hospital almost two years to the day after his release from Pretoria Central Prison. He was 37 years old.

Very sad!...About the comrades who carried out the Church Street bombing, Comrade Johannes Mnisi (MK name, Vincent Molefe) was key, and he organised Freddie Shongwe and Ezekial Maseko to carry out the operation. They died in the operation as the bomb went off prematurely because of interference in the radio signals related to the remote device. Cdes Shongwe and Maseko were previously criminals and the regime made much of that. Actually, from my interviews and reading so far it seems that a certain number of the MK comrades came from a criminal background before they were politicised? Of course, under apartheid there was a structural context for the criminalisation of Africans, and maybe, anyway, people who are prepared to transgress laws in any conflict-ridden society are in certain circumstances prepared to become politicised and take up the armed struggle? One has the sense that this was the case in the armed struggles in South America as well? Also, maybe it applies to the radical movements of African-Americans in the '60s and '70s too? Anything you want to say about this?

I think it's a very difficult question to answer in South Africa. Until 1990, 80% of the population was living outside of the law. Africans, Indians and Coloureds were legally excluded from participating in society. That's the first thing. The second thing, is that Special Ops required a certain kind of bravado. A certain level of risk taking. The bulk of the young people that came out in '76 were students. Not criminals, students. Students are a bit romantic. They had experienced since the day they were born, the day-to-day horrors of apartheid, but they had not yet had what I would like to describe as life and work experience. I would be interested to go back to the files and look at the biographies of the comrades in Special Ops. I would lay money on it that they were not all students.

If you're operating invisibly outside of the law, which is what underground work is, you operate in a way that can't be seen. We therefore shared crossing routes with criminals. After all, there's only so many ways you can get into a country secretly. There's only so many ways you can hide things. So drug pedlars, smugglers etc. and us, I'm sure we had the same methods.

We were doing something noble and wonderful and they were doing something crap, but the methods were the same.

The difficulty was that to do this work a person has to develop a very difficult type of discipline. You have to sit in a residence for months on end, with nothing to do, nothing to read, no TV, and a radio or a tape cassette if you're lucky. You need discipline to be able to sit that out, whereas the comrades suited for Special Ops had bravado and daring. They were go-getters. They didn't want to sit around discussing the dialectic. So while I'm sure we had our fair share of criminals in our ranks, the comrades that I knew, they weren't in the majority, although I think most comrades had broken the law at some stage or other.

It was part of the apartheid condition…

Yes. Before 1994 a black South African lived outside the law. Why are we so surprised in a free and democratic South Africa that there's such a trade in ID documents? Before 1990 an ID document (dompas) would save your life, it verified your existence. The networks that existed in Home Affairs in relation to ID books and passports were extensive but were not dismantled. They are still being used today – a situation not helped by a tedious, and inefficient system. It's much easier to pay R100 than to stand in a queue for eight hours at a Home Affairs office. This culture is embedded in our society and is proving difficult to change. But its origins come from the apartheid system.

…

When I first got to Maputo, Botswana was referred to as P, Swaziland was Q, etc. These codes were part of our daily conversation. So much so that when the comrades used to come to the Internal House looking for me, Franny used to say, 'Suey's gone to Q' – she actually thought it was a country (laughter). When Ronnie came into the Political Machinery in Maputo he re-did the codes. South Africa was the Ocean, Swaziland was the Bay and Mozambique was the Harbour. And the Dolphins swam the seas – they moved between South Africa, Swaziland and Maputo. They were a specialised unit of two. They helped comrades 'swim the seas'. They knew what routes to take, when it was safe to cross borders etc. There were also 'surfers'. Surfers were couriers – they

carried things like documents, reports and money between the Ocean, the Bay and the Harbour. The surfers were people that surfed the waves and took the stuff through for us.

On the matter of comrades saying openly that JS was lying in his report on what was happening in the country, that you referred to earlier, did they mean he was deliberately lying?

You know, JS was not just a revolutionary, he was a politician. And there are some people who just stay revolutionaries, and there are other revolutionaries who become politicians… JS liked to succeed. He liked to win. He didn't like to be challenged. And he certainly didn't like to lose. And that I can tell you from my own personal experience.

Like most of us at the front, JS was frustrated at the difficulties we had in moving the struggle forward. Special Ops, as I have described, was a trigger mechanism. It wasn't the tool by which we would seize power. MK had to be able to integrate more comrades into the country and embed them amongst the people. But this was proving incredibly difficult. We didn't have the resources. The lines were long. We didn't have proper communication. The comrades weren't trained properly. But the main problem was that the Political Machinery was not moving fast enough. We weren't creating enough of a base from which MK could launch military operations. JS felt we had to take chances. He was much more of a chance-taker than we were in the Political Machinery. Comrades therefore were sometimes sent into the country without the proper preparation and with disastrous results. So JS developed this theory of having 'casual contact with the masses'. We queried this and asked what it meant. It's all in the document called *Planning for People's War*. The Political Machinery by and large thought it was nonsense.

Why?

It's the same point I am making throughout this interview. To re-iterate: your strategic goal is armed insurrection and the seizure of power. Your strategy is based on four pillars which are interdependent. The simultaneous separation and integration between legal and illegal work must be understood and protected at all costs.

The shift in emphasis between the four pillars is reflected after the trip to Vietnam after which the importance of political work dominated. That didn't mean that the armed struggle took a back seat. It meant that the armed struggle became a component of political work in the form of armed struggle. Ours was not a military struggle. The document *Planning for Peoples War* did not reflect this whilst it pretended to. We thought that was very dishonest! It

was also self-destructive because when mass action started to become widespread, it was exactly the right time for the military to step in to support those actions.

Where we went wrong, if I could divert for a minute, is that we did not differentiate at that stage between a mass party and a party with a mass base. To think that we could sustain a huge party that could guide the transformation was unrealistic.

When David arrived in Maputo just pre–Nkomati, he became part of the Political Machinery. He was given a diary that MK comrades had kept when they were infiltrated into the country. Here we were looking for how they found 'casual contact with the masses'. There were three or four of these diaries and their subject matter was *Planning for People's War*. David processed these diaries and summed them up as that the comrades were not doing anything. They were just moving weapons from one DLB to another. The cadres the Political Machinery sent into the same area were building a base, mobilising and organising people. There was nothing casual about it.

When our underground structures started to function properly we were able to infiltrate MK cadres into those areas where they were housed, fed and protected. They were able to carry out military operatons. The base was politically prepared to receive and absorb them.

About the stolen cars, you made some fleeting remark earlier. Do you want to say anything about these cars?

You know what a pipeline car is? There's lots of stories about cars and the ANC. Pipeline cars are cars that come off the assembly line. You've got your cars, you've got your assembly line and one drops off quickly and so on. And you buy it. And this is again the interface with criminals. So we would buy a pipeline car, I suppose in those days we'd spend maybe R3000 or R4000 on a pipeline car. But it has not got an engine number.

The car only gets an engine number when the car is completed. The car drops off the line, hence pipeline. And you order them from your contacts – workers at Ford and Audi and the rest of them. That's what killed me – they ordered them (laughter)!

We had people operating networks with criminals on pipeline cars, on drinks and on all sorts of things. I never knew any details but I knew it was going on. So OR comes to Maputo and says 'No, no more pipeline cars. We don't steal. We are not like them – the enemy. We retain the moral high ground. No pipeline cars.' And you know what we all said? We agreed with OR – but we're

disobeying because if we didn't have pipeline cars, we wouldn't be able to make a revolution.

About Hélène and Klaas, is it not correct that they were first recruited by Indres and then the Military took them over?

They were recruited by Bobby.

And there was a fall-out between JS and Bobby or Indres over this?

There were continuous fallouts with JS. He took everything he could for the Military – for Special Ops. He just thought we were there to service him.

I was told that the cream of the crop was taken into Special Ops, they were given the best resources, and the Political Machinery was desperate to get people, and you sometimes got people whom Special Ops and MK units wouldn't take. Do you agree with that or not?

Yes. I said that to you in the beginning. Special Ops got everything. They got all the cars. They got all the money and they got really good cadres. Rashid should have been in the Political. He had contacts in the Indian areas. Well, I didn't mind him being in the Military, but you see what's interesting is, and what I used to fight with JS about – and he didn't like it when I said it – is that the Military comrades wanted to work with us because we empowered them. We told them what was going on in the political arena. We discussed our analysis with them. We told them what we thought was the best way to move forward, not operationally but as an organisation.

And I'll give you an example of not operationally. So we get burnt. Some structure, one of Pravin's (Gordhan's) structures in Natal gets burnt. And we have to pull someone out of the country very quickly. And Mac gets this message from Durban and he comes to the Internal House and he says 'We've got to get comrade X out.'

I'd been two weeks in Maputo. So there's Indres and Bobby, and Mac says 'So how do we get him out?' There's dead silence. So Mac says 'So where does comrade X work?' Dead silence. So Mac says, 'Come on guys, you know… Alright he works at Liberty Life, what's his address?' Anyway, the long and short of it was that we didn't know anything. So now Mac was very disgruntled and very pissed off and asked for the Military's help. He doesn't like doing this.

And JS is very reluctant but JS brings round Blackman, Comrade Njebe (real name: Rev. Msibi). This is the first time I meet him. And in walks this handsome big bloke. So Mac very politely says 'Thank you very much for

coming. We've got to pull this comrade out and this is where he works.' By then we'd managed to get his address. So Blackman says 'Could you tell me what he looks like?' So Indres – I'm telling you this is a true story – said, 'Well, he's quite tall.' Bobby says 'Don't be ridiculous, he's tiny'. Indres said, 'Well, he's quiet…' 'Don't be ridiculous' – Bobby, again. Whatever Indres said, Bobby cut it out. It was like a skit from Monty Python. The only thing they could agree on was that this comrade had very small feet. When Blackman comes back to report, we were in hysterics because he gets to this comrade's office and he's talking to him but to check that he's got very small feet, he has to throw a pencil on the carpet to check his feet under the desk!. He managed to take the comade out of the country (laughter).

So you spoke a lot about JS' role in Special Ops and Obadi's. Are there any other names in Special Ops that stand out for you for their contribution to Special Ops?

You see, I wouldn't have known them for their role in Special Ops as such. I got to know Obadi because we were from the same Party unit and, second, because he and Gebuza were pals. So very often it was the three of us moving around together. The three of us went up to Ponto D'Ouro. The three of us went partying. The three of us went out to eat. We were like a threesome. But I was kept far away from their actual Machineries. I think this was also because I was the Secretary of the Political Machinery. So I knew them but I didn't know them to work with in an operational sense. I'd go into the Special Ops House to see Obadi and I'd greet everybody.

Except that while you were not inside the Special Ops structures, you interacted with several of its key figures, and even from that vantage point outside the structures, do you want to share any other views about them?

I cant remember too well anymore so I may not be very accurate. Well, Desert I remember. He died. I think Desert was the one who fought back during the Matola attack. Rashid will tell you more. Glen (Velaphi Msane), I'm pretty sure he was Special Ops, and I knew him because his wife was Zuma's secretary so she was in the flat all the time. She became the Inspector General of Intelligence, but at one stage she was married to Glen. And then there was Goodwin – was he Special Ops or was he in the Natal Machinery?

Out of all Gebuza's Machinery the one that I was most friendly with was Little Len, Johannes Rasagatla. And then I was friendly with Vivo.

Anything you want to say about Rashid?... Is it true that he was tough on comrades who returned from operations inside the country – about returning all the monies they'd not used up?

That's so Rashid!

The first time I went to the cinema in Maputo was with Obadi and a whole group of other comrades. We watched Cuban films, with sub-titles. Swedish movies too. We saw a lot of Ingmar Bergman. FRELIMO was very liberated on some levels in the first couple of years.

So art movies?

Yes. So there was a whole group of us who wanted to go out. It's not our country, and we're supposed to be a little bit discreet. We're not supposed to be noticed because we are involved in secret work. But, we're young, we want to go to the movies. When we get to the movie house, the comrades are picking up the used tickets others had thrown on the floor. And I said what are you picking up the tickets for? 'Oh no, Comrade Sue, you don't know anything. If you go to the office they reimburse you. They think it's your movie ticket.'

Maybe the comrades were irritiated with Rashid because he is very finickety – almost a perfectionist. So he would definitely make sure all monies were accounted for – especially what had been spent inside the country. Knowing how much was spent and on what made budgeting for the next operation much easier and more accurate.

What was your understanding of the role of Special Ops in a nutshell?

My understanding was how JS explained it to me, which was that you've got a specialised military unit cut off from all the bureaucracy and the obstacles of Headquarters and MK HQ, who were going to show the South African public that the ANC lives. Basically – armed propaganda.

And what were their key targets?

Visually impressive economic and military targets. Targets that would have major propaganda impact and coverage.

Sue Rabkin with Totsie Memela and Ntsiki Memela from the Maputo Political Machinery, with Joe Slovo in the background, 2024, Supplied

Rocky Williams says of Special Ops that 'the effects of the strategy Special Ops were twofold. On the one hand it resulted in a situation where the Special Ops Division, due to it's 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 rank…'

No doubt about that.

And he says too: 'and 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.'

That's vintage Rocky.

'Criticisms moreover,' he says, 'of the operations from the left so to speak, however, maintained that spectacular military operations of the Voortrekker Hoogte 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 late Joe Slovo, was placed under the direct Command of Oliver Tambo, with the Commander Joe Modise retaining only nominal oversight of this division.'

I cant remember so well. Special Ops was under JS who answered to Tambo. Yes. Joe Modise was commander of MK and gave direction on the Military Command Council. Remember – Special Ops operated alongside all the military machineries. It did not replace them. JM was the overall Commander.