



THE FIRST KNOWN EXPLOSION

This is the first in a series of articles to mark the 25th Anniversary of Umkhonto we Sizwe. In this article, one of the founding members of our People's Army relates some of his experiences with comrade Nelson Mandela, the first Commander-in-Chief of our army.

THE YEAR was 1961. The call for a national convention had been ignored by the government. During the three-day strike called for by Mandela in his speech in Pietermaritzburg, many comrades had been beaten, shot and gaoled. But the forces of the regime felt frustrated. They were unable to arrest the leaders, or determine where they were hiding out. Their enemy No. 1, Nelson Mandela, had been named the "Black Pimpernel" by the media. They certainly were seeking him here, there and everywhere, but there was not a sign, not a clue, of his whereabouts. Every policeman in South Africa had been alerted to keep a look-out for him, and to hold him, to capture him at all costs. But not a finger had been laid on him. He was like a fish swimming in the sea of his own people.

There were important matters to be attended to. The decision had already been taken by the movement to move into the

area of armed conflict. A High Command had been established, with Mandela as the Commander-in-Chief. Various area commands had also been established, and recruiting was very selective. It was made crystal clear to every MK cadre that politics took precedence over military affairs, but that armed struggle would now become part and parcel of the fight for freedom until implementation of all the clauses of the Freedom Charter had begun, in a free and democratic South Africa.

What needed to be done at that time was to get a factory established for the making of the bombs, and the opportunity to test them, before going into action on December 16th. This day had been deliberately chosen. It was the day on which the racists celebrate their so-called victory over the 'Bantu' at Blood River. At the same time, the great majority of the people of South Africa, namely the

Africans, regard the day as one of pride for that great warrior, Dingane, who was killed leading his people into battle against a foe which, with superior arms, was ruthlessly plundering the land.

The late Jack Hodgson, a veteran of the war against Hitler, together with others, had been summoned to help in organising the forces and weapons necessary. He was a master at improvisation. He set to work with a will, to produce the bombs and Molotov cocktails, which were the initial weapons to be used. We had al-



P. J. "Jack" Hodgson

ready tested the possibility of cutting telephone wires, electrical wires, and various other means of dislocating communications. The operations took place months before MK as such started operations.

We would hit at all the symbols of apartheid, but under no circumstances were we to kill or maim members of the population. Ours was not a terrorist organisation; the real terrorists were the all-white government and its supporters. Reconnaissance work had been carefully

undertaken. The targets had been chosen. The synchronisation for action throughout the country, in all the main areas, was being finalised. Action stations were chosen, and very careful briefing undertaken. But in the couple of remaining months, the weapons were to be carefully and thoroughly tested.

Jack indicated that we were ready to test about a dozen Molotov cocktails and an improvised bomb. He warned that we would need extraordinary care to ensure secrecy and safety, for, if the bomb blast was detected or the blaze created by the Molotov cocktails spotted, the whole operation would be endangered, and our plans revealed.

Reading this, comrades in MK must remember that we had no access to the sophisticated weapons available to them today. Everything was a hazard. Almost all of us were being closely watched by the Special Branch — we had been known for years. And under these circumstances, right under the noses of the SB, we had to undertake all these very sensitive and exceedingly dangerous experiments and operations. Just the slightest mistake could be fatal.

A place had to be found. This place would have to satisfy the High Command. We found it; it was a disused brickworks known to one of the comrades involved in the operation. We reconnoitred the area. It satisfied everybody. Derelict buildings still remained, and several pits from which the clay had been extracted, surrounded by all sorts of paraphernalia. All brickworks are allowed to use dynamite to blast, so as to loosen the soil for making bricks. This was ideal, as any blast coming from any brickworks (and there were several in the area) would not attract any attention.

The team of inspection had been chosen. It, of course, included the Commander-in-Chief who insisted on being present, in spite of the fact that the police were out looking for him. We had arrived at the



scene of operations and hidden the car, when a man emerged out of a galvanised iron building and strode menacingly towards our group. He was the watchman of the place. This spelt danger for us, and it seems that this unforeseen circumstance would prevent us from continuing with our plan.

But we had calculated without the persuasive qualities of our Commander-in-Chief. He immediately sized up the situation. We could not abandon the exercise at this stage. He signalled to us to bring the equipment forward, while he took aside this man, who was Zulu-speaking. Soon the two of them were in deep conversation, with one arm of Comrade Nel-

son around the shoulder of his newly acquired friend. We noticed that the watchman was nodding his head vigorously, and then he walked away from the scene. We waited for him to disappear. Comrade Nelson explained that he'd persuaded the man to accept our presence there.

One of the buildings was soon being bombarded with Molotov cocktails. Every time a bottle exploded and burst into flames, Comrade Nelson shook his head gleefully, and smiled the smile of victory. We all joined in his glee and enthusiasm, of course.

These were the first explosions of the new era.

But there was more to come.

After dowsing any flames still licking at the walls and other pieces of wood and rubbish lying around, we moved to the open spaces, and chose our pit for testing the bomb.

Today, those who have been trained to use more sophisticated equipment would be aghast at the contraption which was contrived for use in the initial stages of sabotage. But one can only have admiration for those who constructed the device. Comrade Jack was a genius at this specialised work. You will understand what I mean when I tell you that part of the timing of the explosion included the thin tubing contained in plastic ball pens. You can also imagine the surprise of some shopkeepers when we bought up all their stocks of this particular kind of biro.

According to our calculations, that container placed at the bottom of the pit would explode within fifteen minutes. We all stood waiting expectantly, as near to the edge of the hole as we dared. Five minutes went by. Ten minutes. Fifteen minutes. No explosion. Twenty minutes. Still no explosion.

What to do? We certainly could not leave it there, for obvious reasons. Nor would we know its effectiveness or not. A decision had to be made. One of the more experienced comrades clambered down, gingerly lifted the contraption and slowly brought it up; an impulsive act, it is true, but it worked. Soon Jack adjusted the charge, everything was again placed in position, and many hands were proffered to pull the comrade out of the pit. Hardly had he been lifted clear, and positions of relative safety taken by all, when an almighty explosion took place, causing a huge cloud of dust to rise up into the air, and tons of earth to go tumbling down to drown anything left of the bomb.

This was not the normal bang of dynamite. It sounded more like that of a giant thousand-pounder.

Further curiosity about the effects were abandoned, all of us made a very hurried bee-line for the automobile, piled in, and made as hurried and bumpy an exit from that territory as any automobile has ever made.

But we felt triumphant and cheered at the effect created.

Comrade Mandela was buoyant with pleasure and excitement. He advised very soberly that certain adjustments and alterations be attended to, and congratulated and thanked the comrades all round as we sped away from the scene. He proposed that as soon as we were certain that the timing was properly mastered, we should report to the High Command so that every other unit throughout the area be put on alert and properly briefed as to the correct use and working of the anti-apartheid bomb.

Several days after, a reconnaissance of the scene was made. The watchman smilingly assured us that, although it had been an unusually loud explosion, nobody had made any enquiries, and all was well.

I have often wondered over the years exactly what Comrade Mandela said to this man, and also whether the subsequent events made any impact on him. But I am sure of one thing: Comrade Nelson Mandela was an excellent judge of our people — the ordinary people of our country. And this judgment of his inspired many of us to have faith in the ordinary working man of our country. For if his judgment had been wrong, that watchman could have led the police to catch up with us.

I shudder to think, also, what the owner of that brickworks would think if he were told today how Umkhonto we Sizwe tested its first bomb on his property.

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