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Name of Interviewer: De Wet Potgieter

Name of interviewee/s: General Chris Thirion

Name of translator (if any): De Wet Potgieter

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Interviewer	<p>I am sitting here with general Chris Thirion, the then deputy chief of staff intelligence of the South African defence force. General, I would like to talk to you today about the lead up to the dismissal in, what was later named as the purge by FW De Klerk of his defence force, when you and scores of senior officers were summarily fired in 1992.</p> <p>I would like to talk to you about this lead up to the event, how it all started and how you felt about the fact that there was never a court martial held, was there any support from the top by your generals in supporting you?</p>
Chris	<p>Yes, De Wet, it is actually a subject, and I am very serious when I say this, it is actually a subject that one talks about with difficulty because there are still scars, you know, and when you open those raw wounds it still hurts and so on.</p> <p>The fact of the matter is that I served for thirty years in the defence force and I saw myself as a good, professional, loyal soldier and then when your career ends with dismissal, the healing process takes a long time.</p> <p>But I think one cannot talk about the incident without taking the political climate at the time in consideration. There was a shift in emphasis and we were on the way of two choices. The one was a full scale war or we negotiate and secure a political solution.</p>

It is, of course, obvious that war and military action never offers a final solution for political problems. We were taught as young officers that it was our task and our goal to create an internal climate to allow for negotiations towards a political solution. Therefore I never saw myself in a position where it was my duty as a soldier to uphold and protect apartheid forever. Young men who served under me can vouch for this. I always told people that our role, our duty, our goal was to ensure that a climate was created within our borders whereby solutions could be reached through negotiations.

And that is why I supported Mr. De Klerk's initiatives. Well, it was in any case not his initiatives; we all know it was the initiatives that started even before his time. But, I did support those initiatives.

Maybe he came forward with more courageous and more courageous steps, and I supported him to such an extent that I was known amongst my colleagues as being a 'De Klerk man'.

Now, it is so ironic that it was that same man that fired me, you know, but in any case this makes it even more so difficult to live with. The fact of the matter is that Mr. De Klerk was as state president the head of the defence force. This gave him the right and the authority to hire and fire officers. So he could do whatever he wanted, but he gave reasons why he dismissed me and 22 others, we were 23 in total, of which I was the most senior.

He gave reasons why he ended our services and that was not correct. That I cannot accept. I could not live with it.

I wrote a letter for Mr. De Klerk, registered mail, telling him that I accept his decision as a soldier. He had the right to fire me. I told him I do not know on what terms he had done it, and I also told him in the letter I want to be court martial. I knew then that Mr. De Klerk had his reservations about anything with a military connotation at that time.

And I told him or any other form of formal administration of justice and I will let the matter rest with the findings of such a court or a court martial. I did not even get a reply on my letter.

Ja well, I started off by saying one must see this in the political climate of the time. I knew, during that time, because I heard afterwards from Mrs. De Klerk in person, that Mr. Mandela at every meeting he had with Mr. De Klerk told him that his defence force was out of control.

There is a third force that operates internally and a lot of problems create, and did not support your initiatives in what, let us say, who wanted to derail the political process, wanted to derail the constitutional process.

This happened over a time and Mr. De Klerk enquired about it. It was denied, always, and at one time Mr. Mandela told him that the third force was in military intelligence, the brain behind the third force was inside military intelligence.

Now, these things developed over some time. I think that Mr. De

	<p>Klerk did not trust his security forces, but he also did not make a serious issue about it, that is my humble opinion, to pull things together, you know, to handle things properly.</p> <p>In my humble opinion when a state president is confronted with such serious allegations, he should call in his chief justice, he could summon his relevant minister, he could call in his chief of the defence force, and then in the presence of the chief justice ask the questions he wanted answers on and demand that the replies should be provided to him in the form of sworn affidavits.</p> <p>That was never done. One must bear in mind, this is the final lap for a political solution and now there are these military ramifications hindering him rather than helping him and we have come out of a war situation where we supported, trained and armed resistance movements in neighbouring states.</p> <p>This is no longer a secret. I was involved in it. I was part of operations aimed at particular targets. Those targets were later on not only physical targets, but later on became individuals, people in particular.</p> <p>And I think the fact that Mr. De Klerk was very far separated from his security forces, resulted in him making use of judge Goldstone for example to do lead certain probes into the defence force, into military intelligence, because the brain of the third force was said to be within military intelligence etc.</p> <p>This is where I think judge Goldstone came across certain things that created unease- serious unease with Mr. De Klerk. And, as a result of these things, I think, let us call it the shortcomings of this investigation by Goldstone, he thought it well to find judge Goldstone help from within the defence force.</p> <p>This is where general Steyn came into the picture. I still remember very well, after this had happened, I told general Steyn he could rely on my full cooperation and if there were things he needed to clear up, I was available.</p> <p>There was never a single word discussed with me. I think he was led by a lot of gossip stories from national intelligence. Not the organisations as a whole, but particular individuals in this organisation and in the defence force.</p> <p>I realise today that there was also within my circles there was a dagger in my back- inside my own circles. When I needed top cover there was none, you know.</p>
Interviewer	<p>When you talk of top cover. What, can you make a comparison. Where, why and who should have looked better out for you if the circumstances deemed it necessary?</p>
Chris	<p>I would say I functioned within a command structure and from inside that command structure I received my orders and implemented it, and, within that command structure I reported back. So this does not mean that I am trying to hide behind</p>

	<p>something, but what I am trying to explain is that the charges that were very serious, which were amongst others murder and talks of a coup and such things.</p> <p>I think for example that in military terms at least a court martial was necessary and I do not know if those senior officers in Mr. De Klerk's office that so-called night of the generals were completely overwhelmed or totally out of their depth, or whatever</p> <p>But there was nobody that said, but waits if these are the charges against Chris Thirion we recommend he must go on compulsory leave and be court martial. That would have been acceptable for me.</p>
Interviewer	But, this did not happen?
Chris	It didn't happen. In other words the guys above me in the line of command. So what I am trying to say is that the command structure within my line of duties should at least have had the manhood to say that is not right what we are doing. You know, I didn't want the guys to stand in for me or protect me.
Interviewer	But a court martial would have given you an opportunity.
Chris	Yes, exactly. This is what you do, this how it works. And you know lies were told when questions were asked afterwards about our dismissals and it was said about mine that it was part of a restructuring within the defence force, it was a pack of lies.
Interviewer	And the way that FW handled the whole issue. Was that acceptable for you?
Chris	No, not at all. And I will never, as long as I live make peace with it.
Interviewer	And you were never charged for anything?
Chris	Never.
Interviewer	It just had to go away.
Chris	<p>It had to blow over. You know, one has a family. You have a wife, you have children. You have to look them in the eyes. And now life must go on.</p> <p>And I was a good and professional soldier for 30 years. The last paragraph of my career says I was fired. When I wanted to sue Mr. De Klerk. I, in fact did sue him. He requested to settle out of court. And then he put it in writing that I was not guilty on any of those accusations against me.</p>
Interviewer	But the damage was done.
Chris	No, the damage was done.
Interviewer	Why did he do it?
Chris	Precisely. He must take responsibility for what he has done and the people who assisted him.
Interviewer	But he has to live with this for the rest of his life.
Chris	Yes.
Interviewer	Do you think he feels bad about it?
Chris	No, I don't think so. No, I think he just carries on with his life.

Interviewer	Like water from a duck?
Chris	Yes, and I think it applies for some of my former colleagues. They sleep with peace at night.