



MAY 1987

Frontline's offices were two blocks from the brightest and best university in the country, the University of the Witwatersrand, a.k.a. "Wits", pronounced "Vits" in the tinge of the Dutch-derived language that once ruled the land. We knew it was the best – even people who never had the good fortune to be enrolled there – not only because it had the most Nobel prizes, etc, but also because it most regularly and most honourably got its heads bust in the anti-Apartheid cause. Those days, all concerned assumed that when the ANC brought democracy along head-busting would be over, and so would protests. Heh.

Wits Blitz

An eye-witness account of one episode in the rolling-back of the borders of South African normality. By Denis Beckett

Monday, May 4, 1987. Winnie Mandela is meant to be speaking at Wits. There are rumours that the meeting has been banned, others that it hasn't been banned but is illegal anyway. With all the veerings in the Emergency regulations no-one seems to know. At about 12.45 I go to take a look. A few hundred people are gathered round a loudspeaker on the library lawn. I listen idly to some routine Nusas and Black Students Society rhetoric, go to sample the (much improved) student canteen, and then stroll back past the lawn.

The crowd has increased to perhaps a thousand, about half of whom are milling around the perimeter. Most of these are listening with half an ear. One group is talking about sailing. Another, multi-complexioned, seems to be focussing on transport logistics for some weekend plan.

The loudspeaker is droning forth. "Please have patience . . . please keep seated . . . Mrs Mandela is still here and we are almost certain this problem will soon be sorted out . . ." It is only partly audible above the buzz of chatter. Occasional catcalls are ringing out from around the crowd – Pipe Down, Hurry Up, etc.

The scene is as drama-laden as a church picnic. Feeling no need for a dose of *Amandlas* and *Vivas* and assurances of the imminent demise of minority rule,

I turn homeward. Reaching the piazza level above the lawn, I stop in sudden shock. I am directly in the path of an oncoming platoon. They are semi-marching, semi-walking in formation, about ten abreast, with helmets and visors, teargas guns in the port-arms position and sjamboks. A girl is sitting on the ground eating lunch. With the noise from below she has not heard them. They are almost upon her when she scurries off like a startled rabbit.

The police halt at the edge of the piazza. There is sudden tension down below, where most of the students are about a hundred yards away. Figures break away from the crowd. The amplifiers break into a loud insistence: "Please stay calm, please stay calm. Do not run away. Please remain seated."

Standing people sit again. The buzz, having momentarily ceased, rises to a pitch. There are boos and hisses. An authoritative voice comes on. It is Alan Mabin, chairman of the Academic Staff Association. He pleads for calm. Other voices follow. One, distinctively black, invites the "people in blue, if they want to address this meeting, to follow the proper procedure". Cheers and laughter.

Meanwhile a policeman has raised a hand megaphone. "*Aandag, aandag,*" he begins. The main loudspeaker drowns him out. I, alongside, can barely hear him. He reads a statement, first in Afrikaans then in English. Act Number mumble-mumble of nineteen mumblemumble ... Proclamation by acting chief magistrate ... two minutes to disperse.

Confusion down on the lawn. The message is evident. Hesitancy over the loudspeaker. Suddenly a clear call: Gather in the Sports Hall. The students move off north west to the sports hall, away from the police. They are already moving when the commander shouts: "*Twee minute is op. Beweeg in.*"

The police descend to the lawn, walking. By the time they get to the site of the meeting it is nearly empty. A few of the police, including some in plain clothes who look like students, rip down a huge poster proclaiming "One Person One Vote One Unitary State." A few others accost TV crews. Most stand about looking spare. After a while they move on to the Sports Hall, which a second contingent is now approaching in a long file up the narrow steps from below, perspex shields held high.

There is a vantage point overlooking the Sports Hall. It is heavily crowded. The plant-life dies a sudden death under hundreds of feet. People start to yell furious abuse as the police enter the hall. A mature male voice rings out in measured tones above the din: "Please do not provoke them. We do not wish students to be injured." He says it over and over again. The hubbub subsides.

Then the police form a cordon, surrounding the hall door. The abuse rises again.

One policeman is walking behind the cordon, slamming down visors which have been left open. A young black policeman leaps in agony, rubbing his face. He has been pinched somehow as his visor snapped shut from behind him.

Students emerge from the hall under escort and are led away towards the road. I am towards the rear of the crowd above, suffering from some atavistic sensitivity about trampling the plants. This means I would have been likely to see any missiles flung from that quarter. I do see one. It comes from behind me a stone or pebble no bigger than a matchbox.

A policeman points his gas-gun towards us and fires. The crowd flees. A moment later – the interim is blurred – I am standing alone in a flower-bed at the other end of the architecture block, respect for the plants forgotten. Fleeing students and pursuing police are hurtling by. One policeman, sjambok flashing, corners his prey, A second student jumps at the policeman. In a trice more students are in the fray. The policeman is brought down.

There is a flailing heap on the ground. The students don't seem to know what to do now. All but one split off. That one is left grappling. He's on top of the fight, but with limited strategic options.

A noise behind me. I swing round. A policeman is coming. Then he sees the fight. He calls – "*Botha's innie kak*" – and rushes past. Blue figures flash by. I see blows rain down on the wrestling student. Then the teargas hits. My options are to run west, past the fight, or south, back to the lawn. South has it.

Hacking and choking on the library lawn, I recall the Minister of Police explaining on TV that the police are short of men for crime-prevention functions. I am trying to reconcile the feelings I have for policemen I have known or interviewed with the attitude I am currently experiencing towards the SAP as an institution.

Is the admirable lawman who psychologised my former neighbour out of homicidal intent towards his wife here now? Is the earnest constable I met on a bus bench, desperate with weariness after three months' continuous overtime?

I look up and see the acting ambassador of Germany walk past with stern dignity, red and puffy eyes protruding like goggles.

Gradually, the library lawn comes to life. Soon it is nearly as full as before. There is much discussion. What to do now? A professional figure in grey hair and grey suit strides purposefully forward. This turns out to be Mervyn Shear,

deputy vice-chancellor. A student gives Shear the megaphone. He is saying: “. . . many students have already been arrested and I can assure you that . . .”

On the “that”, there is a sudden wild rush. Students scatter. The crowd around Shear shrinks to a small cluster. Then a police column appears. They cross from north to south-east, like a victorious army trudging homewards at the end of a battle. Silence persists until they are nearly gone. Then a smattering of boos and hisses breaks out. A black man, riskily conspicuous, yells loudly: “Go back to the farm.” The lawn rings with laughter. The police keep moving off.

The lawn re-congregates. After much discussion, the venue is shifted to the canteen. People dawdle off; stopping, talking, swapping notes en route. The anger which was tangible earlier, is becoming hard to see. People are laughing and animated. Gesticulating groups are describing who did what to whom.

A lone policeman walks through the throng, back to the architecture block. No comments are heard. He has evidently lost his sjambok. He is unlikely to find it. A TV crewman fished one out of a pond, to the cheers of the staff members at the windows, but overshot when he threw it to them. It landed on the roof.

A group of students crosses the lawn carrying survey instruments and measuring-rods. Someone says: “Don’t you know the campus is at war?” One of the surveying students raises his rod like a spear and lets out a mock-gladiatorial shout,

The shady benches outside the canteen are occupied by a normal complement of students – chatting or studying and apparently oblivious to the drama. I notice two blacks working on mathematics.

In the canteen people are slowly gathering around a central table. Eventually someone stands on it and starts talking. The central position is tactically unwise, since whichever way he faces three-quarters of the assembly can’t hear. There are snatches of the usual – comrades, oppression, racist regime. Someone draws cheers with an impassioned speech about how the white students are not the *baases* of yesterday, they are just as sick and tired of apartheid as any black. Then someone else is predicting the lies to be expected from the Bureau for Information. He’s hard to hear and there are cries of “speak up”.

My attention wanders. I am gauging the prospects of elbowing my way to the cool-drink counter. Suddenly, I am practically bowled over. I’m on the doorward side of the crowd and a torrential mass of humanity is stampeding for the exit.

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Loud voices yell: “Lock the doors Lock the doors.” Whether the objective is to lock the police out or lock the students in, I do not discover. Students divert anyway, rushing through the serving area. Others run to the far end of the canteen. A few people slam the doors and feverishly pile tables and chairs behind them. Someone rolls out the canteen’s firehose

In the serving area a black woman in canteen uniform is imprecating violently, waving her arms in protest at the disorder in her domain. Near the door there is a dogleg in the canteen. This part has been out of the scene of action. It is from here that the tables are brought for the barricade. Some students remain sitting there, reading, eating, talking. A woman is absorbed in a book, hands over her ears in the way one blocks out the noise of a vacuum cleaner.

I follow the serving-area route. A group of sweating kitchen staff are lugging milk cans out of a lift. Stairs lead either downwards and out the back way or upwards to another canteen and a bird’s eye view. I take the latter. The upstairs canteen is nearly empty. Emigrants from below have passed through it to the balcony outside. A canteen supervisor is chivvying a late luncher, a black man in workman’s clothes: “I don’t care how long it is since you ate and neither will they. Just let me lock up”. The cater eats on. A student shouts at the supervisor: “You have a duty. I’ll report you. I’ll report you to the very top”. She shouts back, the eater keeps eating.

The balcony crowd is watching police in discussion below, speculating on their intentions and ancestry. Then a knot of policemen break clean and run hell-for-leather for an unseen target. There is another outbreak of flight. Shortly afterwards the police return, with a clutch of protesting cameramen in tow. The cameramen are led away. Then follows an odd pantomime. The main body of police slowly return southwards. As they recede, hisses and slow claps break out, They stop and turn round, and there is another burst of wild fleeing. After standing still for a couple of minutes, silence on both sides, the police turn their backs and proceed. More hisses, more claps. They stop and turn again. More fleeing.

Eventually the police are out of sight. Word goes round that the academics are assembling on the piazza, in solidarity. Students, now down to perhaps 500, make their way there. The scene is carnivalian. On the piazza students are dancing in large groups, arms around shoulders. A nucleus, mainly black, is singing a song of which the central feature is the word “sojer”. A girl student tells me brightly that she’s made more friends today than in two and a quarter years at ’varsity. The academics are seated on the steps, wearing their gowns.

Masters' black and Doctors' crimson give a mediaeval feel to the affair, and clash incongruously with shirtsleeves and *takkies*. It is said that student and academic leaders are meeting the vice-chancellor.

Abruptly, for once without any preliminary scare, a rain of smoking projectiles falls upon the crowd. Police have re-appeared around a corner, gasmasks complementing their Empire Strikes Back image. And they are firing tear-gas. The eerie sound of whooshing canisters is everywhere. Only one door to the Central Block is open, and people are storming it. A woman falls, a man trips over her. He's up instantly and into the building. She takes longer, hobbling on a hurt leg,

The piazza is almost empty. A few students are stamping on canisters. One picks one up and flings it back at the police. A grey-headed man in a suit stands still and erect as the Rock of Ages, staring defiance. Crimson gown flailing, a professor of nuclear physics is kicking canisters away like a boy playing with pinecones. I take cover behind a pillar, mindful of Azapo's one-eyed president, who was two-eyed until a recent altercation with a tear-gas canister. The firing stops and I'm still breathing oxygen. At this point I think the gas is where the smoke is – I'm soon to learn better – and although there are several clouds of smoke none are coming at me. I emerge and watch the police survey their handiwork.

Next to me a voice rings out: "Fuck off, you cunts". I see a gun quickly raised, pointed at the source. I duck back behind the pillar and simultaneously feel my first fullblooded wave of gas. There are several whooshes, close by. Scared to cross the few feet to the door, I breathe more of the gas than I am happy about. Then the whooshes stop and I scuttle into the Central Block foyer.

Inside, people are shouting "Don't use water, don't use water". Several people are holding up torches of newspaper. Two young blacks grab me and shove my head over a torch. The smoke is a relief to breathe. Soon after, whispers of gas start to permeate the foyer. People retreat down the corridors. A student has considerably taken the top off a big standalone ashtray so he can puke into it. An elderly lecturer has become befuddled, and thinks the people offering him a torch are new aggressors. A boy in shorts is explaining technique to an eminent scientist – something about how it's okay to breathe through wet cloth but bad news to rinse your eyes.

The tear-gas came at 3.05. Until perhaps 3.10 the front of the building feels like the aftermath of a train crash. Red-eyed and weepy people are drifting around aimlessly, coughing and sniffing and looking mournful. Then it starts

to get back to normal. People are talking, cracking jokes, bumping into old acquaintances and making new ones, comparing the state of their eyes. Someone wants to know if he can package the gas in small quantities as a cold cure. Someone else calls out: "All I can say is that this is enough to make a fellow weep". Everybody laughs.

By 3.15 the piazza is full again. The dancing re-starts. Everything is as it was, except for an acrid smell in the air and a lot of ash and half-burnt newspapers flapping gently across the ground. And the red eyes. The police are nowhere to be seen.

3.22: Another flurry. Police are taking up a position on a landing in the Wartenweiler Library. Another sudden scattering, this time smaller and briefer than before.

3.25: The academics form a black-and-crimson line, about a hundred across, on the police side of the students.

3.27: The police at the library silently move off, guns at rest like hunters leaving an unsatisfactory vantage point.

3.37: Mervyn Shear reappears with Alan Mabin and SRC and BSS members. There is quiet while a loudhailer is sought. Shear begins: "I want you all to know that the university feels very deeply . . ." The upshot is that there is going to be a Senate meeting at four o'clock.

Shear hands the loudhailer to a black student. There is a chorus of Amandlas. For the first time I realise how effective the *Amandla*-ing is. It gives people a sense of participation, like the singing. Apart from which, nobody ever dozes off at a liberation meeting. Every ten minutes you're up on your feet and raising the roof.

"My fellow South Africans," says the black man, "my fellow students, my fellow academics . . ." The crowd laughs. The speaker with them. He says the students want the university to be closed for two days. Loud cheers. He attacks P.W. Botha for failing to ban himself from holding meetings where he can seek a mandate to continue with oppression.

Alan Mabin warns that Senate does not have the power to close the university. However, he and others will seek to persuade Senate to put the case to Council, which does. A white SRC lady announces her joy that today has broken the racial mould at Wits, perhaps forever. Black and white students have fully and jointly participated in a common cause, history has been made.

3.53: Another scare. The police reappear where last they fired from and

advance towards the centre of the piazza. The crowd disperses, some fleeing, some just backing off.

3.58: There is first one, then several, shouts of “fuck off” and the like. Police fire teargas. The process of an hour earlier is repeated, with some variations. People learn fast, it appears. This time they treat the teargas with less awe than before. The torches are everywhere.

I for one am less nervous, except about a direct hit from a canister. As familiarity grows, the masks and helmets are losing their intimidatory effect and I’m coming to look on the gas as something nauseating but temporary – no worse than sea-sickness. I’m beginning to think that the tales I’ve heard about township kids’ amazing courage in the face of the gas is no big deal after all. I’m also losing my anger. This thing is assuming the dimensions of farce. If I’m angry now it’s not so much as a citizen aggrieved at oppression and suppression but as a taxpayer aggrieved at the hamhandedness of the people whose wages I am paying. If they’ve got to be here at all, instead of catching muggers and car thieves like they’re meant to be doing, let them at least use some sense.

I’m crouching now in yet another bed of formerly decorative greenery, vaguely conscious of the apoplexies which await various gardeners tomorrow. There is the same sort of camaraderie as earlier in the foyer. People are loudly mocking a guy who is having a hard time – he’s shaking a lot – lighting a sheaf of paper with matches. We’re all waiting for it but noone is desperate. Someone steps in with a lighter and in the meantime the smokers are passing their packs around. Nearly everyone lights up, an ex-smoker welcoming the excuse. People blow their smoke into the faces of others, who breathe it in like junkies.

By 4.05 the police have withdrawn. By 4.07 the piazza is abuzz as per normal. At 4.15 someone from the Black Students Society is holding up for claim a collection of shoes lost in the various rushes. He announces that proceedings will resume in the Senate House concourse – the sixth venue of the day, if we count the library lawn twice – and that the academics have offered to man the doors. They’ll stand there all dignified in their gowns and try to keep the police from barging in. Loud cheers.

5.25: The faithful have dwindled. About 200 people are in or around the concourse. Some are dancing and singing on the floor, the few whites among them keeping up well, at least in respect of the dancing. More are clustered around the stairs and the atrium-type balconies, watching and chatting.

On the stairs there’s a debate going on between a black woman and a white

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man. She's saying she doesn't want to send her kids to Wits any longer, not until the blacks stop needing to assert themselves. He's a little scandalised. She wants to know whether he would send his kids to a university where they spend half their time dodging teargas or observing stayaways.

A laden photographer asks someone to come outside with him and case the street. Police are still there confiscating cameras, he's heard.

Then there's a white man with a beard standing at the crown of the stairs in Hear This pose. For the last time in the day, there's instant panic. In about two seconds the floor is empty. In about another ten seconds it is realised that this is Alan Mabin, minus crimson, and the refugees sheepishly return.

Mabin announces that the university will close on Wednesday, election day. Cheers, rapidly returning to cries of "No, no". A student leader quickly joins him and says No Problem. The university will officially close on Wednesday but the students will consider Tuesday a closed day anyway. Cheers.

Within ten minutes the place is empty but for a foreign television team frantically seeking interviews with anyone in sight.