

Robert McBride: Soldier of misfortune

The bomber who once embodied white South Africa's greatest fears, has just been condemned, for different reasons, by the new rulers. But he's still fighting to bring down babylon

17 March 2019 BY RANJENI MUNUSAMY

In September 1992, Robert McBride was in his cell at Westville prison in Durban when he was summoned for a telephone call.

The caller was Cyril Ramaphosa.

"He told me I was going to be released," says McBride with a wry grin.

The call was fateful for both men. Two years later, McBride would save Ramaphosa from being shot on the East Rand.

In January 1994, McBride was taking Ramaphosa and Joe Slovo on a tour of the areas where ANC self-defence units, he said, were waging war with the IFP.

In an article published on South African History Online, McBride described what happened when they came under fire.

"Cyril's bodyguards run away. By instinct, I automatically grab Cyril. I want to put him down, but I am not his bodyguard, and am feeling embarrassed to throw him on the floor. So I say: 'Chief, go down!'; he says: 'Are you suggesting I must lie down on the floor?' - the shooting is going on all over outside. Anyway, he goes down. Then someone - a lady soldier - dives and puts him on the floor. But the bullets are flying."

When McBride received the call from Ramaphosa in prison, he could not have anticipated what awaited him on the outside: he would quickly have to resume his role as a combatant to counter IFP attacks on communities on the East Rand; he would have to recount all his actions at the Truth & Reconciliation Commission (TRC); and he would become both hero and villain in the democratic government.

Those were heady times when McBride walked free.

The ANC and other liberation organisations had been unbanned in 1990 and former exiles and prisoners were being reintegrated into a society still defined by oppression, racial segregation and violence.

The stop-start negotiations with the apartheid government were under way and the transition to democracy was in sight.

Then, Nelson Mandela put his foot down. He wanted McBride, who had been on death row before his sentence was commuted to life imprisonment, to be released before the ANC would continue negotiations.

FW de Klerk gave in. It was Ramaphosa, then ANC secretary-general and lead negotiator for the ANC, who broke the news to McBride.

That should have been the point when things took a turn for the better for McBride, having been spared death and lifelong incarceration.

Then 29, he had already lived a life that thriller writers peg their plots on.

He was a member and eventually commander of the special operations unit in Umkhonto weSizwe (MK), the ANC's military wing.

He masterminded and pulled off multiple attacks and acts of sabotage against the apartheid government.

In 2001, the TRC granted McBride amnesty for 15 incidents, including a rocket attack on the Mobil refinery, the blowing up of numerous power stations and pylons, and effecting the escape of his comrade in special ops, Gordon Webster, from Edendale Hospital in Pietermaritzburg.

Webster was shot while being arrested, and kept under police guard at the hospital. A daring escape plan was devised, which included detonating grenades at a nearby police station to draw police away.

McBride and his father, Derrick, were disguised as a doctor and a priest to penetrate the heavily guarded hospital. McBride, armed with an assault rifle under the doctor's coat, entered the ward, exchanged fire with a policeman who retreated, and then wheeled Webster

out in a laundry trolley.

Operations such as these are why the special ops unit had legendary status and reported directly to MK chief of staff Joe Slovo - and even ANC president Oliver Tambo.

A TURBULENT CAREER

But it was his setting off of a car bomb on Durban's beachfront in June 1986 outside a nightspot frequented by security branch policemen that earned him notoriety as "the Magoo's Bar bomber".

Three civilians were killed and McBride became the embodiment of white SA's greatest fear and horror.

He was sentenced to death in the Pietermaritzburg Supreme Court in April 1987, three months before he turned 24. He lived with the stain of being a bloodthirsty terrorist long after the rest of the ANC were embraced as heroes and nation-builders.

Twenty-seven years on, McBride's hell ride through life continues.

He is engaged in an epic showdown with police minister Bheki Cele over his position as head of the Independent Police Investigative Directorate (Ipid). Many people have been stunned by the turn of events as the ANC in parliament's police portfolio committee joined Cele in shafting McBride to end his tenure.

On Thursday the National Assembly confirmed the committee's report that McBride should go, but he is still contesting the matter in the high court, joined by Corruption Watch and the Helen Suzman Foundation.

I meet McBride at Liliesleaf, the capture site of the Rivonia triallists. The heritage site is a treasure trove that tells the story of the fateful moments leading to the arrest in 1963 of the MK high command.

McBride is moved by a plaque near the entrance that bears a quote from former ANC president Albert Luthuli on the sentencing of the Rivonia triallists.

"No one can blame brave just men for seeking justice by the use of violent methods; nor could they be blamed if they tried to create an organised force in order to ultimately establish peace and racial harmony."

For McBride, who has spent most of his adult life contending with condemnation of his methods of fighting apartheid, this is vindication.

"People who do moral analysis of our actions don't take into account the context," he says. "Over time we are made to feel guilty about taking up arms against the apartheid state."

He glances around the historic site.

"I was part of the same MK that Mandela started - the same Mandela that received a Nobel peace prize.

"When they were here, they were not sitting together singing gospel songs. They were planning a revolution here. I implemented what they planned," he says.

Then the frown disappears and his voice softens.

"There wasn't a great big humanity opposing apartheid . It was tough. And lonely."

McBride experienced the full brunt of the apartheid system from a young age. He grew up in Wentworth, south of Durban, where coloured people were dumped when the Group Areas Act was enforced. The area was, and still is, beset by crime, unemployment, gang violence and poor living and social conditions.

His first clash with the apartheid security forces was during the Soweto uprising in 1976 when police responded to protests at his school in Kimberley with batons and teargas.

Ten years later, when the country was a hotbed of violence during the state of emergency, McBride, having received special ops training, unleashed a string of attacks on key facilities.

"We were instilled with discipline from the time of orientation. We understood there can be no military victory from our actions. Our aim was to force negotiations," says McBride.

I ask McBride about his state of mind during his time on death row. He says he was always convinced that his actions were justified and accepted the price he had to pay. But in the aftermath of the bombing, he went through a period of depression and grief. Years later, he apologised to the families of his victims.

"The fact that our actions were necessary doesn't take away my own humanity . Those were human beings, like me . War is shit."

McBride's chequered legacy, particularly the campaign for clemency and his release, is captured in the history books. In my research, I discovered a letter McBride wrote to his mother, Doris, after he was sentenced to death.

It begins:

"Comrade Mummy,

"There are so many people here on Death Row. There are so many it's unbelievable. This thing of capital punishment must end as soon as possible. A government that has to hang so many people to maintain 'law and order' should be ashamed of itself."

Referring to the judge, McBride wrote: "How can he ever imagine the social and psychological make-up of a person like myself - a product of the ghetto. I am a product of the ghetto, but not because of choice, because of the colour of my skin! Can he even appreciate this fact? All these things play a part in how a person behaves or will behave."

On his sentence, he wrote: "My sentence is not what all of South Africa wants or expects, it is what the white minority privileged South Africa wants."

He rounds off his letter by saying: "This Babylonian apartheid monster is giving its last kicks . But now we have to deliver the final blow to the philosophy of racialism and racial supremacy."

When democracy came, McBride did not know where he belonged. He served in the Gauteng legislature before going to parliament for a few months. He then resigned and joined the department of foreign affairs.

Then McBride's life took another bizarre turn. He was arrested in Mozambique on charges of gun running and held at Machava maximum-security prison in Maputo for several months.

He was eventually cleared of all charges when it was revealed that he was on an operation for the National Intelligence Agency to track the movement of weapons into the country.

But the incident earned him further notoriety.

So there was great uproar when McBride was appointed chief of the metropolitan police of Ekurhuleni in 2003.

But as in all his roles, he excelled in the position until he was in a car crash three years later after a Christmas party. He was charged with drunken driving, fraud and defeating the ends of justice, but was acquitted.

He claimed he was set up, and this was confirmed by the high court in Pretoria when the state tried to appeal his acquittal.

THE ROTTWEILER

His rotten luck didn't change after his appointment as Ipid head, which there was also fierce opposition to.

But as the watchdog over the SA Police Service, McBride seemed to finally find his place.

"I'm good at doing departmental turnarounds," he says. "Ipid was a little chihuahua, now it's a rottweiler."

But in this role, McBride rattled too many cages, particularly the political and business networks feeding off the state with the protection of crooked elements in the police.

In March 2015, McBride, then Hawks heads Anwa Dramat and then Gauteng Hawks boss Shadrack Sibiyi were suspended by then police minister Nathi Nhleko in connection with the alleged rendition of Zimbabweans.

McBride fought all the way to the Constitutional Court to be reinstated and to affirm the independence of Ipid.

Yet this is still in contention in McBride's standoff with Cele. When his contract expired, Cele himself first tried to end his tenure and when it became clear this was outside his powers, he recommended that the police portfolio committee do so.

"This is not a normal job. It is not only the institution; the person who heads Ipid must be independent, including through security of tenure. The executive director of Ipid is not an employee of the minister," says McBride.

He says the position should not be "less independent" than those of the national director of public prosecutions, the public protector and the head of the Hawks.

"I would have walked away if he did not create a set of lies about me," McBride says.

He is also irate that the portfolio committee would not allow him to make an oral submission to it.

While McBride does not attack the ANC for this stance, he does bemoan what has happened to his organisation.

"There is no value base. The spirit of selflessness that defined who we were is gone. It is now a power grab - how to feed and eat.

"It is not any third force that destabilised the ANC," says McBride. "The ANC did it to itself."
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He adds: "The ANC has never gone to court once to defend the constitution."

Although he is now out of a job, McBride vows to continue the very same battle he started when he was a teenager.

When sentenced to death, he responded: "The struggle continues until Babylon falls."
The new Babylon is state capture.

"I stood up against apartheid and I stood up against state capture. They are on the same side of the coin - it's corruption."

McBride says he is concerned by talk that there should be some form of indemnity for people who come forward to give evidence at the Zondo commission of inquiry into state capture.

"This is treason. There cannot be impunity. There must be prosecutions."

McBride's testimony at the commission is highly anticipated as he has implicated as many as 30 people and is expected to blow the lid off nefarious activity in the police that supported state capture.

It has been speculated that this is the reason the ANC cut him loose.

But McBride is the ultimate political survivor.

Had he been hanged by apartheid's executioners, McBride would probably be among the ANC's legion of heroes.

Now he is what he has always been: condemned, unforgiven, the soldier of misfortune..