

Inside the longest war in SA's history

By Thula Simpson Mar 5, 2016

Umkhonto we Sizwe: The ANC's Armed Struggle is the first in-depth look into the longest ever insurgency in South African history, writes Thula Simpson.

Sergeant Richard Nxumalo and Detective Constable Dorasamy are driving along a deserted dirt road in Natal's Edendale district on the evening of 27 April.

They see a Ford Granada, registered NP 86602, parked on the other side of the road. They see the backs of two men, who are standing by the boot, which is open.

Nxumalo orders Dorasamy to pull up. Upon seeing the police, one of the men, Gordon Webster, closes the boot.

Asked to open it, Webster says he doesn't have the key.

Dorasamy radios to check if the Granada is stolen, while Nxumalo inspects the vehicle using the police car's headlamps for illumination.

Lying on the ground by the boot he notices a brown leather bag and sees it contains several clips of ammunition.

Nxumalo draws his revolver and tells Webster and his colleague, Bheki Ngubane, to lie on the ground, face down.

As Dorasamy radios for help, Webster and Ngubane make a run for it in separate directions. Webster runs towards a barbed-wire fence while Ngubane flees across the road.

Webster's spectacles fall and he stumbles. Nxumalo orders him to stop.

Webster ignores the call, after which Nxumalo fires several shots.

Three of them hit Webster - two on his body, one on his right hand. Webster continues running for a while before crashing into the fence, falling over it, and tumbling on the other side.

Webster hears several more shots fired at Bheki Ngubane, who falls dead on the gravel verge on the edge of the dirt road.

Webster is taken to the second floor of Edendale Hospital's intensive care unit, where he is placed in a bed directly opposite the door.

On 29 April, Robert McBride's father Derrick sees his son reading a newspaper in the takeaway attached to the family's Factorama workshop in Wentworth.

Robert McBride mentions Steve Mkhize, who according to the report was injured by the police in an incident related to the ANC, during which somebody died. He says Steve Mkhize is somebody he knows.

On 2 May, Robert McBride visits Antonio du Preez, a twenty-two-year-old political activist in the Wentworth area.

McBride says a friend of his has been shot and is in hospital. The latest he has heard is that somebody is trying to kill him. The friend has undergone an operation and is in the intensive care unit. McBride says he wants to save his friend and would like Du Preez to help.

At about 4.20pm two days later, Derrick McBride is present alongside Matthew le Cordier, Antonio du Preez, Greta Apelgren and Welcome Khumalo at the Factorama workshop. Robert McBride addresses the group. There is a piece of cardboard on the wall featuring a hand-drawn street map.

"There is no need to make an introduction, we know all of us for what purpose or reason we are all here," Robert McBride says. He points to the map and says, "this is the Edendale Hospital".

After cutting a hole in the perimeter fence at Edendale Hospital that evening, McBride takes an AK-47 and a doctor's coat from a bag. He puts the coat on and places the AK under his arm.

He tells Le Cordier to enlarge the hole while he and his father are in the hospital.

Antonio du Preez and Le Cordier then each take an AK-47 and wait by the bakkie that the group arrived in (Apelgren and Khumalo are elsewhere with orders to create an incident that will divert the police).

Derrick McBride enters the gap in the fence first, followed by his son. Once inside the hospital Robert looks at his watch. It is 8.30pm.

As they approach the second floor via the stairs, Robert McBride sends his father to scout the route ahead. He knows the bed is directly opposite the door of the ward.

Derrick McBride follows the instructions, but sees many civilians and some black policemen, so he retraces his steps. He returns to his son at the top of the stairs and says: "Abort. Civilians."

They make to withdraw, but then Robert McBride says he wants to see who these civilians are.

Constable Edward Ngcobo is leaving Ward 2R when he sees two men approaching.

The younger is wearing a doctor's coat. As soon as they catch Ngcobo's eye they about-face and walk away. Ngcobo meets police colleagues and tells them the way those guys turned

round was suspicious. He says he is going to see where they have gone. Ngcobo has a pistol in his possession as he approaches the McBrides.

Realising he is being followed, Robert McBride takes his AK, which is half extended out of his coat, slips it off safety and onto automatic, and fires in front of him. Derrick McBride looks behind and sees the policeman running away to the right of the corridor.

From his bed, Gordon Webster hears the fire from the AK. He also hears a single shot from a pistol. Robert McBride is about one or two steps down the stairway when he turns and says to his father, referring to the policeman: "He's gone. Stay here and see that he doesn't come back." Robert McBride finds Gordon Webster's bed which stands directly opposite the door. It is empty. Gordon Webster, who has been moved, has a white policeman next to him who draws a revolver and shoots at McBride, who turns round and returns the fire, striking the policeman in the arm. The policeman runs into an adjacent room. The policeman fires another shot through the closed door.

Now McBride sees Webster and approaches his bed. He tells Webster to stand up. Webster can't. McBride pulls the drip and transfusion from the apparatus on which it is fixed. McBride asks a nurse conveying linen to give him the trolley. The nurse is hysterical - screaming, shouting and holding her head. "Keep quiet, keep quiet, keep quiet," McBride repeats.

There is a basket on the trolley, and McBride lifts Webster and puts him on the basket. Webster takes the AK-47 from McBride. This enables McBride to push the trolley with both hands. As he pushes the trolley through the door of the ward and into the passage, there are scenes of chaos, with people running in all directions screaming. Webster fires a salvo into the ceiling. McBride tells him: "Stop! Let's get out of here!"

When they reach the stairs and try to go downstairs, the basket slides off the end of the trolley and Webster falls out. McBride picks him up and returns him to the trolley.

Further down, Webster falls again, and has to crawl down the last couple of stairs himself. At the bottom, McBride puts Webster on another trolley and places the AK-47 on the lower level. With the help of his father he wheels Webster to the fence. Matthew le Cordier and Antonio du Preez see the McBrides pushing a man on a trolley towards them.

Robert McBride calls out to Le Cordier to come help carry Steve off the trolley and put him on the back of the bakkie.

Le Cordier notices that Gordon Webster is holding an AK-47 and that he has some plaster on his stomach with a small piece of pipe sticking out.

With the trolley remaining on the other side of the fence, Le Cordier helps pull Webster through. Robert McBride drives with his father in the front, while Du Preez and Le Cordier are in the back with Webster, who is naked on this freezing winter night.

Du Preez and Le Cordier give Webster their jackets.

Word has somehow spread.

As the bakkie makes off, there are people shouting their approval in the surrounding areas. Nurses are shouting Viva ANC! and Amandla! from the hospital. Others in the hospital give the men a round of applause.

Thula Simpson's decade of research

Thula Simpson is a senior lecturer in the Department of Historical and Heritage Studies at the University of Pretoria. He has spent a decade researching and writing about the history of the ANC's liberation struggle.

His research has been conducted in neighbouring states and Britain, and most extensively in South Africa.

His writing has been published in a number of scholarly journals, including the Journal of Southern African Studies, African Studies, the South African Historical Journal, Social Dynamics and the African Historical Review, as well as in edited book collections published by Wits University Press, and the University of Cape Town Press. Umkhonto we Sizwe: The ANC's Armed Struggle is his first single-authored book.

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