

The Guardian

A siege. A bomb. 48 dogs. And the black commune that would not surrender

Forty years ago, Philadelphia erupted in one of the most dramatic shoot-outs of the black liberation struggle. **Ed Pilkington** tells the surreal story of the Move 9 - and what happened to them next

Main image: The arrest of Delbert Africa of Move on 8 August 1978. Photograph: Jim G Domke, Philadelphia Inquirer

Tue 31 Jul 2018 04.00 EDT

The photograph is one of the standout images of the 1970s black liberation struggle. An African American man, his hair in dreadlocks, chest bare, stands with arms outstretched as though emulating Jesus on the cross. A white police officer is jabbing a shotgun at him with the muzzle inches from his throat. Another officer clasps a police helmet in his right hand as if preparing to whack him over the head with it.

Forty years almost to the day after that photo was taken, the same black man described how he came to be standing there on a sidewalk, half-naked and surrounded by angry police. His account was almost too graphic to grasp, sounding more like something out of a movie than the recollection of what really happened in the heart of one of America's major cities.

It was 8 August 1978 and he had just emerged from the basement of the house in Philadelphia that his black revolutionary group, Move, used as a communal home. In an attempt to evict them from the property, hundreds of officers had just stormed the building, pummeling it with water cannons and gunfire, and in the maelstrom a police officer had been killed and several other first responders injured.

"As I emerged from the basement I had the presence of mind to let them see I was unarmed, so I took my shirt off," the black man said. "That's when I put my arms out wide."

The black man is Delbert Orr Africa, Del for short. When I went to meet him he was wearing a burgundy one-piece with a white T-shirt and blue shoes. Everyone else around him was wearing the same uniform of Dallas maximum-security prison in Pennsylvania that he has worn every day since appearing in that photograph 40 years ago.

I had come to interview him as part of a two-year project in which I made contact with eight black liberationists who have all experienced long prison sentences. They each agreed to embark on an ongoing conversation with me about their political beliefs today and their battle to secure their own freedom.

Del Africa, 72, and I talked for three hours in the prison visitors' room. He spoke rapidly and intensely, as though he needed to get it all out, relating how he had joined the Black Panther party

in Chicago and then switched to the Move organisation after relocating to Philadelphia.

He also told me what happened the second after that photo was taken, as though he were narrating the next few frames of a news reel. As it turns out, that police officer really had been about to whack him.

“A cop hit me with his helmet,” he said. “Smashed my eye. Another cop swung his shotgun and broke my jaw. I went down, and after that I don’t remember anything ’til I came to and a dude was dragging me by my hair and cops started kicking me in the head.”



Debbie Africa was released in June after 40 years in prison.

Photograph: Mark Makela/The Guardian

Del Africa is one of the Move 9, the group of five men and four women, all African American, who were arrested 40 years ago this August during the 1978 police siege of their headquarters in Powelton Village, Philadelphia. They were charged as a nine-person unit with the murder of the police officer who died in the melee, James Ramp. Each was sentenced to 30 years to life, though to this day they protest their innocence.

The ranks of the Move 9 have slowly been depleted over the years. Two have died in prison. In June, the first of the nine to win parole, Debbie Africa, was released from a Pennsylvania women’s prison.

As the 40th anniversary approaches, six of the Move 9 are still behind bars, Del Africa included. They are among a total of 19 black radicals who remain locked up in penitentiaries across America having been convicted of violent acts committed in the name of black power between the late 1960s and early 1980s.

Along with former Black Panthers and Black Liberation Army members, they amount to the unfinished business of the black liberation struggle. Many of them remain strikingly passionate about the cause, even as they strive for release in some cases half a century into their sentences.

In the case of Move members, their politics are a strange fusion of black power and flower power. The group that formed in the early 1970s melded the revolutionary ideology of the Black Panthers with the nature- and animal-loving communalism of 1960s hippies. You might characterise them as black liberationists-cum-eco warriors.

That sense of passion for the cause leaps out from the first email that Del Africa sent to me from Dallas in September 2016, after I'd contacted him asking to talk.

“ON THE MOVE! LONG LIVE FREEDOM’S STRUGGLE!” he proclaimed in capital letters at the top of the message. “Warm Revolutionary greetings, Ed!”



Members of Move gather in front of their house. They were arrested 40 years ago during a police siege. Photograph: Leif Skoogfors/Corbis via Getty Images

He then launched into a long deliberation about the “plight of political prisoners here in ameriKKKa!”. Move members are still imprisoned, he wrote, “just because we steadfastly refused to abandon our Belief in the Revolutionary Teachings of Move’s Founder” and because of “our refusal to bow down to this murderous, racist, sexist rotten-ass system”. He ended with the quip: “But, hey, I don’t wanna burn you out the first time I reply to your email.”

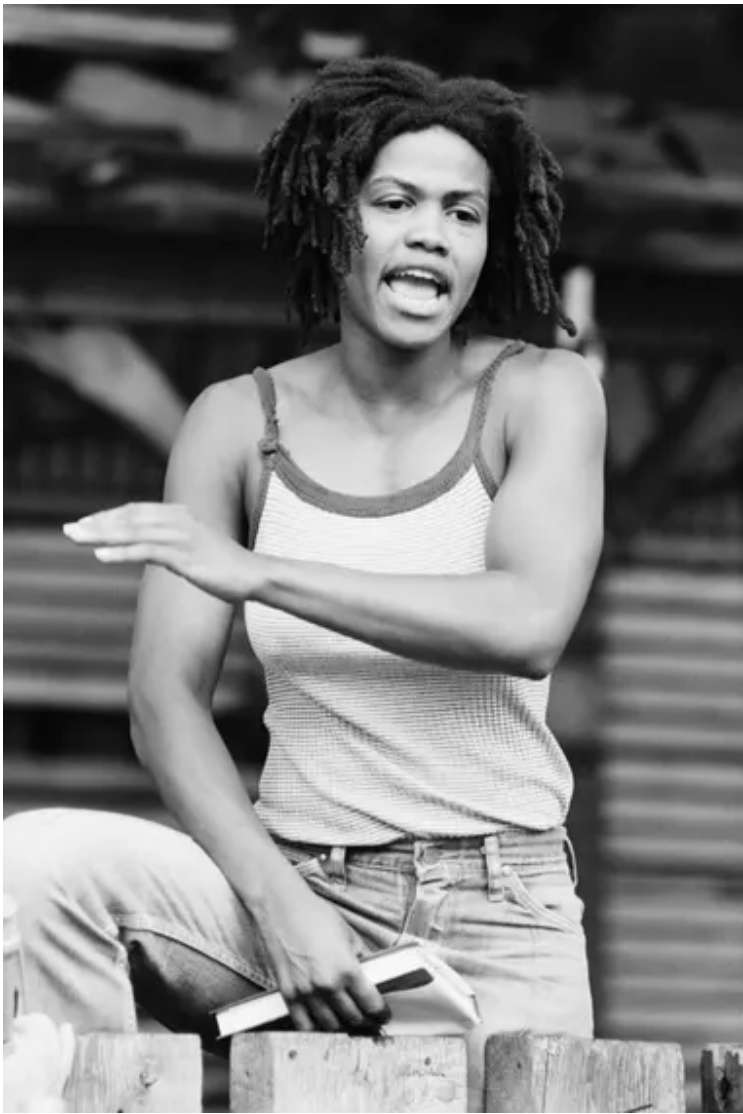
There was a similar robustness to the first response I received in December 2016 after reaching out to Janine Phillips Africa, one of the four women among the Move 9. Unlike Del Africa’s email, she wrote to me by hand, sending the letter by mail as she has continued to do over the ensuing 18 months.

“Me and my sisters are doing good, staying strong,” was the first sentence she wrote to me. That was remarkable in itself coming from a woman who is not only approaching the 40th anniversary of her incarceration but has had two of her children killed in confrontations with police.

“Everybody knows how strong Move men are. We’re showing the world how strong Move women are. That’s how it’s been since our arrest in 1978,” she said.

In the course of that first letter, Janine Africa, who was 22 when she was arrested and is now 62, took me deep into the “torture chamber”, the cruel solitary confinement wing where she spent the first three years of her sentence.

“There were no windows, just a section of the wall with frosted panes. You couldn’t tell when it was night or day, they kept the lights on 24/7. They were ordered to break us but it didn’t work - no matter what they did, they were not going to break us.”



Janine Africa preaching to the crowd in front of the barricaded Move house in the Powelton Village section of Philadelphia. Photograph: Leif Skoogfors/Corbis via Getty Images

Over the months, I came to learn about the double tragedy in Janine Africa's life. In 1976, Philadelphia police officers turned up at the Move house in Powelton Village having been called out to a disturbance. Scuffling ensued between some Move residents and police. Janine was shoved and her baby, whom she had named Life, was knocked out of her arms to the ground. His skull appears to have been crushed, and he died later that day in her arms. He was three weeks old.

Then on 13 May 1985, seven years after Janine Africa was imprisoned, she received further terrible news. Philadelphia police had dropped a bomb from a helicopter onto a Move house on Osage Avenue in the west of Philadelphia in an attempt to force the black radicals to evacuate the premises after long-running battles with the authorities. The bomb ignited a fire in the Move house that turned into an inferno.

Janine's 12-year-old son, Little Phil, was being cared for in that house by other Move adults while she was in custody. The then mayor of Philadelphia, Wilson Goode, notoriously gave the go-ahead for the bombing, and the fire that ensued was allowed to rage, the blaze spreading across the black neighborhood and razing 61 homes to the ground.

Little Phil and four other children burned to death. So too did six adults including Move's founder, John Africa, AKA Vincent Leaphart.

I asked Janine Africa how she coped with losing two young sons during clashes with law enforcement. She was reticent. "I don't like talking about the night Life was killed," she wrote in April. "There are times when I think about Life and my son Phil, but I don't keep those thoughts in my mind long because they hurt."

In that same letter she said she had turned grief into what she contests is a force for good: deeper commitment to the struggle. "The murder of my children, my family, will always affect me, but not in a bad way. When I think about what this system has done to me and my family, it makes me even more committed to my belief," she said.

Del Africa also heard bad news on 13 May 1985. His 13-year-old daughter Delisha was also living in the Move house. She too died in the fire. When I asked him how he dealt with being told his daughter had been killed in an inferno that had been ignited by the actions of the city authorities, he wasn't as sanguine as Janine.

"I just cried," he said during my prison visit. "I wanted to strike out. I wanted to wreak as much havoc as I could until they put me down. That anger, it brought such a feeling of helplessness. Like, dang! What to do now? Dark times ..."

Mayor Goode made a formal apology for the disaster the following year. But a grand jury cleared all officials of criminal liability for the 1985 bombing that killed 11 people, including five children.

The only adult Move member to escape the inferno alive, Ramona Africa, was imprisoned for seven years.



Move members hold sawed-off shotguns and automatic weapons as they stand in front of their barricaded headquarters. Photograph: AP

All Move members take the last name "Africa" to denote their commitment to race equality and their strong bond to what they regard as their Move "family". "A family of revolutionaries" is how Del Africa once described it to me. Unlike the Black Panther party which formally dissolved in 1982, Move is still a living entity.

"We exposed the crimes of government officials on every level," Janine Africa wrote to me. "We demonstrated against puppy mills, zoos, circuses, any form of enslavement of

animals. We demonstrated against Three Mile Island [nuclear power plant] and industrial pollution. We demonstrated against police brutality. And we did so uncompromisingly. Slavery never ended, it was just disguised.”

Deeply committed as they were to each other, the Move “family” undoubtedly had the ability to incense those around them. They liked to project their revolutionary message at high volume from a bullhorn at all hours of night and day. Passersby were accosted with a torrent of expletives.

Then there were the dogs. When the 1978 siege happened, there were 12 adults and 11 children in the Move house in Powelton Village – and 48 dogs. Most of the animals were strays taken in by the group as part of its philosophy of caring for the vulnerable. Black liberation, animal liberation – the two are as one with Move. John Africa was known as the “dog man”, as he was rarely seen without one.

The unconventional nature of the Move community which drove some neighbors to despair in turn led to demands for their eviction, and ultimately to the fatal siege. Over time relations grew more belligerent. Months before the siege Move members made visible their threat to resist attempts to remove them from the neighborhood – they stood on a platform they had built at the front of the house dressed in fatigues and brandishing rifles.



A police helicopter drops the bomb on the MOVE compound on 13 May 1985, as captured by a Channel 10-WCAU camera. Photograph: Channel 10-WCAU

On its side, the city was led at that time by the Frank Rizzo, Goode’s predecessor as Philadelphia mayor, a former police commissioner who liked to talk tough and was fond of dog-whistle politics. He once said of the Move radicals: “You are dealing with criminals, barbarians, you are safer in the jungle!” Another Rizzo classic was: “Break their heads is right. They try to break yours, you break theirs first.”

When Move refused to vacate the premises having been issued with an eviction order, Rizzo said he would impose a blockade on the house so tight “even a fly wouldn’t get in”. He was not kidding. For 56 days before the siege, a ring of steel was erected around the house, no food was permitted into the compound and the water supply was cut off. Rizzo bragged he would “show them more firepower than they’ve ever seen”.

At about 6am on 8 August 1978 the action started. Move members were battered by water cannon as they took refuge in the basement of the building. Tear gas was propelled into the house. At

8.15am shots rang out and a thunderstorm of gunfire erupted that is captured on police footage of the incident. Police and fire officers are seen scattering in all directions as bullets whistle overhead seemingly in all directions. It looked like a war zone.

Soon after Move adults and naked children began emerging from the smoke-ridden basement. Janine Africa can be heard in the police footage screaming. Next, Del Africa appears, his hands outstretched in that Jesus pose. The camera pans in on him as he lies on the street after he was hit with the police helmet. Two police officers begin kicking him on his head which bounces between them like a ball. Three officers later faced disciplinary measures but a judge dismissed the charges.

Prosecutors accused the Move 9 of collaboratively killing Ramp, even though he died from one bullet. They said the shooting had been started when gunfire erupted from the basement where the Move members were gathered, a theory supported by some eyewitnesses.

Move's attorney gathered other witness evidence suggesting the fatal shot had come from the opposite direction - in other words, it was accidental "friendly fire". At trial no forensic evidence was presented that connected the Move 9 to the weapon that caused the fatality. For the women in particular the prosecution did not even argue the four had handled firearms or had been involved in the actual shooting of Ramp.

Del Africa insisted when I interviewed him that though Move had guns in the house, none of them were operative. "There was no shooting from our side," he told me. "No one in the house had any gunshot residue, none of us had fingerprints on any of the weapons they claim came out of the house."

The Philadelphia Fraternal Order of Police has a plaque for Ramp on its memorial site. I reached out to the order many times in the course of a month to hear their reflection on his death and Move's role in it, but they did not respond.

You can get a sense of the depth of feeling by reading the comments under Ramp's page on the Philadelphia Officer Down Memorial website. Several commentators, some of whom vividly recalled the 1978 siege, sent blessings to the deceased police officer and his family.

Others expressed anger at the lack of justice for Ramp, though they didn't specify what they meant. One woman, whose late husband was on duty at both the siege and the 1985 bombing, was more direct. She said of Ramp: "I was so sad to hear of your passing. I felt, and still do feel so badly for your family. Move were scum and cowards, hiding as they shot. You were SO brave. Never forgotten. RIP."

A

s they approach the 40th anniversary of the siege and of their subsequent captivity, Del and Janine Africa described to me how they've coped for so long doing time for a crime they insist they did not commit. They each have their own survival methods.

Janine Africa told me she avoids thinking about time itself. Birthdays, holidays, the new year mean nothing to her. "The years are not my focus, I keep my mind on my health and the things I need to do day by day."

Del Africa thinks of the eons behind bars not as “prison time” but as “revolutionary prison activity”. “I keep saying to myself: ‘I will not fall apart. I will not give in.’”

They’ve both experienced long stretches in solitary confinement, a brand of punishment that the UN has decried as a form of torture. In 1983, Del Africa was put into the “hole” – an isolation cell – because he refused to have his dreadlocks cut.

He stayed in the hole for six years. He relieved the stress and boredom by organizing black history quizzes for other inmates held in the isolation wing. Russell Shoaltz, a former Black Panther, helped him devise the questions, and shout them out down the line of solitary cells. Questions such as: when was the Brown v Board of Education ruling in the US supreme court? What year was the Black Panther party founded? Who was Dred Scott? For what is John Brown remembered?

Eventually Del Africa won the right to keep his dreads. When I visited him in Dallas there they hung, salt-and-peppered now, proudly down to his hips.



Debbie Africa and her son, Mike Africa, whom she gave birth to in her prison cell a month into her incarceration. She was released last June. Photograph: Mark Makela/The Guardian

Throughout, the Move prisoners have drawn strength from companionship with other members of the nine. Janine shared a cell with two other surviving Move women – Debbie Africa and Janet Holloway Africa – in Cambridge Springs women’s prison in Pennsylvania. They called each other “sisters” and did everything together. “We read, we play cards, we watch TV. We laugh a lot together, we’re sisters through and through,” she wrote in a letter in February.

There was one other member of their gang: fittingly given the history of the organization, a dog called Chevy. The prison authorities let them keep the dog kenneled in their cell as part of a program in which they train the animal for later use as a service dogs for disabled people.

Life went on like this for years, and had acquired its own normality, almost a certain tranquility. Until last month when Debbie Africa was granted parole and set free. Her departure came as a jolt.

“It’s strange not having Deb here,” Janine said. “I keep expecting her to walk in from work. They snuck her out at 5.00 in the morning. We only got to hug her briefly and watch her leave. Chevy misses her, he keeps sniffing her bed.”

In June, Janine and Janet Africa also went before the same parole board as Debbie and made essentially the same case that they had earned their freedom. The board asked Janine whether she would be a risk to the public were she to be let out, and she referred them to her pristine

prison record: the last time she had any disciplinary rap was 26 years ago. “The way I’m in here is the way I’ll be outside, there is no risk factor,” she told them.

While Debbie was set free, both Janine and Janet had their parole denied. The board said they showed “lack of remorse” for the death of Ramp in the 1978 siege.

Janine Africa wrote to me a few days after she learnt of the denial, speculating that games were being played with her mind. The contrast of Debbie’s release with her denial was “either to make us resent Deb or make me feel hopeless and break us down. Whatever their tactic, it isn’t working!”

Debbie’s release also made a profound impact on Del Africa. “I feel overjoyed that Debbie is out,” he wrote to me. “Her release is a breakthrough! I see it finally opening the door a crack.”

Del Africa also hasn’t had a misconduct report in prison for more than 20 years. Yet he too was turned down for parole last year and must wait another four years before his next chance to convince the parole board that he can safely be returned to society.

Like many of the 19 black liberationists still behind bars, Del Africa is caught in a trap attached to the crime for which he was convicted. He knows he will only be paroled if he expresses heartfelt remorse. But says he cannot do that.

“How can I have any remorse for something I never did?” he said. “I had nothing to do with killing a cop in 1978. Have they shown any remorse for what happened to my daughter in 1985?”

Would he show remorse to the parole board if he felt it would secure his release?

“No, never going to do that,” he said. “That would be akin to making them right. They are the ones who were wrong.”

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