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Ari Danikas

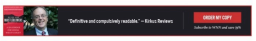
The Price A Hero Pays

By Jane Turner — June 30, 2021 In Whistleblower of the Week Reading Time: 9 mins read

Ari Danikas was born in Amaliada, Peloponnesus, Greece, the cradle of democracy, and he noted, "racial discrimination was non-existent in my family roots, religion and culture." His parents were fine, upstanding Greeks, and Danikas described his mother as "living for her family, dedicated to serving and protecting the family," and giving Danikas "the fundamental principles of humanity, kindness and devotion." Danikas sees her as "healthy, adorable and under [his] protection as she was left alone in life." His mother, a housewife, was dedicated to her family, and is very proud of Danikas. His father was a "hardworking man whose specialty was welding ships." He trained shipyard workers on the island of Syros and gave Danikas "his skills of perfection, never giving up, always telling the truth, being fair to others, and always working hard until the job is done to high standards, and be polite and respectful of others." Law enforcement runs in the Danikas family, as his grandfather, as well as many other family members were police officers in Greece.

Danikas finished high school in Athens, Greece and discovered he was "something of a talent with electronics." His family had a close relative in South Africa (SA), and it was agreed that he would immigrate to SA to further his education in the electronics field. In 1988, at seventeen years old, Danikas moved to SA. He studied Electrical Engineering for a year at Natal Technikon, but had to drop out as "the financial pressure and language was a problem." Danikas stated that in SA, "they speak many languages but mainly English and Afrikaans. Afrikaans has been the language of the Afrikaners, the Dutch colonist who enslaved the Africans for decades with the apartheid policy."

Danikas started his own business, a highly successful computer hardware retail and support store. It started small and in the beginning, Danikas had to cut out the letters for advertising on his store windows from carbon paper. Eventually, Danikas had a thriving business, but had no "culture identity."



One day, into his store walked Johan Booysen who bought a computer, and was impressed by Danikas' computer skills. Booysen was the Superintendent of a murder and robbery unit, a component of the South African Police Service (SAPS) in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal, SA. Booysen suggested that Danikas become a police reservist and have fun with his "super-duper unit." Booysen was promoted to Director of SAPS and became the founder of the Cato Manor Serious Violent Crimes Unit (later the Organized Crime Unit) that was later accused of being a death squad. The Organized Crime Unit was a "pet project of Booysen," noted Danikas, and Booysen "was an extreme Afrikaner who hated everything but white people. He took me under his wing, introduced me to his family and we became friends." The Cato Manor Unit of SAPS had roughly thirty members, starting originally with white members then adding mixed race members.

Danikas started active duty as a reservist in 2001, and remembers being "initiated into the police unit when [he] reported to the office where they were torturing a naked African suspect who was tied to a chair." The suspect was beaten, choked and a bag had been placed on his head. Danikas was ordered to put his foot on the suspect's knee so he did not move, but the suspect, deep in fear, urinated on Danikas. "That was the joke of initiation on me, the rookie," said Danikas.

Danikas witnessed and recorded torture in 2004 that occurred in the office of Cato Manor. He was prepared for it, having seen it done before, so he had one of the first Nokia cell phones with a camera. The Cato Manor Unit members were all conversing how proud they were of the information they got from the suspect. Danikas pretended to be talking to his mother in Greek, and took three clips of the torture. If the Cato Manor Unit members had caught Danikas taking pictures, he had no doubt he would have been killed.

Danikas took the clips to Booysen and Booysen told him, "That is how my boys get results." Booysen "did not act but turned a blt hostile" after Danikas showed him his unit torturing prisoners. After Danikas notified Booysen, when suspects were taken to the Cato Manor Unit all phones were collected in a basket. Danikas was never taken to an interrogation again after he spoke to Booysen. Danikas and Booysen were once very close friends, close enough that they each had a set of house keys for each other's house. They bonded over crime fighting, but did not agree on the means of fighting crime. When Danikas brought details of the corruption within Cato Manor to Booysen and others, their relationship changed drastically because Danikas was no longer a comrade in arms, but a whistleblower.

In the close to ten years Danikas was a reserve police officer, he was only allowed to be involved in interrogations two or three times. One was a Greek citizen, Costas Svourakis, who was tortured for two hours after he had been stripped naked. Svourakis had been found with stolen watches, and Danikas translated Svourakis' statements, and after the torture and confession, Svourakis was cleaned up and officially booked.

Danikas also detailed how Major General Booysen told him to "put a bullet in the head of a crime suspect," which Danikas refused to do. The suspect was shot dead by Cato Manor members a few days later in what Danikas believes was "an execution."

On June 25, 2006, police raided a house in Jeppestown, central Johannesburg, and were ambushed with four officers killed. It sparked outrage, and calls were made by politicians to shoot criminals who challenged police. Among the units that took part in hundreds of criminals who were later killed, was the Cato Manor Unit, the Durbin Organized Crime Unit stationed at Cato Manor, located in a working class area seven kilometers from the city center of Durban, South Africa. This was Booysen and Danikas's unit.

Danikas described the Cato Manor as "trigger happy people that have no respect for human life. They torture, use excessive, brutal force and alter evidence at a crime scene. This I witnessed myself first-hand." The unit's operation was to wait for a suspect to arrive at a scene, and then shoot to kill. They did this because they believe the justice system was corrupted and the suspect would be released on bail. The Cato Manor Unit felt they were "untouchable, and had the power to do whatever they wanted."

Danikas noted that 2007 was the "turning point for me because on my Greek Easter I witnessed and recorded a slaughter." Danikas and Booysen were celebrating Easter when a call interrupted their celebration. There was a break-in of a house nearby, and two robbery suspects had been shot. Danikas filmed the scene where one wounded burglar struggles to live, laying on the floor of a garage. Danikas pleaded that an ambulance needed to be called, but the suspect was denied medical care. No life-saving protocols were utilized, and Danikas believes "it was the standard trick to make sure the suspects were dead and could not reveal their version of the facts."

"In the years that followed I tried to be transferred or promoted, but was refused. I took evidence of torture and killings to Booysen as well as other commanding officers and friends. They did nothing. General Booysen is connected politically and a very gifted bullshitter." Danikas was a reservist for ten years and stated that he could not just stand and watch or participate in such human rights violations.

Danikas states that the culture of apartheid in police methods has been passed down through the police force post-apartheid. Although one could argue that there is a high rate of violent crime in SA and strong measures are needed, Danikas notes: "It does not give the right to policemen to be both judge and executioner." Danikas stated "the issue is an uneven distribution of wealth in a country where up until 2008, 10% of the SA population was white, and they held 90% of wealth in an African country populated by 50 million Blacks."

Danikas started to worry for himself and his family. He was getting anonymous messages about funeral homes on his phone, and he knew he might be killed by his own people. He had tried to alert officials to the killings that were taking place by Canto Manor, but was met with silence.

Danikas decided to leave SA and returned to Greece. He published the torture and death videos on YouTube within months of his arrival, and his story finally received attention. SA prosecution officials were interested in getting his testimony, but they could not promise Danikas witness protection. Someone leaked the fact that the prosecution would use Danikas as a witness in their case regarding extra-judicial killings and torture and as a result, the SA media turned on Danikas with a fury. The media was fed false stories and Booysen, with his powerful friends, accused Danikas of several fake stories, including statements that Danikas was deranged. Danikas was slandered in the media, accused of misappropriating money, being fired from SAPS — all untrue statements.

Booysen also created a story that he, and other members of Cato Manor were being targeted because they had charged and investigated business associates of several high ranking members of the reigning political party involved in State capture, a case previously covered on Whistleblower Network News in a profile of whistleblower Moolo Mothego.

Danikas remarked, "I wish to restore the truth about the torture, killings and obstruction of justice and uncover all those lies told about me in the SA media." Danikas is fifty years old and states that he has had to spend nearly half his life exposing racist atrocities. He stated he would do it over again, but he wishes he could have blown the whistle when he was older and wiser, and had whistleblower protection laws and anonymous reporting mechanisms available to him.

Danikas considers his wife to be the true hero in his life. She is a Southern African and has lived with Danikas since 2004, supporting him throughout his journey, and moving with him to Greece which meant she had to abandon her family, friends, and culture. The first year after Danikas left SA and volunteered to be a witness for the prosecution against Cato Manor was "a nightmare." He is grateful he received assistance from Dr. Mary Rayner of Amnesty International, as they helped the family with physical and moral support, as Danikas followed security protocol and moved every two years. Danikas has been diagnosed with PTSD due to his ordeal. He still suffers from nightmares centered around people trying to kill him.

Danikas received the Blueprint for Free Speech 2016 Special Recognition Award, which is meant to "highlight the bravery of those whistleblowers who come forward in the public interest" and acknowledges "the recipient's devotion to truth and freedom of speech." The award notes, "Danikas revealed that the unit (Cato Manor) was allegedly engaged in extrajudicial killings, tampering with crime scenes, and the torture of subjects." Blueprint for Free Speech also provided legal aid for Danikas and his family.

Danikas is featured as a whistleblower for Transparency International, which is a global coalition against corruption and sponsors International Whistleblower Day. He is also a volunteer project consultant for Transparency International and Blueprint for Free Speech, and he contributes his skills and whistleblowing experience in the design and implementation of the Expanding Anonymous Tipping (EAT) project. EAT is funded by the European Union and it provides a secure anonymous reporting mechanism to allow whistleblowers to safely report wrongdoing and corruption from their workplace.

John Kiriakou, CIA/Torture Whistleblower advised the following about Danikas: "I'm honored to know Aris Danikas. He is an underappreciated whistleblower who, at great risk to his own safety and security and that of his family told the truth about human rights abuses being perpetrated by the police in South Africa. Aris could have remained silent and could have gone on to a long and profitable career. But he chose to do the right thing. And even though the personal cost has been high, he has inspired others in similar situations to do the right thing too. His decision was the right one."

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Jane Turner
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