

Reaping benefits of incarceration

Eddie Daniels was the only Liberal Party member to be jailed for his political affiliations and acts. He spent 15 years on Robben Island for his involvement with the African Resistance Movement. He spoke to political correspondent YVONNE GRIMBEEK.

THERE is one surprising sentiment that binds almost every political prisoner who spent most of his adult life locked up on Robben Island . . . an almost complete lack of bitterness about the time spent in jail.

For Eddie Daniels, in the city recently for a short visit, his time in the maximum security block on Robben Island was an education and a revelation. And it has left him with some happy memories.

Daniels, the only member of the Liberal Party to be locked up on Robben Island for political activities, spent 15 years there. It's a long time in anyone's life, but with no access to books, films or loved ones, it becomes an eternity.

Daniels survived his own party which was disbanded during his term in prison. He was sentenced to 15 years' imprisonment in 1964 for committing acts of sabotage against government installations and electric pylons.

However, being the only political prisoner on the island who did not belong to a major organisation like the ANC or PAC proved to be a major stumbling block. "I was socially accepted by all the prisoners but politically ostracised. I belonged to a non-racial party while there was a very strong anti-white feeling among the other parties. At commemoration ceremonies I was not welcome and this caused a lot of friction between the ANC and Swapo, who were loyal to me, and the other political organisations," he said.

Daniels said the problem developed to such an extent that when the Red Cross came to visit the prisoners, two delegations were sent instead of one.

"One delegation was the ANC, Swapo and the Liberal Party and the other the PAC and its affiliates," he said.

There is one moment that will live with him forever. "I spent three days in isolation when I first arrived and after that I was allowed to join the other prisoners. We were not allowed to speak to anyone but on my way back to the cell I found my way barred by this big man. It was Nelson Mandela. He stuck his hand

out and said 'I am Nelson' and welcomed me to the island," he said.

"I was the only prisoner who went to prison on my own. Everyone else had someone to talk to about the past but after three or four years these stories became stale," he said.

Daniels's admiration for Mandela is almost tangible. His conversation is littered with references to Mandela's forceful personality, his aura on the island, and above all, his magnanimity.

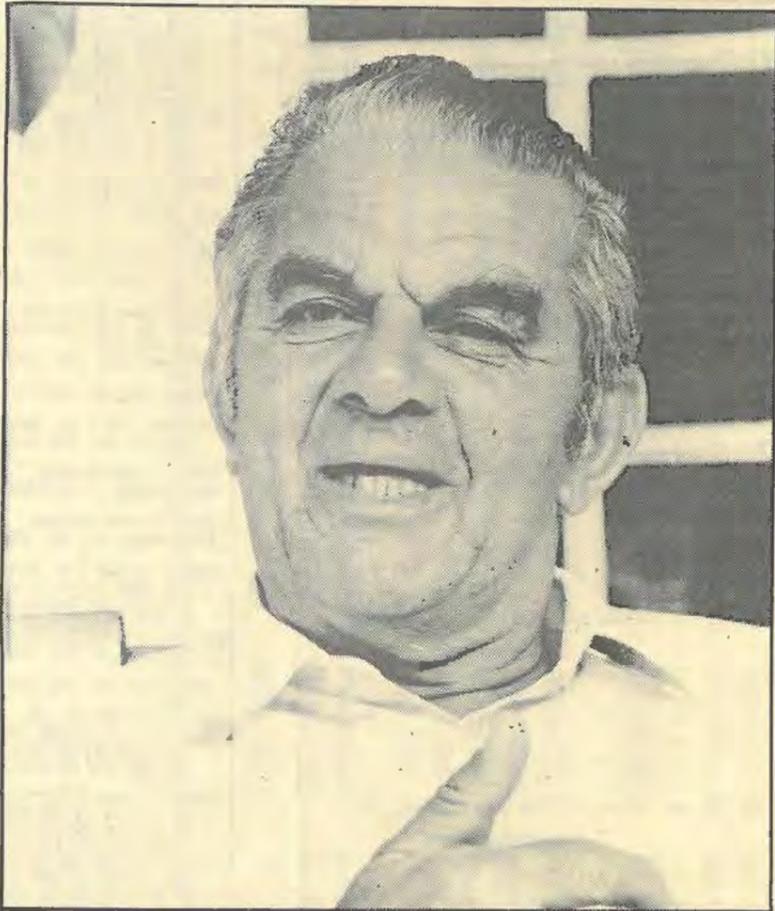
"Both Mandela and Walter Sisulu are magnificent people. All the prisoners would go to them for advice and with our problems. They always had an encouraging ear and when I was down I would hug them and feel their strength flow to me," he said.

There is a small incident, described in Mandela's autobiography, where Daniels managed to steal the *Sunday Times* newspaper out of the briefcase of a visiting priest. Daniels smiled when reminded of it and said the prisoners were starved of outside information.

"We did anything to obtain news from the outside. We even encouraged the common law prisoners, who cleaned the houses of the warders, to steal newspapers for us. We paid them half a box of tobacco for an Afrikaans newspaper and a whole box for English papers. Sometimes they would only give us the classified section and score a box of tobacco," he said.

Looking back at his time spent on the island, Daniels is particularly happy with the fact that 15 years of isolation gave him the time to study. "I went to prison with a Standard 6 and came out with two degrees. You know, we spent 16 hours of the day locked up in our cells and it basically forced us to study. My academic success is largely due to my fellow prisoners who taught me to understand this new world of education. And my brother Norman who paid for my studies. He was very loyal. It's easy to be loyal for six months, but for 15 years, it is very good," he said.

"Today, looking back, it was worth it. I am positive about our country."



Eddie Daniels . . . honoured to have spent time on Robben Island.
Picture by MIKE MATTHEWMAN