

# BASIL FEBRUARY

COMRADE RODGERS: A VETERAN OF WANKIE, SPEAKS ABOUT PAUL PETERSEN (BASIL FEBRUARY).

When we entered Rhodesia in 1967, it was to be our first combat experience. While we were undergoing training in Africa and overseas, though, we were using live bullets and were acquainted to bullets whizzing over our heads. We had confidence in ourselves, individually and as a group.

Our mission was clear. We were to open a corridor to South Africa for our personnel and supplies, coordinating and cooperating with Zapu.

After several days in Rhodesia we discovered that the enemy was aware of our presence. There were many spotter planes in the sky. The detachment ran out of food and, knowing that we would have contact with the enemy soon, we decided to split the group.

Our group consisted of 21 men. It was led by Madzimba Matho (Zapu), who was deputised by Andries Motsepe. I was the third in command. It was decided that we should go into the interior to divert the enemy from the main detachment. We also had in our group a comrade who had a special mission. He was Paul Petersen.

Of course we did divert the enemy. We had our first contact with the enemy on the banks of Nyatuwe river, between Wankie and Detti. The battle started at half past eight in the morning and the enemy disengaged itself at 18.40 hours. Out of all our battles in Rhodesia, the battle of Nyatuwe was the major one. Before I go into this battle let me relate to you the story of Paul Petersen.

He was born in Somerset West in the Western Cape. I think he was between 24 and 26 years of age, 1.85 metres tall, black hair with a goaty beard. His real name was Basil February. He was a so-called Coloured.

We were very close to each other and I knew about his special mission. I knew where and how to assist him. There are certain things one must point out about this guy, things which make me respect him more than ever before, especially after we had split from the main group.

We were a small group and the languages employed for communication were Ndebele and Shona. As a result there was a tendency of isolating him in most conversations. Besides, being a so-called Coloured, most of the Zapu comrades viewed him with suspicion because of his white skin. But all this did not worry him at all. He thought it was best for the comrades to converse in the language they knew best. He was inspiring in all duties in the field, e.g. guard duties, and was always rendering assistance to all comrades in need along the way. Gradually even those who thought he was white ended up seeing him a better white.

The number of spotter planes in the sky was increasing. It was clear that the enemy was on our trail. We decided to take Paul to the nearest place where he could get transport. For him it was painful to part with the group and he resisted but we convinced him that his mission was equally important. If he had gone through we were to contact him in two months.

We took him to a train siding that was nearest. He was armed with an UZI pistol machinegun and a pistol. He gave us his UZI because it was going to be bulky and cumbersome, and remained with a pistol.

The train did arrive and he ran for it. We were watching him from a distant bush, of course. We saw the train pulling off and left. After boarding the train the conductor became suspicious of this "white" man boarding a train at a siding. The conductor fired some questions at him which he answered to the best of his ability.

The conductor phoned the next station, alerting the police. Paul was also suspicious of this chap and had decided to get off at the next station. So when the train reached the next station he got off to a white detective SB and two Africans.

They came straight to him and demanded his identity card. All three were armed. He drew his pistol and shot at the white policeman twice, killing him instantly. He injured the two Africans, one seriously. While running for cover he also injured the station master. Outside the station he found a bicycle and rode away.

Somewhere in that area there was a cinema, theatre or hall (I'm not sure) with a number of cars parked outside. He got into one of the cars and sped away. As he was coming out of that town he met a roadblock, manned by one soldier. The soldier related well to him, thinking he was white. When he realised his mistake, he ran for his gun but was too late. Paul shot him dead and drove away at a high speed. He drove for quite a distance until he reached Bulawayo, and we wonder how he managed it. When he reached Bulawayo, he abandoned that car and took another one.

He was intending to go to Salisbury (now Harare). As fate could have it he took a wrong turn somewhere and found himself heading for Plumtree. By this time we had already had contact with the enemy and our direction was slightly northwards of Plumtree, while the main group was also moving towards Plumtree.

There were several control posts along the road from Bulawayo to Plumtree. What actually happened is not clear. What came out was that he died with a policeman there. I think if he had a gun more powerful than a pistol, he would have done wonders. Sometime later, months and months later, (I had already been sentenced and I was at the condemned cells) I was called to come and identify his picture. They had taken a photograph of him. I denied knowing him. I gave instructions to the comrades when I returned to the cell to do the same.

The enemy was a bit rough with me for not knowing him. They were sure he was from our group, also a freedom fighter. They thought he was a Cape Coloured. We thought it was a good idea that he fights even when he is dead. They were rough the same way with the other comrades.

There is no doubt that this comrade is a true hero, whose name must never be forgotten in our songs and poems. It is regrettable and a tragedy that we do not know the place where he was buried. His bones were definitely going to be taken to a free and independent South Africa. He was young. If he was alive to this day, he would be one of our greatest leaders.