

OWERRI IN THE NIGERIAN CIVIL WAR 1967-1970

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Abstract

The town of Owerri was inadvertently so important to the Federal and Biafran forces during the civil war so much so that the battle of Owerri has been acknowledged as one of the deadliest in the civil war. This was evident in the way the town changed hands between the Federal and the Biafran forces as many as three times. While the Biafran forces saw Owerri as the last major town under their control, they believed that its effective defence would go a long way to ensure the safety of the Uli airport. They were therefore ready to defend it to the last man. The Federal army on the other hand though initially did not consider the town important but when they were committed to attack the town by Colonel Adekunle, they saw it as the key that held their victory. They hoped also to enter Uli, where the last major airstrip under Biafran control was cited, through Owerri to prevent Colonel Ojukwu from escaping. They therefore fought with vigour. The study reveals that the Federal 3rd Marine Commando Division which almost conveniently overwhelmed the Biafran forces in the South East met its Waterloo at Owerri and this led to removal and replacement of its commander. It further reveals that the recapture of Owerri by the Biafran forces reinvigorated the already waning fighting spirit of the Biafran army. It concludes that the recapture of Owerri by the Federal forces gave a fatal and irrecoverable blow on the strength of the Biafran army hence the Republic of Biafra ceased to exist barely five days after the conquest of Owerri.

Key Words: Biafra, Owerri, Ogbu Kalu, Benjamin Adekunle, Third Marine Commando, Utuk, Obasanjo

Introduction

From the ancient times war has been one of the activities of man and its consequences such as starvation and death are succinctly clear to all combatants. Still absolute avoidance of war has been impossible both in developed and in developing countries. War therefore has become a form of relationship between and as well as among people. In the case of Nigeria, due to the coup of January 15, and the counter coup of July, 29 1966 and the reactions that followed them, the only form of relationship which the people of Eastern Nigeria wanted to have with other Nigerians within that period, especially the Northern Nigerians was war and vice versa.¹ The anticipated war came and was waged between 1967 and 1970.

The war came when the East seceded and called itself the Republic of Biafra. The Federal Government needed nothing but to bring the people of the former Eastern Nigeria back to the Nigerian fold and the only option available after all pacification measures failed was war. The Federal military government drew a war plan of crushing Enugu, the capital city of the secessionist regime within a month so as to harry it in jettisoning the idea of secession and return to the status quo. To create a favourable environment for the easy capture of Enugu, the Federal government came up with what she called operation UNICORD (a code name for the police action) which was a war plan to capture Obudu, Ogoja, Garkem and Nsukka.²

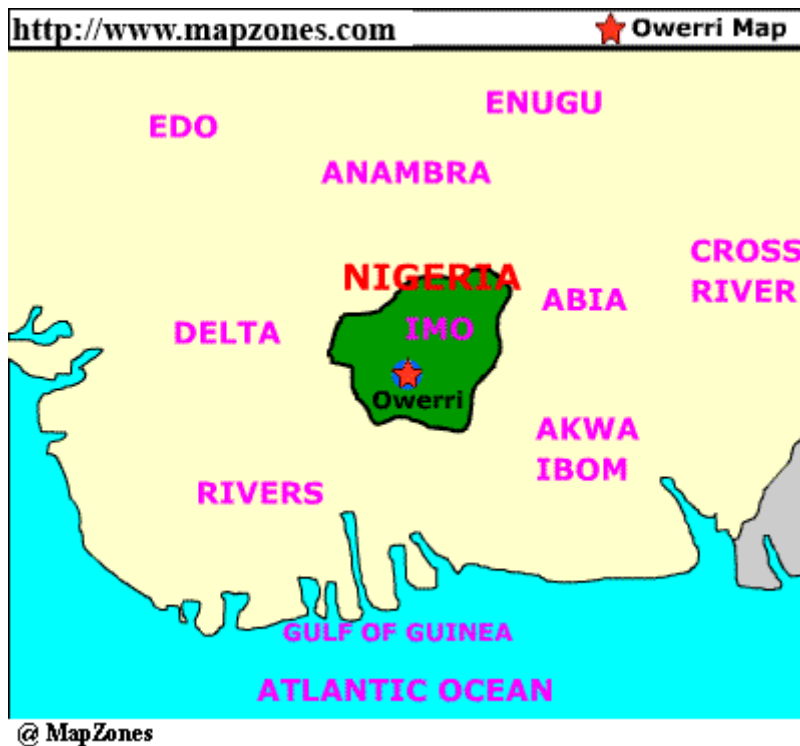
Another strategy was to conquer the water ways to effectively deny Biafra from receiving logistics for prosecuting the war. As a result, the Third Marine Commando (3MCDO) commanded by Col. Benjamin Adekunle was charged with the responsibility of capturing Bonny, Calabar, Opobo and Port Harcourt.³

Sequel to this, 1 Area Command with Headquarters in Kaduna was to be the fighting force, 2 Area Command in Ibadan was for internal security, 4 Area Command in Benin was to defend Mid-west and Lagos Garrison Organization from where 3MCDO was created was to defend the capital city, Lagos. Later, 1 Area Command moved its headquarters to Markurdi in preparation for action against Biafra. In addition, mobilization of ex-service men began leading to the formation of 4 battalions: 20, 21, 22 and 23.⁴

As a result formed 2 infantry battalions: 7 battalion based in Enugu was to defend the North while 8 battalion based in Port Harcourt was to defend the South while the 1 battalion was to be in reserve with the additional task of defending the Niger river to the west. Later, 2 additional battalions under 52 brigade comprising 8 and 9 battalions commanded by Colonels Alexander Madiebo and Eze⁵ respectively were created.

The Biafran deployment was as follows: 7 battalion at Nsukka with A Company at Okuta was responsible for 80 miles Okuta- Onitsha stretch; B Company responsible for 30 miles stretch covering Okuta to Obolo-Eke; C Company was responsible for the defence of communication lines and a platoon at Eha-Amufu. 8 Battalion was moved to Port Harcourt in the south with one company each at Ahoada, Calabar, Oron and a platoon at Bonny.⁶

The air force acquired 2 old planes B25 and B26 bomber and 3 helicopters fitted with machine guns and the navy had some make-shift patrol boats and a ship NNS Ibadan⁷ which had been on eastern patrol duties and which the senior officer Eastern patrol, Lt. Cdr. Anuku, now a Biafran, refused to return to Lagos.⁸ More so, due to acute shortage of logistics for the army training, young men and women who were determined to fight but could not find their way into the army on the Biafran side formed some organizations known as the militia. With the help of some ex-service men, individuals were trained in the use of whatever weapons available to individuals. Biafra also created what she called Biafran Organisation of Freedom Fighters (BOFF) and their duty was to reinforce the regular troops if need be, assist in rear administration, garrison a captured area, educating the people why Biafra was fighting and to also infiltrate the Nigerian line for sabotage, espionage and intelligence activity.⁹ On the Nigeria side, mobilization of ex - service men was ordered by the Commander - in - Chief General Yakubu Gowon. Increased recruitment from the personnel of the Nigerian Police Force and even Local Government was embarked upon. The civilians were trained in civil defense duties¹⁰.



Source: <http://www.mapzones.com> "Map of Owerri" (assessed 18/12/2013)

- Star in green colour was where 16 Brigade led by Lt. Col. Utuk was encircled

Plans and Operations

The battle of Owerri was particularly important to the Federal army as Owerri was one of the last towns Colonel Adekunle, the commander of the Third Marine Commando (3MCDO) believed that when conquered, the capture of General Ojukwu, the Biafran Head of State, would be a matter of days and its concomitant, the capitulation of Biafra. The Federal army also hoped to enter the airstrip at Uli through Owerri to make Ojukwu's escape impossible. Uli-Ihiala had been identified as Biafra's new centre of gravity.¹¹ To the Biafran army, Owerri was one of the last towns that must be defended if her claim of sovereignty must be maintained. Hence the frequent change of hands in Owerri between the Federal and the Biafran army as many as three times.

The Third Marine Commando (3MCDO) which the onus of the capturing of Owerri eventually fell on was one of the three Divisions of the Nigerian army. The troop strength of the Division at some point in course of the war was between 35,000 and 40,000.¹² According to Colonel Adekunle, "the Division was created from scratch, from street thugs, outlaws and renegades...which he molded into a credible force."¹³ To the men and officers of the 3MCDO, the fear of Colonel Adekunle often outweighed fear of the enemy.¹⁴

It was the capture of Port Harcourt on the 18th May, 1968¹⁵ that boosted the prestige and reputation of the 3MCDO and made Colonel Adekunle think of entering Owerri. The capture of Owerri was not in the initial assignment of the 3MCDO. The assignment given to Adekunle's Division was the liberation of Uyo, Annang

and Aba while Owerri lay in the 2 Division operational areas.¹⁶ However after the conquest of Port Harcourt by the Federal troops, the commander of the 3MCDO Colonel Adekunle went to Lagos on Tuesday, May 21st, 1968 and granted interview to the world press where upon he was asked the next target of the wonderful 3MCDO and he answered that he would capture and give Owerri, Aba and Umuahia (OAU) as Independence Day, October 1st 1968 celebration gift, to General Gowon and the people of Nigeria.¹⁷ To achieve this objective, the 3MCDO was divided into 4 sectors. Sector 1 was commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Godwin Ally comprised of 15 and 16 Brigade, 2 Sector by Lt. Colonel Akinrinade comprised of 14 and 17 Brigade, 3 Sector by Lt Col. Alabi Isama, comprised of 12 Brigade, 13 Brigade and 18 Brigade and 4 Sector by Ayo Ariyo.¹⁸ 15 Brigade, under Major Yemi Alabi (and later by Major Makanjuola) and 16 Brigade commanded by Major Utuk were tasked to conquer Owerri. 12 Brigade under Captain Isemede and 17 Brigade under Philemon Shande were given the responsibility to conquer Aba. 13 Brigade commanded by Major Tuoyo and 18 Brigade under Major Aliyu were given the task of capturing Umuahia. 14 Brigade commanded by Major George Innih was to provide the link between Owerri and Aba.¹⁹

The capture and recapture of Owerri by both forces was so confusing that it made the hitherto optimistic government spokesmen in Lagos, to become increasing circumspect about predicting the date for victory, and confined themselves to “we are confident that the war will end this year”.²⁰ The Biafran forces, unlike in some other sectors of the war, were now also on the offensive instead of the usual defensive battle. At Owerri, the war became dogged and dirtier.²¹

The fall of Owerri in 1968 came after the Biafran troops successfully drove the Federal army out of Oguta²² which was undertaken by the Biafran 14 division. The battle of Owerri/Oguta fell under the domain of 1 Sector of the 3MCDO commanded by Lt. Col. Godwin Ally which included a Special Force under Aliyu Abubakar, 14 Brigade commanded by Eromobor and later by George Innih and 16 Brigade commanded by Major Utuk.²³ Oguta was attacked as part of the left flank of Owerri.

The attack on Oguta shook the Biafran army because the town was six miles away from Uli Airport, the only Biafran link with the outside world.²⁴ The Federal forces made several attempts to enter Oguta through Ebocha Bridge but each time, were beaten by the Biafran 60 Brigade stationed in the bridge until 9th September, 1968 when the Federal troops of the 3MCDO entered through Orashi River, and moved to Ezi-Osu²⁵ and overpowered the Biafran Naval Ratings. To make the matter worse, Biafra lacked a formidable force to counter attack the 3MCDO inside Oguta. As a result, on 12th September, 1968 Biafran Colonel Amadi of 11 Division assembled some 300 armed infantry men, the Biafran Navy and the Air Force had 100 armed men each and 250 men of 14 Division. With these troops, the first attempt to clear Oguta by 0900 hours of 12th September, 1968 began and was commanded by Navy Captain Fred Anuku, the Biafran Chief of Naval Staff, Colonels Nwajei and Achuzia and General Ojukwu himself. But they were beaten by the Federal forces.²⁶ The battle was so frustrating that the Biafran Head of State, General Ojukwu, left Oguta for Umuahia and sent to his army commander, Major General Alexander Madiebo signaling thus:

C-in-C for GOC. Oguta operations. Army efforts at Oguta appear fruitless. There is no basis for Achuzia's optimism. Nwajei only hopes while Anuku is hopeless. You will take the situation personally in hand and report progress. Acknowledge.²⁷

However, at 1700 hours the same day, Achuzia, Nwajei and Anuku launched another offensive with the available troops against the Federal forces of 15 Brigade in Oguta led by Major Makanjuola. The attack was very successful so much so that by 1845 hours, the Biafran forces had cleared the town completely from the Federal forces and the Biafran Naval PC 204 played a leading role in the exercise.²⁸ Much equipment and clothing were salvaged from the boats the Biafran forces destroyed including a 40mm Bofor anti-aircraft gun and a Panhard armoured vehicle which the Biafran nicknamed “Oguta Boy”.²⁹

After the battle of Oguta, the Biafran troops ran out of ammunition and the Federal troops swiftly took the advantage of that and on 13th September 1968, they launched an attack on Obinze, eight miles south of Owerri, the headquarters of the Biafran 52 Brigade and 14 Division and disorganized them. They moved their headquarters to Owerri but had not effectively reorganized their army when the Federal army attacked Owerri. In fact, the report of the attack got to the Biafran army Commander, Major-General Madiebo and the commander of 14 Division, Col. Nwajei when the Federal forces were still at Awarra but there was little they could do to remedy the situation owing to lack of ammunition. Not long, the Federal 16 Brigade commanded by Major Utuk (now given field promotion of Lieutenant Colonel)³⁰ got to Ohoba town and was pressing to enter Avu and Obinze on the outskirts of Owerri. Later they got to Chokocho-Okehi-Okpuala road. Yet, the Biafran forces had no answer to the assault. Although the Biafran 63 Brigade led by Major Okilo put some feeble resistance which was highly infinitesimal to the Federal fire power and numerical strength. On 17 September 1968

therefore, Owerri came under severe attack.³¹ The Federal army offensive was preceded by constant air raids by the Nigerian Air force so as to degrade the resistance of the Biafran army before the Federal army final assault. One of the earliest targets of the air raids was the Biafran state house in Owerri.³² In the night of 17th September, Owerri saw a heavy artillery bombardment and on Monday, 18th September, Owerri fell to the Federal army of the 3MCDO and the Biafran 14 Division commander Col. Nwajei who achieved great fit in Oguta was relieved of his appointment despite his plea that he lost Owerri not because of the will to fight but arms to fight with and was replaced by Brigadier Ogbugo Kalu.³³ This operation to capture Owerri, Aba and Umuahia often referred as operation OAU started in September 1968. Even before the Oguta /Owerri battle, the 17 Brigade of the 3MCDO under the command of Lt. Col. Philemon Shande was ordered to attack Aba. He protested that although his Brigade was ready to fight but obviously not sufficiently prepared to attack an Igbo core area where the 3MCDO commanders knew that they would not only be fighting the Biafran army but would also fail to elicit the cooperation of the natives which was the major key of their successes in Biafran non-Igbo areas. Yet, Colonel Adekunle ordered the attack to take place. Although he succeeded in capturing Aba on the 4th of September but he was killed thereafter. Brigadier Alabi-Isama described the crisis that followed his death thus:

Lt. Col. Philemon Shande was a Tiv man from Benue, and more than fifty percent of our men were from Benue...there was protest everywhere. Lt. Col. Godwin Ally, the new Chief of Staff (from Ogoja) and Lt. Col. Obeya (from Benue) had to go round the units to talk to the Benue troops of Benue origin. 3MCDO was in trouble and it took over two weeks to settle the situation. His troops of 17 Brigade withdrew to Obigbo where they started from.³⁴

In October however, the Biafran forces reorganized and launched a heavy counter attack to recapture Owerri. They surrounded the city and then sent troops into the city to have the Nigerian forces flee from the city so as to run into the waiting hands of Biafran forces. Thus, on December 21, 1968 the Biafran army surrounded Owerri, firing mortars and shells into the city. Meanwhile, the year 1969 started with the transfer on 3 January by Colonel Ojukwu of two Brigades of the "S" Division from Aba front under the command of Colonel Onwuatuogwu to the Owerri front to help Ogbugo Kalu and the Fourteenth Division in the siege of Owerri.³⁵ Thus on January 8, 1969 the Biafrans gained control of Owerri.³⁶

But on January 12 Col. Benjamin Adekunle ordered another offensive against the Biafrans inside Owerri. Although the Biafrans lost the city, they regained it within a few days. They gained control of the main Aba-Owerri road at Alakwo and Okpuala down to the road between Olakwo and Owerri Bridge, near Ugba junction and later to Amala.³⁷ Meanwhile; the Nigerians inside Owerri were trying to push out of the town in all directions. They pushed up to Orji Bridge on the Owerri-Okigwe road and from there launched attack on Mbieri and Orodo with the aim of getting to Orlu and Nkwere but they were pushed back to Izombe and Obudi.³⁸ The Nigerians troops were quickly running out of food and ammunition and were constantly being bombarded by the Biafran air force led by Carl Gustaf. By April 1969 the Biafrans had driven the Nigerians more than a mile away from Owerri.³⁹

On April 24 the Nigerian 16 Brigade fought their way out of Owerri and made a beeline out of the area. On April 25 the Biafran 14 Division ambushed the retreating Nigerians killed and captured many of their men. By this time most Nigerians had been kicked out of Owerri and on April 26 many more Nigerians surrendered to the Biafrans.⁴⁰ Therefore, on 26 April 1969 when the Biafran troops led by Brigadier Ogbugo Kalu succeeded in driving the Federal forces out of Owerri for the second time, Biafrans went agog with the news.⁴¹

This battle of Owerri and of course the battle of OAU ended in favour of Biafran army, and to a very large extent, eclipsed all the hitherto achievements of Col. Adekunle, the commander of 3MCDO. His army commanders deserted him and he was solely blamed for the woes that befell the 3MCDO. Even the Army Headquarters accused him of being intransigent. For instance, Obasanjo who later took over the command of 3MCDO put it his own blame thus: "Adekunle wanted to use the capture of OAU to prepare himself up for any future political position or responsibility which he might seek."⁴² While to Brigadier Alabi-Isama who was the Chief of Staff of the 3MCDO, "what was 3MCDO's aim of attacking Owerri if not for the ego of its commander at play?"⁴³ But it was also probably because Adekunle believed that Biafrans were training people for guerrilla warfare in the area and to dislodge the Biafran radio station at Umuahia⁴⁴ which was waging a serious psychological warfare against the Federal troops that made him to launch attack on OAU. Adekunle described the relationship between him and the Army Headquarters as follows:

...Lagos did not take too kindly to those glowing reports. The story was that I was constructing an aura of 'invincibility' around my person. The troops were told through clandestine avenues that I was building up an 'ego' at their

expense....I came to learn that some of my officers were given gifts and promised accelerated promotion to work with these Lagos elements...the domestic press was warned not to give 'undue coverage' to the success of 3rd Marine Commando Division and when the Daily Times disregarded the military warning, Sam Amuga editor of the paper was shown the way out....To the *The Economist Magazine*, I was a friend who relished using starvation as a weapon of war. I expected Lagos to come to the defense of its commander. It did not. Rather, Army Headquarters under General Hassan, repeatedly sent damaging report to Supreme Headquarters. I was branded an obstinate officer who defied orders, an officer who refused to cooperate or implement policy decisions and most incomprehensible of all, a grossly 'ambitious' officer. The Division was accused of being infested with hemp addicts and it was said that I was instrumental in this odium....I was accused of bad management and selling arms and ammunition to Ojukwu.⁴⁵

As it is often said, failure is an orphan while success has many fathers. One crucial question would be, at what point did Colonel Benjamin Adekunle, A.K.A "Black Scorpion" started selling arms and ammunitions to Ojukwu? However, no matter what was Adekunle's reason for attacking OAU against the advice of Lt. Col. Philemon Shande and others,⁴⁶ instead of the attempt to yield the desired result of giving a crushing blow to the Biafran forces, it served as an elixir to the Biafran army because of successes it recorded in that battle.

The battle was so devastating that on the 7th October, 1968, 6 days after the October 1 anniversary, the 1 Sector of commando had lost almost all its troops and weapons⁴⁷ and 3MCDO was up in flames.⁴⁸ Sequel to the above, the 3MCDO became a demoralized fighting force and Adekunle became jittery and was not at his wits end to proffer solution on the war situation in that area.

The Owerri encirclement

At the end of January 1969, in a conference with Colonel Ojukwu and Brigadier Kalu, Colonel Onwuatiegwu proposed that head-on tactics should be abandoned, and what fire-power the Biafrans had should be used to try to clear the flanks of Owerri and close the Nigerian supply line. The plan was agreed to, and throughout the month of February both commanders cleared the Nigerian occupied villages to the east and west of Owerri, finally penetrating in force round to the south of the town. The completion of the encirclement and the final cutting off the Nigerian supply came on 28 February.⁴⁹ The implication was that 16 brigade of the Federal army led by Lt. Col. Utuk that entered Owerri since 16 September 1968 were enveloped and left isolated in Owerri town by the Biafrans.

The seal off was so complete that even another rescue brigade dispatched from Port Harcourt to break the codon in order to relieve the embattled 16 Brigade failed, as the meticulous Kalu had stopped them at Ohuba, some 9 miles from Owerri. The situation in Owerri was so bad that Colonel Utuk had to call for air drops, for supply of arms and ammunition and other essentials such as food and uniforms. That however did not improve the situation because they never got upto ten percent of the total drops.⁵⁰ Any Biafran unit around Owerri which wanted something dropped by the Federal air force, only needed to clear a bit of bush, spread a white sheet of cloth over the clearing, and he would get a drop⁵¹. This was because the Biafran Directorate of Military Intelligence intercepted the conversation between the encircled Colonel Utuk and the Nigerian air force where upon he was counseled to mark out areas for the drops by spreading white sheets with some red markings in the centre.⁵² Although due to inefficiency in the air drop operations, most of the weapons dropped were badly damaged and was of little use. But the gun powder extracted from the damaged weapons was used by the Biafran BOFF and members of the army who were in 14 Division at least for the time the food dropping lasted were able to feed well.⁵³

However, on the evening of 22 April, Lt. Col. Utuk held a meeting with his battalion commanders. It was decided that despite orders from Colonel Adekunle in Port Harcourt to stay put, they would instead pull out.⁵⁴ On 24th of April 1969, the stressed troops of the 16 Brigade led by Colonel Utuk managed to tactically withdrew in the night with what remained of his Brigade and joined another unit of 3 Marine Commando at Amunelu, about 23 miles south of Owerri but his second in command, Major Ted Hamman was killed in an ambush at Owerri. Meanwhile, the moving away of the men of 16 Brigade led by Lt. Col. Utuk was not unknown to the Biafran army. When it was noticed that the Brigade lined up their vehicles facing southwards, in a manner suggesting withdrawal, the Biafran army commanders in Owerri operation like Major Igweze, Col. Onwuatiegwu and Maj. Gen Madiebo decided that it was better to allow the Nigerian forces to leave the town and then attack from somewhere outside Owerri to avoid waste of ammunitions which were in short supply in Biafra. As a result, the Biafran 60 Brigade was dispatched to Umuguma to wait for the retreating 16 Brigade.

Major battle started at Umuguma on the morning of 25th April and up to Avu and Ohoba when the few remaining men of 16 Brigade led by Utuk joined other Nigerian troops after Ohoba.⁵⁵

In warfare, the inability to rescue isolated troop held in enemy territory has the capacity of throwing both the military and the political class into disorientation. The eventual withdrawal of the encircled 16th Brigade commanded by Lt. Col. Utuk from Owerri brought relief to the Federal military and political class but also marked the complete recapture of Owerri by the Biafran forces. Therefore, the tactical withdrawal of the enveloped Federal forces from Owerri and the total recapture of the town had consequences to both Biafrans and the Federal Governments. On the Biafran side, it sent a signal to Nigeria and the world that despite all the reverses of the war to date, Biafra was still capable of significant resistance. It destroyed the myth surrounding the federal 3rd Marine Commando Division and its well-known commander, Colonel Benjamin Adekunle, a.k.a. "Black Scorpion". It enhanced road and telecommunications links within the enclave of Biafra. It relieved the threat to the strategic Uli-Ihiala airstrip. It also created a hinge point for subsequent aggressive Biafran probes towards Port Harcourt.⁵⁶

According to Madiebo: The Owerri victory revived the dying Biafra. All Biafrans who a few days before wanted nothing but an end to the war, now pressed for a continuation of the struggle to the end. The Umuahia disaster was soon forgotten and the only quarrel civilian military tacticians had against the Army was that they allowed the enemy to escape from Owerri. The enemy left a considerably large amount of ammunition of different calibres, but he managed to take away almost his entire heavy equipment including armoured vehicles and artillery pieces. The town was completely ravaged and not a single building was habitable without major repairs. All vehicles not taken away by the enemy were overturned and burnt by him. Mass graves were discovered all over the town and the victims appeared to be civilians and prisoners of war....the head of state put out a long list of promotions to commemorate the recapture of Owerri."⁵⁷

On the Nigerian side, it led to preparation by the Army Headquarters of new Operational instructions, dated 9 May 1969, for the reactivation of progress in the war effort and at the war fronts.

Although no official casualty count has ever been rendered, but if Major General Shuwa's estimate is correct, then it can be surmised that of the approximately 3000 soldiers that confidently thundered into the town in September 1968, about 300 made it back alive in April 1969.⁵⁸ Although this had a negative consequence, it forced the army Headquarters to make a change in the command of the 3MCDO which eventually led to the victory of the Federal army.

To revive the morale of Commandos, Colonel Adekunle was replaced by Colonel Obasanjo on May 16 1969.⁵⁹ According to Obasanjo,

The Moral of the soldiers at least of 3 Marine Commando Division was at its lowest ebb. Desertion and absence from duty without leave was rife in the Division. The despondence and general lack of will to fight in the soldiers was glaringly manifest in the large numbers of cases of self-inflicted injuries throughout the formation. Some officers tactically encouraged these malpractices and unsoldierly conduct by condoning such acts or withdrawing their own kith and kin or fellow tribesmen to do guard duties in the rear and in the officers' own houses. Distrust and lack of confidence plagued the ranks of the officer corps. Operations were unhealthily competitive in an unmilitary fashion and officers openly rejoiced at each other's misfortune.⁶⁰

And as was expected, Obasanjo revived what was left in the 3MCDO. He paid them their salaries and paid greater interest in their welfare.⁶¹ Before his time, the soldiers of 3MCDO could not get leave at all and could not get their salaries in full. Although the idea of paying soldiers their full salary has been questioned by another author, Alabi-Isama, it may have served a purpose at that time in the lives of 3MCDO. But despite Col. Obasanjo's effort in adopting measures that would upswing the fighting morals of the men and officers of the 3MCDO, his first war plans against Owerri also ended in fiasco. The first thing he did was to ask Lt. Col. Godwin Ally to produce for implementation within forty eight hours a written appreciation on paper for an attack on Ohoba, fifteen miles from Owerri. According to him "the aim was to hit the rebels as close to their base as possible so that they would stop ofwithdraw from their southward thrust on Port Harcourt."⁶² The attack was led by the I sector of the 3MCDO on 20th May, 1969 and in just one hour battle 3MCDO lost about 1,000 troops.⁶³ After the battle, and despite series of attempts, the Federal forces did not conquer Owerri again until 9th January 1970.

The use of Mercenaries in Owerri battle

It is true that mercenaries were used by both the Federal and Biafran forces in the civil war however, available evidence would tend to suggest that there was minimal use of mercenary in the army in Owerri sector. The bulk of the mercenaries were in the air force than other forces. On the Biafran side in the Owerri sector, mercenaries formed and fought as commandos. In the Biafran context, Mercenary was synonymous with Commando.⁶⁴ However, while it is uncontested that mercenaries were used by the Biafrans during the war, the role of the mercenaries (Commandos) was very minimal in Owerri sector partly because as at the time the Owerri battle was on, the Biafran government and the army had fallen apart with their mercenaries. In fact in 1969 the Commando was reorganized and the Biafran officers took over.⁶⁵ As a result of frequent disagreement between the Biafran army and the mercenaries, they were forced to leave Biafra. When one of the mercenaries, Major Steiner, from Germany⁶⁶ left Biafra, the remaining of his group left before the war ended. The bunch of white men who remained in Biafra till the last week of the war were those styled Technical Adviser and they were never involved in combat, their role was purely advisory.⁶⁷

On the Nigerian side, there is no known record of the role of the mercenaries in Owerri sector. However, since it was said that most of the Nigerian war jets were piloted by foreigners especially Egyptians, it was not impossible that it was the Nigerian air-force mercenaries that piloted the planes that bombarded Owerri.⁶⁸

However despite the minimal participation of the mercenaries in Owerri sector, their presence was observed. On the Biafran side, in July 1968 the Commandos moved from Onitsha to Owerri sector, and a Mercenary called Johnny Erasmus, a wizard in the handling of explosives, went to work and planted mines and foot cutters that dealt with the advancing Federal forces from Port Harcourt to Owerri. But it was not long before the Commandos were moved again.⁶⁹

The air force in Owerri sector of the civil war

The air force played a significant role in the Owerri battle. On the Nigerian side during Owerri battle, the Federal air attacks were stepped up. The Russian Ilyushin-28 bombers had joined the MiG and Dolphin fighters in the ongoing bombardment. Markets, hospitals, churches, villages and other non-military targets were indiscriminately strafed and bombed killing large numbers of civilians.⁷⁰ Most inhabitants of Owerri moved into the surrounding villages to take cover from the Nigerian air attacks.⁷¹ As usual this constant bombing of civilian targets had the opposite effect to the one intended: it stiffened rather than undermined popular support for the war in Biafra and added substance to the fear of genocide. When the 16 Brigade of the Nigerian army under the command of Colonel Utuk was enveloped in Owerri, Utuk contacted the air force for the dropping of food, weapons and other logistics for the war.

On the Biafran side, the Biafran air force which had been knocked out of operation by the superior Nigerian Air Force dramatically bounced back and made dramatic re-entry into the war in 1969 with their newly acquired "Minicon" air crafts. These Minicons performed extremely well against selected strategic targets. The Minicons were light aircrafts of extremely maneuverable type fitted with rockets and bombs. They flew at tree-top level to destroy the Nigerian MiGs and Ilyushins on ground. Escape was achieved by element of surprise and the low altitude of the planes painted green on top, and blue underneath. They flew scarcely above the tops of the palm trees and were mostly undetectable until they struck and largely impossible to follow afterwards. Count Von Rosen played a commendable role in the operation of these small air crafts which he nick-named "Biafran Babies". By 1969, there were 15 Minicons operating in Biafra.⁷²

Biafrans in the Owerri battle

Unlike in some other sectors especially the southern sector of the civil war where the Biafran forces claimed that they lost due largely to sabotage and questionable cum minimal or lack of cooperation of the natives. Owerri was a core Biafran city where loyalty to Biafran state was less in doubt. Both the military and the civil population were committed in the war. Again due to experience of the past, every Biafran both the military and the civilians never wanted to be seen as anti Biafran as a result of the bitter consequence it carries. It is said that the people of Biafra never wasted time in dealing with any person accused of sabotage. At times even the army attacked their officers suspected of sabotage without the orders of the army headquarters. For instance, the Biafran Science Group could not completely move their chemicals, unused grenades, rocket and bomb casings at the fall of Enugu for fear of being lynched by over-zealous civilians who could mistake them for saboteurs.⁷³ In Owerri sector therefore, there was no known record or account of sabotage. In addition, the Federal forces were initially afraid of entering the Igbo heartland where they could hardly have native collaborators. Brigadier Alabi-Isama put it thus, "looking at the map, we realized that the piecemeal attack and advance into Ibo heartland would be suicidal. Everybody kept away unless he was called or ordered"⁷⁴

Furthermore, there was remarkable increase in availability of weapons in the sector. Although there is no definite account of the weapons used in the battle of Owerri but in addition to other conventional weapons of war, in this

Owerri battle, the Biafran Head of State issued “the following ammunition for all troops taking part for the first one week of the operation-50,000 rounds of small arms ammunition. 200 rounds of 105 mm artillery shells, 300 rounds of mortar bombs, 20 rounds of anti-tank rockets, grenades and other smaller items”.⁷⁵ Later he made available 960 bolt action guns⁷⁶ in addition to other locally made weapons of war. Again the two armored vehicles operating in Biafra named “Corporal Nwafor” and “Oguta boy”⁷⁷ were used in this sector. The newly invented “flying *ogbunigwe*” (flying rockets) and foot cutter were used in Owerri sector. As Achike Udenwa put it, “our *ogbunigwe* was very effective in checking enemy advance”⁷⁸. Commenting on the use of *ogbunigwe* not only in Owerri but in other sectors of the war, *The News*, a newspaper on the American secret files in the war which was quoting Chinua Achebe and Vincent Chukwemeka maintains that “*ogbunigwe* bombs struck great terror in the hearts of many a Nigerian soldier and were used to great effect by the Biafran army throughout the conflict...when the history of this war comes to be written, the *ogbunigwe* and the shore batteries will receive special mention as Biafra’s greatest saviours. We have been able to wipe out more Nigerians with *ogbunigwe* than with any imported weapon.”⁷⁹

CONCLUSION

The Owerri sector of the civil war appeared to be one of the bitterest battle zones in the war. The two warring factions demonstrated their military superiority over each other and that resulted in the change of hands of Owerri between the Federal and the Biafran army up to three times. The recapture of Owerri by the Biafrans reinvigorated the already waning Biafran’s fighting spirit so much so that in the meeting of the Biafran military and civilian leaders on 5th of January 1970, Major General Alexander Madiebo the Biafran army commander, assured the leaders that if given more arms and ammunition, he would turn the table on Nigerians in less than one month. But despite the optimism of the Biafran army, the revitalized 3MCDO led by Colonel Obasanjo recaptured Owerri on 9th January and the Biafran leader, General Odumegwu Ojukwu left the country on 10th January 1970 and the war formerly came to an end on the 15th of January 1970.

NOTES

1. It is a common story in Igbo land that when survivors of the 1966 crisis came home with different stories of inhuman treatment they suffered in the North, young men preferred to settle the matter in a battle ground. Interview with Peter Enechukwu, 67, Awka South Local Government Headquarters, ex-service man, 17/01/2013 confirms the above statement.
2. Abubarkar A. Atofarati “Nigerian Civil War, Causes, Strategies and Lessons” www.africanmasterweb.com/Biafran-war-cause.html (accessed 26 February, 2013)
3. “Military History Lectures One and Two”, Vol. 1-3, Lecture Note for Senior Staff Selection Examination, Nigerian Army, 2011, pp.32-33
4. Abubarkar A. Atofarati “Nigerian Civil War, Causes,...
5. “Military History Lectures...pp.37-38.
6. *Ibid.* p.39.
7. Alexander A. Madiebo, *The Nigerian Revolution and the Biafran War*, Enugu: Fourth Dimension, 1980, p.100.
8. Nelson Bossman Soroh, *A Sailor’s Dream*, Lagos: Crucible Publishers, 2001, p.223
9. Alexander A. Madiebo, *The Nigerian Revolution and the Biafran...* p. 102.
10. Abubarkar A. Atofarati “Nigerian Civil War, Causes,...
11. Godwin Alabi-Isama, *The Tragedy of Victory On the Spot Account on the Nigerian-Biafran War in the Atlantic Theatre*, Ibadan: Spectrum Books, 2013, p. 354.
12. *Ibid.* p.139. See also Abiodun Akekunle (ed), *The Nigeria Biafra War Letters, A Soldier’s Story*, Atlanta: phoenix Publishing Group, 2004, p.13.
13. Abiodun Akekunle (ed), *The Nigeria Biafra War Letters, A Soldier’s Story*, Atlanta: phoenix Publishing Group, 2004, p.13.
14. John de St. Jorre, *The Nigerian Civil War*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1980, p. 276.
15. Godwin Alabi-Isama, *The Tragedy of Victory On the Spot Account on the Nigerian-Biafran War...* p.300.
16. Obasanjo O. *My Command: An Account of the Nigerian Civil War*, London: Heinemann Educational, 1980, p.49.
17. Godwin Alabi-Isama, *The Tragedy of Victory On the Spot Account on the Nigerian-Biafran War...* p.338.
18. Obasanjo O. *My Command:...* p.53.
19. *Ibid.* pp.52-53
20. John de St. Jorre, *The Nigerian Civil War*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1971, p.291.

21. *Ibid.*
22. FolaOyewole, *Reluctant Rebel*, London: Rex Collings, 1975, p. 134.
23. Godwin Alabi-Isama, *The Tragedy of Victory On the Spot Account on the Nigerian-Biafran War...* p.347.
23. Alexander A. Madiebo, *The Nigerian Revolution and the Biafran War*, Enugu: Fourth Dimension, 1980, p.347.
24. *Ibid.* p. 276.
25. *Ibid.* p. 275.
26. *Ibid.* p. 276.
27. *Ibid.* p. 278.
28. OgbonnaOleka, NdubuisiOfondu (ed.), *Power with Civility A Biography of Rear Admiral Godwin Ndubuisi Kanu*, Lagos: Neskon Productions, 1998, p.103.
29. Alexander A. Madiebo, *The Nigerian Revolution...* p.278.
30. Godwin Alabi-Isama, *The Tragedy of Victory On the Spot Account on the Nigerian-Biafran War...* p.250.
31. FolaOyewole, *Reluctant Rebel...* p.135.
32. *Ibid.* p.13.
33. Alexander A. Madiebo, *The Nigerian Revolution...* p.280.
34. Godwin Alabi-Isama, *The Tragedy of Victory On the Spot Account on the Nigerian-Biafran War...* p.344.
35. Frederick Forsyth, *The Making of an African Legend: The Biafran Story*, New York: Penguin Books, 1977, p.143.
36. [http//Wikipedia.com](http://Wikipedia.com). Free encyclopedia (accessed on 21 February, 2013)
37. Alexander A. Madiebo, *The Nigerian Revolution...* p. 282
38. *Ibid.* 283.
39. [http//Wikipedia.com](http://Wikipedia.com). Free encyclopedia (accessed on 21 February, 2013)
40. *Ibid.*
41. Bernard Odogwu, *No Place To Hide (Conflicts and Crisis Inside Biafra)*, Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publisher, 1985 p. 47.
42. Obasanjo O. *My Command: An Account of the...* p.52.
43. Godwin Alabi-Isama, *The Tragedy of Victory On the Spot Account on the Nigerian-Biafran War...* p.352.
44. Abiodun A. Adekunle, *The Nigerian War Letters A Soldier's Story, Brigadier Benjamin Adekunle, aka The Black Scorpion*, Atlanta: Phoemix Publishing Group, 2004, p.125.
45. *Ibid.* p. 163.
46. Godwin Alabi-Isama, *The Tragedy of Victory On the Spot Account on the Nigerian-Biafran War...* p.341.
47. www.major-battles-in-nigeriacivilwar "Military History Lectures One and Two", Vol. 1-3, Lecture Note for Senior Staff Selection Examination, 2011
48. Godwin Alabi-Isama, *The Tragedy of Victory On the Spot Account on the Nigerian-Biafran War...* p.344.
49. Frederick Forsyth, *The Making of an African Legend: The Biafran Story...* p.143.
50. Odogwu, *No Place To Hide...*, p.147
51. Alexander A. Madiebo, *The Nigerian Revolution...* p. 309
52. Bernard Odogwu, *No Place To Hide...*, pp.147-148
53. Alexander A. Maduebo, *The Nigerian Revolution...* p. 309
54. Frederick Forsyth, *The Making of an African Legend: The Biafran Story...* p.144.
55. For details see Alexander A. Maduebo, *The Nigerian Revolution...* pp. 320-321. Elsewhere, the death of Ted Hamman had been attributed to the pressure by his wife to leave the war front to visit her. For details see Godwin Alabi-Isama, *The Tragedy of Victory On the Spot Account on the Nigerian-Biafran War...* pp. 359-360.
56. NowaOmogui "Federal Nigerian Army Blunders of the Nigerian Civil War-part-8" www.gangi.com/nowa61.htm (accessed on 21 February, 2013).
57. Alexander A. Maduebo, *The Nigerian Revolution...* p.321
58. www.gangi.com/nowa61.htm (accessed on 21 February, 2013)
59. "Military History Lectures One and Two", Vol. 1-3, 49a Lecture Note for Senior Staff Selection Examination, 2011. p.75.
60. Obasanjo O. *My Command: An Account of the...* pp. 56-57.
61. Obasanjo O. *My Command: An Account of the...* p. 69.
62. *Ibid.*
63. Godwin Alabi-Isama, *The Tragedy of Victory On the Spot Account on the Nigerian-Biafran War...* p.543.
64. FolaOyewole, *Reluctant Rebel*, London: Rex Collings, 1975, p. p.92
65. *Ibid.*

66. Joe O. G. Achuzia, *Requim Biafra True Story of Nigeria's Civi War*, Asaba: Steel Equip Nigeria Limited, Second Edition, 2002, p. 275.
67. Fola Oyewole, *Reluctant...*, p. 99
68. There is no record of a mercenary fighting on the Nigerian side in Owerri sector but since most Nigerian planes were piloted by Egyptians, it was possible that the planes that bombarded the Biafrans in Owerri were piloted by non-Nigerians.
69. Fola Oyewole, *Reluctant...* p. 94
70. John de St. Jorre, *The Nigerian Civil...* p. 291
71. Kalu Okpi, *Biafra Testament*, 1982, p.207
72. Frederick Forsyth, *The Making of an African Legend: The Biafran Story...* p. 169. For details on how the Biafran Air Force operated during the war, see Nnamdi Chukwujindu, *Beckoned by Destiny: The Biography of Gibson Nwabueze Nwosu The Obi of Awka and Eze Uzu II*, Enugu: Eminota Enterprises, 2012, pp.77-120
73. Eugene Arene, *The Biafran Scientists the development of an African indigenous technology*, Lagos: Arnet venture, 1977, p.44.
74. Godwin Alabi-Isama, *The Tragedy of Victory On the Spot Account on the Nigerian-Biafran War...* p.347.
75. Alexander A. Maduebo, *The Nigerian Revolution...* p. 304
76. *Ibid.* p. 309
77. Achike Udenwa, *Nigerian/ Biafran Civil War My Experience*, Ibadan: Spectrum Book Limited, 2011, p.130
78. *Ibid.* p. 150
79. *The News*, "America secret files Biafra, the facts the fiction part 3", Vol.40, 11th March, 2013, p. 20.