

FIRST TERRORIST MURDER

I can't remember why I was there; perhaps I'd just gone along for the ride and to escape from the enormous pile of dockets that flopped untidily about my desk at Mrewa. Whatever the reason, that day in 1975, at Katiyo Township in the Uzumba Tribal trust Land, I saw my first victims of terrorism.

They were together in the body box, mother and child; together because their burnt bodies could not be separated and so they were to be transported together to Salisbury for the administrative punctilio of a post mortem.

I had read, I seem to remember in a book about the holocaust, of a death embrace and now I was looking at the pathos of a mother and child's final entwinement. Would they have stayed like this if it were not for the barbed wire that had bound them together in their final moments of life, or would the horror of those final moments, the dousing in kerosene, the instant when matches had been thrown onto them to ignite the flames that would kill them have caused them to recoil from one another?

I remember reading the post mortem report later, how the government pathologist had matter of factly observed that they may have lived slightly longer than had they been doused with petrol, since kerosene burns slightly differently. It meant that they would have suffered that much longer, before their bodies went into shock and their agony came to an end.

The short report had gone on to observe that the Female Adult had been in her mid to early twenties, and the Female Juvenile had been five or six years old at the time of their deaths.

I spoke to the investigating officer, one of my senior Patrol Officers about it in the pub one evening soon afterwards. He was all of twenty-four and

had seen more than a few terrorist murders, and so was able to look contemplatively into his beer and speak without emotion.

"Well, we'd never heard of her before, but it seems she was sleeping with a District Assistant and the Terr's didn't like that. Mind you, that was one of the meanest ways to go. Suppose they didn't want to shoot her because of the noise. One good thing about burners though; they don't smell. Want another beer?"

I drank several more beers that night, and perhaps a few gins for good measure.

I suppose it's the first one that you will always remember, because memories get jumbled. As new terrorist groups moved across the country, and I became more and more involved in counter terrorist operations, terrorist murders became a weekly event. Eventually the body box, the sarcophagus-shaped aluminium coffin gave way to body bags, and post mortems went by the wayside. Murder dockets gave way to log entries and brief synopses and a dozen, perhaps fifty, perhaps a hundred murders became a commingling in the mind's eye, of shattered bodies, of burnt out huts and the helpless blank eyes of tribesmen who had seen nothing, had heard nothing.

And so, to add to their trauma, you arrested them. Remember the theory? They can't speak in their villages, with everyone watching. They would be denounced to the next bunch of Terr's as a "Sell-out". So you pick up a number of them. Perhaps in the police camp, removed from the interrogating eyes and ears of the terrorist collaborators, they will volunteer information. Perhaps.

SCHOOLTEACHER

Zuze-Gatsi Village, I think it was; an informer had reported a terrorist presence close the Nyagui River and I went down with the Ground coverage lads to do some local enquiries. It was mid 1976 and I and a team of African Policemen had been sent on a reconnaissance course and deployed back to Mrewa where, in theory at least, we knew the lie of the land and its characters. In part the theory proved well founded.

I had known the headmaster of the local school from my days in uniform at Mrewa. I had done him a small favour once, and I reckoned he might owe me one. We had driven to the village quite openly, in a small convoy of Landrovers. I reckoned that no one would notice myself and the teacher talking quietly together in his office. Just a few short months before it would have been a matter of routine. Visiting policemen would always sign the school visitors' book; it would have been rude not to.

"Ah no Mister Jones; I have heard nothing, no not from the children, and not from their parents. Yes, of course I would report a terrorist if I knew about one. Yes, I promise, if I hear anything I will let you know."

It hadn't rung true. Timothy had always been slightly diffident and, as is polite among the Shona people, had never looked me straight in the eye. But this day he seemed to stare studiously at his feet, and there had been something in his tone, something furtive in his manner. It was hollowness, sentences left unfinished, something I would come to intuit in the years that were to follow. But for now, I simply left Timothy, beset with the feeling that this man, with whom I had believed I had enjoyed a rapport, was lying.

"We'll give it a day, and then you and the boys can snivel in and have another look around. Maybe do an OP and see what you can come up with."

The Special Branch officer's instructions were fuzzy, but then so was the intelligence and the local tribespeople and the schoolteacher had denied that there was a terrorist presence. I had discussed my unease with the SB Officer. It was probably nothing more than a hunch, we agreed. But the Nyagui River was just fifty kilometres, by the reckoning of distance, from Salisbury, the capital. Fifty of the white man's kilometres perhaps, but the subjective environment that was Zuze-Gatsi Village was a thousand miles and five hundred years away from the offices and cinema's and clubs, from the electric light dome that you could see from your Observation Post in the hills at the Western extreme of Chief Mangwende's land. Would I be labouring the point to death if I said that it was a world removed?

But if the first reports were true, it meant that a dozen men, armed with the means to kill, were within a day's march of the capital, where people

slept unarmed and unaware in their suburban homes, where we who worked in the bush could go on R and R and drink and laugh away the dust and the cordite, the sweat and the human misery we daily witnessed; where sweet young women might succumb to your moral blackmail and give of themselves if you were lucky and sober enough.

But it was bad country for OP's, too densely populated, the hillsides regularly patrolled by herdboys and woodcutters. And so, for three days, we stayed concealed during the daylight hours, and groped our way around the hills in the darkness, trying, perhaps in vain, to leave as little sign of our passing as possible.

We stopped on this hillside by accident, our night time climb interrupted by movement above us as we were just short of the summit. An urgent clattering in the Jesse bush ahead of us, perhaps an antelope, perhaps two or three humans making an urgent withdrawal as they heard us coming. So we inched forwards, trying hard to keep our skirmish line, eyes questioning the patchy darkness, turning grey before the false dawn.

I was not aware of the passage of time, but as we came to the flat top of the hill, a long flat-topped ridge that followed the eastern bank of the Nyagui River, I heard my Sergeant issue a low guttural "Ah". In the fickle light of the false dawn, I saw his face for the first time in hours, and followed his gaze as it shifted among the undergrowth beneath the msasa trees that crowned the ridge.

Slowly as my eyes adjusted, they found the patches of flattened grass, the pulled down branches, the faint dust paths that told of a prolonged human presence. Perhaps twenty men had camped here, for several days if not weeks, but had left recently.

My Sergeant snorted. "They knew we went to the village, and that is why they left, two, maybe three days ago. They had a holiday here. Look": he pointed in the direction of the village, smoke beginning to rise from the lines of huts as the tribespeople prepared to go about their daily affairs.

Up and down the hillside, even my poor eyes could make out the six or seven paths, where the grass had been frequently parted and the earth beaten by

human feet. Unsubtle signs that showed where the villagers had nightly travelled to the place where we skulked, to feed and fete our enemy.

The SB man's voice on the radio told me that he was not pleased about being dragged away from his breakfast. His tone changed when he heard my report.

"Roger, go down to the village and make sure none of those buggers gets out of there. We'll get there as fast as we can."

Obviously his map didn't show the village I was looking at. Zuze-Gatsi was two villages, joined together by some accident of tribal politics I would probably never be able to understand. I selected the group of huts closest to the terrorists' camp, with a clearly defined path that told of its inhabitants' relationship with my enemy.

I remember thinking it strange that the villagers showed no surprise at the approach of six dirty unshaven men in camouflage uniforms, with their rifles at the ready. Instead, their eyes spoke of a certain resignation, as if they had known this visit would be an inevitable consequence of the presence of their other visitors. We swept up through the villages, gathering human baggage as we progressed. The villagers seemed to make no attempt to escape, although I'm certain to this day that they were melting away into the bush just beyond our line of sight. No matter I thought. Someone amongst this lot will talk. But that was the SB officer's problem, not mine.

They were as good as their word. At about half past eight a small convoy of Landrovers rolled into the village along the dust road that linked it tenuously to the outside world. My SB colleague climbed out, already sweating slightly and looking a little jaded from the previous night, spent, I guessed, in the Mrewa Club.

He didn't need much of a briefing, just a short appraisal and a map reference. We had gathered about twenty villagers and he reckoned it was enough to start work with. Besides, there was only just enough room in the Landrovers for my stick and my catch, now sitting resignedly in small clumps under the trees at the edge of the village.

"Hang on mate", I said to the SB man. "There's one more bugger I want to speak to. Stop at the school and pick up that bloody headmaster. I'll bet he's up to his neck in this."

He was standing outside his office when our convoy drove in. He seemed to be waiting for us. No doubt a child had run from the village to warn him, and no doubt he had decided it was futile to try to escape.

In the Special Branch office the headmaster held my gaze for the first time. He read my anger and he read it well. He spoke before I did.

"I know you are angry Mister Jones. I am sorry. Perhaps you are going to beat me; there is nothing I can do."

He read me so well.

"But you must understand; yes I am afraid you will beat me, but they will kill me. And you might say that you can protect me. But you cannot protect me. You will go back to your camp, with your guns and your lights and your wire, where you are safe. And I must stay in my place in the bush, where they can come whenever they like. And how can you protect me then?"

And I looked back at his face, impassive, save for the glint of fear deep in those black eyes. And in that fear I saw the truth that I would learn over and over again; that in this small war, it did not matter who was right and who was wrong. This man knew it, and he was showing me what he knew, was giving me an insight into how this war was going to be fought, was already being fought.

He was telling me that my enemy had stepped beyond a threshold that I would never cross; that among my enemy's arsenal was a weapon I would not, could not use. It was something that went beyond mere brutality, beyond murder and harm. We used the word terrorist loosely, but in these eyes I saw its true meaning. I saw it in the absence of things; the absence of anger, of grief, of hatred, and in their place I saw a vacant resignation, that I would witness over the coming years, spreading like a cancer in the

collective mind of a people at whose vulnerability I could only guess.

I saw the lesson repeated over the years, and as I write, I find to my surprise that I did indeed lose count. I carry in my head a collage of mutilated bodies, young and old, male and female, and some day I will attempt to analyse the immediate cause and manner of their various deaths.

But for now, what needs to be told is the lesson that lay in the face of a man who tried perhaps, to live in two worlds; who had gone to be educated and who had returned to share his education with his people. But for all of his aspirations, and I can only guess at what they were, at some point in that year of 1976, he had been shown the reality of life in Africa; that in Africa, for all of the progress that the white man may have thought he had brought with him, he had done no more than spread a thin veneer over the tiny place which he occupied and beyond that lay fear and vulnerability beyond his knowing.