



Rhodesian SAS fighters in action, and taking a break, in the 1970s when they tried to assassinate Robert Mugabe. Ian Smith's regime burnt camps during a war against guerrillas that cost thousands of lives

How mission to kill Mugabe was foiled by British tip-off

Valentine Low

The plot to assassinate Robert Mugabe was well-planned and well-armed. The Rhodesian SAS squad, confident of success, had machineguns, rocket-propelled grenades and a bomb described as "big enough to sink a ship". As one of commandos taking part said: "This is going to be quite something."

In the event, as described in a new



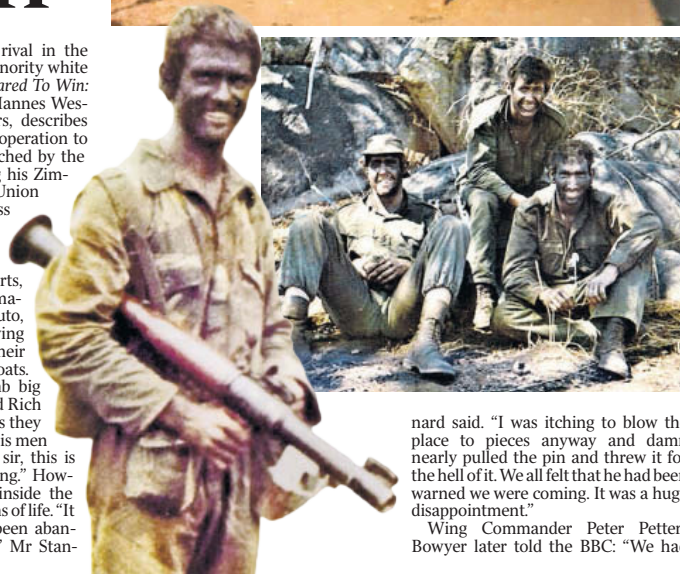
Robert Mugabe was alerted before assassins arrived at the suburb in Mozambique

book, it failed. Mr Mugabe, who was leading the fight for majority black rule against Ian Smith's government in what was then Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe, had fled before the attackers even got there — tipped off by the British.

Both the attackers and others believe that the British government thwarted assassination attempts on Mr Mugabe

and Joshua Nkomo, his rival in the armed struggle against minority white rule. The new book *We Dared To Win: The SAS in Rhodesia*, by Hannes Wessels and Andre Scheepers, describes how in February 1979 an operation to kill Mr Mugabe was launched by the SAS while he was leading his Zimbabwe African National Union (Zanu) forces from across the border in Mozambique. With South African special forces — the so-called Recces — as escorts, they were dropped by submarine off the coast at Maputo, where Mr Mugabe was living in the suburbs, and made their way ashore in inflatable boats.

"I was carrying a bomb big enough to sink a ship," said Rich Stannard, a commando. As they neared the house, one of his men said to him: "Good luck, sir, this is going to be quite something." However, when they looked inside the grounds there were no signs of life. "It was clear the place had been abandoned and only recently," Mr Stan-



nard said. "I was itching to blow the place to pieces anyway and damn nearly pulled the pin and threw it for the hell of it. We all felt that he had been warned we were coming. It was a huge disappointment."

Wing Commander Peter Petter-Bowyer later told the BBC: "We had

absolute proof. The guy who lived across the road from Mugabe happened to be a South African. I met the man, confirmed that Mugabe was at home and all was well. But, when we got there, [he had] gone. No question, Mugabe was called." Asked who he believed called Mr Mugabe, Mr Petter-Bowyer replied: "The Brits."

More than 30 years later David Owen, who was foreign secretary in 1979, implied he was right. There had also been a failed assassination attempt on Joshua Nkomo in Zambia in 1979; a few days later Nkomo asked if Dr Owen, now Lord Owen, would make public an exchange which had passed between them.

Asked by the BBC in 2011 what that was, Lord Owen said: "I think it was connected to whether or not we had tipped him off about an assassination attempt. It seems to be a pretty sensible thing, a pretty clear link."

Asked how they had got the information about the assassination attempt, Lord Owen said that Rhodesia's head of intelligence, Ken Flower, was "on our side" and regularly passed information to Britain. Both Mr Mugabe and Nkomo survived the various attempts on their lives and attended the peace talks at Lancaster House in London which led to majority rule.

Mr Mugabe won the elections that followed, and exercised his increasingly violent and despotic rule from 1980 until last year. Asked if he had done the right thing, Lord Owen said: "I think assassination was not the route to peace. Mugabe was at that time, I think, the genuine choice of the Rhodesian people."

"What went wrong? If we could have avoided Mugabe being the top man, then the history of Zimbabwe would have been a great deal better one. The 'ifs' of history."

● *We Dared To Win: The SAS in Rhodesia*, by Hannes Wessels and Andre Scheepers, is published by Casemate.

Couple attacked noisy druid next door with a knife and umbrella

Georgie Keate

A couple who retired to a bungalow park in Dorset were given suspended sentences for attacking a druid who lived next door with a knife and an umbrella after becoming fed up with the "intolerable noises" of his rituals.

After hearing loud chanting and drums on November 4, Mark Denyer, 56, traded insults with John Bennett, 50, aka Bearheart, before going to his house with a kitchen knife, Bournemouth crown court was told.

Mr Denyer's wife, Anne, 52, followed and hit Mr Bennett over the head with the umbrella while her husband made a

"short jab" at him with the knife, which did not penetrate far. "Suffice to say Mr Bennett is a 22-stone man... with a big belly," Judge Jonathan Fuller said. "The knife went in sufficiently far [only] to penetrate the abdominal muscle."

The Denyers, who had denied the charges, were convicted after a trial. Mr Denyer was sentenced to ten months in prison suspended for a year and 130 hours of unpaid work; Mrs Denyer was given a six-month suspended sentence with 100 hours of unpaid work.

Mr Bennett said: "We are peaceful pagans who live by the rule of 'do no harm'. We were performing a peaceful act of worship in our own garden and

ended up being stabbed. Nature is our church; even witches deserve the freedom to follow their beliefs in peace."

The problems began soon after the couple moved to Hillbury Park, near Alderholt, in February last year for a "peaceful and tranquil life". The Denyers had complained to the park owners about Mr Bennett's rituals but had not spoken to him until the night of the attack. Mr Bennett — a member of the Clan of the Pheryllt, inspired by ancient druids they say practised alchemy in the Welsh mountains — was performing a full-moon ritual, which resulted in Mr Denyer complaining over the fence. "It simply should have ended there,"



John Bennett had been performing a full-moon ritual

the judge told the couple. "But a few minutes later each of you left your home to go round to Mr Bennett's."

At the druid's garden gate, Mrs Denyer set about her neighbour with the umbrella, striking his head. "This resulted in two lacerations that caused immediate bleeding," the judge said. "Within moments you Mr Denyer... punched

out towards him in the stomach area, thereby causing the wound to the abdomen. He grabbed the knife from you but not before receiving some other minor injuries. Throughout the struggle Mrs Denyer continued to strike him with the umbrella, seemingly thinking her husband needed protection."

The judge accepted that neither of the Denyers had intended to do serious harm to Mr Bennett. "You are of previous good character. You had gone to Hillbury Park for the tranquillity," he said. "This was clearly out of temper and frustration at the intolerable noises coming yet again from your neighbour's garden."