

Limelight

By A.J. Venter

It is really quite amazing how it all happened and had I not been there I doubt I would have believed it myself. The story has been retold in the papers over and over and somewhat like a legend each telling added a little bit to the events until nobody really knew what the truth was anymore.

This is why I am writing this down now. By the time it is read I shall be dead, and therefore there is no further risk in finally setting the record straight.

The papers picked up the story on September 3rd 1983, but the real story started several years before that, sometime in January 1971, in fact. I had just graduated from University; a lawyer like my hero Madiba. I was also a member of the ANC, which back then meant I was already a criminal. Being a young white ANC member wasn't unheard of, but it was certainly not a common path for people my age to take. Things were still different then, the bush war had not started yet. Later it would change the picture as virtually every young white boy was sent off right after school to fight in a war which officially never even happened. It certainly happened for the boys who grew up to suffer from its effects. Even today, it happened for the families of the thousands who never came home.

1971 in South Africa was another world though. Always culturally behind in those days, the hippies and flower-girls had just started appearing on the scene. It was almost beautiful. If you closed your eyes you could almost live the dream of the National Party. You could almost forget the many people who had been taken from their homes, impoverished. You could almost forget the pass laws. You could almost believe that the system would actually work eventually, even if you were a rebelling young ANC lawyer.

Almost.

I remember sitting on the Hillbrow tower staring out over Johannesburg at dusk and thinking about how peaceful it all looked.

It wouldn't last. On June 16 1976 the whole pretty picture came crashing down. By that time I was a fairly established lawyer and I would actually defend one of the accused protesters in one of the few trials that actually resulted from that bloody day.

While the links may not be obvious, that is where the story really started. Those days made me the man I was in 1983. Thirteen years older I had seen too much suffering, too much bloodshed. The war was on but it didn't exist. In May of that year I had a visit from a very high ranking ANC official. That alone was unusual

enough; after all I was a secret member and deliberately tried not to stay out of the public eye. He was coming however to ask my help with what the papers would come to call 'Operation Limelight'. Today it's nearly forgotten, but back then it was the next big hope of finally ending the system. Limelight was intended to overthrow the government with minimal blood loss. A series of well executed tactical strikes would take out core elements of their communications and travel infrastructure, in one fell swoop. There were more than two thousand selected targets, all intended to be blown up in one night. First however, the explosives would have to be brought in.

The ANC's normal methods were effective for small quantities, and they were often successfully applied. Even the infamous Safety Police couldn't check the entire border all the time. However it would take months to bring that much explosives in bit by bit, and the reality was, that if the plan was to work, the deadline was tight. At this time the ruling was before Parliament that would replace the Prime Minister with an executive State President.

To achieve maximum effect, we had to strike on the day the new president was sworn in. That was less than a month away. This was where I came in.

A collection had been set up at a safehouse in Mozambique, the plan was to bring it all in at once, right on the main road. My job was to use my legal knowledge to come up with a way this could be achieved.

I took me a week of research, but I found a way. It took some practical work to set up but we had money and power behind us, so it could be done. What arrived at the border were three trucks loaded with crates of ice-packed L.M. Prawns, at least on top. Under the thin layer of frozen prawns were packed stacks upon stacks of mines and grenades. The trucks arrived with legal pre-clearance. Under an old diplomatic arrangement with Mozambique certain foodstuffs would get express clearance through customs as their travel and sales life was so short. This was our gap; express clearance would prevent a thorough search.

That was where it all went wrong, in defiance of the paper work, the trucks were fully searched, the drivers arrested and the content confiscated, somebody had given the Safety Police an anonymous tip-off.

I was never directly involved but my involvement was sufficiently suspected that the National Party issued a banning order against me. Back then that was happening to a lot of people. For six years more the struggle continued until F.W. De Klerk's famous speech repealed the apartheid laws and released Madiba from prison. It was the glorious new South Africa. Five years later, Nelson Mandela was sworn in as President.

My actions were honoured then. Like so many people who had supported the ANC, in those days, I received rewards and a degree of hero worship despite the failure of Operation Limelight. My six year banning order added weight to it all. My family lived well, and my children became parents themselves.

Now here I lie in this bed, writing this down. My doctor assured me with a sad shake of his head that I will not get up again, the cancer is too far spread. In a moment I will place this letter in the envelope next to my bed, with the title already written - asking that it be read on the day of my funeral.

So as you hear this, you are probably standing around my grave. Perhaps you are an old friend; perhaps a child or grandchild. Even you my dear Gertrude who has been the light of my life; perhaps a politician who had decided to honour me with his presence, listening as one of you reads this final letter I left you, and finally the time has come to reveal the reason for it.

As I lie here, with death looming over me, I find I must clear my conscience of a secret too long carried. I was the one who had made that anonymous tip-off. It had been my fault that Limelight failed. Had it not, how many lives could have been spared? If the struggle had been six years shorter?

Why had I done it? I have asked myself that question a million times over. I never really knew, a part of me had gotten scared. Deeply scared of what it would mean if Limelight had gone through, afraid that the National Party's propaganda might be true, and I had done a horrible thing out of fear. I have spent my days since then staring into the black abyss of my own soul with dread. Trying in vain to atone for my weakness. I am but a man, and I committed a terrible crime against people who trusted me. How can I now I ask your forgiveness? I cannot. I merely wish that the truth be known. That as you start to drop the dirt on my coffin you walk away and forget about me. Let the honours end, for I deserve none of it...