

INTERVIEWEE: Chris Wilken

DATE OF INTERVIEW: 24 May 2007

PLACE OF INTERVIEW: Johannesburg Central Police Station

Q: Could you give us an idea of what your daily routine was as a security policeman?

A: Obviously investigation formed a major part of your daily routine. If there was a suspect already detained then you would go to the cells in the early morning and see to the needs of this guy in detention. Whether he needed anything, whether you were going to take him out for further investigation, that type of thing. Further from there, our investigations normally were done during the night, early hours of the morning because that's the time that you would be able to get your suspects after you've been given your information. So daily routine would be: coming to the station, first check your people in detention, go to your office, start with your docket investigation, planning your teams for the night. You would never go out alone; you would always be accompanied by members of your unit. Then also, strangely enough, members from the uniformed branch. It all depends on which area you are going to. These people are familiar with the area, they will first go in and make sure that it's safe and then you'll move in, arrest the suspect and carry on with your investigation. So that was normal investigation in the Security Branch. The other people that worked on desks they were mainly working during the daytime because these people were operative during working hours: students, unions and so on. So they operated during the daytime and you would adopt your investigation according to that.

Q: When you started working here were there already the other units in Sandton and Protea and was there a close relationship between this station and those units?

A: At the time when I started at Jo'burg Central Sandton was already in place and Protea Glen was operating. I worked there myself. So they were already operating. In those days all the Security Branch would interact normally, not on a daily basis, but very regular. Cause there's no ways that you can investigate by yourself. A lot of these people had come from different areas and we were based in Johannesburg so obviously you would connect them and see where and when they left the country, the route that they were following etc so then you would come into contact with your colleagues in other areas as well.

Q: How did the relationship between those different units and this station work? Did they feed into this main unit?

A: Witwatersrand was one area at that point of time. Soweto was an area on its own like Pretoria was its own area. So each province had their own Security Branch and all the information that was gathered there was channelled to Pretoria because the head office of the Security Branch was based in Pretoria. So all the other units outside were doing work in their own jurisdiction.

Q: You remained in the police through the transition period. In your opinion what are some of the most important changes that have taken place in the police since 1994?

A: I think I've been one of the few lucky enough to go through the transition. I was one of the few members in this country who had interaction with high level members of the ANC who are now in government in this country because I used to make appointments for various Commissioners in the police to go and visit these people at Shell House in Johannesburg so I'm familiar with these people, I've met the leaders of this country. So for me, we all looked forward to these changes because we knew that something drastic must happen in this country and being in the police you feel it first because its via the police and the military that these changes come as they have to restructure. So I was one of the fortunate people to see these changes come and I've seen through the elections and after the elections. I must also emphasize the fact that don't think because we're in a democracy at the moment everything is going smoothly in this country. There're a lot of things that we still need to overcome. The race problem is still a major problem in the country and we see it wherever we go on a daily basis. Whether it's sport, whether it's in the police, whether it's in normal life, it still exists and we need to work hard to get those perceptions removed and see whether we can really make this democracy work.

Q: Was race an issue within the Security Police?

A: There was always a differential between senior ranks and junior ranks in the police during those days. I want to emphasise however that the members of the Security Branch were handpicked, both black and white. Black policemen were your colleagues and you needed to rely on them for information about the areas where suspects came from. Many of those policemen are still my colleagues today. They're still in the police and I liase with them very regularly. So within the Security Branch there was camaraderie between Security Branch people. However, like in any organisation the race issue came to the fore. Certain functions were Whites only; certain functions were only for Blacks. It was only much later that Blacks and Whites were allowed to go the Officer's Club and have a drink together. Nowadays obviously it's open for everybody, for any officer within the police force

Q: Can you tell us a bit about the Officers' Club?

A: The Officers' Club was there in those days for members to relax. Especially when you were busy with a major case or you had a successful case in court. You could go there and relax with your colleagues. That was the purpose of the Officers' Club. You could join your friends from other areas. Today we get together once a month at the club and forget about everything and relax. The only thing today is that it's open for everybody.

Q: Was this one of the biggest police stations in the country?

: It was one of the biggest. In those days it was run by a full Colonel (now a Senior Superintendent). These days it's run by a Commissioner. In 1986 Commissioners were confined to Pretoria. These days you've got them at a station level. Those days the station was run by a Senior Superintendent and there was as district commander, he was a Brigadier. Those people you would hardly ever see those people. Today at a station like Johannesburg Central where you have more than a thousand members there's many Senior Superintendents, there's many Directors. So a lot of things have changed from a small station to a major station been run by twice as many members as there were in 1986.

Q: Has this station always had a barracks facility?

A: Yes. Ever since I arrived here there was a barracks. Married and single quarters.

Q: What do you remember about the feeling within the station about the name change from John Vorster Square to Johannesburg Central?

A: There's still controversy about name changes more than ten years after democracy so it's a big issue and in those days even more. Obviously there was discussion between members about the name change and the question was asked as to whether this would be for the better or the worse at the end of the day. The government of the day decided on that, it was run past the police and they decided to change the name and sure some police were in favour, some were against but as things change you adapt to these changes.

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Q: Do you think there is an appropriate way of commemorating this police station?

A: Commemoration is very important and one must look at the history of this country both prior to and after 1994. So to me personally I feel that commemoration is very important as it is for the government of the day and the people of the day to remember what happened in the past. Me and you, we cannot rectify that, we had no control over that but I think it's very important to commemorate members that were involved in those days taking into consideration that there were a lot policemen who were very involved in what they were doing. I'm not for one moment saying that everything they did was above board but there many dedicated policemen as there are today. There are many of those dedicated policemen from the apartheid days who now serve the new government with as much dedication and those members should be recognised whether they came from those days or not, they're now in a new democracy serving a new government and they've given everything they have to serve this country so we need to bear that in mind. So commemoration is very, very important for those to come, for our children.

Q: How did deaths of policemen from this station affect other members?

A: In those days I was also attached to the bomb disposal unit so I know what you're talking about when it comes to the magistrate court bomb and the Marion Sparg bomb. I attended those scenes. Police were targeted, members died. Unfortunately the members that died weren't attached to the Security Branch, they were attached to the uniformed branch so those members need to be recognised because when the second bomb went off some of them were killed. I believe there is a role for those members as well.

Q: So you're saying that in terms of commemoration we need to look beyond violence and abuses?

A: I would like to see that one goes beyond that and stops focusing on the Security Branch and allegations of torture, etc, etc. I think it's important to go wider than that and commemorate those other members that were involved. I think there's room for that and that it will be to the benefit of everyone. You can't leave the past behind if you only hammer on a certain issue all the time.

END OF INTERVIEW

