

Southern Africa: A Smuggled Account from a Guerrilla Fighter



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THE STORY THAT FOLLOWS comes from a fighter in the guerrilla struggle against the rule of the five per cent white minority in Zimbabwe (called "Rhodesia" in English). It was set down as he told it in a guerrilla training camp soon after the events. In describing the operations of his detachment over a period of several weeks, he provides a vivid insight into the realities of waging such a war. In particular, one can see the constant, painful dilemma of conflicting military and political imperatives: the fatal danger of informers, as opposed to the need to work with and draw upon the people; the demands of discipline and security, as opposed to respect for local traditions and sensibilities.

Intensifying the conflicts in this war, and opening the way for further tensions and suspicion, is the fact that a significant part of the guerrilla army fighting in Zimbabwe comes not from Zimbabwe itself but from South Africa. For the army is the product of an alliance between the Zimbabwe African Peoples Union, ZAPU, and the African National Congress, ANC, the chief resistance organization in South Africa. (In both countries the demand is for majority rule, although ANC has a clearer socialist orientation.) The ANC, not willing to risk premature warfare in South Africa, has chosen to aid in Zimbabwe for the time being. This joining of forces across a border, which made possible the successful launching in mid-1967 of the guerrilla struggle in Zimbabwe, represents a unity of resistance that followed from a unity of oppression. The convergence of these liberation struggles was an inevitable response to the united front of white power confronting them.

Several years ago, at the end of that heady decade in which a score of African countries regained at least a nominal form of political independence, the southward thrust of nationalism came abruptly to a halt. It was turned back not by a single outpost, but by an imposing phalanx of white minority regimes, encompassing a 1.75 million square mile region in the Southern Africa subcontinent (nearly 20 per cent of all black Africa), including chiefly the Portuguese colonies of Angola and Mozambique, together with South Africa and Zimbabwe. The strategic core of this vast White Power stronghold was of course South Africa itself, with four million whites, an industrialized economy heavily financed by U.S. and British interests, and a massive and mobile military capacity. In the early '60s, white rule, seemingly more and more firmly entrenched in South Africa, formed a bulwark of intransigence among the neighboring countries as well.

In November 1965, the Ian Smith government in Zimbabwe, impressed by the stability of South African racism, declared independence from England, whose nominal jurisdiction and presumed constitutional principles had until then held out some prospect of eventual majority rule. Thirteen months

later, in December 1966, the United Nations Security Council was moved to vote the "mandatory" sanctions against Smith's government that it had previously declined to impose on South Africa itself. A July 24, 1969 Times-Post Service dispatch commented on the impact: "No one any longer expects sanctions to bring down the government of Prime Minister Ian Smith." The dispatch explains that "... the regime is receiving all the imports of oil and other strategic commodities it needs through South Africa..." and "Portugal... is flouting Security Council resolutions openly." The bonds of mutual support seemed to be holding firm.

But if South Africa's power was the strongest link in the chain, the colonial sovereignty of impoverished Portugal over Angola and Mozambique was the weakest. In September 1964, a united front of Mozambique nationalist organizations, called FRELIMO, launched armed struggle in northern Mozambique. Within two years it had liberated two northern provinces, built up a guerrilla army of some 7000 men trained mainly inside the country, and begun the arduous task of reorganizing production and establishing health, education and a political structure in liberated territory. In 1968 FRELIMO opened a new front, and despite the murder of its leader, Eduardo Mondlane, the Mozambique struggle continues. In 1966,



SOUTHERN AFRICA

Dates indicate year armed struggle began.

the MPLA, the Angolan movement, opened a front in eastern Angola which rapidly extended along lines similar to the struggle in Mozambique.

These two armed struggles were and are a serious drain on Portugal's resources, diverting well over 100,000 troops and 50 per cent of its military budget. But Portugal is not alone. Together, the Unholy Trinity could probably keep the Mozambique and Angolan insurrections under control (South Africa has already sent equipment and troops) if they could be contained within the Portuguese colonies.

Thus it was a development of immeasurable significance when the combined force of ZAPU and ANC guerrillas went into action in August 1967 in the Wankie area of Zimbabwe against Ian Smith's South African-reinforced troops. Though the armed struggle remains considerably smaller than those in Angola and Mozambique, the opening of a guerrilla front in Zimbabwe has closed the geographic and strategic gap which existed before. Now from the Indian Ocean to the Atlantic there is continuous activity: Angola, Mozambique, Zimbabwe (and the sporadic guerrilla activity in South West Africa and the Caprivi strip). The South African regime has been forced to extend itself beyond its borders: already there are at least 1700 South African troops in Zimbabwe which are indispensable to the maintenance of Ian Smith's regime. South African public opinion is being softened up for the dispatch of a qualitatively larger troop contingent to the Portuguese territories. South Africa is being forced to overextend itself; it must defend white privilege throughout the subcontinent or become an isolated enclave on its own. The whole of Southern Africa,

then, is a single theater of struggle. The commencement of fighting within South Africa itself becomes a matter for strategic decision, timing and coordination—although ultimately it seems clear that it must occur, since political activity and international gestures by themselves have proved so impotent.

This is not to say that the guerrillas have abandoned political activity. They recognize it as a critical, indeed an inseparable, part of waging armed struggle—as the story presented here so eloquently shows. Nor should international action be undervalued; it has been and continues to be an indispensable weapon of the revolution. It is, after all, international support which sustains the white minority regimes. American arms supplied through NATO make the Portuguese military effort possible. The refusal to impose sanctions on Portugal and South Africa makes even those that are imposed against Ian Smith a mere diplomatic plesantry. It was only the massive infusion of emergency financing from the U.S. that saved South Africa from a serious economic crisis following the Sharpeville massacre in 1960. Only domestic popular action can force the Western powers to disengage from their support of the Southern African regimes—in particular, to deter the U.S. from backing the white South Africans in a mad, desperate assault against black Africa as the guerrilla movements gain strength. Organization, education, action; raising funds for the armed struggle; demanding disengagement. We too are part of the struggle in Southern Africa.

—AFRICA RESEARCH GROUP

The Africa Research Group is a Cambridge-based organization devoted to research on African affairs from a radical perspective.

This account of the experiences of an ANC guerrilla in a place which, like the fighter himself, must remain unnamed, was obtained by Ramparts from the ANC through the Africa Research Group.

THE FIGHTING ALLIANCE MADE BY the African National Congress of South Africa was reflected in our group, which consisted mainly of ZAPU members and a few of us from the ANC. The commander was an able comrade from ZAPU, with remarkable leadership qualities. Both at the political and personal level, our fighting was unique. We all realized that the liberation of Zimbabwe was the job of the Zimbabwe people. But we also knew that the unity of the white regimes and particularly the occupation of Zimbabwe by South African forces made cooperation in the liberation front not only desirable, but indispensable, both for our own victory and for the victory of the Zimbabwe people.

After the last big engagement and the continuous bombing which followed during the daylight hours, our commander split the detachment into a number of smaller groups. Our section made its way to our general area of operations. We were hungry and thirsty, but morale on the whole was good. The previous four months taught us a great deal both about ourselves and the enemy. No one had dared to say during that frustrating, dangerous period of inactivity and waiting that we might not be a match for the enemy; deep in our minds, however, we weren't so certain.

But now at last we'd been through it. We'd seen the enemy run in more than one engagement, leaving his dead and wounded. Doubt was replaced by certainty. It would not be

easy, this we knew. A few had already lost their lives, a few had been injured and one, so far, had lost his stomach for the fight and had deserted. But those months had taught us that victory is certain, whether we personally survive the fight or not. The weeks that were to follow strengthened this conviction. We continued to give a good account of ourselves. But more than that, it was our village which taught us. It taught us the reality of this thing called "the people" and how it is possible that an enemy a thousand-fold more powerful than ourselves can be defeated.

I remember that morning clearly. For a week we had had no proper food, and no contact with people. Suddenly the sound of a muffled drum and then a cock crowing and donkeys braying. Imagine our joy! The commander sent two of the men who spoke the local language to investigate. Some hours later the reconnaissance group returned and reported that after making an unsuccessful approach to a man in a house on the outskirts, they had been directed to the main village where, in the first house they entered, they had met Old Man. This was our name for him, even though he was a man in his middle twenties. He had a wife and two young children.

"We are fishermen on the river. We are hungry and we have run out of food. Could you give us something to eat and also . . ." Before they could finish Old Man said: "I am not to be played with. I have heard of the war. You must be honest with me. If you are freedom fighters, say so. If you are not, say so."

After some evasion, they became convinced that his expressions of sympathy for our struggle were genuine, and admitted who they were. His response was warming. He shook their hands and hugged them, and for the first time they saw the

beaming, happy smile by which we all came to think of him. He at once gave them 50 pounds of mealie meal, two chickens, salt and milk, while indignantly refusing an offer of money. Before they left he said, "If you really are what you say you are, then I want to see your commander. I want to speak to him about something which is just between him and me." He refused to give any hint of what it was he wanted to discuss.

That night we ate our fill and talked of Old Man. Should the commander go? What if it were a trap? Why in any case should he want only the commander? In the end our commander decided that on balance it was a reasonable chance to take, and with the necessary precautions—he was covered by a few of us—he went to Old Man.

Old Man welcomed him and said almost immediately that he was one of those who had been rounded up during the State of Emergency when he knew no politics. "In the camp," he said, "I started thinking for the first time. Now that the war is on, I want to do something, not only to give food. I sit here idling whilst you fight and die. My life is no more valuable than yours. There are others in this village, young men, who will come forward. I know them. I can get them." Of his sincerity there could no longer be any question.

Thinking back on it, we were much too cautious in our attitude. We wanted to be careful. We had been told to be careful. We had learned from bitter experience that one traitor is worth a hundred supporters. But when can you ever be absolutely certain? In any event, the commander told him that his request to go into the mountains would be considered later. Meanwhile, he should recruit no one and tell no one of our presence without first getting permission. He was to leave food, messages and especially information about the enemy at an arranged spot. Throughout these discussions Old Man's wife sat silent and accepting. He had given an indication that what he did, she would do. Every day thereafter, he did his duty.

During the second week he gave us a message from someone claiming to be a comrade of ours who was being hidden in one of the huts in the village and was trying to meet up with his detachment. From the description we concluded that it might be one of our men who had been sent out some months earlier with an ill-fated reconnaissance unit which had suffered heavy casualties. But we could not be certain. Old Man was instructed to take the man to an arranged spot without giving him an opportunity to talk to anyone.

He was taken there. It was our comrade. What a reunion! It was joyous like a township party. We laughed so much, it was getting risky; in the open sound travels dangerously. That night he told us of his reconnaissance unit, of the heroism and death of B, of the battle which their section had put up against superior numbers (they had been ambushed and caught unawares), of how he fought until he was wounded, rolled down a river bank and crawled to safety. From then on he had searched continually, trying to join one of our detachments, helped all the time by ordinary peasants who hid him and gave him food. He told us too that the villagers who had hidden him were anxious to join our section. Again we felt that making such contacts was premature—probably wrongly.

Then, almost casually, he related something which came to have a most important connection with what was to happen to us. The people with whom he had been staying had advised him to carry out the custom which every stranger for his own good must do whenever he comes to a village in the area: visit

the local Maswikero (fortune teller). Only he would be able to say whether our stay would be safe.

The first day this was mentioned, it was as a part of the story of his experiences in the village. We soon noticed, however, that some members of our group continued to talk about it. Eventually they raised the matter with the commander. The commander called us all together. He explained that we had received advice from the local people which some of the men strongly felt should be followed because we should respect local custom. Many of us spoke against it: "We can't follow all the traditions in our special situation. If this is the tradition, then the police must go there too. Informers must also go there. Is it right for us to take such a risk?" Someone asked whether this could be done secretly. The answer given was no.

After two days of discussion, some of the fighters became impatient. "You despise our customs," one of them said. "You undermine our traditions. Is it because you are communists? This is Africa, and to achieve our aim we have to follow our own traditions." In all six months of sharing hardship and battle (up to now we had already buried six of our men, four ZAPU and two ANC), there had been a warm, wonderful comradeship between us. Now for the first time there was friction, sharpness, even anger. The commander, who sensed this friction and the way it was beginning to divide us at a most irrational level—a level at which pure argument does not always prove to be adequate—decided on a compromise. If Old Man confirmed this tradition, then he should take our comrade who had been hidden in the village to the Maswikero.

Old Man, who confirmed the existence of this tradition, urged us strongly not to send him, "because," he said, "I don't want to show my face with one of you." This was obviously right. Instead, he arranged for his uncle to do the job. On Saturday evening they met and set off for the Maswikero. After standing in a long queue their turn came and the uncle, who by then had drunk quite a quantity of the beer sold on the premises, said to the Maswikero, "I have brought a representative of the freedom fighters and they have come to find out whether they will be successful." The answer came: "I see blood in all you are saying. I won't take your money, but everything will be peaceful. I will arrange a mist to cover you on the route to any place you want to go."

On their way out of the hut, the uncle consoled our comrade in loud whispers, saying that he should not worry and not take too seriously the part about the blood. He babbled sympathetically about the freedom struggle, and so on. Not far from the Maswikero they were stopped and questioned by two Security Policemen who had followed them. The uncle explained that his friend had come from Salisbury to see the fortune teller whose fame is widespread. He would be leaving the next morning. For some reason they were allowed to proceed, and our comrade returned safely, after taking extra precautions to make sure that he was not being followed.

The following day brought shattering news. When we went to our supply point, we did not find Old Man, but someone else. He told us that the uncle had been arrested and had collapsed under interrogation. The village was invaded by Security Forces and a search was on for Old Man who had been warned just in time, and was proceeding to a spot in the mountains where it had been previously arranged that we would meet him in just such an emergency. It was now nighttime and the command decided to wait until first light to keep this

rendezvous, since we had not arranged a call sign and he feared that our approach at night might cause Old Man to panic.

At first light, a section was detailed to move toward the rendezvous point two hours away. We approached in skirmish formation. Suddenly the air was filled with bursts of gunfire. They came from the direction of the rendezvous point. We crept closer, and there in front of us, already moving toward the village, was a large, well-armed enemy force carrying the limp body of Old Man. We were neither strong enough nor positioned well enough to invite a battle.

We moved back to base. That day, even the hardest among us shed tears. The commander gathered us together. We stood, heads bowed in silence for our brave, smiling Old Man. We knew then that without people like him, we are nothing.

A few days later, after taking precautions, we managed to make contact with the Old Man's wife. There were no tears, just sadness. She spoke about the struggle for the first time. She asked why it was that he had to die without a gun in his hand. "Just running," she said. "Why didn't you carry out his wish to take him into the mountains with you?" We explained as best we could that Old Man was doing as much of a soldier's job as if he had carried a gun, that his was the death of a freedom fighter in battle. "It is often much easier to be brave with a gun in your hand than to carry on as Old Man did, risking his life every minute of the day without defense, and alone." I think she understood for she put an end to the talk of Old Man by saying, "And how are you going to eat? And be told things? I will see that it is done."

OLD MAN'S FAMILY AND FRIENDS assembled from many parts of the country. Among them was a young boy from the Z area who was appointed to continue the supply work. This he did with enthusiasm and efficiency. He was in a continuous state of excitement about the reports of fighting in many parts of the country. He wanted to join us and to bring some friends along; he also told us of some excellent terrain in the Z area in which supplies could be stored and from which operations would be effective, particularly in view of its proximity to large population groups. We refused his offer. Again, possibly mistakenly. We were being cautious almost to a fault.

Some days later we received a message that the house of Old Man's widow was under the strictest surveillance, that it would be dangerous for anyone connected with her to continue doing the supply and contact work, and that another old man, a villager (this time the description fitted the age, for he was also called Old Man), would take over. We were encouraged by this further proof that the reserves of sympathy, loyalty and readiness to sacrifice are large. How it was all discussed and decided in the village was a mystery to us. The new Old Man did his job as the contacts before him had. He refused to be paid for anything which came out of the villagers' own stock. Things like meat and vegetables were given free though we tried to press them to accept some money. It was only for items which had to be purchased at the local store that money was accepted, and then every single penny was accounted for.

The time had come to move. We had built up a reasonable stock of food; our physique and weight were back to normal. The commander worked out a plan of march toward the Z area described by the young boy. We were to proceed in two

groups, with two hours distance between us.

I don't know whether it was the result of a leakage of information or whether we had somehow betrayed ourselves by relaxation of vigilance (for example, we cooked at night in an area which was out of bounds to villagers and the fire may have been spotted), but, shortly before we were due to move, we suddenly observed a well-camouflaged enemy force of company strength advancing on our base in skirmish formation. It was early in the morning. We knew that once the fight started we would be harassed until nightfall from the air, but we had no option. Our retreat would have been up hilly ground and it was too late to sneak away. Quickly the commander whispered his orders and they were passed on. The group of which I was a member, due to set off toward the Z area, would start moving a short while after the commencement of the battle. The other group, under our commander, would remain to cover our retreat. The order to fire was given, and we punished the enemy badly from our well dug-in positions. The usual pattern was repeated. Their ground forces moved away and the aerial bombardment started. Our group was then ordered to move as arranged. During the fight we lost two men, one of them our medical officer.

After moving about half a mile I felt my right leg getting weaker and weaker. I looked down, and for the first time, a blood-covered boot told me that I had been wounded. It must have been shrapnel from a grenade. I could no longer walk. There was no alternative but to leave me. I was taken to our new Old Man. He hid me in a dug-out in a field near the village. I was told that our unit would return for me in a few days.

Next to the death of Old Man, this separation from my comrades was for me the saddest time. With them I felt strong, almost invincible. Alone I felt like nothing. Every noise and every movement put fear into me. Every night the new Old Man came to me with food. He nursed my wound with an impressive skill. He regularly applied hot poultices of boiled leaves, and used some balm made out of local roots. After a few days, when the infected area seemed ready, he applied more and more poultices, and after making a small incision with a sterilized knife, pressed gently round the area, and a metal fragment came out. My recovery thereafter was speedy. But ten days had now gone by. My unit had not returned for me and there was daily news of increased fighting all over the country, including intensive activity in the Z area.

After the new Old Man had discussed it with friends in the village, he suggested that it would be dangerous for me to remain any longer. The area was now being combed by Security Forces and my unit was obviously unable to return for me in time. He suggested that he guide me back to a place of safety where I could once again join our freedom forces. This he did at great risk, and with great skill and devotion.

It struck me later that after the disastrous fortune teller incident nothing at all was said of it in our detachment. No recriminations, and no apologies. We were all close once again. All understood now. It had to be learned, not from books, but from life. As for the mists, this was not the season for them. But we had all learned that what will really keep us secure and covered in our route are our millions of oppressed countrymen who will throw up thousands of people like Old Man, like his widow, like the youth, like the new Old Man, and like all the other people in our village.

