McBride & the TRC: Secrets, lies and legacy of deadly bombing

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The courtroom version of the Durban Magoo bombing was common knowledge by 1988: Robert McBride, an MK Special Operative, had bought a 1978 blue Ford Cortina with money given to him by the ANC in Botswana. After purposefully cutting down burglar guards into appropriate shrapnel, he packed the car with explosives and chose a target. McBride, however, says the court record as summarised by the SCA was not the truth in its entirety and there are other details that are less commonly known. Here follow the TRC's Section 29 Inquiries for Robert McBride and Greta Apelgren (Zahrah Narkedien). By ROBYN LESLIE & DEBORA MATTHEWS.

On 14 June 1986, a fierce explosion rent through Durban's beachfront strip, killing three women and wounding 89 other people. It was 9:30 on a drizzly Saturday night, and the Parade Hotel on Marine Parade was packed to capacity. The explosion, identified as a car bomb, caused devastation at the Hotel's two bars, Why Not? and Magoo's, the former a popular haunt for Durban's security branch and police force.

When Robert McBride was tortured by the security branch for information about the explosion a few months later, his assailant was furious about the attack on his turf. In his Section 29 inquiry, Robert McBride recalled the angry taunts from a policeman: "You fucked up my buddies there", the man spat, while McBride was subjected to "kicks and clouts". The more serious torture methods – sustained punching, squeezing his testicles, verbal abuse and having his leg broken – those would come later.

Handed the death penalty for planting this bomb, amongst other terrorism charges, McBride challenged this sentence as far as the Supreme Court of Appeal (SCA) in 1988, in pursuit of clemency. Justice Corbett, in his SCA judgement, states the facts of the case as described by the appellant himself. Robert John McBride had told the court that anger, rage and constant police harassment of himself and his community led him to consider violence. "If they want war, I am going to give them war", he claimed. In his judgement, Justice Corbett simplistically stated that McBride "thought about it, and on the morning of 14 June decided to make a car bomb".

The courtroom version of the Magoo bombing was common knowledge by 1988: McBride, an MK Special Operative, had bought a 1978 blue Ford Cortina with money given to him by the ANC in Botswana – money intended as compensation for family members of an MK member who had been killed. After purposefully cutting down burglar guards into appropriate shrapnel, he packed the car with explosives and chose a target – the Hyperama shop on Durban's West Street, a busy shopping area that would have been almost deserted on a late Saturday night.

He then asked fellow MK operatives Matthew Lecordier and Greta Apelgren to make themselves available, but still didn't tell them about the plans for the evening. Greta had been asked to arrive at the Hyperama in her sister's car, a Mazda 323. She was soon waiting for McBride, unaware of the intention or purpose of the night's activities. She was dressed smartly, ready for a night on the town to clear her mind from recent events: on 13 June, Greta's sister, Jeanette Apelgren, had been detained by the police at gun point.

Lecordier was to be McBride's passenger in the Cortina. When exactly McBride told Lecordier about the bomb is unclear. In his testimony to the TRC's Amnesty Committee in October 1999, Lecordier said that when driving into the city centre en route to the Hyperama, the Ford had gone over a large bump, shaking the car and its occupants. In a heart-in-mouth moment, McBride confessed to having 60kgs of explosives in the boot. “I did not think he was serious,” said Lecordier.

When he heard about the operation’s intent, Matthew immediately convinced McBride to place the bomb in a location that would be “more damaging to white people”, and suggested a popular bar on Durban’s beachfront strip. After settling on Marine Parade, Greta Apelgren was informed that her car was now required at a new location. She went ahead to save an appropriate parking spot for the Ford on Marine Parade. When the Blue Cortina arrived, she vacated the spot, waited for Robert and Matthew to park and then drove off with the two men in her passenger seats. It was only at this stage that she was told Robert had just lit a fuse that would shortly detonate a boot full of packed explosives.

McBride’s death sentence was upheld by the SCA, and he remained on death row for the next five years. Reprieved on 21st April 1991, McBride was released from prison in 1992, and faced his first inquiry at Truth and Reconciliation Commission exactly six years after his stay of execution.

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On 21 April 1997, Robert McBride, with his lawyer Brian Currin, sat in his first Section 29 inquiry. This closed inquiry took place a few months before his amnesty hearing, and by this stage, Robert McBride’s public persona – as saboteur or freedom fighter, depending on your politics – had been established for a decade already. Journalists perennially wonder why McBride’s reputation as a “terrorist” has stuck, when sabotage and murder formed part of South Africa’s narrative for more than three decades. Janet Smith wrote in 2011: “Of every atrocity committed by the Apartheid government against black South Africans, and of every retaliatory act by the liberation movements, it still seems as if Magoo’s is the one that cannot be forgotten or forgiven.”

At his Section 29 inquiry, McBride explained that the court record as summarised by the SCA was not the truth in its entirety – something many people had become curious about in the intervening years. Discrepancies about what really happened on 14 June 1986 had crept into the public domain: did McBride act on his own volition? Did Matthew Lecordier really change the target at the last minute? What was Greta Apelgren’s true role in the bombing?

In his Section 29 inquiry, he explained that the version of events he presented in court was designed to protect the MK and ANC, and his own life. He left many details out of his defence that would have pointed to a planned and authorised act of sabotage. The truth was that both the target selection and car bomb method were part of the ANC’s People’s War – a response to Apartheid brutality and an attempt to make South African ungovernable. His court appearance was designed to encourage the view that he was interpreting his mandate as an MK member, alone and unsupported. By altering certain details of the car bomb plot, he hoped to avoid the ANC being stigmatised as a terrorist organisation. Also, if he had admitted to taking orders from the ANC in exile in court, McBride explains, the death penalty would have been a certainty.

So the truth, McBride begins, is that in 1986 he had been an MK Special Operative, focusing on sabotage, and receiving orders from the ANC in exile in Botswana. McBride had originally been part of Gordon Webster's guerilla cell, and had recently been instructed by the ANC to form his own unit. Greta, and her sister Jeanette, were soon recruited to McBride's unit, and would provide "romantic cover" for the trips over the border into Botswana, necessary for receiving his orders and meeting with commanders of the ANC in exile.

The instruction to create and suitably place a car bomb, it turns out, was actually Gordon Webster's task, who then asked McBride to find an appropriate target. Such a target choice, countering the information provided in 1986 – that he simply woke up one morning to make a bomb – had involved intelligence-gathering and personal verification of whether the choice of location fitted the ANC's mandate. The ANC's directive was clear, as McBride stated in his inquiry "...generally activists were instructed by the ANC to form their own units, attack policemen and collaborators".

MK intelligence had identified that the Why Not? Bar on Marine Parade was one of a few favourite haunts of off-duty policemen. McBride visited the spot himself a few times, and felt that this would potentially be an appropriate target. On one of his *recce* visits, McBride explains, he was not allowed into the bar – but someone was leaving as his entry was denied, and he overhead a particular greeting that was associated with the security forces: "*May the force be with you*" – a *Star Wars* film reference that was in vogue at the time. McBride explained that it was used "in a comradely spirit" by the police and security branch.

Contrary to the 1980s court record, discussion about the location of the car bomb was fraught and by no means unconsidered. McBride explains how he raised his concerns about the target with his commander. "[The target selection] was a place where there was a concentration of security personnel, but where there could be injury or death to people who were not direct targets...this is the issue I raised with my commander". Highlighting concerns about collateral damage, McBride realised that the ANC's stance on cross-fire was changing.

The 1980s had indeed seen a shift in ANC policy. The brutal tactics of Apartheid's security forces had prompted the ANC to consider alternatives to the kinds of sabotage and guerilla tactics that were currently deployed. After its 1985 consultative conference in Kabwe, Zambia, the ANC made a statement redefining its armed struggle's ambit:

"*Up to now our dedication to the avoidance of racial confrontation has often prevented us from dealing telling blows against the enemy and his installations for fear that white civilians would be caught in the cross-fire or be killed or injured in the vicinity of an enemy installation...The escalating brutality perpetrated daily against our people is now creating a new situation. We can no longer allow our armed activities to be determined solely by the risk of such civilian casualties. We believe that the time has come when those who stand in solid support of the race tyranny and who are its direct or indirect instruments, must themselves begin to feel the agony of our counter-blows*".

These – the Kabwe Conference outcomes – were the guidelines McBride's commander suggested he examine, when identifying targets for sabotage.

Things only got worse when the Apartheid state declared a state of emergency on 12 June 1986. The latitude allowed to security forces as a result of this declaration resulted in at least 1,000 people being detained in its first 12 hours of operation. In response to such escalating violence, MK recruitment, training and communication became even more entrenched in secrecy and minimal information-sharing. In his Section 29 inquiry, McBride explained that he had been told to set up small guerilla cells, and then exit as commander, leaving the recruitment of further cells to the new leaders. That way, no-one would ever know who exactly was part of the People's War. McBride describes that the MK operated "within a code of secrecy and maximum discipline", and can reel off a list of colleagues' aliases as long as his arm: Bheki, Temba, Chris, Oupa, Kallie (sometimes, George), Victor, and McBride's commander, Rashid.

This culture of secrecy had its problems. McBride's reportedly deep discomfort with the order to execute the car bomb plan, may have been because he wasn't allowed to mention any specifics of his operation to his commander, as per the extreme secrecy of guerilla operations. MK members had to be trusted to know ANC guidelines, and their commanders were never to know any operational details. At best, his fears had to be vaguely articulated to Rashid – and nebulously responded to. Greta Apelgren, who accompanied McBride on this trip to Botswana where he was given the go-ahead for the operation, thinks back to their drive home at her Section 29 inquiry: "I know when we left Botswana…Robert wasn't his normal self…He was withdrawn, he was very anxious and hardly talking to me. He didn't really want to eat."

Apelgren continues: "Eventually I had to question him and say 'but why are you so tense?'…Then he said Rashid had given him an instruction he feels very uncomfortable about. He doesn't even think he can do it".

Many years later, Greta Apelgren would explain to a Section 29 panel how she tried to deal with the consequences of her actions on 14 June 1986. She only discovered the full impact of the blast from the Sunday papers the next morning; and when McBride – her boyfriend at the time – came to see her that morning after, he found her packed and ready to run. She told Robert sharply, "I'm leaving. I'm leaving you. I can't work with you anymore." Explaining her feelings of shock, Apelgren attempts to describe how she and colleagues dealt with what they were doing – fighting a People's War that was terrifying and violent: "We had a philosophy, after each incident, each activity – we had a policy where we said 'it never happened'…in order to suppress the information and deal with the horrors of what we were doing".

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McBride joined Apelgren on her flight, and together they went on the run to Johannesburg, but were arrested about a month later, at McBride's relative's house. In her Section 29 inquiry, Apelgren explains how McBride was desperately attempting to arrange for them to go into exile, but his contacts said it wasn't safe to extract them. It's presumed that a phone call from this relative's house was their undoing, as the phone was most likely tapped. They were soon arrested, and after a long drive down to the security police in Durban, they were ready for interrogation.

The trauma Apelgren sustained while being tortured for information about her role in the bomb blast as an MK member is clear. In her Section 29 inquiry, Apelgren admits that her memory is blurred and there are some aspects of her torture she declines to describe. She remembers few names, but recalls phrases used to mock and intimidate her: "…nobody knows what we are doing to you, and we'll make sure we don't leave marks". Much like McBride, she was coerced into numerous false confessions, which she states were then shredded after she had signed. Repeated threats against her family, and continual taunts about how the ANC had deserted her, formed part of her psychological torture.

Matthew Lecordier, McBride's wing-man on the night of the bombing, also claims that he was severely assaulted and threatened with grievous harm to his family, particularly his son, when he was arrested for his role in the sabotage. And it was this pressure, he explains, that made him turn state witness against his comrades.

"I was very afraid of both standing against my comrades and of standing with the police," he told the Amnesty Committee in 1999. With his credit destroyed in his own community, and his terror of the noose that was repeatedly shown to him by prosecutors as a death threat if he turned again, he was soon ruled an unreliable witness. A further casualty from this desperate period of South Africa's history, Lecordier was hounded by security police for the next few years, being badgered to turn informer, to infiltrate, to spy.

The secrecy and corresponding distrust that is a hallmark of guerilla tactics has left its mark on South Africa's psyche. Closing ranks and protecting their own was a policy practiced by both sides of this asymmetrical battle, and the constant mantra of "don't ask, don't tell, follow orders" meant the line of responsibility was constantly blurred. The power of a police and security structure unfettered by accountability had long been in evidence: in this case, the torture of MK operatives, the enforced betrayals and coerced statements. The retaliation of those oppressed by Apartheid's racism was dangerous, clandestine and desperate. In his Section 29 inquiry in 1997, McBride succinctly summed up South Africa's 1980s of discontent: "It wasn't exactly how we are sitting here, where there is no war going on outside. I think it's important I must mention that to you".

McBride's car bomb ended people's lives, and altered his own irrevocably. Greta Apelgren, while they were still in hiding together before their 1986 arrest and torture, remembers how Robert seemed to be slowly falling to pieces. "I couldn't talk to him much. He used to cry a great deal. He was depressed a lot." She describes how he used to rise early in the day and weep, "…his whole body would be bent over and crying, sob so badly…he was damaged after that."

And for herself? Apelgren, who converted to Islam and changed her name to Zahrah Narkedien, says: "Certain things will bring back the memory, and all I can do is say, 'Well, I'm in God's hands. It's entirely up to Him what He does with me.'"

The moral of this dark episode is that war is dirty, and cruel, and degrading. A battle for freedom is not waged through pretty speeches, but a chaotic, violent, often despairing struggle that thrives on secrecy, obedience and sacrifice – with patterns of behaviour that leak into our democratic dispensation. Along with a hard-won freedom, this too is a legacy of our brutal past. It is this less glamorous inheritance that South Africans do not often acknowledge – and it is ignored at our own peril. **DM**

Leslie and Matthews work for the South African History Archive (SAHA), and this article forms part of SAHA's long-standing work on the unfinished business of the TRC. This is part two in a series of articles discussing the newly released Section 29 materials. You can read more about SAHA and Section 29 here.

Photo: Robert McBride is seen at the Constitutional Court in Johannesburg on Thursday, 30 September 2010 during an appeal by the Citizen newspaper against an award of damages and defamation granted to him. Picture: Werner Beukes/SAPA