

OPERATION INGWAVUMA

UNDER normal circumstances, military participants are expected to write their memoirs only when the war is over, to give them the advantage of looking at things more objectively, weighing both successes and failures unemotionally, and taking advantage of the total outcome of the whole war period to appraise the contribution of single battles.

I took up my pen to write about our experiences in the planning and implementation of 'Operation Ingwavuma' for the following reasons:

1) I was asked to do so by the Editor of Dawn, who insisted that since a special issue of our army's journal was being prepared to commemorate the 25 years of Umkhonto we Sizwe, telling the story of Ingwavuma would be a proper contribution to illustrate, by this example, how it is possible under South African conditions to build up a people's army from within the country. We therefore reasoned that if this story was told, this article would not only serve as concrete documentary inspiration to the thousands of our combatants whose task at this period is precisely to root our army among the people, but would also, for the first time, provide the members of our Movement in general and of MK in particular, with a generalised strategic context of the circumstances and conditions that led to the writing of 'The Diary of A Guerrilla' by Comrade Mugabe (Robert Dumisa), the first document of its kind in our military history.

2) Although I am confined by security considerations from giving many important details about this Operation, yet certain aspects of the story can and should be told, more so that, as I have said one of the commanders of this area has written a much publicised diary, and also went further to make revelations of our intentions during their public trial in the Natal Division of the South African Supreme Court. Comrade Mugabe's diary was confiscated by the police during the arrest of his unit, but we also managed to get our own copy.

I find these two reasons compelling enough to justify the

Memoirs of a Political commissar break with the conventional rule requiring the writing of military memoirs only when the war is over.

THE NATAL REGIONAL COMMAND MEETS TO DISCUSS 'OPERATION INGWAVUMA'

I was summoned to the first meeting to discuss the implementation of this plan in the underground Operational Headquarters of the Natal Regional Military Command. Also present at the meeting was the sub-structure of this Command, called the Northern Natal Military Command (NNMC) whose specific task it was to execute this task. I was appointed the Political Commissar and Deputy Commander of this sub-structure of the Regional Command, and apart from its Command, I was to work with a Chief-of-Staff, Chief-of-Intelligence as well as a Chief-of-Logistics.

As a result of the decision that the Northern Natal Commander's task would, for quite a long period (until the plan had gone into a certain advanced stage) be more of a servicing personnel to the rest of the members of our Military Command who were to be stationed geographically elsewhere, the effective task of Commanding, 'Operational Ingwavuma' fell on my shoulders during all its events.

In the room the whole map of Natal was spread over the table, with all the eyes starring at it as though the battles we were planning were already taking place right there on the map.

I must admit that the driving force and one of the most moving personalities in that meeting was our Regional Chief-of-Staff, the late Comrade Zweli Nyanda, who was killed together with Keith McFadden during a South African Defence Force raid in Swaziland. I highlight the name of Zweli not because he happens to be dead and has joined our martyres. No. I am conscious of the queer tendency nowadays of calling everybody who dies a hero. Comrade Zweli was a living hero of our armed struggle. I remember him very clearly in that meeting, sitting opposite me and standing up now and again to pace up and down the room. Then he would come back and quiz me with one hundred and

one questions since I was the only one in that meeting who was thoroughly acquainted with Northern Natal, as I was actually born in Zululand and had already worked as a political operative in the area of Ingwavuma for a period of close to two years under the political structures of the ANC.

After about four hours, our meeting was over. The task of our Military Command was clear. We were expected to begin working immediately to prepare conditions for the creation of guerrilla zones in Northern Natal. The area of Ingwavuma, situated on the most Northern tip of Natal and also bordering on Swaziland and Mozambique, was specially earmarked for this purpose. Right on that first meeting, and basing our analysis on the available intelligence data as well as political information about the area provided by me on the basis of my experience in working in that area, we reached a general agreement in our assessment that this area had the potential to accommodate (either in the terrain or among the people), trained and armed cadres which were to constitute the nuclei for the internal recruiting, training and arming of guerrilla units from among the local population.

Our plan had to consider not just the survival of those combat units, but also the potential of transforming those areas over a period of time into active guerrilla zones, during the course of which the enemy would be wiped out, or forced to retreat or come directly under our political administration, which would be an organ of people's power. We also envisaged the development of mass peasants' political organisations and underground units whose task would be augmented by our military organisation.

Conscious as we were of the strategic line of our organisation, we would not have allowed a situation where the military structures were to be the sole determinants of what went on in Ingwavuma and elsewhere in our zone. The point, however, and this we minced no words about it was that we were supposed to develop a war in Ingwavuma, and war means the physical military elimination of the enemy and the imposition of our political will over him. This war perspective

was to be guarded against reverting back to the strategic period when our priority task inside the country was only to do political mobilisation with armed propaganda serving as a secondary and supportive exercise.

Although the political situation in Ingwavuma was not so promising, in the sense that we had no political mass organisation and other underground political structures involving the peasants as active political fighters for freedom, and neither were there organised units to serve as reception bases, a few contacts, however, served as the initial group to receive our comrades. We also counted on the seething discontent of the people of that area about the apartheid regime's plans to cede Ingwavuma and the KwaNgwane bantustan to Swaziland.

Indeed, when I made contact with a few peasants I had known when I was working in that area, they insisted that they wanted weapons and they would willingly join Umkhonto we Sizwe. If they were to be organised, they used to say, well and good but let this be done simultaneously with their being armed for war against the apartheid regime. For us in the Military Command, these were sufficient sparks under the circumstances to kindle the fire of People's War in that part of the country. I seem to remember Kark Marx advising his friend Kugelmann that "if history was made only under infallibly favourable circumstances, it would indeed be very easy to make". I can add to this statement by Marx that also if it were so, it would know of no heroes!

THE STAGE OF RECONNAISSANCE

Our initial military reconnaissance in Ingwavuma was done by two persons, Comrade Post (who later died like the famous Matrosov of the Second World War when he gave his life to save the members of his unit — I shall come back later to this incident when I demonstrate the state of morale of our combatants in Ingwavuma) and "R" (about whom we shall also hear more at the appropriate time).

Their mission was to conduct reconnaissance in one area of Ingwavuma for a period of two weeks, during which time they were to stay with the families who were the contacts of our Military Command. The unit was supposed to assess the possibilities of staying with the villagers



Comrade Mugabe

as well as the building of safe bases in the terrain in the event of battles with the SADF breaking out and survival of a sizeable guerrilla unit among them becoming difficult. They were also expected to find training bases far from their rear bases, where mobile training camps were to be established to build an army from among the local population. After the period of two weeks, one member of the unit, "R" (who had been appointed the commander) would have to go to report their findings to our Military Command.

At the end of two weeks, indeed "R" came to us and reported that he did not believe that the area provided possibilities for the establishment of guerrilla bases as well as training camps, since, according to him, the area was only favourable in a very small part, the rest being plain and without forestation where guerrillas can hide. We tried to find out if that view was also shared by Post, whom he had left behind. To this "R" said that this was his opinion as the commander of the mission.

Negative start, undeniably! This was the report of a man from the spot, who had spent two weeks, and on whose information all future plans were to be based. As we listened to his report, I remembered reading a book about the guerrilla war of the Yugoslav partisans under the command of Broz Tito. There is an episode where a reconnaissance operative reported that the terrain he had seen was "as plain as the palm of my hand", and therefore drawing the conclusion that the brigade would not be able to press through. I remember actually

repeating to "R", almost word for word, the response that is said to have been made by Broz Tito to that soldier:

"Comrade, are you suggesting that we will never be able to fight guerrilla war in South Africa because there are insufficient forests? If the area you saw has no widespread jungles, then it is precisely the place we need to prove that guerrilla warfare does not depend on jungles!"

The Chief-of-Staff however, thought that I was making a mistake by responding like this (although he did not say it in the meeting in the presence of "R"), and he suddenly said to "R":

"Okay, Comrade "R", thank you very much for the report. We shall discuss your report in detail in a full meeting of the Command, we shall then inform you of the next step after those discussions."

As soon as the word reached the members of the Regional Command as well as some members of the PMC that "R" had some report from Ingwavuma, almost everyone was keen to debrief him in order to ascertain the situation from the man on the spot. "R" 's report thus, subsequently, became the basis for the whole re-examination and re-assessment of the feasibility of our plan. The Chief-of-Staff and myself were directed to rediscuss the plan against the background of "R" 's report and make a written report to the Regional Command.

It was after the meeting in our machinery that a decision was taken that I should go to Ingwavuma personally in the company of the Chief-of-Logistics, spend no less than two weeks, during which we were to be joined by Post in assessing the situation in the same manner in which their unit had been assigned. I therefore left our Headquarters for Ingwavuma together with our Chief-of-Logistics armed with pistols but hidden under the overalls we were wearing as we had to look exactly like the peasants in the area. We also carried sticks in the same way as all men do in the rural areas of Zululand.

During our presence in the area, we were able to meet various peasant families, held extensive discussions with them and prepared those we thought were suitable as receptionists for



our combat units. Everywhere we went, the people received us well and often with enthusiasm, and although we had some with us, I can say it with all the power of truth that we never spent even a cent from our pockets for food or for anything we needed for our survival there. We ate breakfast in one home, and lunch in another; we were fried a chicken in a different home and provided a sleeping place in another home. Such were the conditions that we met during our stay in Ingwavuma.

Given these favourable conditions, we made further preparations in other sectors for the reception of our comrades; we also reconnoitred bases as well as areas that could serve as training camps for small units of people in the localities.

I must not leave the reader with a rosy picture of everything, however! Our movement was not at random, neither were the people who offered us food and places of sleep chosen arbitrarily. There was nothing spontaneous about all this, and as I pointed out earlier, most of our contacts were people who were known to us through previous political work in the area, and who subsequently led us to others who thought and felt like them about the situation. I think that this is important to emphasize because, as a matter of fact, no guerrilla unit, no matter how 'lucky' it is, can successfully stay among a people who have not been prepared politically and also organised for such a task.

On the completion of our mission, we gave our report to other members of our Military Command as well as to the whole Regional Command. On its basis

two basic decisions were taken, 1) to proceed with our plans and to establish combat units inside the country with urgency, and 2) to reassign "R" the task of commanding another combat unit that was to base in another area, one of those we had reconnoitred in our mission.

"R" 's unit was called "Nozishada" (named after an extraordinarily courageous Zulu warrior during the wars of resistance), and the first unit which was then commanded I may mention that neither of these units was Comrade Mugabe's, since he commanded a separate one.

ACHIEVEMENTS AND SHORTCOMINGS OF THE PLAN

All our units that landed at Ingwavuma did so successfully, and this was despite great security odds against us, most of which were caused by the eminent signing of the Inkomati Accord. And all of them, without exception, were taken care of by the local population in terms of food as well as information.

Perhaps more than anything else, Ingwavuma proved that it is practically possible to develop a People's Army within the borders of South Africa. We may reveal this much that between them, the combat units that were established at Ingwavuma trained a whole guerrilla company from among the local population. The enemy could not find our training camps, and those that he ultimately discovered, had already been existing and operating inside the country for close to twelve months.

Ingwavuma also demonstrated the tremendous potential that lies in the rural areas of our country for the establishment of guerrilla zones, which can prove ten-fold successful only if necessary political preparation and co-ordination is done, as laid down in the strategy documents of the ANC. Many Ingwavuma's can be organised, taking into consideration, obviously, the specific conditions and politics of each area so selected.

THE MORALE OF OUR COMBATANTS

The best method to illustrate the morale of the MK combatants that established their bases at Ingwavuma is not to use long English adjectives, but to tell the story of how Post died, the commander of Maqedindaba. I have selected Post in order to broaden the knowledge people have on their heroism which many only know from the accounts of Mugabe's Diary.

One local young man, "N", who was a trainee of Maqedindaba unit, was taken by the South African police for detention. The comrades in the unit got this report about "N" 's arrest, but decided not to be alarmed about it since it was a frequent thing for "N" to be arrested for petty criminal offences in the villages. The unit, however, had committed a mistake of having shown "N" where their underground base in the terrain was. This was inexcusable. My own reasoning, also confirmed by other subsequent events, is that the comrades had become very lax about their security because they had not only survived a period of close to nine months

by that time, but had also developed tremendous confidence on the members of the local population, who knew of their presence in their midst during all this period.

But war is war and security of the combatants should never be taken for granted. In that village alone, Maqedindaba had already trained more than a platoon of persons from among the local population. But victory has its negative aspects as well, and once a combat unit starts believing that it is invincible or forgets that that very victory is the result of its vigilance on a minute to minute basis, then such a unit is on its way to unnecessary problems.

Three days after "N"'s arrest, the unit again received a report that a blue VW kombi was seen in the village carrying a group of white men, which was a very



James Maropeng

unusual thing in that part of the rural world. This information was communicated to the comrades by their contacts in the village precisely because they considered this event as strange and a possible danger. I am sad to say that once again the comrades ignored this information and did not change their base swiftly.

Third warning: after about a day or two after the Kombi event, the village was suddenly visited by KwaZulu police units who spread the story in the villages that they were hunting for wild pigs. Yet clearly, the "wild pigs" they were looking for were our comrades. Still the comrades did not change their base. This 'pig hunting' event, however, was



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to be the last warning history provided.

That evening or the following day's evening, Post left the base and went to the village to meet an important contact for the unit. He was only armed with a Makarov pistol. Very early in the morning before people could wake up and see him crossing the fields and getting to his base, and as he approached the base, he discovered that the base was surrounded by an army formation of the SADF, which was steadily encircling the base where four members of Maqedindaba were sleeping. When Post saw this, he took out his pistol and fired shots which were clearly meant to warn the comrades in the base of the eminent danger. Post obviously knew that by doing so, he would attract the fire-power of the SADF to himself and die, but his major concern at that time was not his life but those of the members of his unit.

Indeed the unit heard Post's warning shots from his pistol, and all four of them escaped through a secret exit. All four of them managed to break out of the SADF encirclement, and they are still alive today and telling the story. They all shamelessly admit that they owe their lives to their Commander, Post!

The fascist soldiers killed Post, and according to the information we have been able to gather from the local population, the body of our heroic commander was tied by a rope by the racist soldiers and tied to a helicopter which flew in circles around the village

in a cowardly attempt by the SADF to intimidate the peasants. Villagers came out of their homes, looked up at the sky, and saw the black body of their own commander hanging from a rope. None of them is said to have spoken a word, but some women are said to have sobbed quietly since they knew who it was that was hanging on that SADF helicopter — it was the leader of the men they had daily cooked for and mended their clothing.

The story of Post must be told throughout our movement. His heroism should be the beaconing banner for all our heroic combatants. Songs should be composed about him. Poets should take their pens and not wait for rhythm and rhyme but write a war poem about Post. Where are our novelists? Is their ink dry not to tell the story of Post?

The last time I saw Post was when I had gone to brief them about the recent political situation and also to give them some copies of *Dawn* and *Sechaba* plus a few *Newsbriefings*. I stayed with them (the whole unit) in that very same cave which they had made their underground base. Post made tea and kept on saying to the members of our Military Command that had gone to pay them a visit: "I hope that the same experience is happening in other parts of our country."

We assured him, and I saw a smile of satisfaction on his face. In a way, the whole unit was taken by surprise by our visit and this reminded me as well about the visits that our leadership often makes to us in our various training areas, the difference now being that it was being made by us to the comrades in their guerrilla bases inside

If ever in this account I have painted a picture of glorifying myself, please pardon me, since this was not my intention; without making the story a personal account, I could have run the risk of taking realities out of it and it would have remained hollow and imaginary. Let me conclude by paying tribute to all whom I served with in the Northern Natal Military Command as well as the heroes of that struggle both the dead and the three that were arrested with Mugabe and are presently serving their sentences in Robben Island. Victory is in sight, and all our sacrifices are not in vain!