

My Military Career

I enlisted in the Nigerian Army in 1957 immediately after I finished my school certificate examination. The idea of beginning "life" at once, without the suspense and irritating interlude of university strongly appealed to me, a young man without the luxurious backdrop of a solicitous family. Large or small, I had already proved my physical mettle on a thousand occasions, why not, I reasoned, fight for a worthy cause in the service of my fatherland? With the images of the confident giants of 1945 in my head, I departed for Lagos after my final examination and found my way to the Apapa cantonment.

The first hurdle in my chosen career was stiff entrance examination. At the succeeding interview, numerous white headed expatriate military officers gave me the grilling of my life. The Nigerian Army was then in its infancy and placed every conceivable impediment to dissuade aspirants from making the army a career. I was not daunted by these obstacles. We were then to undergo physical exercises. I found these exercises hilarious. I was given size 12 boots (I take a size 6); and oversized clothing. For a joke, I put them on and appeared at the venue to the vast amusement of the other boys. Notwithstanding my deficiency in size, I was accepted by the Army.

Our first introduction to military language and bearing was at Major Bassey's command the Corp Commandant. The dialogue went something like this: "Gentlemen, today, you are starting off a bloody noble career," said Major Bassey. "You are lucky boys and by God, you will damn well make up your mind to do a good job." We all stood dumb and still. "Any questions?" he thundered, to which we answered in unison, "No Sir."

We were 'marched out' and received further instructions:

"Fall in you miserable lot. When I speak to you, you will answer 'Sir' and you have to do things in double-quick time. I can see already that most of you will not make the grade." Subdued and bewildered about what offense we had committed to provoke the Major's hostility so early in the game, we timidly 'fell in'."

Our baptism of fire came almost immediately in the form of one week of punishing physical training, after which we were hauled to the Regular Officer Training School, Teshie in Ghana.

Teshie

The Teshie Institute was a military training school that served as a pre-selection institute for prospective military officers. It was an offshoot of the former Royal West African Frontier Force and centralised initial training school for prospective officers from all over West Africa. Other officer cadets from Ghana and Sierra Leone later joined the Nigerian Cadets. This joint training forged a bond between the officer class of West Africa it was at Teshie that Afrifa met Nzeogwu, and Adekunle met Kaisamba of Sierra Leone, as well as Techie, Minfen, Dako, Kobori and former Ghanaian Head of State; Acheampong.

As I stepped over the portals of Teshie, I felt that my military career had truly begun. We

spent six months at this institution and it was six months of pure unadulterated Hell. I, who had hitherto prided myself on my toughness, resilience and ability to manage any condition life cared to throw at me, found myself to be thoroughly challenged mentally and physically to maintain my chosen course. We were fed a daily and unrelenting diet of rigorous, dehumanizing, physical training, arbitrary punishment, sleep deprivation, psychological harassment and inducement of fear. While the academic aspect of our training did not find me wanting, the rapidity with which cadets were expected to execute physical and academic assignments soon took its toll on my health; the midnight oil had to be burned. Some of my classmates at this time included Sotomi and Adegoke.

However, some of our instructors injected some humour into the hellish situation particularly 'the bastard of Teshie,' the expatriate Sergeant-Major Cameron. Sergeant Cameron was a massive man who wore his regimental pick hat half over his eyes. He swore like the devil incarnate, drank like a fish. His vocabulary was somewhat limited and 'bloody, monkey brain, filthy pigs' (and more), was our daily lot. In contrast, our Commanding Officer, a six-footer who stood as erect as a palm tree, presented us with an alternative role model with his tightly controlled manner of speech (devoid of foulness), immaculate uniform and highly polished boots.

The objective of the Teshie training was to produce leaders. Leadership was conceived in two dimensions at Teshie: leadership as a personal quality, and leadership as an organisational function. Personal leadership was perceived as the ability to influence and guide other individuals, infuse confidence in other persons and to extract from them voluntary obedience. Effective leadership also denoted the ability to correctly interpret and judge current situations and accurately predict outcomes. The prevailing school of thought at Teshie was that leaders were born and not made. We were taught that the essential pillars of leadership were a sense of purpose, self confidence, power and vision. All other qualities were secondary and peripheral. Our instructors at Teshie preached these towering qualities and consciously strove to crush rugged individualist tendencies. What they sought to do was to break down, strip and dismantle the psychological make-up of the cadets and reassemble our personalities along the approved pattern.

At the end of our course, the major criterion for assessing the leadership qualities of cadets, was their ability to diffuse, decentralise, and depersonalize authority. It is supremely ironic that several graduates of Teshie attained positions of political power in their respective countries and despite their training, avidly pursued the centralization and personalization of authority.

Reflecting on Africa's propensity for coups in the post independence era, I sometimes felt that it could be traced to some extent, to the feelings of indispensability that was nurtured in cadets at this stage of our training. Time without number, the importance of our roles in shaping the future of our nations was impressed on the minds of young military officers. This was not done with any sinister motive, but certainly, the orientation we were given was capable of sowing seeds of the 'messiah complex' in some of the cadets that passed through the institution. Also of some significance I believe, were subconscious feelings of competitiveness among the officers. If former course mates could successfully execute a coup in their countries who wanted to be caught lagging? On January 15, 1966, Nzeogwu implemented his coup, in my own opinion, there was a

domino effect on the rest of Africa following the one in Nigeria.

The day of reckoning, which separated the boys from the men soon arrived. Though I had immersed myself in the world of institution and had given my all, I was as nervous as hell. I had never before failed any task I set out to achieve, but there was no telling what the results of this election board would be. The waiting period was a period of severe anxiety for me. To my profound relief, I passed this selection and the board recommended me for Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst, England (RMAS). We (the successful cadets) went wild with joy. For the rest of our stay at Teshie, we conducted ourselves with licentiousness that would have been unthinkable only a few short weeks before.

Britain

Prior to Sandhurst, cadets were sent to Mons Officer Cadet School in the UK for a period of three months. The objective of the Mons training was to separate cadets for either a long or short training course. The older cadets were sent on short court, while the younger or more able cadets were sent to Sandhurst. The Mons training was to be my first experience outside my native country and nothing in my interactions with expatriates in Africa prepared me for the culture shock I experienced in those first few months in Britain.

The examination period arrived and again, I was filled with anxiety about my chances of success given the sour relationship between the instructors and myself. Other Nigerian officers who were contemporaries at Mons were Chukuka, Idiaja, Amadi, Obasanjo and Adegoke. Once again, my fears proved to be unfounded. I passed the Mons examination and was confirmed for Sandhurst in January of 1959.

Sandhurst

I considered my selection for the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst to be an honour and a privilege. To my mind, Sandhurst was the best military institution in the world. Not all the Mons graduates were so privileged for example, while Adegoke, Idiaja, Chukuka and I were selected, Obasanjo was not. He finished at Mons and returned home.

In later years, I attributed some of the actions of my former course mates in the national arena, especially with regard to their colleagues, to the need to assuage feelings of inferiority which may have sprung from having been publicly adjudged and labeled inadequate in the midst of their cohorts.

I was at Sandhurst for two years (1959 and 1960) and registered for the course with three hundred odd cadets. In addition to the physical training, officers were imbued with a thorough academic grounding in the art of warfare. The ultimate purpose of our training was to produce not the stereotype officer, but the dynamic officer. Character development was an integral part of the course and this was brought home to me in the first week.

By now, I was accustomed to killer exercise regimes that constituted the core of military training. At Sandhurst, however, physical exercise served the additional purpose of

teaching us vital life lessons. One such exercise was the 'chopping parade', which was conducted by a squad of senior cadets. At the first chopping parade, a senior squad courteous I y ordered us thus:

"Listen attentively cadets! You are all required to change into the different forms of uniform handed to you within a specified period. You are all to be immaculately dressed in full accordance with the Sandhurst dress regulation that have already been explained to you. You will now begin by changing into your physical training outfits! "

Hundreds of cadets, anxious to complete the exercise within the specified period, charged towards the dormitory. Naturally, in the mad rush we obstructed one another, wasting precious time. Sanity prevailed and we proceeded in a more orderly fashion. We were compelled to repeat this exercise several times. The lesson sought to be instilled by these exercises was the old one: time waiteth for no man. Rather than stand still and be overtaken by time, we were to race ahead of time, in order to chasten time.

The last exercise required us to change from our pajamas into full ceremonial regalia. Thinking to outsmart my instructors and the cadets, I omitted to divest myself of my pajamas (as expected), but simply pulled out the ceremonial attire on top of the pajamas. Naturally, this attempt to cheat time did not deceive the hawk-eyed senior cadets. I was severely admonished and lectured for over thirty minutes on the virtues of honesty of purpose and related standards. I was overcome with a sense of deep remorse not just for getting caught but also for my choice of action. I rededicated myself to strictly adhere to the rules and regulations throughout my stay in Sandhurst.

As the days rolled by, we began to settle down into the complex Sandhurst routine. The only major examination in the first year was the 'Passing of the Square', which had to be achieved in order to enjoy certain privileges.

Though my responses to overt incidents of racism were more subdued at this institution than at Mons, I sometimes rose to the bait and expressed my objections with brutal frankness to those cadets or instructors involved. This never failed to create tension and discomfort between my instructors, the white cadets and myself.

Subsequently, my first year's confidential report reflected the observation of my 'poor' command of English, due to this gambit of sometimes playing deaf and dumb. Nonetheless, my second year's studies proceeded in a more congenial environment, after the tempest of the first. I was now much better acclimatized and fell into the lifestyle typical of cadets.

My nemesis in this year was the Political Science course. As far as I could see, the entire exercise was a rather poorly veiled attempt to glorify Western civilization down our throats, western values, norms and political ideology. On the other hand, Africa, her peoples, her values were denigrated. Needless to say, this left me seething and struggling to keep my peace. All too often, (after an initial period of silent anguish), I would erupt and engage my instructor, in an animated and nasty verbal brawl.

These outbursts earned me an unprecedented total of sixty four days of restrictions with hard labour in my second year. I believe I still hold the punishment record for second year cadets. During my two-year span as a cadet at Sandhurst, I made only one close friend among the entire three hundred cadets I was instructed with an Irishman.

Before I left Sandhurst, our college Commander invited me for an interview. He examined me closely about my 'unorthodox' political positions, my views on his institution and my opinions of the training that I had just completed. In our final report, Sandhurst cadets were required to make a self-assessment of their officer qualities, which was then graded by their instructor. My final report and grade contained some of the now familiar complaints about my 'attitude.' Since the report had already been written (and passed me, notwithstanding), I felt at liberty to give the Commander an unedited piece of my mind on every subject he raised.

Far from being satisfied with my responses and desirous I think of modifying my views, he suggested an extension of the 'interview' over dinner. We talked far into the night, and I conveyed my amazement that any institution would teach a course which mutilated the pride and self-worth of some of the cadets and yet expect no reaction.

On the whole however, I enjoyed the period at Sandhurst. The skills I picked up, particularly on the 'Tactics' course, (my favourite), were to prove invaluable to me in later life.

Further Training

My encounter with British military institutions did not end there. Two further courses were arranged for me in accordance with my selection. The first was at the School of Infantry at Warminster and the second was at the School of the Tactical Wing. And so ended my military training in Britain.

So much for now of Benjy talking of Benjy. Please get the book soonest.

At this stage, a significant tactical matter must be raised. There should be a catalogue of possible origins of anti-Benjy forces. Some may be located quite naturally in the BIAFRA part of NIGERIA. Some may be in NIGERIA proper in military circles, political circles or civil society generally. Some may be of foreign origin. There were many foreign actors in and around the war including mercenaries, journalists, politicians, overseas governments, humanitarian agencies such as Red Cross, Caritas, as well as observer teams.

Some Nigerian anti-Benjy forces may arise from deep-seated envy, jealousy, hatred, insecurity and fear in top brass of the military and civil politicians of the time. From the horses mouth, we have just heard that one particular top flight actor in Nigerian affairs fell short of Sandhurst. This is Obasanjo who replaced Benjy at 3MCDO. We must all re-evaluate just exactly what fraction of the job Benjy did and what fraction OBJ's rounding off represented. All those initially at the rear, with Gen. Gowon as head without exception appear vulnerable to a charge of fear and envy.

Popularity with media and suspected political ambition were some of the points canvassed even in the grapevine at the time. Each member of this audience must pose and answer the following sharp question. How much was Benjy given and how much did he achieve with it? How much was OBJ given and how much did he achieve with it?

Given the luxury of the benefit of hindsight, spanning 40 years, to wit 1969-2009, what political ambition or induced instability through coups did Benji or OBJ each display. Who of the duo developed and displayed a vividly discernible and almost insatiable appetite for political power and/or connection with coup making?

I hope General Gowon is listening as attentively as he might have been listening after Benji's reverse at Owerri. If Benji, whose military hero of choice is Napoleon and who displays a style like America's Gen. Patton or Shaka the Zulu, can we accept that one reverse, lull or alleged stalemate compel his rather rough removal from a stiff job he had done more than halfway. If the Douglas MacArthur in Benji panned out in a certain way, does that turn a hero automatically into a villain or a genius into a dunce? History and posterity must now begin to tell four decades after.

It took us some time to realise in Nigeria that there are military politicians as well as normal civilian ones who litter the place, two a kobo! IBB is the only honest Nigerian military politician. He came, he saw and he stepped aside. He crowned himself and performed more experiments, all very useful, with our collective political lives. Now OBJ is the most comprehensive and costly military politician Nigeria has so far ever encountered. Only goodness knows those who loaded Gowon's ears with tales about Benji. Only God knows how he came to choose and later change his three war commanders. Who pressed and prevailed on him? What he surely knows, however, are those who conspired against him in July 1975. We have to move forward. These issues will be treated swiftly soon.