

WOMEN'S BRIGADE

The decision to form a separate unit for women soldiers was evidently motivated by Joshua Nkomo. From evidence in the interviews he was uncomfortable having the men and women together and was also uncomfortable with the women becoming a fighting force. Sibongile Khumalo elaborates:

You know he had a good policy. His thinking was that “Why waste a seed? These women are the ones who will replace those soldiers who would have died in the front, so why waste a seed. All we have to do is to prepare these girls for administrative work, yes”.

He preferred to deploy them after basic training for training in such roles as police, nurses, secretarial etc. However, it is not clear from the interviews exactly how the decision was taken to form a separate brigade.

The brigade was first formed in 1977. At that time Victory Camp was being designated as a holding camp for women and girls, and selections were made for those who wanted to be trained as soldiers, those who would continue with education and those who might be teachers or sent for other non-military training. There appeared to be a policy that everyone not going for primary or secondary education should have military training first before going for other training, but evidently this was not strictly adhered to, as many went straight for other courses.

The brigade was formed at Victory Camp, and the first group remained there while the training camp at Mkushi was being prepared. It seems that almost all of the photographs of the brigade were taken at Victory Camp, perhaps even mostly on the same day when there was a parade. The chief of personnel, Ambrose Mutinhiri, is seen addressing them in one photograph. Grace Noko explains how the brigade was formed and what role they initially played:

...when the brigade was now being formed, we had about 200 ladies who were now at the Victory Camp ... So since we now had the trained personnel among women ... it was also now on the security side, helping men and the Zambians to ... teach our people, the ladies, ... how they should behave in that camp, and also teaching those who were supposed to go for the training the slight or light training like how to handle guns, stripping the guns and also some ... doing some exercises in the morning.

Sibongile Khumalo⁵ talks about many of the individual girls shown in the photos, saying where they came from and in some cases where they are today. She mentions the practice of equality, without special privileges, without special uniforms or insignia, even for commanders, and the spirit which prevailed of trying to live socialism. She was in the first group of women to be sent to Mkushi, in about October 1977. She describes the experience:

The whole idea was for us to receive political orientation, military training, so that we are ready for any situation to defend the country... So we went to Mkushi and when we got to Mkushi ... I was in the first group, I can say in the lead truck - as I told you that I was in Company A - the lead truck that got to Mkushi and when we got there already, as organized as ZAPU was, we found a team already there ... and they had already sort of like laid out the area where we would be, the company, and also where the kitchen would be, and nothing was done. It was a complete bush. And we were told, “Company A, this is your block” ...and the block was just trees, and we were given tents, and we had to pitch up the tents ... in that tent it would be like a section, maybe two sections in one tent, depending on the size. Our friends from Cuba gave us some airbeds. We had airbeds, we also had beautiful uniforms, beautiful uniforms, and they were brand, brand new...

⁵ Pseudonym



TOP LEFT: Soldiers of the Women's Brigade hoisting the ZAPU flag

TOP RIGHT: Khanyile Mazwi and Nompumelelo Moyo enjoying mealtime with other cadres of the Women's Brigade

BOTTOM: Chief of personnel Ambrose Mutinhiri addressing the Women's Brigade at a parade





TOP: Cadres of the Women's Brigade marching at the Castle Arms Parade

BOTTOM: ZPRA cadres Syvester (deputy camp commander) and Sijabuliso Gumede in combat attire



...and then we said “Now, where are the toilets?” And we were shown ... we were shown the map in fact, the following day after everybody had arrived, we went to the parade and then we were shown the map of the camp “This is where the toilets will be. This is where your bathroom will be” ... We said “bathroom” ... and that was the stream; it was just a river; yes, it was just a river. And then we were shown where the kitchen will be, and then we were given the housekeeping issues, like “Don’t wander as far as this area, because this ... I think the area was highly infested with wildlife and also there were ... a few kilometers away there were farmers ...

Sibongile Khumalo⁵ describes the training in some detail (covered under the section on Military Training) and then explains how after completion, sometime in the first half of 1978, some were selected to go for various other trainings. She remained to become one of the instructors for the next group of girls. It was this second group of young women who suffered a vicious air and ground assault by the Rhodesian forces. Cecilia gives a detailed emotional and very moving account of this attack in which many young women died just when they were about to begin their training. The camp had been alerted to the possibility of some activity, and some had managed to get out of the camp and taken cover, but when they first saw the jets approaching, the group she was with ran for the river, where many were able to conceal themselves. Those new recruits who headed for the defence pits took the full brunt of that air attack:

...they taught us that ... in case of any aerial attack, how we should retreat ... so that’s why we had to run eastwards, the enemy was coming from the east going the opposite side and I remembered Makanyanga, he ...and then the jet, when they saw us coming out of there where we were taking cover, and you know what they did, they realized there were people underneath the trees, they just started increasing speed it was too late for them to dive, and so they just released the bombs... they were like silver and underneath they were dark, and you could just hear the whistle, and I remember the old man Makanyanga and that was the river where he was teaching us. He said “*ungezwa ukhwelo lala pansi, dakhe*” [trans: when you hear the whistle, lie down, recruits] He came, I tell you it was vivid and it ... from nowhere I said “Ground” and we all went down. A few metres away from us, where we were hiding, where those big trees were, those where the bombs were dropped .. then there were two of us ... some of us, two.. ..Nhamo, she didn’t take cover, she continued running, and then she was hit by splinters, but she didn’t die.

Then came helicopters, dropping paratroopers, to finish off whoever was still alive:

They were white guys “There’s some in the river” and we kept quiet, we were still. We told each other that ... we were holding the semi-automatic rifles ... we had ammunition, we said “If anything happens, we just take our lives”. That’s what we were prepared to do, but that would be the last resort, yes. If we see them coming for us, we’d rather kill ourselves, not them kill us. And then one of them said, “No, no, no, maybe it’s fish, let’s move on move on, move on”.

Now they were moving towards the helpless girls who had not received military training. After the bombs ... they dropped bombs everywhere ... now the girls were confused, and they couldn’t move out of those pits... we watched as they shot them straight on the heads pah, pah, pah, pah ... and one of the girls who was part of our group - I think she was overwhelmed, she couldn’t move after the bombs were dropped. Then she crawled – she was trained in Mwembeshi – she crawled to where these other girls now were trying to run out of the pit and they were ... they were just holding each other. There were about three of four and they were already dead from the bombs.

⁵ Pseudonym

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.