

INSIDE BOSS

Gordon Winter

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6 • The Truth about that Bomb

Just before eighteen minutes past four on the afternoon of Friday, 24 July 1964, a calm and precise man telephoned a senior official at the Johannesburg Railway Police and said:

‘This is the African Resistance Movement. We have planted a bomb in a large brown suitcase twenty feet from the cubicle above platforms five and six on the concourse of the new Johannesburg Railway Station. On the handle of the suitcase is tied a label bearing the words "Back in Ten Minutes". It is not our intention to harm anyone. This is a symbolic protest against the inhumanity and injustices of apartheid. The bomb is timed to explode at 4.33 p.m. Clear the concourse by using the public address system at once. Do not try to defuse the bomb as the suitcase is triggered to explode if it is opened.’

The man who made that call then telephoned a briefer message to the liberal *Rand Daily Mail* which, believing human life to be in danger, quickly phoned the Security Police at their Johannesburg headquarters. The anonymous caller telephoned a third warning through to the pro-government newspaper *Die Transvaler*. All these calls are on record and were later admitted as evidence in the High Court. Yet no warning was broadcast over the loudspeaker system at the Johannesburg Railway Station, and the bomb exploded at 4.33 p.m., throwing the beautifully tiled concourse into utter chaos and injuring twenty-three innocent people.

One witness saw a massive flash of flame sear upwards to a height of about sixty feet. Another witness saw a stout old lady lying on the floor moaning with her hair on fire and her face blackened. She was Mrs Ethel Rhys, a grandmother aged seventy-seven, who later died of horrible burns. Her little granddaughter, Glynnis Burleigh, aged twelve, was

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also terribly injured. A witness said she looked as though she was covered in tar-flecked red paint, and skin came away from her arm as she was lifted on to a stretcher.

Glynnis, who was to become a close and trusted friend of mine, suffered the worst burns that day. She now lives in London under the name of Josie St Laurent. She has had forty skin grafts on her face, arms, chest and legs. One hand is disfigured. Her face today looks like a roughly-iced cake. Much of the skin on her face was taken from her bottom, and when no more was left her father told surgeons to transplant whatever they needed from his backside.

As the injured were still being taken away on stretchers the Security Police mounted a massive comb-out of all known political activists, Black and White. During the next six hours no mercy was shown. Every person picked up for questioning was first beaten and then asked to talk. Of the hundreds of people so treated, only two knew about the actual bomb plot and both talked within seconds of being kicked and punched by wild-eyed screaming Security men.

A secret Black police agent submitted vital details about a White liberal who had asked him to find an old broken alarm clock.* This information linked in with other data obtained during the mass interrogations, and it all pointed to one man. He was John Frederick Harris, a South African schoolteacher living in Roodepoort, near Johannesburg, who had studied philosophy and economics at Oxford University.

* The Black agent was Matthew Nkoana, who still spies on his fellow Blacks for B O S S.

Less than seven hours after the bomb blast Harris was arrested by Security Police officers and immediately interrogated by Captain J. J. Viktor, a friend of mine who knew I was a spy. Viktor later boasted to me how he had persuaded John Harris to make a full confession within five minutes. This is roughly what he told me:

‘One of the latest tricks in interrogation is to lull the suspect into a false sense of security. You start by being over-friendly with him and then suddenly scream like a

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maniac. I’ve always believed the only way to make a man talk is to give him a bloody good hiding, but there’s something to be said for these new-fangled psychological methods from overseas. I tried my own variation on Harris and it worked.’

Viktor said he first sat Harris down on a chair in the middle of the room. Then he told him: ‘Look, John, you are a member of the South African Liberal Party, so I know you are not the type of man to go round blowing people up with bombs; so I’m not going to waste time trying to interrogate you about the station blast.’

Viktor said Harris started to smile when he heard this and thanked him. Viktor then reassured him more by saying they could spend their time better by discussing sport because Harris’s file showed he was a leading figure in the anti-apartheid sports organization SANROC (‘South African Non-Racial Olympic Committee’).

‘When I asked him to name his favourite sport, Harris said he preferred playing cricket and tennis. I told him I was mad about rugby but that I always made a hash of my drop-kick. Harris said he was a keen student of rugby but didn’t actually play the game as it was too rough for him.’

Viktor told me this gave him a good idea. He picked up a newspaper, crunched it into a ball and walked back to the far wall with it. He ran forward three or four steps and drop-kicked the ball of paper at a table in the corner.

‘Harris told me he knew at once why my kicks went wide and said I swung my foot out as I kicked, which took the ball off course. I thanked him for his advice, picked up the ball of newspaper and carried it back to the wall. I ran forward again and delivered a massive kick. Not at the ball but right on John Harris’s jaw.’

Harris hurtled backwards and somersaulted over the back of the chair. As he lurched to his knees he swayed dizzily, cupped his chin in both hands, and blood spurted from his mouth as he coughed.

Viktor continued: ‘Agh, man, you should have seen the astonishment on his face. If he could have moved his jaw,

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man, I’m sure it would have fallen to the floor. He just couldn’t believe my sudden change of mood had happened.’

Viktor said he did not waste any more time and as John Harris knelt there coughing he kicked him on the jaw again saying: ‘And that’s how I take a penalty.’

Viktor then walked back to the far wall, stood with his palms pressed against it and leaned forward snarling: ‘You see, Mr John Bloody Harris, I asked for special permission to interrogate you because my little child walks through Johannesburg station every day at the time your bomb went off. You could have killed my kid, so now I’m going to score some more points off your chin.’

Saying this Viktor ran forward screaming and kicked Harris again but this time in the stomach. As Viktor returned to the wall and took up his pre-kick stance once more Harris managed to mumble: ‘I’ll talk, I’ll talk, but for Christ’s sake don’t kick me again, you’ve broken my jaw.’

He made a full verbal confession and next morning repeated it before another Security Police officer, Lieutenant W. J. van der Merwe. A doctor examined John Harris and treated him for a broken jaw. Broken in two places.

Spy-master H. J. van den Bergh cannot say he was unaware of Viktor’s unique questioning technique. I interviewed H J within twelve hours of that interrogation and he gave me the exclusive story that a man had been arrested for causing the bomb blast.* During that interview H J quipped ‘That’ll teach Harris to get involved in a scrum with one of my officers.’ HJ told me something else in the privacy of his

* *Johannesburg Sunday Express*, 26 July 1964.

office. He admitted that the Railway Police had alerted him about the anonymous telephone call it had received at 4.18 saying a bomb had been planted. HJ had got this warning by 4.20 and had used his hot line to call Justice Minister John Vorster.

When the bomb did explode, the South African government took full advantage and used it to whip indifferent and uncommitted White voters into line behind them. It was South Africa's first taste of terrorism, and John Harris never

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stood a chance when he came to trial. Public opinion was totally against him. He was a mad bomber who had 'deliberately set out to kill and maim innocent men, women and children'. Even the judge at his trial dismissed Harris's protestations that he had gone out of his way to have the railway concourse cleared 'to eliminate all risk of harm to people on the concourse'.

The court did not believe that Harris had only meant the bomb blast to be a symbolic protest which would be witnessed by hundreds of people safely herded outside a police cordon. The court was not interested in Harris's insistence that he had put two gallons of petrol in the bomb so that the cordoned-off crowd would witness a massive sheet of flame and would be able, as he put it: 'to visualize it quite clearly.'

Harris's claims were negated by a State witness who alleged that John Harris was a violent man. This was palpably untrue. I knew John Harris well, and in fact he took me with him on the very first public demonstration he made against segregated sport in South Africa several months before the bomb blast. No. John Harris was anything but violent. He was, in truth, a softie and dozens of his friends who live in Britain today will, I am sure, confirm that.

But apart from all that there is another disturbing factor in the John Harris case that I discovered myself quite by accident. At the trial a member of the public stated she had seen Harris hide his suitcase bomb *underneath* a wooden bench in a small cubicle on the station concourse. Yet when Harris made his warning calls to the newspapers and the police he said his suitcase was on the concourse. He said nothing about its being hidden underneath a seat. In any case he had given a graphic description of the suitcase, saying it was a brown one and had a label attached to its handle bearing the words 'Back in Ten Minutes'. Clearly, then, Harris had wanted the suitcase to be found quickly so that the crowds could be pushed away from it.

In this respect I have the best witness in the world,

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Glynnis Burleigh. Ten years after the blast, in December 1974, Glynnis told me she was writing a book about her life since she was injured. She wanted me to write a story giving the book some publicity. At my insistence she finally agreed to return to the scene of the explosion and be photographed sitting on the wooden bench at exactly the spot where she was injured. This photograph was taken and I used it to illustrate my story.*

Before the photograph was taken I asked Glynnis to show me exactly where John Harris had left his suitcase bomb. Glynnis paced it out carefully. It was eighteen feet from and directly in front of the wooden bench on which she had been sitting at the time. The suitcase then was actually an obstacle which passers-by had to step around as they walked along the concourse. Can anyone believe that Glynnis Burleigh, who went through such a traumatic experience, could be mistaken about the position of that suitcase bomb?

This evidence came far too late to save John Harris. He was sentenced to death for deliberately planning an explosion which killed and maimed. I have no legal qualifications, but it seems to me that any man who deliberately planned to kill innocent women and children (which Harris didn't) must surely be mad? And that being so, why was Harris sentenced to death? Was it the mass hysteria whipped up by the South African government?

I have one more story to tell about John Harris which gives a good insight into his character, and also into the tactics used by H. J. van den Bergh. I do not know the in-depth details but there is at least one person now living in Britain who can confirm the most important aspects.

As John Harris sat in the death cell a warder asked him if he would like to escape. When Harris said he would the warder said it could be arranged for £7,000. The warder wanted a down payment of about £1,000 as proof of goodwill and £6,000 after the escape.

* *Johannesburg Sunday Express*, 15 December 1974.

Harris quickly whispered this to one of his visitors (probably a relative) and within a matter of days the

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warder received a brown-paper parcel containing banknotes to the value of £1,000. The parcel was sent anonymously but I understand that a short note inside it told the warder that nobody outside the prison would be contactable and that the warder must arrange the escape with John Harris. The note added that if Harris succeeded in his escape a further £6,060 would be posted to the warder.

Harris and the warder hatched an escape plot which would be mounted one or two weeks before the date Harris was due to hang. On a particular night the warder gave him a suit of civilian clothing, a toy gun and some black shoe polish. The polish was for Harris to daub over his face so that his skin would not reflect the moonlight as he sneaked out of his cell, climbed a rope over the wall and jumped into a car parked near by which he would use to drive to freedom.

Convinced he was going to cheat the hangman; Harris lay in bed wearing the suit and waited for the warder to open the door at 2 a.m. as arranged. The door did open. But instead of the warder it was a smiling H. J. van den Bergh who walked in and said: 'Come on, John, give me that thing you have in your pocket.' Astonished, John Harris handed HJ the toy gun.

The warder had been planted on Harris by HJ right from the start. He had been told to offer an escape plan to Harris because HJ wanted to capture Harris's other associates in the underground African Resistance Movement. But Harris's friends on the outside had foiled HJ's cunning plot (although they may not have realized that the escape plan was a set-up) by sending the warder his £1,000 payment anonymously.

In this way, only John Harris knew the identities of his friends outside the prison. As he stood in the death cell that night, H. J. van den Bergh offered to let Harris escape if he agreed to spy for South African intelligence when he reached Britain.

But even this was a trick. If Harris had agreed to spy for South Africa, H J intended asking him to disclose, as proof of 'good faith', the names of the people involved in the

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escape plot. HJ would have had these people arrested at once and Harris would not have been allowed to escape.

But HJ never got to first base. Harris told him: 'You are wasting your time. I'd rather hang than spy for you people overseas.'

That plot by H. J. van den Bergh is one of South Africa's best-kept secrets. I tried every trick in the book to persuade HJ to let me publish a splash front-page story disclosing that 'the dreaded Communists could even infiltrate the death cell'. But HJ could not do so. It would have exposed his warder as a plant.

On 1 April 1965, as the noose was placed round John Harris's neck he sang *We Shall Overcome* and as the trapdoor opened his last words were 'Some day ...'

His body was taken to the Pretoria West Cemetery for cremation. There, a boy aged fifteen, whose parents were banned and could not attend the ceremony, stood up at the last minute with a farewell message to John Harris.

Reading from Ecclesiastes, Chapter 3, he said: 'A time to kill and a time to heal; a time to break down and a time to build up . . .'

The young boy and his parents had been friendly with John Frederick Harris and they knew, without any doubt whatsoever, that he had been a gentle, peace-loving man who would never have planned to harm anyone with his misguided bomb of protest.

The boy was Peter Hain, who also became a prime target of Pretoria six years later.