

*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**

#### **Sunny Singh**

**27 June 2019 and 15 September 2019**

#### **Durban**

**Of course, the personal and political history of a veteran of your stature is well known, but maybe you can offer a very brief overview?**

Well, my political history started with my first experiments with exploitation at the tender age of eleven or twelve. Not consciously, but emotionally; it was the vicious exploitation by Indian landlords. I had not come across White people at that time so you could say it was a class issue within the Indian community, although I didn't realise that until later. It was the evils of landlordism. We leased land from one of them and they were very, very cruel, and that's when I began, in my own right, to understand an enemy, in my own environment in Cato Manor. My father was a rice grower and a flower planter. So, we leased the land from an Indian landlord...

I came from a family of five children. Our home was infringing on one of the landlord's son's property. He had demarcated the land among all his children and he forced us to demolish our home; and then my father managed to get volunteer's work. I was still very young. This was in 1951-52. But more important was child labour, that landlord owned an upholstery factory, and I used to come from school and help there at the factory, I used to tease the coil used for the upholstery of the sofas. My hand accidentally went into the machine, I still have the scars. Then my anger grew. I almost committed my first act of sabotage without knowing the consequences. I tried to set the factory alight but the machine didn't go on fire, and it wasn't a success.

So, it was not an accident that when the call was made on 16 December 1961 to join MK, I hastily did so in January 1962. Ebie (MK veteran Ebrahim Ismail Ebrahim) approached me. By then I had grown up, my consciousness had developed.

For example, '56 was a very historic year, full of excitement. (Gamal) Nasser (Egyptian President) nationalised the Suez Canal, the treason trial in South Africa, Russian tanks in Budapest. Those three events influenced me, and in

later years I realised there was a fourth event – Khrushchev at the twentieth Party congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union denounced Stalin. These four major events gave me a global view. I looked at the Indian ocean here, and I thought there was like an impending invasion because the ships could not pass through the Suez Canal since Nasser nationalised it.

In '58 there was a call for a boycott of potatoes because Joe Gqabi and Ruth First exposed the potato scandal, and that year I joined the Natal Indian Youth Congress. So, that was my beginning of politics.

### **And you end up on Robben Island?**

Well, there were draconian laws passed, including the Sabotage Act of 1962. We had a massive demonstration in West Street, led by Alan Paton and Monty Naicker. In '63 an amendment to the Sabotage Act was passed, the ninety day detention provisions. In August there were massive arrests of comrades throughout the country. In Natal the entire leadership was detained. I was detained on 7 August 1963.

The 'Trial of 19' was important. We had a non-racial composition of the accused, with 9 of the nineteen being Indians - and most of them came from working class backgrounds, except three students who were on Salisbury Island, Ebrahim, Siva Pillay and Suria Moodley.

I was sentenced to ten years on the Island.



**Sunny Singh with a photo of Che Guevara, his hero, Supplied**

### **What happens after your release?**

I was placed under twelve-hour house arrest. I was staying with my mother in the same house where I was detained in '63. I asked for a transfer to stay with my sister in Chatsworth. I had to report twice a week at the Smith Street police station. That's when I did political work in the underground whilst under house arrest. My focus was on Merebank. I recruited Ivan, his brother, Daya Pillay, Coastal Govender and Krish Rbabilal. I recruited some of them from the Black Consciousness Movement through political education. I

used Paul Sweezy, a Canadian Marxist's book, and an essay by Angela Davis on race and class. I used that essay to conscientise the Black Consciousness guys, bringing them towards the Congress movement. It was not an accident. Quite a few later joined the ANC, including Shamim Meer.

### **At some stage you leave the country – why was that?**

Well, section 10 of the Internal Security Act came into being. It put you out of circulation. Even Shun Chetty and Fatima Meer were locked up. Then, I got a message from one of the comrades, Shadrack Maphumulo, that I should leave the country, right. He was one of the accused in our trial. He was in the mid-80s kidnapped – a day or two before Ebrahim was kidnapped – from Swaziland and then subsequently killed.

I left the country in 1976, just after the Soweto uprising. Shadrack picked me up at 2 on Christmas morning at home in Chatsworth and then we went to fetch Riot Mkhwanazi, who was arrested with Zuma in Zeerust but was also, to our surprise, tried with us.

He also died about two years ago, I think. He was an ANC councillor in the predominantly IFP area around the University of Zululand.

I left South Africa for Swaziland. From Swaziland, Zuma fetched Riot and me from the Swaziland-Mozambique border. I spent a couple of weeks in Mozambique, then spent about three months in Tanzania before the ANC chartered a Zambian Airways plane to fly us to Angola. We had brief training there before five or six of us were sent to Berlin, in the then the German Democratic Republic. I did three months training on military combat work.

I came back to Angola where I had a short six weeks training programme at the Funda Camp. Then I joined the Natal Command as deputy to Zuma. I was a political Commissar with Johannes Phungula or Pass Four. He passed away. Then I realised after reading a book on a New People's Army in Philippines - by a progressive church group about organising people for power - that you cannot start without a political power base. The Internal Political and Reconstruction Department was set up, with Mac as the secretary, and Ivan and I joined the Political Intel Construction Committee about two years later.

I was in Mozambique for about nine years. After that I went back to MK, not to say that the political underground was not part of MK – but there was confusion. Some think that MK was only about AK47's, which is a fundamental error. I joined MI, MK's military intelligence, Ronnie Kasrils' unit. And then about five of us went to Moscow in the winter of '83 on a three months training course on military intelligence, after which I headed MI in Mozambique.

This was from '84, the pre-Nkomati Accord (between the apartheid regime and Mozambique). Two to three weeks later, Timol and I went to fetch Rashid at the airport and he was very excited, what are you guys doing here, he said.

There was a discussion taking place in Angola on People's War using the *Green Book* – following the leadership's visit to Vietnam. There is a fundamental error the leadership made; they wanted to separate the political struggle from the armed struggle, but the two are inter-related, and politics commands the

armed struggle, which needs a political base to be effective. When the document was finalised, drafted by Joe Slovo, I think, all the cream of the leadership was there, but only from MK, not the Political Section. When the document finally reached our hands – I got it from Sue (Rabkin, from the ANC Political Section), they didn't want me to distribute it to the MK guys. I said no, it doesn't make sense, it's a contradiction, and it's totally wrong. What is People's War if you don't have a political base? But without Zuma knowing, I showed it to Gordon Webster who had just come back from Moscow. I met him en route coming back.

My main focus was on recruiting foreigners in Mozambique for the simple reason to take pamphlets, booklets, whatever, across the border to Swaziland. Among them was Klaas de Jonge. And in some instances under pressure I could not separate the political and the armed issues, and those taking in political literature sometimes smuggled in guns hidden in car doors.

Two weeks after Klaas arrived with H el ene, his wife and their four children, Indres and I recruited him for the political underground. But then weeks, not even months, later Joe Slovo had his eye on Klaas and hijacked him from us, and the rest is history.

But following the Nkomati Accord, Rashid and Slovo and others were deported. I was then made the treasurer of the ANC, responsible for Maputo, Lesotho and Swaziland, the operations part, plus Joe decided I should chair the Military Committee, including Special Ops. My job for Special Ops was to be in charge of ordnance, the hard weapons, the rockets and so on. Rashid showed me where these were hidden, including in the homes of foreigners there. I knew some of them. But that role was for a short spell.

### **Were you formally part of Special Ops?**

No, not formally. I was formally MK, first in the political wing, then later in MI. But given the circumstances in Mozambique after Nkomati, Rashid and Joe said you are responsible, and Rashid showed me where the arms were. Victor (Johannes Mnisi) was also aware of my role.

I didn't work on any specific Special Ops operation with anybody. My focus was on ordnance for all MK operations. Most of the comrades were expelled from Mozambique after Nkomati but some of the guys infiltrated back and were underground, others went to Swaziland.

I remember for the last operation on Sasol, I took out the rockets and other materiel from ceilings of the safe houses, and assisted the comrades in the process of taking the hardware. But they forgot the ruler, the measuring rod, and when the rocket struck beside the loose earth it skewed because they didn't have the measuring rod. That was Barney Molokoane and them.

I also knew Rashid, of course. He is a very bright guy and technically very good and he did a lot for Special Ops. But I would not be able to easily work with him. He had quite a temperament and he could antagonise comrades in his unit. You must remember that those are the foot soldiers going into the country, doing the fieldwork, and he is based in the rear states.

I had a fight personally with him in Lusaka over a simple thing. We went to relax at Mac's place, Mac told him a simple learning from the Algerian Revolution: you can't attack a police station, you're going for sensational stuff, our struggle had to be rooted among the masses. But he wouldn't agree.

But you have to give Rashid his due for his planning and organising of operations. He also paid the price like many others and you have to acknowledge him. He was one of the key commanders of MK, not just Special Ops, as it was a wing of MK.

You know, Mandela was already behind bars – armed struggle is going nowhere. That's when he started the talks. He quoted the Algerian colonel. No academic studied the Afrikaners, de Wet, de La Rey, all these guys, like Madiba. Che Geuvera too, everybody you can think of, Madiba read. Also, while Mac was a student in London he sent books on guerrilla warfare from London to Madiba before Madiba got arrested in 1962.

**Okay. Who recruited Klaas for the Political Machinery? Was it you or Indres?**

Both of us. It was not Indres's job though. My focus area. I can tell you scores of people that I recruited, from Chile and elsewhere.

**Which of the foreigners that you recruited ended up with Special Ops?**

I can't mention names.

**But these days it's fine to do that? Others have mentioned names?**

No, no, I can't - because I will compromise people. Some guys are at Oxford, historians.

**Okay. Did you have a problem with Slovo 'hijacking', as it were, Klaas for Special Ops?**

No, no I didn't have a problem. Klaas did a good job. He is a romantic, but an excellent human being.

**Did you recruit Hélène as well for the political underground?**

Both of them.

## Together?

Yes, we spoke to both of them at their home, Indres and I. Indres is no more, but give the respect that's due to him. But Indres was involved at another level, he was not recruiting. At the end of the day, my job was not only to recruit - you tell the person why you are recruiting and they agree without compulsion, through persuasion – but to finish the final product, it means get the vehicle, ensure the literature is taken across the border into Swaziland. We would put it in the doors or under the backseats of the vehicles.

**Hélène seems to think that Indres recruited Klaas and he was already working with you without her knowledge? She says it was only after she was recruited into Special Ops that she discovered Klaas was involved with the political underground? And Klaas' involvement in Special Ops led to Indres arguing with Slovo about his hijacking of Klaas?**

Ja. I think, I would agree, possibly there was a clash. But, again if my memory serves me, Indres and I went to their house in Indres's car. We were in and out; it was like our home, like a station, seriously. So, we discuss this with them, that's my memory. I don't think I was alone. Both of them were there. But about her being approached by Joe into Special Ops, that's possible too.

And, you know what, I tested Klaas's memory, I asked him recently who recruited you? He said me.



**Sunny Singh with Julius Nyerere, President of Tanzania, Supplied**

**So, what do you think was the specific role of Special Ops?**

I can empathise to an extent, meaning it played its role, but it also had limits. It was more emotional and armed propaganda to have a psychological impact amongst our people. People were excited and felt that this great, grand army will be coming in to liberate South Africa with its sensational

attacks – Koeberg, Sasol, Voortrekkerhoogte, the Pretoria car bomb. The reconnaissance for the Pretoria car bomb was done by a British historian, now at Oxford, who was recruited by me, together with his wife. He took photographs. I gave them to Ronnie, Ronnie got excited like a baby and he ran to Joe Slovo.

### **'Excited like a baby', I like that expression...**

That's Ronnie. You know, if you study People's War in Vietnam and Nicaragua and other places, it's always rooted amongst the people. The Algerians started with knives, bayonets. The Algerian colonel discussed with Mandela, and he had brief training there also. Given your situation, he said, if you don't have international support and you are not rooted amongst people, like the mass democratic formations were, you will go nowhere. The Old Man (Mandela) had all the time in the world on the Island to think about this.

But I think it would be wrong to deny the role of Special Ops; it played a role.

### **Who denies the role of Special Ops?...**

I say it would be wrong to deny its impact psychologically; but then again it was not rooted among the people, it was more sensational; it wasn't like the Cuban, Algerian, Angolan or Mozambican armed struggles because our own geographical and political terrain was different and our political methods were different. We had a deep-rooted working class, a strong trade union movement, an urbanised population and built-up infrastructure, and we didn't have the conditions for classical guerrilla struggle. And we had four pillars to our struggle – the mass struggles, armed struggle, political underground and international. Even Mugabe later in the struggle period realised Zanu (Zimbabwe African National Union) couldn't focus on the armed struggle only, they had to put the political struggle in the forefront.

Anyway, Joe Slovo was the overall Commander of Special Ops. The MK Chief of Staff was Chris Hani, but Slovo was deputy to Joe Modise. I played a very limited role in Special Ops in terms of the post-Nkomati situation. I realised I can't be sectional or sectarian, Special Ops was part of MK, part of the struggle. But we had to build the political underground. It was the first time in the history of the struggle that OR couldn't take it anymore, and that's why *Operation Vula* (political underground structure as part of basing senior ANC leaders inside South Africa) came into being. Leadership was put inside the country. Chris was also supposed to come into the country, I don't know why, but at the last minute he pulled out.

### **Of the Special Ops operations, which two or three you think were the best and why?**

Well, Voortrekkerhoogte didn't have a big impact. The rocket just fell on the yard. It's a massive base, and it didn't hit the the sleeping quarters or where there were scores of soldiers. I think the biggest attack – sensational – was Sasol in 1980. As a result there was a revenge reprisal from the state, the Matola Raid in January '81

## **Who are some of the leaders in Special Ops that stand out for you and why?**

Victor Molefe (Johannes Mnisi) and particularly Barney. They were right inside, carrying out operations and then you can't exclude the rear base, Rashid, we must give him due respect in terms of organising, planning the operations.

I was constantly servicing comrades in the underground. Barney and them, I used to see every second day as if I was in Special Ops. I developed an intimacy with them and Rashid and all knew that. Logistics was my main concern. Comrade Barney was very, very special, absolutely humble. I don't know his social background, but he was always with his group, giving them moral courage, encouraging them spiritually and so on. He gave them that kind of support. To have a tight unit, you have to be with the comrades in your unit. Barney had that special characteristic. Unlike the overall Commander who was in the rear base, Baker.

It was like the guys when the Germans were attacking Stalingrad, whatever. Ronnie wrote a poem about a Russian soldier who was part of a sniper group who became a hero of the patriotic war, as they called it. This is an excellent example, it's like when they hoisted the red flag on the Reichstag and arrived in Berlin. Here was this huge home where the Special Ops guys were dumped, on a Portuguese estate, like the Natal Command. The Portuguese had no birth control, massive homes.

Barney fought very bravely and ended up dying at a military hospital. It was the most touching, moving and inspiring event. This was part of Special Ops. When you talk about a soldier prepared to give his life that's Barney!

## **Did you know Obadi, the first Commander of Special Ops after Slovo?**

With Obadi, it was more logistics and so forth, but I didn't know him well because he was based at the Matola residence.

## **Anything you want to say about Klaas and Hélène?**

Firstly, when I reflect now, I have a problem with a middle-aged couple with four children volunteering for that kind of operation, I don't know. They were too caught up in romance and revolution. I wouldn't have done that. I would do other things for the underground. I would take the leaflets and so on. But to take such a high risk, no. And Hélène also, she totally breached rules of security; she had no right to connect with Ebrahim in the underground. Ebrahim compromised her and also by cutting across lines also Mo Shaikh and them. But that's history now!...

Klaas and I are also very close friends. He always talked about educating his children, Fabrice, Bridget, Phillippe and Eno. Eno was the closest to me, the boy

from his first wife. But both Klaas and H  l  ne are lovely human beings. Both were elsewhere on Africa before they came to South Africa.

H  l  ne was in Belgian Congo. Her husband was teaching there and she had that exposure to the problems there. All that built up her understanding, and that's why she didn't hesitate when the call was made by Special Ops. In summary, I think like scores of others, they are lovely human beings. Very caring. And I think that is why we are indebted to them and scores of others.

### **You've spoken about Rashid. What did you make of Joe Slovo?**

I was in the same Party unit as him, which included Edwin, Steven Dlamini's son, and Lennox Lagu. Marvellous guy as a human being and also in terms of giving political leadership – but I am not so sure about military leadership. Slovo was a principal theoretician of the struggle overall, also in the SACP and MK. He would talk for hours with the young guys about MK and Special Ops and so they also decided to join the SACP, including Barney, Obadi and Paul Dikeledi. But he cut across and influenced the political consciousness of young guys in the movement as a whole and he really conquered them. Here's a White man who could have been a judge, he could have had a high position in the apartheid government like Braam Fischer, but he was prepared to sacrifice all that. I got to know Slovo very intimately, I was staying a few doors away from Helena Dolny and Ed Wethli and used to sometimes babysit their little girl. Later, Slovo became Helena's partner.

**Now about the role of Special Ops, (MK Intelligence operative) Rocky Williams says the effects of the strategy of a Special Ops unit within MK were twofold. His exact words: 'On the one hand, it resulted in a situation where the Special Operations Division, due to its profile, responsibilities and capabilities, began to assume a much greater responsibility for the conduct of internal military operations than it should have done. On the other, the preferential location of the Special Operations Division under the command of Tambo created a degree of resentment and mistrust amongst MK rank-and-file...'**

I would go along with that to an extent – because there wasn't much else happening. At one stage Durban was a bombed city through the Natal Command. But Special Ops' had sensational attacks, Sasol especially. I am not too sure what impact Koeberg had. There wasn't an explosion, they hit the reactors before they were loaded with nuclear fuel to avoid a disaster. Even the Voortrekkerhoogte, it was more like a Chinese cracker landed there. Empty fields. But Sasol had an impact; these little boys, this big, massive action. It reverberated through the length and breadth of the country. And the media gave huge coverage. It also cut both ways, it inspired confidence among our people but at the same time the enemy used it to attack us badly.

**Williams also says that by locating Special Ops preferentially under the command of Tambo directly, it created degree of resentment from other MK Units. They felt why is this unit directly answerable to OR? Do you agree or not?**

I won't agree.

**Did you get any sense that people in MK were feeling that Special Ops is getting more resources, more funding, more support from Tambo and Slovo and they resented that and said why are you giving so many resources to Special Ops as against us?**

Not personally, but I think perhaps to a little extent, by not the foot soldiers, but by the Commanders. There wasn't much happening. But OR would not give twenty three hours to Special Ops and one hour to the foot soldier. OR was extremely sensitive and sensible, he gave everybody an equal share. Really!

**And Rocky says too that this: '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'...**

I think Rashid and Mac are better qualified to answer this. I couldn't at the middle level see that kind of tension.

**'Criticisms moreover,' he says, '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 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 agree, it goes back to the argument with Sue (Rabkin), about People's War and having a political base. I will agree with that.



Sunny Singh with students, Supplied

**Overall then, in summary, what do you think were some of Special Ops successes and failures?**

Well, you can't answer this question without taking into account the overall strategies and tactics of the ANC. The

fundamental error the leadership made was that none of them was prepared to even go to Swaziland. Yet during the Maseru massacre, OR flew to Lesotho. He was there as a Commander. Even Cassius Make was killed in Swaziland, part of the Central Command. So, I mean you cannot separate one from the other. You can't make Special Ops a special, totally different sort of organ from the armed struggle as a whole. It had a special purpose, it served its mission, its mission was limited.

As you know, you were inside, it's the mass struggle, especially when the UDF (United Democratic Front) was created, the unions and the strikes that carried more weight and also international sanctions. I think the Algerian colonel made that very clear to Mandela way back in '61 about the situation.

It was too late, the mission to send leadership in '86. They were scared to get to the Swazi border. I don't think even Joe Slovo came – the overall Commander, I mean, of Special Ops, he didn't even go to Botswana, Swaziland, really.

You know what happened after the Nkomati Accord? All hell broke loose, helter skelter, three quarters of them moved to Zambia and Tanzania. Others were waiting for their assignments and their heads were blown off because of the rocket attack by the enemy in Swaziland. We were too cushioned, became too cosy in Mozambique. After the Mozambique Command summoned us to their security headquarters, only a few of us were allowed to stay, Zuma and some others.

### **How come you were allowed to stay there?**

I think the police didn't know me. I had the MK name - Bobby Pillay. I was made chair of the Military Committee. And I recruited Zuma's wife, Kate. She was working at the airport. I went right up to the Tanzanian, Malawi and Zambia borders and to Lake Malawi to see which way we could get weapons below the belly of the security. We tried the airport and I should pick Kate up at about ten at night to collect the bags with arms that were on the Taag, the Angolan airline flight to Maputo. Kate played a pivotal role.

### **What do you make of where South Africa is today?**

I liked Pravin Gordhan's response about the present government under the new Ramaphosa leadership and the problems of the country. It's a different leadership, but I think there is a difference between being complacent and being optimistic. I think I am optimistic. The problem is that we make a fundamental error again. The enemy forces are arrayed against any change, against this Cyril Ramaphosa government. The majority of these (compromised) people are in the NEC, the National Working Committee and as chairpersons of the different committees in parliament.

That's why it's important to mobilise the patriotic forces. You have to go beyond the ANC to give support to the democratic dispensation, I think. It's not only the task of the ANC, but somewhere the ANC must give leadership to a broader front like the MDM (mass democratic movement) to support democracy, calling on the patriotic forces, I believe. But I don't believe we will get that from the ANC.

**But since 1994, as a whole, how do you think we've done?**

I think a lot has been done on education, health, housing, electricity and so on. But much, much more could have been done. And there is no argument, you see it in the Auditor General's report. Just look at the mayor here (Zandile Gumede in eThekweni) and her corruption trial. The City Manager will testify against the mayor. We are like a Gangster's Republic, really.

**You made a huge, selfless contribution and have asked for nothing in return, like many others of your generation. If you knew before 1990 that South Africa would turn out the way it has now, would you still have sacrificed so much?**

If we knew then that it would be like this now? I think that's a very good question. People have all the right in terms of the Constitution to speak and criticise. But how you, a new soldier in a new cadre in the present dispensation, respond is important. You have to be like a tailor and cut your cloth to suit the situation – and I think many of us failed.

I think, yes, I would have made the sacrifices anyway because democracy has given us space and if you don't exploit the space, don't blame Pretoria. It's given us freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, whatever, to mobilise and go across the party lines and engage with the broader community, not in a doctrinaire way. No, I would never go back on the black, green and gold. Our people, firstly, need to have pride that we have sovereign state with one of the best constitutions in the world. Yes, there are massive problems, crime and joblessness in particular, and we need to push the wagon together. As Cyril says, *Thuma Mina* (send me to serve).