

The man who risked his life for Nelson Mandela

BY SALLY KENNES

IN four days' time South Africa goes to the polls. The ANC (African National Congress) will almost certainly get back in. But as Nelson Mandela steps down from the post of president, the election marks the end of an era.

Mandela, 81 in July, has arguably been the most charismatic leader the country has known. However, he could not have achieved what he did alone. His supporters were crucial. One of the most unlikely was a white English theatre director, Cecil Williams, who risked his life for Mandela at a pivotal time in his life. His story, long forgotten, has just been turned into a film, *The Man Who Drove With Mandela*, starring Corin Redgrave.

Cecil Williams was a tall man with an aristocratic bearing, though his origins had been humble enough — he was the son of a Cornish ironmonger. A grammar school scholarship boy, he first settled in South Africa in 1928.

In 1962, a young English theatre director tried to smuggle the ANC president into South Africa. His story has been made into a film



flashed past and signalled them to stop. Williams asked: "Who are these men?" but they both already knew. Mandela, military fit, considered making a run for it, but the sight of two more cars, full of police, changed his mind.

The two of them were arrested and locked in separate cells. Mandela wasn't to know it then, but he was looking at the beginning of 27 years behind bars.

Williams was released the next day. Returning to his car, he noted, with some triumph, that the police had found neither Mandela's gun nor his notebook. He took them to the ANC, then considered his



Working as an English teacher, he lived in Johannesburg, which he found "a gangster's moll of a mining town". Among his pupils at the stuffy, elitist school where he worked was John Brett, later the railways chief of police. Williams made a big impression on Brett - so much so that years later he was able to call upon him for a crucial favour.

It's not clear exactly why he was chosen for the task, but in August 1962, Williams was asked to meet Nelson Mandela in Botswana and smuggle him back into the country. Certainly he was known as a liberal who had joined the country's first anti-fascist organisation, the Springbok Legion. A kind of trades union for soldiers, the Legion was almost unique in not operating a colour bar.

In 1962, Mandela was the most wanted man in South Africa. Dubbed the Black Pimpernel, he was an elusive revolutionary, president of the ANC and the most dangerous thorn in the government's side.

Having decided that the ANC's long cherished policy of non-violence wasn't working, Mandela had persuaded the movement that it was time to fight. He had spent the year abroad learning how.

The man Cecil Williams picked up in his big Austin Westminster had left the country a trainee revolutionary, and come back an expert. Trained by the Emperor's Guards in Ethiopia, Mandela could now make - and avoid - small bombs and mines, use an automatic rifle, plot a guerrilla war and start a revolution. His parting gift from his Ethiopian masters was an automatic rifle and 200 rounds of ammunition.

They were an incongruous pair. Cecil Williams, the well-spoken gay theatre director, who had helped bring tolerance of homosexuality into the anti-apartheid movement; Mandela, in army fatigues, plotting to overthrow the government. They were in high



CAPTURED: Nelson Mandela

spirits. Mandela was back where he belonged.

The gun tucked between the seats, Mandela posed as Williams's chauffeur. "I told him afterwards he was a damn fool," says Bill Williams, Cecil's older brother, 91 and living in London. "He was in his own car and in South Africa. If you were on the blacklist you were tracked as soon as you stopped for petrol."

But Greta Schiller, director of the film, says: "A flashy car would be just what you would expect a black man to be chauffeuring. And I suppose there was a certain naivety and innocence, the sense I imagine you have when you are launching a revolution and you are young and believe it's all going to work out."

They slipped across the border at midnight, driving across the country to Durban; they then planned to go to Johannesburg. Though it was winter, the weather was beautiful. Natal, on the east coast, remains green all year, and while they admired the view they discussed sabotage.

Williams brought Mandela up to date with events, and Mandela in his enthusiasm spoke freely. Noting that the highway from Durban to Johannesburg runs parallel with the railway, Mandela made a note about sabotaging it.

They never made it to Johannesburg, however. A few hours out of Durban, a Ford V8

for his notebook. He considered the ANC, then considered his options. They were few: going underground, risking house arrest, or leaving the country.

With the help of Brett, his former pupil, and promising to forgo any future political activity, Williams returned to Britain.

Bill Williams, who also lived in South Africa for a while, remembers the miseries of apartheid well. "There was so much hate in that country. Everyone hated something or somebody. I managed a shop, and if there was ever a burglary it was always assumed it was the blacks.

"We were very alike in many ways," says Bill of his brother. "As youngsters we were both very religious and thought of becoming parsons."

"The homosexual thing was a mystery to me for years," continues Bill. "Looking back, I can recognise it but I couldn't then. Cecil made a great effort to get out of it at one time. He even got to the stage of arranging to marry a girl, but it fell through."

WHEN, after the war, Cecil became a theatre director in Johannesburg, the two brothers moved in different circles, the younger entertaining the likes of Danny Kaye and Laurence Olivier at parties.

On his return to Britain in the early Sixties Cecil Williams was able to pick up his theatre career. "He toured Europe teaching theatre," says Bill, "and he put on plays in London."

Williams died, aged 70, in 1979. Sadly he hadn't lived to see the final act - Nelson Mandela's release from jail, his election as president, and the end of apartheid.

● *The Man Who Drove With Mandela, at the ICA, London until June 3, will be followed by screenings around the country*



HERO: Williams was prepared to stand up to the horrors of apartheid