

Operation Barbed Wire

During the 1981 Springbok Tour of New Zealand the South African government's policy of racial segregation polarised opinions and sparked controversy throughout New Zealand. I was opposed to the tour as apartheid is a form of racial discrimination. Robert Muldoon, Prime Minister at the time, realized that the sporting element in New Zealand would want the tour, so to appeal to that fraction of the population the government proclaimed the policy of "no politics in sport", despite the commitments it had made under the Gleneagles Agreement. During the games, Muldoon himself slipped out of the country to attend the royal wedding of Prince Charles and Diana.

I lived just out of Palmerston North at the time and the Palmerston North game was after the Hamilton game which was cancelled after protestors broke onto the rugby field and a light plane had been stolen from Taupo and was heading for the stadium. While there was confusion as to its intentions, the police decided that the situation was getting out of hand and cancelled the match for security reasons.

The anti-apartheid movement in South Africa was buoyed by events in New Zealand. Nelson Mandela recalled that when he was in his prison cell on Robben Island and heard that the game in Hamilton had been cancelled; it was as 'if the sun had come out'.

In New Zealand the police were wound up for the Palmerston North game. They had the army surround the stadium with barbed wire and flew in police reinforcements on the day from all over the country. I was at the airport that morning and watched plane load after plane load of Hercules transport aircraft arrive and discharge masses of police who marched off their aircraft. A friend and I went on the protest march later that day and I still remember being turned around by the police at one point and there was a particular officer at the centre of their line that was grinning at us. Most of them had straight or worried faces but he eyed us and grinned.

The popular saying that went out at the time was: "Help the Police. Beat yourself up!" We all wore motor bike helmets as protection from being battered.

That evening we were at a party and I had a sudden idea, I turned to my friend and said: "Let's go and cut up the barbed wire." He replied instantly: "That's a brilliant idea!" So we drove back to my place got wire cutters and swapped my car for a motor bike. We rode to the stadium area, left the motor bike in a dark area and commenced cutting the barbed wire up into short lengths. It was not ordinary barbed wire that farmers use. It was combat wire with long barbs and sharp ends. Rugby fans at the Kia Toa Rugby Football Club in Cuba Street were providing the perfect sound cover for us by singing loudly in their clubrooms. There were Alsatian dogs being led around the area but they did not smell us because masses of people had been through the area. So away we went chopping up the barbed wire.

Finally we stopped after we had enough fun and quietly left the area. What do you do with a mass of chopped up barbed wire? They must have taken it to the army dump and covered it with dirt. The police and army never said a word publicly about it, obviously they did not

want the word to get out but they did change their policy. I noticed on the television that after that game they always placed the police outside the barbed wire at other games; they had to protect the barbed wire.

I learned afterwards that the army was extremely wound up and spent a lot of time as a result of the game in Palmerston North. Well what do you do with a whole lot of short lengths of combat wire?

I stand by the old saying: 'All it takes for evil to thrive is for good men to do nothing'

In hindsight it was like something out of the movie: "The Great Escape" it was done right under their noses. However unlike the movie we did escape, Steve McQueen should have had wire cutters :-). I am sure we wiped the grin off that policeman's face.

The Wire Cutter

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