

BACKGROUND

In the early 1980s the ANC's military wing ('MK') realised the urgent need to create a strategy for smuggling arms from the frontline states into South Africa.

At this time, most weapons were smuggled across the border in small, risky missions. Many of the ANC cadres were captured and killed, and their weapons were discovered by the South African security forces. The idea of an undercover operation using a tourist adventure operation was first mooted in the late 60's in London by Joe Slovo, the MK chief-of-staff, but the chances of detection were then reported as being too great. However by the early 80's things had changed. Better technologies were being developed to seal arms, preventing detection by sniffer dogs, and the frontline states were also becoming favourably disposed to the arms struggle.

The ANC set up ***Africa Hinterland***, a commercial company registered in London, which offered tourists overland sight-seeing trips between Kenya and Johannesburg. The company purchased a Bedford truck and fitted it out using the expertise of a brilliant architectural draughtsman completely dedicated to the cause. Drivers were recruited overseas, using volunteers of the British and Dutch anti-Apartheid movements and were given special training before they embarked on the mission.

The Bedford truck would leave Nairobi with just the tourists on board. A few days later the drivers would leave the tourists camped for the night and take the vehicle to a pre-determined point, where they would leave it for 'service'. There, ANC military wing operatives would pack weapons into the specially created secret compartments. The buses would cross the border — where the soldiers would "just see a bunch of nice tourists". These tourists would complete their journey to Johannesburg or Cape Town, where the truck would be unpacked by local MK cadres, and the arms would be distributed throughout the country.

Weapons and explosives were crucial to the success of campaigns carried out by the ANC's Special Operations Unit. The Unit was set-up to sabotage key military installations, power plants and

transportation links in an effort to bring the government to the bargaining table. The sabotage campaign continued through until August 1990.

The ***Truth and Reconciliation Commission*** has bought many operatives of the ANC's military wing into the open. Their roles are now a matter of public record, and the amnesty they will receive frees them to talk openly about their involvement in the underground.

THE SUBJECTS

- **Mannie Brown - a veteran communist and mastermind of the operation.**

Mannie set about preparing the vehicle, recruiting drivers and using his entrepreneurial skills to set up the business side of the operation. He is an extremely likeable character who talks about the absolute secrecy which covered the operation and the dangers involved. Mannie recounts stories how he nervously sat by the phone during each operation and how he planted spies to check the reliability of the drivers. Several times their cover was nearly broken. At one stage a border guard started dismantling the truck but was distracted by a commotion at the check point, and waved it through. It was one of many close shaves.

- **Rodney Wilkinson - an architectural draughtsman**

Rodney conceived the design for the truck and built it to careful specifications. Besides storage space for food supplies and camping equipment Rodney added secret extra oblong compartments to house three-quarters of a ton of AK 47's, explosives and detonators sealed in grease, plastic and heavy tin-foil.

- **Rashied - one of the cadres in the ANC's Special Operations Unit**

Rashied was responsible for procuring and storing the weapons in the Bedford truck, and then overseeing their distribution into MK units in the townships. Rashied is now a well-to-do lawyer living in a pleasant street in a quiet middle-class Johannesburg suburb and is married to an ambitious newspaper executive. They have a 10 month old daughter.

- **Menno - one of the truck drivers - a young Dutchman.**

Menno believed passionately in the anti-apartheid cause. He kept accurate records of each operation and took many photos of the tourists. Menno also became an effective manager of the African Hinterland operation, moving the headquarters to Johannesburg from Mombassa in Kenya. He now studies computers, and has two children.

- **Jo and Mike - British drivers.**

Jo and Mike became involved in the operation through a strong sense of political commitment and adventure. They met and fell in love on the job and subsequently married. Jo and Mike are ambiguous about their role in the operation, concerned that the guns they risked so much to smuggle across the border are probably being traded on the black market and used by gangsters. They now run a small vegetarian restaurant opposite a housing estate in South London.

The tourists

Men and women, mostly in their early 20's who went on the trip not only for sightseeing, but also for a good time. But they also kept journals, photographs, film and video tape — which will all be used to help recreate the experience of the journey.

- **The Bedford truck**

The truck that was used in the operation is the literal and figurative vehicle for the film. The truck will be refurbished put on the road again. We will also use it to bring key personalities involved in the story together.

THE STYLE & APPROACH

The film tells the story through the key people following a chronology of events: how the operation was originally conceived, how the truck was designed and out-fitted, how the business was registered and the drivers recruited, what the tourists saw and experienced, 'near-misses' at border crossings, dropping-off the truck at pre-determined locations etc.

The telling of the story is intercut with a 're-creation' of one of

the trips done in a suggestive, as opposed to a literal style. This is shot in a highly controlled manner and treated to produce a saturated tone and look. We travel the full length of the journey to get a sense of the changing scenery — the geography and the wildlife, but we also see the truck being loaded and unloaded, driven through check-points etc. A stylised treatment of these re-enactments serves to heighten the drama.

This controlled footage clearly sets apart the coverage of the cross-border journey from the 'innocent' home-movies of the same safari shot by the tourists at the time (on the early generation video cameras) - young women posing by waterfalls, boys larking around with beer cans in hand, the camaraderie of these tourists on an "adventure", the barbecues being prepared, passing shots of wildlife, guards at border crossings. These images dramatically underscore the clandestine nature of the whole operation and its true purpose.

The very same Bedford truck that ran the missions had been languishing in a graveyard of vehicles from the world wars. It was refurbished and put on the road. As the film progresses, we will learn what people did then and how they feel about it now. We get to know how their life has changed since those events.

Throughout the film moral questions are raised – such as is it acceptable for armies like the ANC to run such operations even though now it is clear that without the subterfuge, South Africa could still be gripped by the inhumane system of Apartheid?