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Kidnap trail of Botha's spies

Behind the sudden dropping of kidnap charges against three men last week lay a classic South African intelligence operation. **DAVID LEIGH** reports.

In September last year, a second South African businessman appeared. He was Johann Niemoller, a wealthy man formerly in the South African military, who runs Adder, a clothing company in Upington, Western Cape, which supplies military equipment.

Niemoller visited Evan Evans, one of the men against whom kidnapping charges were dropped last week. Evans, a middle-aged British ex-officer, had served in the South African army but had returned in 1985 to run a post office in Anglesey.

Niemoller next went to the London house of a Seychelles exile politician, Pierre Ferrari, with whom he stayed for a week.

Accounts of this trip contradict each other. Niemoller said in South Africa that he visited Evans about an outlet for his clothing factory.

Yesterday, in interviews with South African newspapers, he agreed that plots against the ANC had been discussed. He says he refused to help. Evans, on the other hand, made a courtroom statement that Niemoller had demanded assistance with explosives 'to blow up the ANC.'

Ferrari says that he was asked to put Neimoller up for a week because he would help to overthrow the nominally Marxist Seychelles Government and install Ferrari as Minister of Defence in a new regime. Later, to his surprise, he found bottles of poisonous drugs in the room where Niemoller had stayed.

Niemoller was accommodated at the request of a peculiar figure who had befriended Ferrari and other Seychelles exiles: his name was Frank Larsen, he wore military uniforms, and had a house near Aldershot. He was eventu-

ally to appear in court with Evans, accused of ANC kidnaps.

Larsen claimed to work for British intelligence. He also produced a blueprint for a coup in the Seychelles which he said had been approved by British intelligence, and letters of support, apparently from right-wing British politicians. He also had a Ministry of Defence police pass and British MoD manuals.

Although the Seychellois did not realise it, Larsen's real name was Viggo Oerbak. He had served prison sentences in Norway for fraud and forgery and had served in the Rhodesian special forces before turning up in Britain in 1982 with an elaborate alias.

Ferrari and his colleagues also did not know that, at his Aldershot house, Larsen had another, more sinister document. It was a list of ANC members to be kidnapped or killed, with British home addresses.

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A SOUTH AFRICAN strolled through London's Smithfield meat market and into the nearby fourth-floor offices of Lynx, a small British security firm, with a proposition.

'He said he was a salesman from Clansman, a company in Pietermaritzburg,' says the firm's director, Jeremy Wetherell. Lynx had some South African connections and was interested in buying bulletproof vests.

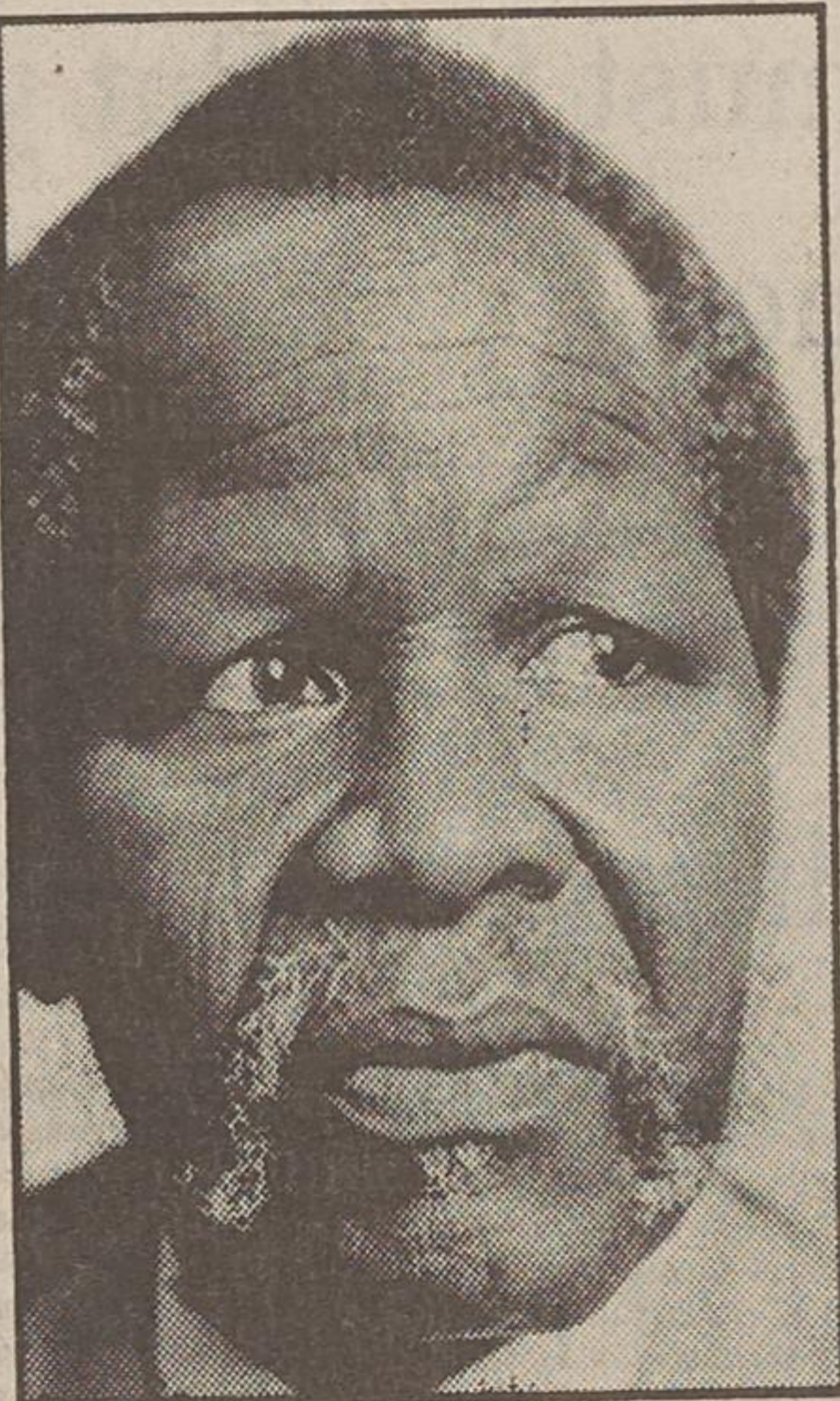
After some preliminary talk about his background as an Oxford graduate, the 'salesman' came to the point. He was interested in the firm's surveillance capacity: could it do what he described as 'covert work'?

Wetherell says: 'He was clearly a professional intelligence officer.' He says he promptly reported the contact to MI5.

That was in the middle of 1986, the earliest established date that MI5 knew for certain that Pretoria was mounting another London operation. It did nothing to stop it.

Africa had made the worldwide harassment and assassination of ANC leaders a key objective.

Using standard intelligence agency 'deniability' techniques, they use foreigners, and make attempts to leave a trail pointing at some other culprit. They have recruited Britons, Scandinavians, Pakistanis and Egyptians. Such people can travel freely and be disowned by Pretoria if caught.



Tambo: Target.

Last December a New Zealander called Martin was discovered in Lusaka with weapons. He had gained entry to the house of the ANC's director of information, Thabo Mbeki. Martin worked for South Africa during the Rhodesia civil war; he had been recruited from the French Foreign Legion in North Africa.

In Swaziland, a succession of ANC officials have been assassinated, culminating in the gunning down this summer of ANC national executive member Cassius Make. Another ANC leader, Lucas Seme, was kidnapped.

In May this year there was an attempt to shoot a prominent white South African anti-apartheid activist, Ronald Watson, in Botswana. The hit man was Stephen Burnett, a British-born former member of the SAS, who joined the South African army in 1981 and became a Johannesburg businessman in 1986. Burnett initially claimed that he had been acting for MI6.

Another team was sent in 1982 to fire-bomb ANC offices in London. It was controlled by a South African security police officer, Craig Williamson, who is connected with a company in South Africa, Longreach. A Rhodesian-born

Frank Larsen was picked up by police in a London hotel lavatory last July. They were watching for homosexual misbehaviour. Searches threw up the haul of documents at Larsen's house.

The Anti-Terrorist Squad, led by Supt Alan Talbot, took some time to disentangle what was going on. It transpired that the 'MI6 blueprint' for a Seychelles coup was a forgery. So, too, were the letters of support from British politicians.

But were all the MoD manuals and Foreign Office documents forged? And how had the plotters been able to assemble forged warrant cards so easily?

It is clear that the answer to these questions could be embarrassing. It is also clear that the activities of the arrested group were far from a joke.

After MI5 was consulted, on 12 October, officers of the Director of Public Prosecutions' special casework division, met Supt Talbot. They told him to drop the case and release the men.

A long list of reasons was produced: there was no evidence that the kidnap conspiracy had been active; the defendants were 'publicity-seekers' and 'lived in a world of their own'; the Crown would look 'ridiculous' during the trial; and the lesser charges — of forgery and impersonation — were not serious enough for the Anti-Terrorist Squad to waste its time with.

The Anti-Terrorist Squad clearly disagreed: as late as 15 October, its officers were pressing on with inquiries, in the hope of reversing the decision. At the same time, the DPP was instructing his men to insist, against the wishes of the judge involved, on a re-trial of three anti-apartheid demonstrators who threw paint at the South African Embassy this year.

On Friday the Attorney-General, Sir Patrick Mayhew, defended in the Commons the decision to drop all charges against the three men, charged as Frank Larsen, Evan Evans and Jonathan Wheatley.

The shadow Home Secretary, Roy Hattersley, said he was not convinced.

'Frank Larsen' was last night being detained, pending deportation proceedings.

Additional reporting by Paul Lashmar, Martin Bailey, John Merrit, Robert Taylor.