

A BORN LEADER

A 70th birthday tribute to Nelson Mandela by Joe Modise, the Army Commander of Umkhonto we Sizwe

I have known Comrade Nelson Mandela from 1947. There was a place called Freedom Square in Newclare Western Native Township where the ANC used to organise rallies. These rallies were organised on Sundays and since I would be at home (I was still a schoolboy) I used to go and listen to the oratory there. I was still young at the time and just beginning to be introduced to politics. I used to find Nelson Mandela to be very interesting and impressive. Mandela, the late uncle J.B. Marks, Moses Kotane, Robert resha and Edwin Mofutsanyana were very outstanding speakers.

When the Nationalist Party came to power in 1948 the tempo of political agitation increased. Meetings became more frequent and more interesting. The Youth League in Newclare and Sophiatown also intensified political work among young people. It is around this time that I joined the ANC Youth League.

In 1949 Mandela began to attain a very significant position in the thinking of young people. It was after the 1949 conference which decided on the Programme

of Action. Associated with Nelson Mandela, OR Tambo, Lembede, Mda and others, this Programme of Action was in everybody's lips. There was a lot of talk about the new militancy that was emerging and Mandela occupied a central position in this talk that went around South Africa, particularly among young people.

VOLUNTEER-IN-CHIEF

Mandela was very active during the preparations for the 1952 Campaign for the Defiance of Unjust Laws. He went to a

a number of places, including where we were, carrying out agitational work. His appointment to the position of Volunteer-in-Chief during the Defiance Campaign came as no surprise. It was expected by all.

He was among the first to defy the unjust laws and was arrested and jailed by the racist authorities. After the Defiance Campaign he was ban-

ned for almost the entire period he spent outside prison. Mandela also played a major role during the 1954 campaign against Bantu Education and the 1955 Congress of the People.

In an attempt to arrest the growing agitation and militancy among the people the regime arrested 156 leaders of the people in 1956 and charged them with



treason. Mandela was one of them for, to a very large extent, credit for that new mood among the people should go to him. Naturally he was not the only leader. There were other leaders but he was so outstanding amongst them. In all the campaigns that were organised he would always emerge at the head. An orator and a charismatic figure, he is a person whose presence could not be missed, whatever the situation. Even at social gatherings the moment he entered everybody would notice that a person who matters had made an appearance and would leave a long-lasting impression on all around. He was a born leader.

After the Sharpeville massacre and the banning of the ANC in 1960 it became clear to our people that it was no longer possible to continue the struggle using non-violent means. The ANC began consulting its membership and a number of delegations from all over the country went to Stanger where the then President of the ANC, Chief Albert Luthuli, stayed to discuss the way forward. Chief Luthuli, since he was banned, could not travel to Johannesburg where Headquarters was, or to Bloemfontein, which was the traditional meeting place of the ANC. Mandela played a very prominent role in those discussions.

Mandela played a very important role in the preparations for the 1961 All-in African Conference which decided to call a national convention of all the people of our land, Black and white, to discuss an alternative democratic constitution for South Africa, in opposition to the racist republican constitution which the boers were preparing to introduce. The conference elected a steering committee which was to prepare for the convention and Mandela became its secretary.

The same year, after the organisation had taken the decision to embark on armed struggle, I was recruited to join Umkhonto we Sizwe. One day I was instructed to go to a house in Ophirton where our MK group was to be constituted. The late Masondo (Mavili), and the late Mashaba were also in the same group. There were two other comrades, one from Germiston and the other from Alexandra.



All-in African Conference PM'Burg, 1961

While the five of us were seated we heard a knock at the door. We opened and in came Nelson Mandela. He was underground already and was not in the usual attire we knew. Normally he was found in a suit and a tie but then he was seen in work clothes most of the time. He held a brief meeting with us and told us that the movement had decided to embark on armed struggle and that a few comrades had already

been selected to go for military training abroad. We (the five) were going to constitute a cell and he appointed me head. Mashaba and Masondo were going to be responsible for Pretoria and Alexandra respectively.

On December 16 1961 Umkhonto we Sizwe announced its birth. I led a group which went to demolish the Kliptown Post Office while Masondo led a group which hit the Meadowlands Administra-



At Algerian military headquarters, 1962

tive Offices. Both missions were carried out successfully and there were similar operations in all the major centres of our country. The key man and co-ordinator of all these activities was our Commander-in-Chief, Nelson Mandela.

COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF

After December 16 we carried out a few more operations. Mandela then pulled me out of the units and assigned me a task of moving round the country and set up MK

units where they did not exist, while consolidating them in areas where they already existed. The latter became the major task in fact because there were units already, initiated by him, in all the areas I managed to reach. Mandela was truly committed. In spite of the fact that he was underground and the police were searching for him, he moved around, appearing at different places at different times, meeting different people and issuing them their instructions.

Whilst directing the army he was also deeply involved in the building of the ANC underground, a task which was very difficult given that ANC activists were used to operating openly and had developed over the years an operational pattern which did not involve hiding from the enemy. The art of conspiracy was new to our people and there was lots of carelessness as a result.

People had to be sent out of the country for both political and military training. Under the leadership of Mandela, we began to organise. I was given the responsibility of ferrying people out of the country through Botswana, then still under British rule. From Botswana they would proceed, via Kazangula, to Zambia and ultimately Tanzania which was the only independent African country nearest to our borders.

In 1962 Mandela left the country to undergo military training and organise facilities for our people in independent Africa. He visited Tanzania, Egypt, Ethiopia and Algeria. When he came back I, together with one other comrade, was organised to fetch him from Botswana. He had chartered a private plane from Tanzania. We drove in two cars. Mandela was disguised as an old man.

We transported him across the border in one car whilst I, carrying his weapon

which he had acquired in Algeria, followed in the other. When we were back in Rivonia he briefed us about his trip. He told us that it was then possible to send people for training in Ethiopia, Algeria, Egypt and Morocco. During the same year, while on a mission from Durban, Mandela was arrested in Horwick. There was a lot of sadness in our ranks. The pain was felt greatly by the cadres of Umkhonto we Sizwe. All those I met expressed grief. An outstanding leader of our people, organisation and army had been captured.

RESCUE

From Horwick he was transferred to the Fort (no.4) in Johannesburg. He was brought to trial, charged with leaving the country illegally. We employed good lawyers, including Joe Slovo, to defend him. During the trial an idea of rescuing him emerged. No.4 being a fortress (that's why it's called the fort) it was not possible to free him by force because we did not have the means at the time. We had very few rifles and pistols and very few amongst us could use them.

We decided on a two-pronged approach. One was to manufacture or acquire in whatever way a key to the cells at the Johannesburg magistrate's court where the trial was held. The other was to find somebody from the Fort, preferably a senior warder. Attempts were made and we managed to find a warder who agreed to help in freeing Mandela for a fee. He would create conditions for him to escape and demanded R7 000. We did not rely much on this jailer and opted for the first plan.

The plan involved a lot. Mandela was a very known figure, even to the police. There was absolutely no way in which he could come out of the court cells without

being properly disguised. We had to change his appearance from African to Asiatic. A wig and pads for changing the form of his face had to be made and that meant obtaining measurements of his face, the part around the crown, the circumference of his head, etc., so that the whiskers and wig would be the size of the face to fit properly. To obtain all these measurements up to the point when the wig was ready took a long time.

When the wig was ready and put on the face of Walter Sisulu it transformed him completely and we were convinced that the plan was going to work. Imprints of the key to the cell were taken. The key was made, tested and it worked. The wig was sewn in inside the the lining of the suit's jacket which was going to be taken to him as if it was just for changing when he went to court. We had worked out how somebody would sneak in and give him the key to the cell.

Unfortunately when everything was ready Mandela's trial was shifted to Pretoria and both plans were frustrated. Conditions in Pretoria were completely different but we did try to work out other ways of rescuing him. Meanwhile the trial continued. He was convicted and sentenced to five years.

I also had to leave the country in 1963. We were in Tanzania when news that the High Command in Rivonia was arrested and Mandela had joined them to stand trial reached us. Added to the five years he was already serving he, together with the other Rivonia trialists, was sentenced to life imprisonment.

Those of us who served under him are very proud of having had that opportunity. We have confidence in his leadership and are looking forward to the day when he will be with us again. We will do all in our power to bring that day ever nearer.