

Statement to the Commission of Inquiry into TRC Stopped Cases

Case Reference: The Rietbok Aircraft Tragedy, 13 March 1967

Submitted by: Robyn Lichter (nee Blankfield)

Contact Details: **Email:** [REDACTED]

Phone: [REDACTED]

Date: 04 November 20205

This statement is submitted to THE JUDICIAL COMMISSION OF INQUIRY INTO ALLEGATIONS REGARDING EFFORTS OR ATTEMPTS TO STOP THE INVESTIGATION OR PROSECUTION OF TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSION CASES (TRC CASES INQUIRY) by Honourable Madam Justice Khampepe.

I wish to highlight the information I have gathered to form evidence in this claim of a stopped TRC case of the Rietbok air crash when my father Joseph Blankfield was one of the passengers.

Over the almost 60 years since the Rietbok crashed, near East London I have gathered information and met people who have enlightened me further. At the time of the crash, I was 12 years old and living in Johannesburg. I was not aware of the political ramifications but I remembered clearly the tragedy as it affected not only our family but the many people who were in our community. I also remember the haze of confusion and conflicting information we discovered so frequently.

Only recently events have spurred me to explore more. As I probed deeper, evidence began to surface suggesting a government-orchestrated cover-up.

The Rietbok disaster involved political sensitivities, suggesting the apartheid regime may have intentionally hidden the facts.

1. Witnesses and connections:

My search led me to the following:

- **Alan Elsdon** who is the author of the 2009 publication, "*The Tall Assassin*", which exposes many of these dark operations and the inner workings of the Bureau of State Security (BOSS).
- **Ian Boyd**, son of SAA Investigator Capt. James Boyd, who related his family's trauma including the state of the ashes claimed to be his father, after a cremation not sanctioned by the family. He described an urn containing "strange black ashes" – most unlike normal ashes.
- **'Griet' le Roux** (Daughter of passenger Prof. Johannes Bruwer) who shared her family's experiences, waiting for her father at the airport.

- **Helen Brown**, who led the TRC submission in 1998 and was able to secure many government archives on the Rietbok, never before seen. She also shared all these documents to the AFORAT research group.
- **Mrs Pat East**, who was able to identify her brother as the unfortunate “headless” torso that washed up a few weeks after the crash. The body was retrieved by SAP and SAA and taken to the mortuary where a post mortem was conducted and the body buried in an unmarked grave without contacting any families.
- **Ms Benita Long**, the partner and next-of-kin to Ian Boyd who shared many memories and documents from Capt. James Boyd.
- **Ms Illana Milner**, daughter of passenger Max Melmed, who shared her family story.
- **Aaron Goodman**, great nephew of Audrey Rosenthal, the American ANC member
- **George Allen**, grandson of Edith and Victor Wood.
- Several other contacts included **Graham Hudson Lamb**, **Philip Edkins** and **Ian Kilwa Anderson**

While we have not had a satisfactory formal investigation or inquest for the Rietbok, despite repeated appeals by the families, we continue to pursue the truth. This inquiry is a welcome opportunity.

2. Rietbok Crash - Possible Time Line

Over the time I have tried to unravel the mass of information collected by our group. I tender this scenario:

1. Apartheid was introduced in 1948
2. Already in 1956, Professor Johannes Bruwer said the Government needs to face social problems involved in diplomatic relations with independent African states
3. He urged the creation of a Department of Indian Affairs as an integral part of the population
4. He was a star witness for South Africa vs South West Africa at World Court in The Hague (1960).
5. As member of the Odendaal Commission (1962), draughting the five-year plan of separate development
6. He was appointed Commissioner-General for the Ovambo's in South West Africa
7. His first professorship was at Stellenbosch University.
8. He was beginning to **doubt the future of white rule** in the country
9. He wrote the speech Verwoerd was due to deliver before he was assassinated. His family believe Verwoerd was killed to prevent him making that speech.
10. He attended Verwoerd's memorial service, telling his sister, 'I'm the next one', (1966)
11. **He was Acting Chairman of the Broederbond (1967)**
12. Premier John Vorster, who had been in office for about six months after the assassination of Verwoerd, and the foreign minister at the time, Dr Helgard Muller, approached Bruwer to take up an unprecedented post as a roving ambassador to African states. He was to be based in Zambia, with the approval of former president Kenneth Kaunda.

13. Johannes Bruwer (Jnr) related that “on March 11, two days before the Rietbok disaster, Dr Helgard Muller came to Port Elizabeth and spent a day with my father to discuss the ambassadorship. When my father boarded the Rietbok on March 13 he was on his way to a final meeting with Vorster in Pretoria before the announcement of the new post, which was to be made public the next week.”
14. But that night the Rietbok disappeared, and nothing came of the plan, which was never made public. Kaunda sent Mrs Bruwer a telegram expressing his condolences, and a letter inviting her to visit him in Zambia.
15. **There was a call to Prof. Bruwer's secretary**, Mrs Benjamin, from a "travel agency" a few days before the disaster. The travel agency told her they wanted to offer my father a special discount if they could handle his bookings, as they knew he travelled a lot. She told them that unfortunately his next flight had already been booked on the Rietbok, but she would contact them in future. However, when she did try to make a booking for another planned trip a few days later, she found that the travel agency did not exist.
16. **Johannes Bruwer** said, “A student of my father and I had accompanied my father to the airport.
17. Passenger **Audrey Rosenthal**, was an American who had been recruited by Professor **Martin Legassick** to work for the **Defence and Aid Fund**, a group run by Canon Collins, dean of St Paul’s Cathedral. They met in London in 1966.
18. Defence and Aid Fund financially supported organisations such as the Pan African Congress and the African National Congress that had been banned in South Africa in 1966.
19. Her duties were to have clandestine meetings with elements of the PAC and the ANC that remained in hiding in South Africa. Apparently, she was also gathering intelligence to be used by the South African Freedom Movement.
20. On the afternoon of March 13, 1967, Rosenthal, who had taken a taxi, walked into the office of Eastern Cape journalist, **Jimmy Matyu**, carrying a light brown briefcase. He was one of the names she had been given to contact. She was young, beautiful, full of life and they instantly became friends.
21. As a precautionary measure, they decided to say little in the office, fearing it might have been bugged as they did not have a night watchman or security guard. They decided to do much of their talk by taking a slow stroll to a cafe at the bottom of Theale Street and Main Street (now Govan Mbeki Avenue). She took along her briefcase.
22. He gave her the names and addresses of families and filled her in on the political situation in Port Elizabeth. As she was aware that she was being followed during her stay, they felt strongly about visiting the families in the townships whose fathers and relatives were incarcerated on Robben Island.
23. At the same time, she had to avoid missing her flight to East London.
24. Their stroll did not escape the curious stares of passers-by as it was not common at the time to see a black man and a white woman walking and holding hands amicably and laughing. But walking together and laughing was not breaking the infamous Immorality Act nor could they be arrested for conniving to contravene the Act as they were walking in a public street.
25. As they were walking, they noticed that there were people watching us through binoculars from the second floor windows of New Law Courts and they assumed without doubt that

they were from the Security Branch. They returned to the office where she took down some names of local political activists who were imprisoned on the island.

26. It was sometime late in the afternoon when Rosenthal left in a taxi to board a plane to East London
27. Mr Pieter Bruwer, was telephoned on the night of the crash by an East London policeman to come and **identify the body** of his father. He was then told it would not be too distressing, as his father **had not been too badly disfigured**
28. When he arrived the following day, **police denied ever calling him.**
29. A few days after the disaster Johan Bruwer, son of Professor Bruwer, was visited by two men in suits at the Pearson high school, where he was a matric pupil. The headmaster introduced them as "security policemen". Bruwer said, as "A student of my father and I had accompanied him to the airport, and they wanted to know whether I had seen him, with my own eyes, get on the plane. I answered yes, but they repeated the question two more times, quite sternly, which caused me enough distress to remember the incident. It was like they were making sure it was the right person who was dead."
30. 'Griet' Le Roux (Bruwer's daughter), said her brother Piet had a pilot's licence and wanted to fly over the area where the Rietbok had gone down.
"They [people at the airport] told him at the airport that the air space was blocked.
31. Pieter then tried to hire a boat to search the sea near the beach but ran into the same problem: it had been declared a no-go area by the minister of defence.
32. There was "the rumour" - that 21 bodies had washed ashore – denied by the Minister of Transport.
33. There is an **official memo** to the Secretary of Transport reporting **21 bodies found.**
34. At least three bodies floating on the water, many pieces of wreckage and an oil slick were seen by personnel on board two navy minesweepers
35. Johannes Bruwer related: "Constable Card reported searching for a briefcase." "There's nothing sinister in the fact that the security police were looking for a briefcase, even if it was really my father's (Bruwer) briefcase. In the light of his appointment as roving ambassador to African states he may well have been carrying documents which it would be in the government's interest to retrieve."
36. "Pieter Bruwer was allowed to hear the final tape recording from the crew's communication to East London airport. He said there was nothing funny in the voice of the pilot, that all seemed normal. He had a friend with him, and he wanted his friend to also listen to the tape recording. But when he asked the airport officials to hear the tape again, they said there was no tape recording." He said he found it strange that the radio message which he had heard quite clearly was not mentioned later at the official inquiry. According to him it was testified that that part of the tape was just filled with incoherent noise.
37. Emlyn Brown told Johannes Bruwer that reportedly the voice on the control tower recording was not that of the pilot, or co-pilot but of someone else! (Johannes Bruwer's report to TRC).
38. Newspapers reported in 1967 that they had reliable information that the wreck of the Rietbok had been found by divers - but that this was being kept secret by the Department of Transport.

39. **Video of plane** by minesweeper was recorded showing passenger still in their seats – as testified by divers.
40. In 1998 a reputable source alleged that during the investigation into the Rietbok disaster in 1967 photographs were taken of the wreckage by Navy divers, who were ordered to maintain strict secrecy. In one of the photographs the body of a young woman could allegedly be seen protruding from the wreckage
41. In the week of the crash a newspaper reported that “Railway Police had a **set of pictures** of the people who were on board the plane was delivered yesterday. The pictures were supplied through the co-operation of South African morning newspapers, including the Daily Dispatch.
42. The divers of Underwater Technical Services P/L and the rest of the crews of the minesweepers were ordered not to speak to anyone about the finding of the wreck.
43. They said they were going to leave the plane and the bodies in the water just as they had been found, because it would cost too much to raise the wreck."
44. Divers of the private firm Underwater Technical Services P/L thirty years ago **tied down huge nets around the wreck** of the passenger plane Rietbok to make sure that as few pieces of wreckage as possible would later wash ashore
45. Incidentally, the initial team of navy divers assigned to search for the wreck was replaced by a team of divers from a private firm in Cape Town.
46. By March 17 SAA Chief Investigator Capt. **James Boyd** had reportedly finished his preliminary investigation and was due to fly back to Johannesburg that morning, Capt. Boyd was found dead. It was presumed that he may have died in his sleep of a heart attack... after saying to his wife “**shady things going on**” here.
47. There was no post mortem but a death certificate stating he had died of a heart attack.
48. The mortuary register has a record of his death, but the body was not admitted.
49. Boyd’s body was reportedly sent to Springs and before his family was notified of his death, it was cremated without consent.
50. Wednesday, March 29, 1967, two weeks after the Rietbok disaster, *Die Oosterlig* (a now defunct sister paper of *Die Burger*) wrote an editorial slamming "the sudden veil of secrecy" surrounding the air disaster. Others too “Kept in the Dark”
51. In early April a **headless torso** was discovered floating in the sea by two fishermen. It was claimed by the SAP and SAA as connected to the Rietbok and taken to the mortuary. A post mortem was conducted, and the torso was buried in an unmarked grave. No family was notified at the time.
52. About 5 weeks later a naked body with a decomposed face was washed up at Queensbury Bay. The body, suspected to be from the Rietbok, was claimed by SAP and reportedly taken to Cambridge mortuary for a post mortem. No entry exists. No family was notified. A Postmortem was never sited. Apparently, this body of a white male was buried in Duncan village, a black cemetery.
53. Fishing boat skipper Joe Neff relates his discovery. “While bringing in the nets, one of my crew spotted this item on the top of the net, and he says, ‘There was a skeleton there.’ And it was staring at him, and he ran away around towards the stern of the vessel.

“And I radioed to our radio station. They in turn got hold of our office, and I was asked to bring the body in. And I got into the harbor just after 7:00, and, all the lights here were out. “And I had to come alongside in the dark. I didn't know why, what the reason was for it, but then, of course, I was totally worried too. They didn't want to make a scene and let everybody know what was going on.

According to Joe, the body was then sent to Cape Town for forensic examination. Two months later, one of the security police told me it was a body of an **Englishman**, a **23-year-old Englishman**. Wow. He said, "But that was definitely Rietbok." (This matches the identity of Norman Sosnow).

54. ‘Griet’ Le Roux, Bruwer’s daughter, said the mystery deepened about **a month after the crash** when officials paid a visit to her late mother, Cora, demanding she sign a letter stating that she would not talk about the crash to anyone.
55. June 14, 1967, a reporter of the Afrikaans Sunday paper *Dagbreek en Sondagnuus* was threatened with prosecution by Judge CS Margo, chairman of the official inquiry into the Rietbok disaster, for reporting certain allegations concerning the wreck.
56. Mr Card later thought the story about the woman was a smokescreen and the briefcase in question actually belonged to Prof Bruwer – nothing was proven.
57. Family members who at the time attended the sitting of the commission of inquiry into the disaster, yesterday confirmed that the printouts were never offered as evidence, "*Die Burger*" reports
58. Mr Emlyn Brown, director of the National Underwater and Marine Agency (Numa) in Cape Town said he believed the wreck had indeed been found in 1967. Brown said:
59. Johannes Bruwer told that somewhere in the Free State there is a retired man who says he occupied a "sensitive" post in the old dispensation and has in his possession not only information on the mysterious disappearance of the SAA passenger plane, the Rietbok and its 25 passengers 30 years ago, but also a piece of the aeroplane. The man said from the nature of his work he had met Prof. Bruwer at the University of Port Elizabeth twice before his death. "I was also there when they removed the plane from the sea in the Eastern Cape. It is a lie that the plane and passengers were not found.

And if this was simply a tragic plane crash, then how can we explain all the above?

I, Robyn Rose Lichter, am committed to contributing to the aim of the Associated Families of Rietbok Aircraft Tragedy (AFORAT) in seeking the truth, justice and transparency regarding this tragic event.

The recently appointed Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Allegations Regarding Efforts or Attempts to Stop the Investigation or Prosecution of Truth and Reconciliation Commission Cases (TRC Cases Inquiry), has both the authority and the moral obligation to address this long-standing injustice and to enable us to set the record straight, to **put an end to misinformation** and further **Human Rights Violations**. Almost six decades have passed without accountability or closure. Many families have lost loved ones without answers, and the passage of time has only deepened their grief.