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Ordinary people honoured for extraordinary deeds

Their families hurt for very different reasons, but medals awarded posthumously shine new light on their lives

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AHMED Timol was alive when he arrived at the Blue Waters on Goch Street. His next appointment was his funeral.

It was 1971 and that blue building, John Vorster Square, had been a place of plot blood-letting for three years. Its nickname taken from a hotel on Durban's beachfront.

It housed the security police on its 10th floor, although the lift only rose to the ninth. But the arrival of the teacher and graduate of Moscow's illustrious Lenin School, and his torture in Room 1026, introduced another terror that would go on until 1990: murders in detention that would be ticked off as suicides.

ANC and SACP operative Timol had done something unexpected during questioning, said the cops. According to them, he had run across the room, opened the window and dived through it to his death. Or he had hanged himself in the shower after being locked in his cell. Nobody could quite say.

The only absolute truth is that Timol would be the first detainee to die in custody at the Blue Waters. He had been in love, but gave up on his relationship with his girlfriend in Britain to join the struggle. It is believed that after the most blood-thirsty interrogation, he may have been dangled upside down out of the window of Room 1025 until the cops holding his ankles let go.

No one has been charged with his murder. No one applied for amnesty for it from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

In 2006, a National Prosecuting Authority task team concluded there was no irrefutable evidence to show he had been killed by police. It closed its file.

So Timol's family are still in pain nearly 40 years after he died. They still ask how could either of the versions of his death be true when he was brutally bruised? His right eye had been gouged out, his testicles hammered in and his fingernails ripped off.

In October, on the 38th anniversary of his death, Timol's nephew Imtiaz Cajee pleaded again for the inquest to be opened.

The family require justice, and they hope now that government has honoured Timol in its National Orders, which were bestowed by President Jacob Zuma at the Union Buildings yesterday, there may be a chance of that.

GRIEVING: Ahmed Timol, above. Forty years after his unsolved murder, Timol's parents are still in pain. This week they received his Order of Luthuli.

Timol's family were in Pretoria to receive his Order of Luthuli – created to recognise extraordinary things done by ordinary South Africans – on his behalf.

Cajee had been nominating Timol for an award for a few years, but it took a letter this year from the Ahmed Timol Secondary School in Azaadville, Mogale City, to persuade the Presidency. The school was renamed in 1989 by Nelson Mandela as a dedication.

"One has mixed emotions," says Cajee of the award. "On the one hand there is jubilation, but when I long and yearn for my uncle, I know which cemetery to and go and visit. We should not forget that my uncle was only one life. One's heart goes out to the thousands of other families who have never had any sort of justice, and those who have absolutely no idea as to where their loved one was laid to rest."

"Generations come and go, and the onus is on people like myself to keep the legacy of those who were murdered alive. It's an ongoing challenge, especially because the younger generation finds apartheid difficult to grasp."

The Order of Luthuli bestowed on Timol is thus somehow symbolic, as if it represents an honour to all murdered detainees. Not a single inquest into their deaths at the Blue Waters was ever conclusive. Not a single police officer has ever been officially blamed.

"Through our own research and investigations, we came up with as much information as possible," says Cajee, "but it seemed like what the NPA was expecting when it did its investigation was for someone to just appear and make a sworn affidavit that they knew what happened to my uncle in 1971.

"We all know about the role informants played during the apartheid era in order for the security branch to be so effective. There was a wide network of informants in our community, so our appeal goes out to them as well. Even if they have done wrong, surely the time has come, 40 years later, to acknowledge what they did."

It is indeed a great sadness that 15 of the 29 people who received National Orders yesterday are dead. But this was anticipated.

The violence of apartheid claimed many great people.

Former president Thabo Mbeki, who initiated the six meritorious orders in 2002 and 2003, said then that many of those who would be honoured would "have sacrificed much in their own lives, and yet some their very lives, so that all our people can enjoy the right to live in a society free of oppression, racism and bigotry". His position on those who would be chosen was that "all (must be) standard bearers for freedom who have blessed us with the gift of liberty".

The Orders (see the column on the right) are the highest awards that can be bestowed on any individual or organisation, and are designed to perpetuate democracy and human rights. Excellence is the undercurrent.

So it is that Timol's name stands alongside that of Phindile Ndlovu, the Soweto mother who succumbed to an inferno at her home in historic Vilakazi Street in Orlando West in August this year. The 29-year-old died trying to rescue her two young children and their young cousin, and was yesterday decorated with the Order of Mendi for bravery.

"I was thinking that we could use the coal stove to boil water for the baby, but it was too cold."

Phindile's grandmother Charlotte Ndlovu twists her handkerchief around and around in her small hands. Next door, tourists are taking pictures at the Mandela House Museum.

"It was that cold winter and we hadn't had electricity for two weeks, it was off like everybody else, so we bought a gas heater. Something went wrong. We tried to turn it off. Then it exploded in our house."

Ndlovu, 81, gets up and empties a big envelope full of photographs. "There's Phindile."

She points to a serious young woman, posing in summer shorts and a hat next to a shiny sedan. "She was so neat, she was sweet and patient. She grew up right here, in the old house. You know, she walked at eight months."

Phindile's baby, Nthabeleng, was christened a Catholic last weekend. She'll never know or feel her mother's warmth around her, but everyone will surely tell her how her mother saved her life by grabbing her through the flames and cradling her in her arms to pass her to a cousin on the outside. Phindile burned to death in her bedroom with her niece Paballo, four, and daughter Flikile, eight, when the smoke became too much. Her other child, Sipho, survived.

"'It's burning! It's burning!' That's what he was calling out to his mother that night. He's battling now, but he's strong."

Charlotte Ndlovu and her daughter Roseline, Phindile's mother, were to receive Phindile's medal from Zuma yesterday. "It's too hard, but we are proud of her. It's just the life, but we miss her."

The house on the corner of Baqwa and Vilakazi streets was demolished immediately, and the intervention of Winnie Mandela and others in the community resulted in a new house being swiftly built after the tragedy.

There was once only one bedroom for seven to share in the home that was exactly like all the other old elephant houses around it with their concrete walls and roofs. Now there are three, but it's not something to celebrate.

"They took me away, they didn't want me to see anything," says Charlotte. "But the last thing I saw was Phindile rushing for the children, so I won't forget that."

Together with Timol and Ndlovu, Zuma yesterday honoured nearly 30 great South Africans, paying particular attention to the tirelessness of apartheid-era liberation fighters like James Mpanza, Simon Senna and Sina Keitsing. All deserve the fresh attention these awards bring on them. It's that spread of greatness which was held high.

Timol and Ndlovu may have lived 40 years apart and performed extraordinary acts that were not at all like those of each other, but both showed such a true selflessness.

Their families hurt so hard for very different reasons, but in collecting the medals on behalf of their loved ones, there was a shared consciousness.

Just a for a few moments, they were alive again.