

The LMJ Nostalgia Pages

SOUTH AFRICA

The Detonator

In 1954 I was 12 and in my first year at boarding school in Greytown, in the Natal Midlands of South Africa. One day someone at school had got hold of an electrical component that he showed to his friends, and before long it was shown to me as they knew I was inquisitive in such matters. There was no real knowledge of where it came from – it had just been passed from one person to another, with some suggestion that it had been found at the railway station.

Nor did anyone know what it actually did, although one lad said he was sure it was part of the light fitting in train carriages. It was a brass-coloured cylinder about the size of an obese matchstick, with a pair of wires coming from one end. In that era before plastic had become so universal, the insulation was a silver-grey silk that I remember clearly - woven, I think, but that detail is less clear. The other end didn't have the rounded end that I had expected, like a sausage, but a dimple. This lad said that the base of the light bulb in a carriage fitted against that dimple. I argued that applying electricity to one side of a light bulb would achieve nothing unless it could continue out the other side and on its way. His reply was that like it or not, that's how fittings on the railways worked. Someone in his family worked on the railways and he claimed that they knew all about such things.

Although others were interested, no one really wanted the device and so the fellow who had it gave it to me. So, back at the boarding house that afternoon, I made plans to test it. I had a small torch and it was easy to dismantle – I had done it often enough before. I would then hold the bulb against the dimple and apply the wires to the terminals of the two little batteries (what we now call AA).

Space was scarce – I shared a bedroom with several other boys – and anyway I thought the test would only take a minute. So, I unscrewed the torch on my lap by the drawer with my things, just squatting beside it. Remember that in that hot climate, it was normal for boys of my age to wear shorts. In this situation I was trying to make several good electrical contacts at once. With only 1.5V I thought that the light might not be visible in daylight even if the device did work and so I wanted to use both batteries, to give 3V. Thus I was trying to position my hands and fingers to hold the two batteries together, a wire at each end of the battery pair, and a bulb on the end of the device.

At first nothing happened and I assumed that an oxidation film on the various surfaces was preventing an effective electrical contact. The solution was to rub the contacts more vigorously against each other, so I let go of the bulb and device while I concentrated on the batteries and the wires at each end. Suddenly there was a tremendous bang, and I found my senses reeling. I was probably momentarily unconscious though no longer than that. As I gathered my senses I was still squatting, and I would surely have fallen over if it had been longer. On the other hand my eyesight definitely blacked out briefly, and as it returned my vision for the first few seconds was not clear. Looking at my bare thighs in front of me I saw that they were covered in black splatters.

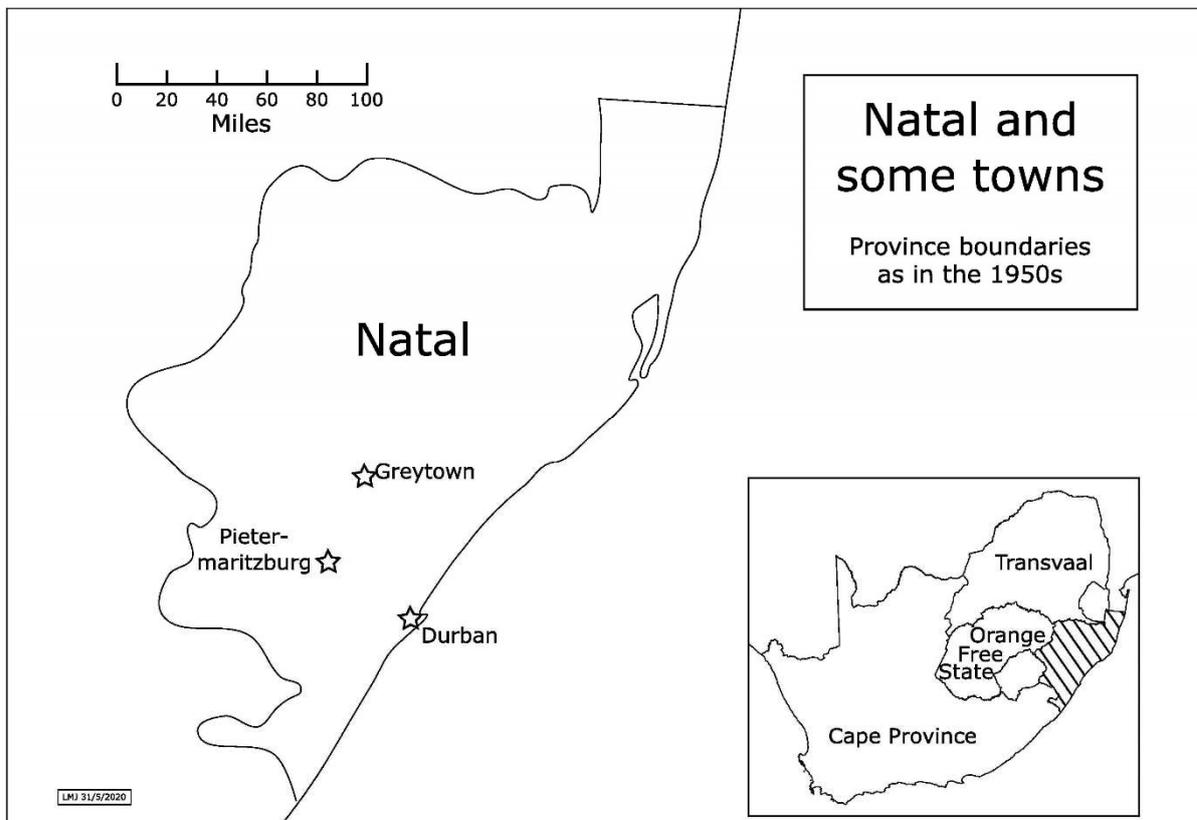
My immediate guess was that the batteries had in some way exploded (I had probably heard adults warning that batteries could explode if thrown on the fire) and that the black liquid was the battery contents. Then, as my mind and eyesight cleared more fully I saw that it was red, because it was blood. By now other people were scuttling around, and it was obvious that I needed help.

The real explanation is that the device was a detonator for explosives. The official view was that it was from the coal mines and must have reached our area in a wagon of coal that arrived at the station. As you will appreciate, in that time and that place health and safety precautions were not as thoroughly enforced as they are now.

My right thigh took the biggest load of shrapnel, my left thigh getting some but considerably less. Of my hands, most was on the back of my right hand with virtually nothing on the left. Amazingly, no other part was hit. Those initial bad electrical contacts turned out to be the one bit of good fortune. As I had released the device, the fairly stiff wires in my hands arched upwards and then curved down with the device dangling at the end. Thus when it exploded my hands shielded my face - otherwise I would probably have been blind for the rest of my life.

They took some X-rays of my thighs, which were quite astonishing in the number of white specks. I was also taken to the local police station to give a report to a genial officer who assured me that one could live quite happily with chunks of metal in one's body. In his upper arm he still had a piece of genuine shrapnel, left over from the war that had ended less than ten years earlier. He invited me to feel it and I found it somewhat unnerving the way it moved beneath the skin. It felt about the size and shape of a jelly bean, which made it vastly bigger than anything shown on my X-rays.

I was sent home for two weeks, and home was on the coast about ten miles south of Durban. That meant that someone had to drive a hundred miles each way via Pietermaritzburg to fetch me and also that I was then quite out of reach of the school. For the first couple of days I just sat around, mainly reading, my thighs swaddled with white bandages showing little red patches where blood had oozed through. (These attracted flies, and I had to keep shooing them away.) Before I long I was up and on the move, so that the last week or so seemed more like a free holiday to me.



I also noticed over the week or two after the incident that some of my hair seemed to be falling out; when I combed it, I would find more than usual caught in the comb. My first thought

was that although none of the fragments had struck my face or head, some had passed so close above my head that they zipped through my hair and severed some of the strands. I eagerly described this close miss to anyone who would listen, but gradually I realised that for it to continue over some time it was more likely to be a simple case of hair falling out after a major shock.

In those first few weeks quite a lot of fragments worked their way out, showing that there were two distinct populations. Some were mangled bits of the brassy metal but a surprising number were short lengths of the wire - perhaps there was more of the wire inside it than I realised. In fact, pieces continued to work their way out over the next few years, getting less and less frequent. Most of these later fragments were wire rather than brass.

Seasons change, and winters in Greytown were cold enough for frosts for several months. At school, in winter when I went outside during breaks with my classmates we were still wearing shorts and my legs caused much amusement with their remarkably mottled look. The little patches of scar tissue were red, against the wintry blue of the normal skin. Also, when I stretched or flexed my legs, some of the scars would turn into dimples. Some of those dimples are still visible to this day, as are many of the scars.



Scars from detonator fragments, 65 years later. Dimples where the skin is flexed, white patches where it is taut.

As a postscript, the last few metal fragments to come were spread over many years. In each case I would become aware of a lump under the skin as it became more prominent. This could take months, and sometimes it would just fade away but on other occasions it would come close enough to the surface to be visible through the skin as a dark patch. By that time I could probably get it out, by squeezing or digging in with an instrument like a needle.

One of these fragments, a few years later, came out on my right forearm. I was fairly sure that there had been no surface injury there at the time, implying that it had travelled through my body to get there. However, after those years I couldn't be absolutely certain that none had struck me just there.

That was the last for many years. Then, in 1985, our family took a holiday in South Africa and we visited some of the family scattered across the country. This included a stay in Greytown and around this time I had noticed a lump on my stomach, close to my navel. This looked and felt very much like those earlier pieces of metal working their way out. I had my shirt off in the heat one day and could not help noticing the lump - and I was only about half a mile from where it had happened, several decades earlier. I squeezed and scratched at it and before long I had got it out, a piece of wire about 5 mm long. That was the last one, and it occurred in a very appropriate location! Also, in this case I am quite certain that at the time of the explosion there were no injuries anywhere near that part of the body. That piece of wire must have travelled some distance within me although I do not know where it originated. My guess is my right thigh, because some years earlier there seemed to be a piece coming to the surface on the right side of my groin but it then faded away. Perhaps that one continued upward to my stomach.

A worrying thought: are there any other pieces still on the move inside me, and if so what places might they have reached?

