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'If I stand behind Mandela and he gets shot, I'll take a bullet, too'

In the final years of apartheid in South Africa, a young doctor was asked to prepare for an assassination attempt on current and future presidents.

Peter Friedland and **Jill Margo** [/by/jill-margo-j7gd4]

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Dr Peter Friedland was one of several doctors who treated South African leader Nelson Mandela in the years after he left the presidency. In this exclusive extract from his memoir, Friedland recalls the dramatic circumstances of the first time he came close to Mandela.

Nothing much happens in the South African Army after 3.30 on Friday afternoons. On one such afternoon in February 1991, I had just seen my last patient and was packing up when my desk phone rang. I'd been in the army for almost eight months as a medic and was running an ENT (ear, nose and throat) clinic for military personnel. I picked up. Offering no pleasantries, a male voice barked orders in Afrikaans: "Present yourself in officer's uniform to the lieutenant colonel at the Witwatersrand High Command at the city barracks in Twist Street at 16.30."

Dr Peter Friedland with Nelson Mandela.

Before I could ask why or what I'd done wrong, the line was dead. I was a second lieutenant – the most junior rank of officer. That command centre was the largest in the army. To make things worse, my step-outs were at home and not in a presentable state. I looked at my watch. I had 45 minutes.

As I got to the car, I counted myself lucky not to have ducked out a few minutes earlier. Imagine missing such a call! I sped down the highway and, from my new brick of a mobile phone, called home. No answer – oh no. At our house I got dressed as best I could. Back on the highway I called again. My wife answered. "Linda, I don't know what I've done, but something is terribly wrong and I think I'm going to be court-martialled. Don't expect me for dinner. Tell the guests anything. I may be shot." She told me to stop babbling and said I was overreacting. But then she didn't understand how the army functioned and what an out-of-the-ordinary command this was.

When I skidded through the gates of the barracks at 4.32pm, I recognised the officer who was waiting for me. We'd been on a couple of training courses together, but he didn't acknowledge me. He looked me up and down. "Lieutenant, you're late," is all he said as he marched me down a corridor towards the large desk behind which the top brass sat. I saluted, stood to attention and braced to hear my fate.

Without looking up, the lieutenant colonel said, in Afrikaans, "I've received intelligence that tonight there may be an assassination attempt on Mandela." Without looking at me or pausing, he began a rapid briefing:

"Mandela and President F.W. de Klerk [https://www.afr.com/link/follow-20180101-p59898] will receive a joint media award at 19.00 hours at the Johannesburg Country Club. Each will receive the Johannesburg Press Club's 1990 Newsmaker of the Year award; each will make a speech. You will set up medical facilities to manage the assassination attempt."

The room felt airless. The briefing continued. Two military ambulances and two helicopters would be on site, and I was to set up two resuscitation stations and co-ordinate the whole operation. I would have all the staff necessary to get this done.

The plan was that Mandela [https://www.afr.com/link/follow-20180101-p5jb9r] would walk up first and speak from a lectern at the corner of the stage. A heavy velvet curtain would be drawn across the stage and I was to stand immediately behind the curtain, as close as I could get to him. The intelligence was that he would be shot at the lectern. If and when he returned to his seat, President De Klerk would then come up and I was to remain in position. I would be given a civilian suit to wear.

By now I was wiggling my toes – an old parade-ground trick to avoid passing out. When the briefing finished, I nervously raised an issue. "Colonel, if I stand behind Mr Mandela and he gets shot, I'll likely take a bullet too and there won't be anyone to ..."
For the first time he glanced up, and, with a sneer, cut me off. "Orders are orders. Dismissed."

From the army stores, where "one size fits no one", I was handed a dark blue suit, a white shirt and a tie. I found a moment to call Linda to say I had to attend a function but couldn't disclose the details. I definitely wouldn't be home for the Sabbath meal. She asked why I had been chosen. I had no idea. Perhaps it was because my clinic at the J.G. Strijdom Hospital was two kilometres from the country club. But then this hospital, named after a former apartheid prime minister, was not yet admitting people of colour. But helicopters would be there to take the injured to 1 Mil in Pretoria, the biggest military hospital in Africa. Things were happening so fast I couldn't think beyond the immediate logistics.

We got the equipment to the venue and were fully set up by 6.30pm, leaving me time to scout the club complex that I'd heard so much about. The old ballroom was already filling up. I recognised a couple of local white celebrities, captains of industry and some journalists. Someone said this was the first time Mandela and De Klerk would be appearing on a joint public platform, acknowledging each other's work in the push to end apartheid.

Nelson Mandela with then president F.W. de Klerk in 1990.

At the time, these two men had different views about how the post-apartheid system might look and there was tension between them. They were working towards a new constitution for the country, and both had to contend with furious opposition within their own ranks. To appease his angry constituents, De Klerk, who had been president of South Africa since 1989, wanted whites to have some form of veto or other special rights in the new constitution. Mandela, who had been out of jail for just a year, rejected this outright. There would be no compromise on a one-person-one-vote system. There would be a majority government.

Alone on the semi-darkened stage, I looked around, trying to imagine where an assassin might be hiding. On the same side as the lectern, there was an access point that led to the kitchen behind the stage. Wasn't Robert Kennedy shot in the kitchen off the stage? There seemed to be no security police around, although they might have been in plain clothes. It occurred to me that this exclusive country club, which had upheld solid colonial views for almost a century, didn't admit black, Asian, Indian or Jewish people. Now it was hosting a revered black freedom fighter and a junior Jewish doctor.

It had been a year since Mandela's release and the country was still deeply unsettled, with open talk of civil war. After more than three centuries of white domination, the extremist right was not going to relinquish its entitlements without a fight. It was smarting from the whiplash of the change and the swift unlocking of a prison gate so that Nelson Mandela could walk free on a summer afternoon.

But now, behind the curtain, waiting for Mandela to fall backwards into my arms, I could not calm myself. With 20 minutes to kill, I decided to go outside for some air and to check on my medical teams. Everyone else seemed agitated too. There was a big army presence behind the building and these uniformed men were restless. What was going on? I hung around and as I listened to their conversation in Afrikaans, I realised they were furious at De Klerk for throwing away their heritage.

These were right-wing Permanent Force (the term used for South Africa's standing army at that time) Afrikaners who had defended South Africa

against communism and hostile border incursions, and who for decades had fought the "Swart Gevaar", the "Black Danger". Now, they were being asked to protect the man who was putting them in danger. The numbers were against them, and they feared a potential bloodbath, with 30 million blacks putting the country's 5 million whites to death.

These career soldiers had been brought up, taught in the schoolroom and long encouraged from the pulpit to believe their mission was to bring enlightenment to the indigenous population. Their church held that whites were the fruits of Christian civilisation and gave them the right to rule and to limit the human rights of the colonised population. Now, look what was happening. As I listened, it occurred to me for the first time that perhaps I might also have to resuscitate De Klerk. That would explain the duplication of resuscitation facilities.

My thoughts were interrupted by the arrival of Mandela's motorcade. As it rolled in, the soldiers were even more put out. He was in a classic, new red Mercedes-Benz 500 SE. This car symbolised so much. Hundreds of workers in the Mercedes factory in East London had banded together to build it for him. A day after his release from prison, they persuaded the factory's management to supply the components and then they systematically assembled the vehicle in their own time, free of charge.

It was a project of pure passion. As Phillip Groom, who was instrumental in the project, told *CarMag*, "From the moment the car was merely a skeleton, and every time it was passed onto the next station, the workers would gather around the car, like in a ceremony, dancing as it passed them." In those days there was a long waiting list for expensive German cars and the standard joke was that Mandela had been on the waiting list for 27 years.

The soldiers, of course, didn't approve of the car and were further affronted that he had arrived with his own security detail. These black men were armed with guns and semi-automatic rifles. The cheek of it!

Minutes later, De Klerk arrived with his well-armed white security detail, which the soldiers felt was appropriate and which they begrudgingly respected. At that point I returned to my post.

Linda Friedland, Mandela and Peter Friedland in the early 2000s.

I was in time to see the two men walk into the hall together, to a standing ovation. Peeping through the curtain, I could feel shivers down my spine. The power of two old adversaries coming down the aisle, side by side, was something to behold. I'd seen De Klerk live before, but this was my first glimpse of Mandela in the flesh. He was almost majestic. De Klerk is a big man, but Mandela towered over him. The symbolism was clear, and when they sat in the front row, the house sat too.

Mandela had the bearing of a member of the royal family of the isiXhosa-speaking Thembu tribe. He was a young boy when his father, a principal counsellor to the acting king of the Thembu people, died. The regent stepped in and took care of the boy. I'd read something of his ancestry and, out of respect, when others addressed Mandela by his clan name of Madiba, I decided I would do the same if ever I got the opportunity to speak to him.

As the evening progressed, I grew more anxious. When Madiba came up on stage, I stood centimetres behind him and thought I could feel the heat off his body. Waiting for the first bullet, I didn't absorb a word of his speech. I was overthinking the situation. Perhaps this was deliberately planned by the army. If Madiba was going to be shot, so was I, and there would be no one medically qualified to resuscitate him. More likely the army hadn't thought it through.

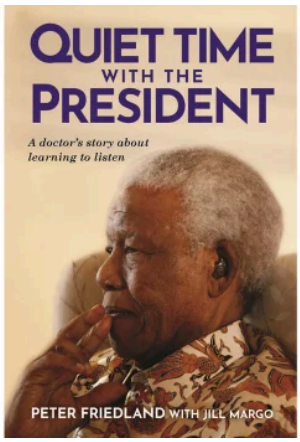
Mandela finished his speech and, to rapturous applause, returned to his seat. Nothing had happened. Then I thought, "Oh my God, now they're going to shoot De Klerk." He wouldn't be the first Afrikaner leader to be taken out. I searched my memory for the story about a deranged white farmer shooting Dr Hendrik Verwoerd, the chief architect of apartheid. As prime minister, he was shot twice in the head at an Easter cattle show in Johannesburg.

Suddenly, it came to me. I remembered Linda's father, Dr Israel (Boomie) Abramowitz, telling me the story of how he had resuscitated Verwoerd. As a newly qualified vascular surgeon, he was on duty at the old

Johannesburg General Hospital when Verwoerd was rushed into the emergency department. Boomie worked on him, stabilised him, and then transferred him to the old 1 Mil Hospital in Pretoria. That was in 1960 and he survived. Six years later, a second attempt was successful when a uniformed messenger, Dmitri Tsafendas, stabbed him in parliament.

The potential parallel with my father-in-law unnerved me even more. An assassination attempt on De Klerk would be on almost the same ground as the Verwoerd shooting. Back in those days, the cattle show was held very close to this country club. My mind was running away from me but returned abruptly when I heard De Klerk's footsteps on the stairs. As he stood at the podium, I felt his presence just as I had felt Madiba's.

Although I was listening acutely, it was not to his speech. I was trying to catch any sound out of the ordinary. But, despite myself, I heard him referring to a measure of resistance to change, saying, "many of our people, quite understandably, are uncertain and fearful about the future". This chimed with the sentiment among the soldiers outside the hall and gave me no comfort. Then his speech was over. There was clapping. Again, nothing bad had happened. My new suit was drenched.



Once the hall had emptied, we packed up and I was given a lift home in a military ambulance. The corporal at the wheel was spitting mad and insulting De Klerk in the vulgar manner in which army corporals excel. He lamented that De Klerk had not been blown to pieces and repeated how he would like to have killed him with his own two hands. He was incensed that he had to be there on a Friday night, and asked why the hell I was there. Why would I want to aid De Klerk or Mandela if they needed resuscitation?

He was driving like a lunatic, at about 160 kilometres an hour down the M1, and I felt he was going to kill me. He wanted my address, but he was so vicious that I didn't trust him and insisted he drop me at the Corlett Drive off-ramp, saying I lived right next to it. He wouldn't hear of it, and when I persisted, he screeched to a halt and ordered me out and onto the motorway. It was near enough to my ramp, so I got out and, with trembling legs, walked the rest of the way home. The Friday-night candles were still burning in the sleeping household. On an empty stomach, I downed a double Johnnie Walker.

Neither the next day, nor ever, did anyone from the army follow up on the event. It simply dropped away, as if it had never happened. But from then on, I followed the unfolding political scene with fresh interest, never imagining I'd ever come close to Madiba again.

Quiet Time with the President: A doctor's story [https://scholarly.info/book/quiet-time-with-the-president/] by Peter Friedland with Jill Margo (Australian Scholarly Publishing).

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