

The rest of her chilling story can be read in the full interview - how they managed to survive in the river, how they then left the camp in the night and walked for two full days looking for some kind of assistance, finally reaching Kabwe, where they were rescued by sympathetic Zambians and local members of ZAPU.

That disastrous incident took place in October 1978, at the same time as the attack on Freedom Camp close to Lusaka. It effectively ended the military training of women. The camp was abandoned by ZAPU and the surviving girls settled at a camp near Kafue, south of Lusaka. Gradually they were redeployed, some for civilian types of training in other countries, others to work in the offices in Lusaka or to attend courses in the local colleges. They were given duties such as publicity at international meetings or were trained as secretaries.

We meet the Womens' Brigade for the last time in 1980, when they are seen parading at the Castle Arms hotel, a property which had been bought by ZAPU, on their return home just before Independence. From Castle Arms most of them went to Sierra Assembly point, where they were selected for incorporation into the new army being formed (Zimbabwe National army) or for the police or prison service. Some chose to leave the military and found their way in civilian life.

The story of the women's brigade is a fascinating one, as it represents an attempt to treat women equally, but yet not equally, and find a military but non-combatant role which would allow them to make their own contribution to the struggle. The young women themselves expected eventually to go to the front, and perhaps if the struggle had continued longer they might have, but with so many men available for training and deployment, and especially after the massacre at Mkushi, they never took on that role.

MILITARY OPERATIONS

A significant number of photographs in the Nkobi collection as well as several of the accompanying interviews depict various aspects of military operations. These include military parades, weapons captured in battle, casualties of the war, relations with the civilian villagers, military strategy as well as specific incidents. Since most of the photographs were not taken during actual operations, we rely purely on the oral testimony for such information, and of course there are significant gaps in the record provided here. Rather than presenting a coherent overall narrative of the military aspect of ZAPU's role in the struggle, we deduce the flow of events from the glimpses given by individuals when narrating their own experiences.

The early stages of armed struggle were mentioned earlier, with the first smuggling of arms from Egypt via Tanzania through Zambia. Thomas Ngwenya referred to the early contacts with the enemy as they brought more weapons into Rhodesia working with Dabengwa, finally leading up to the Wankie and Sipolilo campaigns of 1967. Those were the first big operations launched by ZAPU, in alliance with the ANC of South Africa, and they signaled to the Rhodesians that they were facing a determined and capable enemy. Unfortunately none of those interviewed here were involved in either of these campaigns, but interviews with those who were can be accessed elsewhere⁷.

⁷ Interviews have been carried out by Mafela Trust and can now be accessed through SAHA.

Since ZAPU was operating primarily from Zambia in the 1960s, a major obstacle was the crossing of the Zambezi, and one of the primary tasks was to establish viable crossing points, and use them to take arms into the country to stockpile. Sabotage was also an important activity, especially of the railway line from Bulawayo to Victoria Falls. Jack Mpofu describes these activities:

So I was appointed [in 1968] to ... to lead a certain group as a reconnaissance, head of reconnaissance, from east of Livingstone up to next to where the Kariba starts, then we were looking for ... the routes where we could cross.

These operations were rudely interrupted by a disagreement between the politicians in Lusaka which led to withdrawal of two of the executive – James Chikerema and George Nyandoro - two mutinies amongst some of the cadres, and the formation of FROLIZI⁸. Eventually the crisis passed and ZAPU was able to revive its military thrust under the newly formed ZPRA. Jack Mpofu again describes a sabotage operation which must have taken place in 1972 or 73:

I remember one day when we crossed with me and Mazinyane and Machimini to go and destroy the railway line at Victoria Falls. Then we went at night carrying a box of explosives with the detonating cord and fuse and so on. We thought it was a small bridge but it was just a culvert; No, let us break some stones which were on the side of that culvert and then put it under that culvert and on the side both, both corners; then we lit the explosives and then we left the area.

They succeeded in hitting their target and blowing up the train, but the next problem was to get the three-man unit back across the river. The other three men in their group had waited with the boat to take them back across the river, but were frightened away when they threw a stone into a gorge, thinking that the Rhodesians were firing:

Then I decided that no let us take the dry log, two of them and then we tied two of them. I sat on those logs and then I started rowing, rowing those logs so that I can take the boat because it was on the open ...I could see the boat. Then the current was too powerful when I was right ... when I was inside the river. Then the logs were taken away by the water and then I .. I swam back to ... Rhodesia, Zimbabwe. Then I said, no I failed. Then Mazinyane pulled me when I was about to ...touch the banks of the river then we stayed there the whole day. But in the morning, then the enemy started bombing, from the bridge coming towards where we were and you could see even monkeys and baboons running away, fearing the sounds of the bombs.

That story had a happy ending as the Rhodesians retreated at nightfall and the comrades returned to rescue them. But in fact there were many casualties by drowning in the Zambezi⁹.

It wasn't long before the ZPRA forces moved from such hit-and-run sabotage operations to something more sustainable. Mpofu explains:

Their aim was to come inside the home, train others and see whether they can get small... small targets of the enemy, like police, or those soldiers who are patrolling maybe along the railway line and so on and then destroy those people, and take the guns and then give their recruits..

⁸ Front for the Liberation of Zimbabwe

⁹ The writer's brother-in-law was one who did not make it when trying to swim after their unit's boats had been discovered by the Rhodesians.



Some rudimentary training was carried out amongst the villagers, especially for defence, and then, too, the political education during training was important in establishing procedures for relating to civilians. The guerrillas relied on villagers for food and other essentials as well as information on enemy movements:

It was very common in fact it was a daily thing to be fed by the locals because guerrillas could not carry food all the time. The source of feeding was ... were the masses. But this picture also indicates that even if these women came to feed these guerrillas they ... came with their babies. It indicates that they were very aware of the fact that there were no soldiers within the area. Otherwise they would not have allowed the women to bring in ... their babies ... the mujiba network I think was very much active in this situation, for this situation to take place.

Dube notes that in the photograph the guerrillas are being fed outside the village:

it was necessary that whenever this kind of feeding was to take place it was to take place away from the ...the eyes of the ... of the ... civilians, because within the civilians there could be informers.

Mzila-Ndlovu gives some detail of the difficulties of moving on foot, guerrilla-style while transporting artillery, and intersperses his discussions of particular weapons with examples of when they were used in the field and how they moved:

... I remember many of our infantry guys went through Sipolilo, that's Feira I think ... many of them because I mean they were many, they were then broken down to smaller units to actually suit the situation . So in groups of tens, groups of twenties, no more in groups of five hundred or 120 [as they were organized for training].

But later the groups became bigger:

...towards the end of 79 when our units became even bigger in the front, like the attack on Makuti, Makuti¹⁰... you know Magunje police camp. That attack, it was the noisiest when our guys wrote ZPRA ... I always remind people in Magunje when I go there to say that "Do you remember ZPRA inscribed on this police station?" The police fled that police station.

Mzila-Ndlovu also describes the strategy as it developed:

So the training that was being done there saying advanced guerrilla meant that you had a kind of combination of guerrilla warfare, kind of hit and run you know activities, but you want to transform those ... those operations to hit, assault and stay. And the hit, assault and stay approach would then be useful when you go for settlements – enemy settlements, whether they were police camps, they were farms...

As larger and larger numbers began to be staged along the Zambian border for deployment across the river, the Rhodesians began to take the war to the camps, generally with aerial bombardments. Dube describes the impact on the operations there:

TOP: Joshua Nkomo with A. Mangena (army commander), and E. Masengu (chief of training) at a pass out parade
BOTTOM: ZPRA guerrilla forces being given food by women

¹⁰ Mashonaland West, near where the road to Kariba diverges from the Chirundu road

What used to happen in the camps in Zambia during those days when the Smith ... regime was bombing... the camps in Zambia ... what we used to do ... each morning we would ... the commander would evacuate the base, or the camp, move the people maybe some ten kilometers north, others south, others east so that the camp remained an empty space vacant and empty of people. ... when the camp was empty even if the enemy came it would just bomb the camp and the people would be safe ... far away from the centre of the camp.

During these years Joshua Nkomo was based in Lusaka, and assumed the role of supreme military commander, visiting his men to encourage them, as Dube describes:

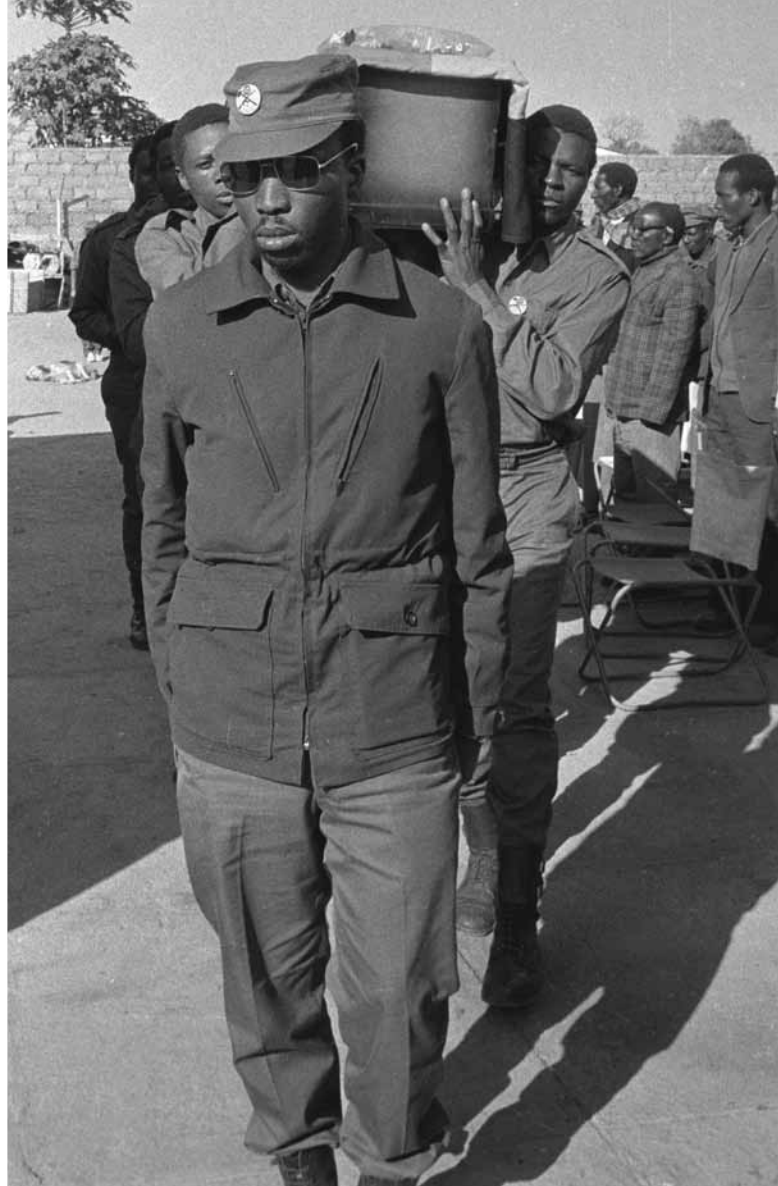
Usually the message that he passed to the men was that, especially when they are through with their training, “Comrades you are through with your training, the enemy is across the river. It is you to liberate your country, it is you to liberate that country.” Because ...it was at that time the enemy was always afraid of the ... operations especially by ZPRA... in a parade of this kind this is exactly what he [would] say, that “The enemy is afraid of you; get home and fight the enemy.”

As activities built up there were both successes and failures. Failures were particularly painful when lives were lost, especially those of leaders. Two of the interviewees, Mpofu and Dube, were present at the incident in which the commander at the time, Alfred Nikita Mangena, was killed in 1978. They explain how a unit which had returned from training in Angola was being deployed in southern Zambia to cross the river for operations when they met an ambush and many – up to 30 – were killed. Mangena then went on a mission to investigate exactly what had occurred. In spite of warnings not to take any vehicle into the area as there were mines, Mangena called for his land rover when he was returning, fatigued from walking on a recently injured leg. It hit a landmine and he died on the spot. Jack Mpofu, who refused to get in the vehicle, was shot in the leg. The outbreak of shots was somewhat mysterious and led to speculation that Mangena was assassinated by his own men. Both Mpofu and Dube deny this, with Dube explaining:

... some people, of course, well, were heard to be talking about Mangena [being] assassinated Mangena was killed by ... some of his soldiers ... this talk was there but it wasn't really pronounced ... but there were some people who used to talk like that.

Both pay tribute to the qualities of Mangena as a leader. Photographs were also taken at the funeral of Mangena, which followed, and show Lookout Masuku leading the cortege as the coffin arrives at Zimbabwe House in Lusaka. ZAPU's policy was that if a commander falls in the field, the political commissar of the unit assumes command. Lookout was the chief of the commissariat so he automatically took over as commander.

But there were also successes, demonstrated by the capture of weapons. Then the administration could display these to the public, to the diplomats and journalists as was done on several occasions. A series of photographs show these captured materials, including rifles, mines, mortars, explosives, even uniforms. One captures a press conference at Zimbabwe House in Lusaka and another, a display of material at a public meeting. Sometimes markings on the material could show where the material was manufactured, thus proving complicity of certain western nations in Smith's war. Frequently planes were downed, especially spotter planes and helicopters; many photographs show these, probably all the same plane or planes, but one has been selected which appears to have parts of both a spotter plane and a helicopter.



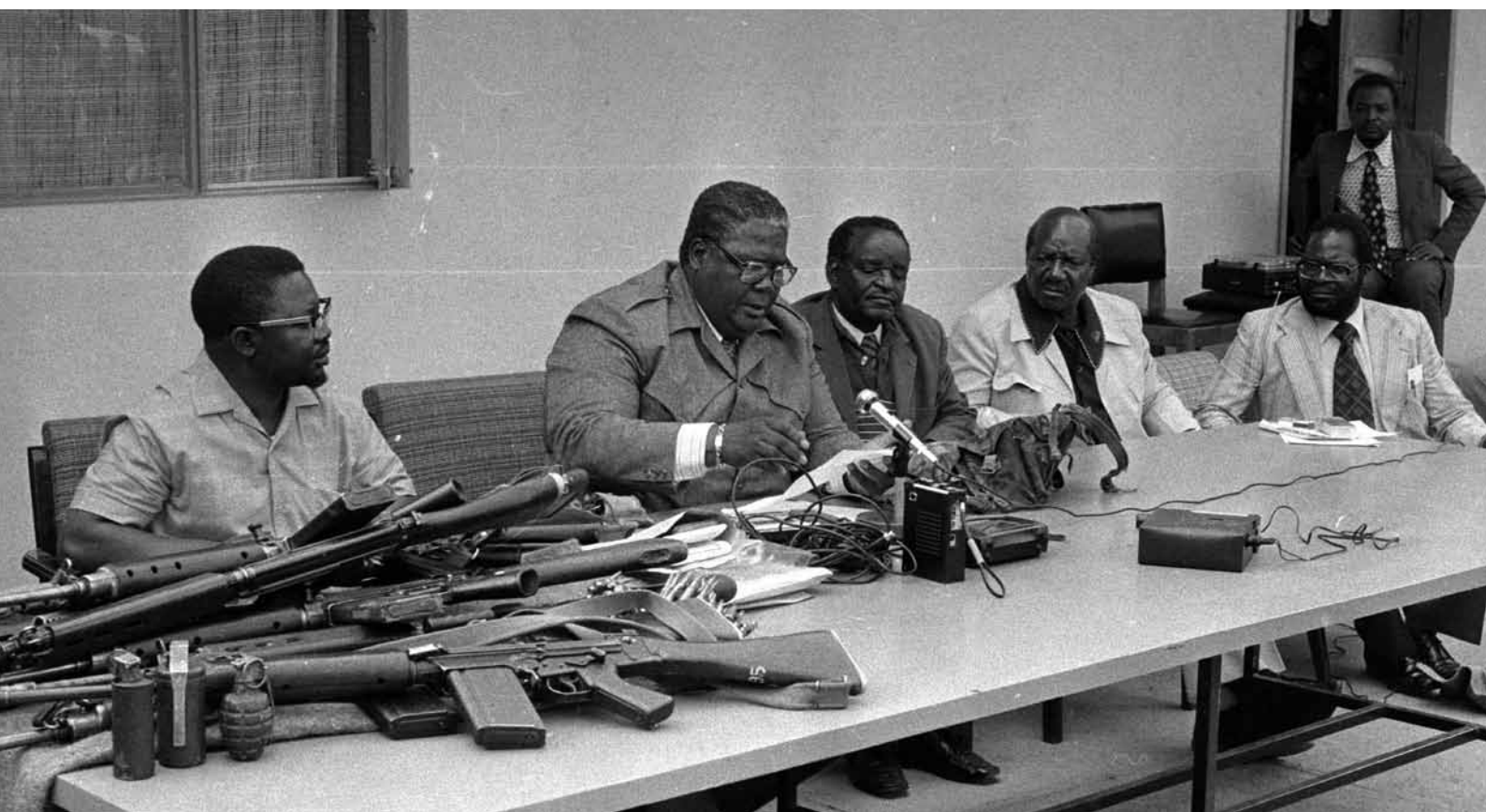


TOP LEFT: Rocket used in bombing in 1978

TOP RIGHT: A cadre inspects captured weapons in Lusaka

TOP MIDDLE: Captured explosives, weapons and ammunition in Lusaka

BOTTOM: Joshua Nkomo is making a statement next to a display of captured weapons





TOP: Cadres inspect parts of the downed spotter plane
BOTTOM: Display of captured weapons



Mzila-Ndlovu relates how his unit used a Strela heat-seeking missile to shoot down a Rhodesian troop carrier returning from the attack on Mkushi women's camp. They were stationed near Mwembeshi and were unaware of the attack which had been staged until later. They saw a large number of helicopters flying from the north:

...and we counted those helicopters ...and I decided no we cannot want to use a missile. Little did we know that they actually were flying ahead of a bigger troop carrier, a Dakota. And when it appeared ... I don't know ... it was around about 4 o'clock, 5 o'clock. It was really getting ...kind of ... it was cloudy, kind of getting dark....but that Dakota was flying below the cloud level but higher than the altitude of the helicopters, and so we hit it and our guys went to assault and found that they were already dead, burnt.

By 1978-79 with three trained battalions already in the field, the Rhodesians were trying to contain ZPRA forces within Zambia, but were not succeeding. Mzila-Ndlovu describes the strategy:

The understanding was that more battalions would be deployed along the Zambezi River, thereby you know testing the enemy's strength in terms of dislodging us from the gorges, the mountains along the Zambezi Valley. If then that failed [i.e. the Rhodesians failed] we'd push further inland and then the strategy was eventually we'd go for towns and capture towns.

The enemy failed to dislodge the ZPRA soldiers when they fought against a single battalion at Feira. For two weeks they tried and finally had to withdraw. That then told ZAPU leadership that the time was ready for their final strategy "The Turning Point". Those troops trained in conventional warfare would be thrown in to assist the guerrillas on the ground to seize and hold territory. Richard Dube described it thus:

Now, the turning point was a result of the fact that in the country here, especially in Matabeleland North we had semi-liberated zones. I can give you my experience of the semi-liberated zones we had. I was one time assigned to come and make an assessment inside in NF 2¹¹ which includes... Hwange, Lupane, part of Nkayi, Tsholotsho up to Plumtree. I left Zambia of course with a group of men; we walked through ... Hwange up to Lupane, walked up to Nkayi, walked through up to through Tsholotsho and then Plumtree and finally I ... crossed over to Botswana. Now, you can be surprised that during my movements around this country at certain places I could ride on a bike during the day along the roads ..., in uniform ...

Now the idea of the ... Turning Point was - we had reached a point where we wanted to capture land and defend it and ... how we were going to do that without regular soldiers. This is what necessitated us to train five battalions initially which we were going to use the armaments of course that our Russian friends had already given us, the tanks, the amphibious I mean the pontoons and so on which we were going to use for ... Yes we were going to bring the tanks on pontoons¹². We ... were really amassing the arsenal to ... move in the regular battalions and defend the areas ... the liberated areas.

Dube describes how the Rhodesian commander on the southern side of the river later told him that they realized that they would not be able to defeat the three battalions amassed on the Zambian side:

¹¹ Northern Front 2

¹² Across the Zambezi

They had already tested that when they ... they attacked the battalion at ... Kariba. It was one of ... the battalions that had been trained at Mulungushi. The battle at Feira it took about it took about almost two weeks. Then they were unable to defeat that battalion and they lost quite a good number of planes and men. So they ... they realized if they could be resisted by a single battalion using all the ... equipment they had, all the ... special forces they had on one battalion ... they were being resisted by one battalion, how more ... what more with ... three battalions...

...General Schute - when he was Brigadier actually - in One Brigade here in Bulawayo ... he is the one who was responsible for that area. He sent his MIO's, his intelligence group about three times going there to make reconnaissance and so on. Each time they came back they thought they had come to the final ... the point where they would decide to go and attack but all the three times they made reconnaissance and came down here and assessed what they had discovered they aborted ... the decisions to go and attack those battalions.

Meanwhile, though, ZPRA forces were themselves moving. Dabengwa explains how six hundred troops with heavy artillery had already crossed and attacked from within Rhodesia:

When the Rhodesians started bombing the ZPRA forces in 1979 and they actually started bombing them when the forces were already being deployed towards the front, that is along the Zambia and Zimbabwe border, and most of the fighting that took place took place really in the border areas and the ZPRA forces were ready to cross. One battalion had already crossed on the western side of the country, ... between Kazangula and the Victoria Falls. The destruction of the ... the Elephant Hills Hotel at Victoria Falls was a result of ... it was hit by the ZPRA forces using artillery fire.

Dube expressed the view that the knowledge of the strength of these ZPRA battalions was certainly a factor in pushing Ian Smith to accept talks at Lancaster House which led to a negotiated settlement by the end of 1979. Of course this deprived the ZPRA forces of the battlefield victory which they so desired, but as Dube reflects:

Now I must say the ZPRA operations were a decisive factor in the liberation of this ... of this country because without ZPRA fighting I don't see the actual reason why the Rhodesians or Ian Smith would have given up this country to be taken by ... I don't. This is the way I see it. It's unfortunate of course that things have gone the way they have gone, but we in ZPRA actually liberated this country with our own ... our own strength. It's a fact.

RHODESIAN ATTACKS

The attack on Mkushi Camp was not the only bold assault by the Rhodesian forces on ZAPU installations in Zambia. As the war intensified such attacks became a daily threat and a frequent occurrence, not only for the military staging and training camps in the Zambezi Valley, but also for the refugee camps, for administrative and military personnel housed in Lusaka, and for the transit camps. The attack on Nampundwe Camp in which several people died has been described by Cetshwayo Sithole and Benjamin Dube, Regina Ndlovu refers to threatened attacks on Victory Camp. Mzila-Ndlovu refers to an attack on the training camp in Angola; the boys' school at JZ Moyo Camp nearby was bombed and even after it moved far north to Zambia's north-western province near Solwezi the children were subjected to bombardment again.