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THE IMPECCABLE ZAPU AND ANC ALLIANCE IN RETROSPECT

The 1967 Wankie and 1968 Sipolilo Campaigns



For ZPRA the battle of Wankie was understandably the watershed in the history of Zimbabwe and South Africa's armed liberation struggles. The Luthuli detachment's indomitable fighters proved the lie of the invincibility of the Rhodesian and South African racist and apartheid regimes.

By Dumiso Dabengwa

The delay of more than four decades before telling our nations about the Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army (ZPRA)'s version of the armed struggle in Zimbabwe's war of liberation has not been deliberate. But the politics in play since 1980 have been to blame.

As the war combatants of 1962 – 79 are getting reduced in number as a result of natural wastage and memory loss, the necessity to record their story now cannot be over emphasised.

The million rand question that you as readers out there may want to ask is "Why did ANC cadres from Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) die alongside ZAPU's ZPRA cadres between 1967 and 1979 in the Zimbabwe war of liberation?"

My major focus will delve on the impeccable ZAPU and ANC Alliance in retrospect; the 1967 Wankie and 1968 Sipolilo joint campaigns.

Early ZPRA inland Rhodesia operations between 1965 and 1966 had specific, intelligence missions defined by reconnaissance and military hardware logistics personnel. Apartheid South Africa had sought to enter Zambian territory under the pretext of miners destined to the Zambia Copper belt mining towns, gathering information that would be relayed back to RSA in collaboration with Rhodesia for military incursions.

It became necessary that the ZAPU and ANC forces worked together to dismantle colonial Rhodesia's impunity that was supported by Apartheid RSA. ANC type chapters in Southern Rhodesia, Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland had been established in the 1950s.

These chapters were banned in 1959. In the end, the NDP was formed in 1960 and facilitated the ANC cadres who came through Rhodesia to cross the border into Zambia.

Later, in 1962, when ZAPU decided to engage in the armed struggle, it established an external office in Zambia. By this time, the ANC had already established an office in Lusaka. As a result of the relationship of both parties, the heads of the military wings of ZAPU and ANC realised the need to engage each other.

First they held a number of exploratory meetings where they

discussed their strategies. The ZPRA (then known as the ZAPU Military Wing) was represented by its Commander Akim Ndlovu and Chief of Reconnaissance Dumiso Dabengwa, plus, whenever necessary, by other relevant command staff.

The ANC military wing MK (Umkhonto we Sizwe) was represented by its Commander Joe Modise, Chris Hani, Zola Zembe plus others in the command structure where necessary.

During these interactions, the ANC explained its main obstacles in the deployment of its cadres for operations in South Africa. They told of their limited choice through Botswana and how in most cases their cadres were intercepted by police, arrested and sent to prison before they were deported back to Zambia.

ZPRA on the other hand felt

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uncomfortable about the extent of this co-operation, taking into consideration that their military wing had only been established in 1965 and had started with small scale deployments into Rhodesia.

They were still testing the ground as it were. On the other hand, MK had been on the ground for some time. However, their cadres at the holding camps in Tanzania were growing weary of waiting to be deployed. This posed a big headache for MK as they were expected to come up with some significant movement or face a revolt in their holding camps.

The main topic therefore became the need for cooperation between the two military wings to use Zimbabwe instead of Botswana for significant deployment of their cadres. It was then

recommended that the leadership of the two parties be briefed before they could be any concrete suggestions on the extent of the cooperation.

After each side had briefed its party leadership, the leaders approved the idea and suggested that the military should come up with firm proposals on how they would implement this cooperation. At this stage the two commanders then set out to establish relevant sub-committees to plan and submit their recommendations.

The sub-committees made their reports which included a full operations plan with the Wankie and Sipolilo campaigns earmarked to kick-start the cooperation. This operations report was later presented to a combined meeting of the two organisations and their military wings. In this meeting the ANC was represented by Oliver R Tambo and Thomas Nkobi while ZAPU was represented by James R Chikerema and Jason Z Moyo. At the end of this meeting the military wings were given the go ahead to work out the details of this implementation and to report back to another combined meeting.

All the relevant military departments such as Reconnaissance, Logistics, Training and Operations were assigned to study their roles and ensure that they would fit into the broad operational plans of the two campaigns. Initially, it had been suggested to undertake the two campaigns simultaneously through Wankie and Sipolilo; but later on account of logistical problems, it was agreed to start with Wankie.

The Wankie campaign

Reconnaissance, Logistics, Operations and Training departments all went into overdrive to achieve their targeted date of August 1967. The choice of selecting a crossing point at the Zambezi River Gorge area, about ten kilometres from Victoria Falls entailed complications:

- Climbing down the 90 metre distance by rope to the river.
- Using three available canoes capable of carrying only two passengers.
- Climbing up another 90 metre distance by rope onto the Rhodesian side.

This issue was debated at length but

the Reconnaissance team would not be drawn to find another alternative. The operation strategy entailed that within one week after crossing, two ZPRA sections (6 to 8 men) would separate from the detachment with one to deploy permanently in the Wankie district and the other in Lupane district. These would remain springboards to provide support for future campaigns.

Similarly, when the detachment reached Southern Matabeleland another two ZPRA sections would support the MK cadres to cross the Limpopo and stay behind to redeploy in the Matopo and Gwanda South districts.

For the Wankie operations the Luthuli detachment was led by John Dube (Sotsha Ngwenya) deputised by Chris Hani as the commissar.

In spite of some setbacks, the final combined meeting of the two parties and the military commanders approved August as the crossing date.

August 1, the setting down of the sun signalled the D-day for the Luthuli detachment. OR Tambo was there to raise the flag for the crossing to go ahead.

It took the whole night to cross about half the detachment of three platoons. At daybreak, everyone on both sides of the river had to take cover and rest until nightfall the following day.

On the following day, crossing resumed at night until early hours of the morning. Once the entire detachment had crossed, they were guided towards the main Victoria Falls to Wankie road by a few cadres selected from the reconnaissance team. As soon as they cleared from the Rhodesian side of the bank, two old men from Matetsi village, as arranged, drove a large flock of goats to cover the footprints of the detachment.

The two ZPRA sections were allowed to separate for deployment in the Wankie and Lupane areas. Meanwhile the detachment proceeded and encamped in the Inyantuwe area on 12 August. The following day on the 13th, they had their first encounter with the Rhodesian forces, comprising a platoon made up of BSAP and RAR.

After Inyantuwe, they had a number of other major battles at Sinamatshela, Tsholotsho and along

the Natha and Tekwane river areas before they retreated into Botswana. The Botswana police arrested and had them imprisoned before deporting them back to Zambia.

For ZPRA the battle of Wankie was understandably the watershed in the history of Zimbabwe and South Africa's armed liberation struggles. The Luthuli detachment's indomitable fighters proved the lie of the invincibility of the Rhodesian and South African racist and apartheid regimes.

Chris Hani as commissar of the combined forces in the Luthuli detachment commented on the battle of Inyantuwe thus, "It was one of the battles they were engaged in that will probably go down in the history of MK military operations as one of the most heroic. Displaying outstanding heroism and sacrifice, they fought like lions and

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actually kept Smith's forces pinned down for the better part of the day".

The Rhodesian account of the same battle, "contact was made between the terrorists and a patrol led by senior officer Barry Tiffin at first light on the 13th August near Inyantuwe railway siding. The BSAP was pinned down and reinforcements were called for. After reinforcements had arrived and during the encounter, five ZPRA terrorists were killed and Tiffin was seriously injured. Two RAR were killed and three European and one African security force members were wounded".

The Tegwane River battle

One of the most memorable of the battles of Wankie which perhaps places the commanders and fighters

of the Luthuli Detachment in a class of the greatest fighters of all time anywhere was fought on 23 August 1967 in the Tegwane River area. Chris Hani had this to say about the battle:

So the enemy commander and the enemy's HQ must have believed that the air-force had struck at us accurately and yet the truth of the matter is that we were not affected by the bombardment at all. The commander of the joint MK/ZPRA Detachment took the decision that this was the time to raid the enemy. We organized units to go and raid the enemy. I was in that, together with James April, Douglas Wana, the late Jack Simelane, Victor Dlamini and others.

We crawled towards the enemy's position and first attacked their tents with grenades and then followed with AKs and LMGs. The enemy fought back furiously and after fifteen minutes, we called for reinforcements from the rear and within ten minutes we overran the enemy position. In that battle, we killed the enemy's colonel who was commanding. His name was Thomas, a huge chunk of a man wearing size 10 boots. We killed a few lieutenants and other soldiers. The story was the same as in our previous battle. The enemy fled leaving behind supplies, weapons, grenades, and ammunition and communication radios. Another victory for our Detachment! I want to emphasise the question of victory because the Luthuli Detachment was never defeated in battle.

Chris Hani's account of the battle is also corroborated by a member of the Rhodesian forces:

After a fleeting twelve minutes of strafing by the hunters and before a scheduled bombing run by Canberra's from No 5 Squadron at 1800hrs, Wintall moved the two platoons into thick cover to prepare a safe night position. All their movements were watched, however and as the Rhodesians relaxed with no apparent sentries, terrorist leader Dube and one of his men put on captured Rhodesians combat jackets sauntered over to unsuspecting

R.A.R platoons. Shortly afterwards, heavy fire was brought down onto the platoons by hidden terrorists wounding eight including P.O. Horn Wintall himself. P.O. Spencer Thomas died of gunshot wounds to the chest. Two terrorists were killed.

Taken totally by surprise and under immediate threat of his position being overrun, Wintall organized a withdrawal as fast as he could, leaving behind weapons and kit.

The story of victory was the same in all the battles. The enemy was overrun and leaving behind supplies, weapons, grenades, uniforms and communication radios.

The Sipolilo campaign

Soon after the Wankie campaign, the joint ZPRA/MK command and its sub-committees started to prepare for the Sipolilo campaign. The Reconnaissance team had recommended a crossing point where the Zambezi River is flat and wide between after the Manna Pools area and Feira, near where the Chewore River on the Rhodesian side flows in.

This crossing point although less strenuous, had its disadvantages:

- The twenty kilometre road from the Great East turnoff was only accessible with four wheel drive vehicles.
- Crossing by canoe was going to be a challenge when they got to the circulating current of the river.
- Since Wankie, Rhodesian low flying air force planes patrolled this part of the border along the Zambezi River between Feira and the Kariba Dam.

Therefore Commander Joe Modise developed a plan to construct a pontoon using sealed empty 100 litre drums with a wooden platform on top. This he argued would make crossing easier in particular for the transportation of heavy equipment and ammunition. This second detachment with Moffat Hadebe as the detachment commander would comprise two ZPRA platoons and ANC with also two platoons, with Ray Tichafa as the deputy commander. Johnson Melani was Commissar, deputised by Sly Masuku. Ralph Mzamo was Chief of Security, George Mthunzi was

responsible for Communications while Felix Kayiya was chief of Personnel. Kenneth Mzathi was Chief of Staff completing the command of the detachment.

The crossing happened in December/January but battles would only break out in March after the game rangers had informed the authorities that there was an intrusion into the vicinity by unknown people. They had established 5 bases, but communication was very poor as they could not quickly relay information from base to base since they had only one radio manned by a Cde Zilani in base 1. They were also far from the people, so they could not use locals to communicate.

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The operational plan was to create a makeshift headquarters along the mountain range overlooking the Dande River. One of the ZAPU platoons would be permanently deployed there to protect weapons, ammunition and ration stores for future campaigns. They therefore needed heavy armourment such as mortars and heavy machine guns. The rest of the detachment would proceed south with another ZPRA platoon to accompany them across the Limpopo.

Whilst advance teams prepared storage places along the headquarters mountain range, the rest of the men would transport the equipment from the Zambezi to those mountains about forty kilometres away.

When the whole detachment was at the crossing point area, it was decided to cross them in batches of platoons. This process started during the heavy rains in January up to February. The pantoon idea proved to be a disaster as it was wrecked midstream by high current that swept off its entire load and dismantled it into pieces. Fortunately, the few cadres on board who were to guide it wore air jackets, so they were able to swim back to the river bank in time before the patrol planes flew over.

This time it had been decided that some of the ZPRA and MK commanders should accompany the Luthuli detachment up to its Pyramid headquarters on the mountains.

The following were selected from ZPRA, Abraham Nkiwane, Dumiso Dabengwa, Jabulani Ncube plus other reconnaissance team members. From MK, Joe Modise, Walter Msimanga, Zola Zembe and other cadres were selected. This team walked the whole day and arrived at the Pyramid headquarters just around sunset. Their strategy was to inspect the location of the headquarters, acknowledge its suitability and to spend a week with the detachment commanders to ensure they were clear about their assignment.

However, after a few days of inspections and discussions, the detachment commanders felt they had had enough of the high command and suggested that they return to Lusaka. They would keep the high command briefed through coded radio communication. We had no choice but to take their polite orders. We further left room for courier messages from either side should there be need. About ten days after our departure, the detachment had their first contact with the Rhodesian forces. For about a week, our people back home had witnessed an unprecedented call-up by the Smith regime of all members of their security forces and their reserve, with orders to report at their brigade headquarters. Meanwhile the detachment had also noted the frequent spotter plane flights above their area. As a result, they took a decision to evacuate their headquarters shelters and move to an area where they would be better placed to defend themselves.

Reports on the Sipolilo battle

campaigns have been recorded from the detachment commanders and other participants. Herewith an example of one of the encounters recorded from the Rhodesian High Court trial of the detachment's deputy commissar.

Bulawayo, Friday, August 16 1968

Sly Masuku, the Rhodesian-born African who claimed he shot two Rhodesian soldiers, troopers Christopher Wessel and Reginald Binks, in self-defence during anti-terrorist operations last March, was sentenced to death by Mr Justice Davies at the High Court, Salisbury.

Giving judgement, the judge referred to a claim by Masuku's counsel, Mr N Scobie, that the attack made by the security forces on the anthill in which Masuku and six armed companions were hiding on the day of the incident, was unlawful, because the men were given no chance to surrender.

The judge said he considered that Lt Reid-Daly, who led the attack, was perfectly entitled to act the way he did, and the fact that the men were not at first called to surrender did not make it unlawful.

The judge said Masuku was one of a considerable number of people who had crossed into Rhodesia from Zambia armed with modern weapons.

He had admitted that the objective was to train others in the use of fire-arms "so that eventually a rebellion would break out".

But also to get a fairer picture of the Wankie and Sipolilo campaigns, listen to what political leaders from both ZAPU and ANC had to say.

In the ZAPU report of the Central Committee to the 1984 Congress of 12 to 15 October, Joshua Nkomo had this to say:

One of the most important experiences of the armed struggle was contained in the Wankie/Sipolilo campaigns of 1967 and 1968.

Using the experiences of the 1960s these became the first large scale operations ever launched in Zimbabwe, which involved several men. These campaigns were planned and jointly led by ZPR and MK commanders.

Their full history is yet to be told like so much of our rich history of the liberation struggle. But we would like to mention two important aspects of these campaigns.

In the first place, because of the scale of the fighting and the outstanding courage of our fighters, these battles had a profound effect on the people of Zimbabwe. They showed that it was possible to tackle the enemy on our own soil with modern weapons and inflict serious damage on the regime. They showed that the racists were not as invincible as they claimed.

In the second place, these military campaigns provided invaluable lessons for the future conduct of the armed struggle and gave us concrete experience of

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battle conditions in our country. This experience was analysed by our military commanders and political leadership and provided basis for the new strategies and tactics which we then adopted.

OR Tambo on the ANC side acknowledged the outstanding display of courage at Wankie and Sipolilo.

How the enemy were rendered panic stricken by the relentless courage of our combined forces, who on the banks of the Zambezi before they marched into the hostile Rhodesia, were armed in memory of our great leader, the late President General of the ANC, Chief Albert Luthuli; and who are known since then and for all posterity as the

Luthuli Detachment.

In battle after battle, the racist forces were overwhelmed by the courage and fire power of our gallant fighters instance after instance, the coward enemy broke ranks and fled, abandoning weapons, their injured and dead. Many members of that indomitable detachment fell in battle in Wankie and on the Eastern front. Their names are inscribed in the roll call of honour of our revolution. On this day every year, we pay special tribute to those illustrious combatants who fell on sacred fields of Zimbabwe with the warrior cry 'Victory or Death!!' on their lips.

A complimentary write-up of Moffat Hadebe memoirs is being edited for publication. The Sipolilo battle campaign narrative will be shared amongst us as a National heritage pride.

The 1967 Wankie campaigns signalled to the International Community the magnitude of the efforts strengthen the military and combat capacities of ZIPRA and MK in Rhodesia and South Africa whose geo-strategic position for the West meant they could not be allowed to fall into “Communist” hands. As the war intensified, the cold war vestiges weakened the centres to hold leading to round-table talks. Rhodesia was losing the war.

We recognise the heroic deeds of our military men who laid down their lives for freedom in Southern Africa. In doing so, we also recognise that during that difficult period of the liberation struggle of Southern Africa, ZAPU was one of the five authentic liberation movements (others being MPLA, FRELIMO, SWAPO and ANC). The other four are in government. Let us not forget, these movements still have an obligation to acknowledge and honour the sacrifices of our people (in particular those in our liberation armies) by fulfilling what they fought for – the values of our liberation struggles. These values include ensuring better standards of living for all our people, respect for, promotion and protection of human rights and full participation of our people in the governance of their countries. ■