

## **PART THE SECOND**

We now hear about Benjy from the mouth of his peers in his military constituency. I start with a mild caveat. Military people are also human with all the foibles, fancies and weaknesses that flesh is heir to. We promise to consult and display opinion of Benjy from honest, respected, respectable and relatively objective peers. Just before we make our selection, we choose the speaker, quote him, verbally but deliberately start with a digression. We choose the voices of Major General David Medaiyese Jemibewon (rtd), Major General M. Chris Ali (rtd) and Major General J. J. Oluleye. In the book "The Federal Republic of Nigerian Army: The Siege of A Nation," Major General M. C. Ali, one of the most decorated Nigerian military officers, took the trouble on 1.10.2000 to write confidential reports on most of his seniors and other colleagues in the Army. He put his comments in the third chapter titled "Maturity after the War and Men of Honour," he offered us insight into the personalities of Major Isaac Adaka Boro, Brig. Gen. Alabi-Isama, Brig. Joseph Nanven Garba, Col. P. C. Tarfa, Gen. Aguiyi Ironsi, Gen. Murtala Muhammed, Gen. B. M. ADEKUNLE, Gen. Olusegun Aremu Obasanjo, Gen. Hassan Usman Katsina, Lt. Gen. Aliyu Gusau Mohammed, Gen. Theophilus Danjuma, Gen. Godwin Ally, Gen. Ike Nwachukwu, Gen. Isola Williams and finally, Col. Umar Abubakar Dangiwa, among others. For our own study here today, we choose OBJ's and Benjy's assessment by Chris Ali.

### **Olusegun Aremu Obasanjo:**

He is an able soldier statesman, intellectually capable and of the proponents of purposeful leadership. He received Biafran surrender by divine opportunity and went on, in years, as head of state, to be one single African leader to demonstrate that national interest could override personal ego and aggrandizement by willingly conducting a return to democracy, and handling political power to a civil government. An eminent global personage and a fitting window on Nigeria. Luck and opportunity have been, arguably, his greatest divine asset.

This assessment is very illuminating. In this particular case, we have to scan 'My Command' and 'Not My Will' for a long reply.

Major General M. C. Ali wrote on the same page 59 of Benjy as follows:

### ***General Benjamin Maja Adekunle***

He remains one of the most indefatigable, physically and mentally versatile warrior the nation and the Army has produced. Nigeria's Napoleon or Shaka the Zulu **without a personal empire**. That may account for his **misplacement** in the nation's history. At critical times of national anxiety, during the civil war, he repeatedly gave the nation hope and certainty by his predictions and victories on the battle-front. He proved that the art of war is one of superior intellect, continuous and fluid motion, precision, physical and moral courage. Today, **the powers that be pretend** that the Black Scorpion can be denied his monumental contributions and place in history.

However, the history of the civil war will be written, and by whosoever, Brigadier General Benjamin Maja Adekunle will live in the hearts of all Nigerians as the tiny great soldier who, amongst others, won the war to keep Nigeria one. Generals like him, and they are very few, must be stunned by our lack of professionalism today. He concretely paved the way to Biafran subsequent surrender. He falls into the category of Nigerians who gave everything, but, denied their glory, are powerless to command justice and fair play. He remains the most revered and internationally acclaimed warrior-commander of the civil war, nothing can change that.

We now come to Maj. Gen. David Jemibewon's book, "A Combatant in Government." In his Chapter 3 titled "The Regime of Yakubu Gowon, July 1966 to July 1975 " he wrote inter-alia, first descending bravely but politely on Gowon thus:

And so for almost three years, the country grappled with the war of the survival of the whole nation. Those who were close to the corridors of power and those who had the opportunity of watching the administration of the war years saw only too clearly that all was not well with the leader of the nation. Day by day he revealed himself as a very weak man and a man of indecision. A few instances will suffice to demonstrate the weakness in the character of Gowon. During the war years, it was common knowledge in military circles that Gowon was completely unable to control the three divisional commanders responsible for the actual fighting in the field. There was no coordination among the three divisional commanders and each one acted entirely independently of the others. As a matter of fact, elements of rivalry and jealousy crept in among the three commanders and each one of them resorted to decisions and actions that would impair or jeopardize the progress and prospect of success of the others. Such reprehensible conduct was known and reported regularly to Gowon. But throughout he did nothing to coordinate the activities of the three commanders or call them to order. **Nigeria was only fortunate to have a few saving graces during those critical years. The first was that the three field commanders Shuwa, Muhammed and Adekunle** were all of them born soldiers of great merit whose efficiency and perseverance were unsurpassed. Had they been men of lesser caliber and had they been of lesser military genius, the nation would have lost the war for the survival of Nigeria as one political entity. The second saving grace was the invaluable contribution of Major-General Hassan, who was the army chief of staff at the time. Like his three commanders in the field, he too was a natural soldier and a born leader of men. He exerted such a tremendous influence on the prosecution of the war that history can never forget the part he played to ensure the victory of the federal military government and the continued unity of Nigeria. Perhaps it is no exaggeration to assert that our greatest problems and headaches during the years of civil war came not really from the side of 'Biafra' but from bad leadership at the very top.

The bad leadership sprang from an inherent weakness in Gowon. It was a serious flaw in his nature and it was such an overwhelming weakness of character that in the end it proved fatal. Otherwise how could anyone ever explain the fact that the man who could be said to rank next to Gowon, and who occupied the position of chief of staff, supreme headquarters, during the war years, never once visited the

front throughout the two and a half years of the civil war? Not only this, this same man was known to have occupied himself at the time with reading for a law degree on part-time basis in the University of Lagos. Gowon knew of this but he was too weak to call Major-General E. O. Ekpo to order.

David Jemibewon then went on later to make a very deep observation:

History often tends to focus attention on the central leading figure in the affairs of men. Other figures and personalities who played useful and noble roles are often glossed over or completely forgotten.

How very true! What great perspicacity! This is what the good boys of the bedchamber, what the establishment had done to Benjy. The history of the war must be written in a balanced truthful and responsible way restoring his name to where it truly belongs, the center-piece in gold!

We just must add a third mature Military voice and probably that would do. This is from the much-respected and disciplined Major-General J. J. Oluleye. His book "Military Leadership in Nigeria: 1966 1979" contains copious references to Adekunle's exploits, their consequences and how they came to be received in certain quarters. It also contains a hair-raising but ultimately humorous encounter with A WOLOWO involving Gen. Adebayo, Gen. Obasanjo in the background and some pro-Awo intellectuals like Prof. H. A. Oluwasanmi, who nearly destroyed the cohesion and internal structure of the Nigerian Army as an entity.

By mid-October 1968, Major-Gen Oluleye, G.S.O I, visited the three divisions in company of Lt. Col. F. A. Z. Shielu. He said he found Benjy overworked, exhausted, erratic, irascible, over-centralising his command. Oluleye, an ex-teacher at a famous Ibadan school, St. Peters' Aremo, was and still a very trusted man in whom there is no guile. He had visited Aba, Ahoada and Ebocha. He made a vital suggestion that Benjy be sent on leave for recuperation so that on resumption, he could take over his command or create 4<sup>th</sup> Marine Commando ... etc. Benjy had earlier dismissed a vital suggestion as a piece of nonsense. This was the need to protect Benjy's line of communication in the then East Central. Later facts confirmed Oluleye's fears. Benjy was human. He was not perfect. He made errors. The matter was brought in good faith to General Gowon's notice who smothered the attempt to dislodge or dislocate Benjy. This led to the Owerri setback and a chance for detractors.

The Black Scorpion (who had been summoned to Lagos) triumphantly returned to his Headquarters to continue his operations without a change of tactics in the hostile territory. This lack of change in tactics led to the encirclement of Owerri and its eventual loss. For almost six months after the first recommendation to the C-in-C, he did not agree but he gave no reasons. I later reasoned to find out that why the C-in-C refused and I arrived at the following points:

( I) As a result of success after success, Benjy had become a political hero. His

relief could spark off a political row in the West which could lead to major disturbances short of a *coup d'etat*.

(2) Benjy had become politically conscious as it was alleged he told some foreign pressmen that he would become the Army Commander. How and when might have been one of General Gowon's problems. For a *coup d'etat* to occur during the war could be fatal as an idling Benjy in the rear could easily lead to one.

(3) It was also a fact that the C-in-C always hated offending anybody. He could settle a misunderstanding satisfactorily to both sides without apportioning blame. Benjy from time occupied a place in his bosom as a brilliant and smart officer.

(4) Relieving Benjy alone could be seen as an act of tribalism.

(5) The C-in-C possibly held himself responsible for the disaster that followed an attempt to capture Umuahia for his political birthday because of his privity. Benjy was not to blame. Even when Benjy falsely told the world that he had killed some Chinese mercenaries fighting for the rebels, he was spared from blame. Benjy continued until his reputation was dented. Benjy realized his tactical error belatedly. When he did realize that he was seen as an intruder and not a liberator in the Iboland, he ordered his troops to 'shoot at anything that moves.'

David Jemibewon's trenchant criticism of Gowon is professionally valid and his anger at the Ekpo syndrome, very righteous indignation. Gowon, however, had a lot to learn hence he chose to go back to school after nine good years in power in a periodically chaotic country. Gowon ought to have read Machiavelli's 'PRINCE.' It was not enough to be loved, nor was it sufficient to be good and kind, it was definitely necessary to be feared. Gowon's weakness emanated from his overly good heart and solid Christian background.

I once dreamt of being Nigeria's Minister of Defence. Those at Abacha's Confab knew this. I was in the Defence and Security Committee. I once dreamt of joining the Nigerian Army. Obasanjo would remember this. We were to join the same time. I remember him telling me if I had joined, I might have become the Commander-in-Chief which he then was, for the first time. I was once billed to be the Academic Provost/Commandant of the Defence Academy. Maj. Gen. Omojokun, my first student in Mathematics at the University College, Ibadan, would remember this. I was top of the list of the candidates shortlisted. I have all my life been interested in Military matters, the science and technology aspects of the art, the literature and music connected with it, the development of weaponry over the ages, conventional and guerrilla warfare and the question of power in philosophy and social sciences till today.

Oluleye himself mentioned two qualitative decisions GOWON made. They looked like rebuffs but were not. Under the first pressure on Gowon to forcibly change either Adekunle's tactics or Adekunle himself, Gowon told Oluleye that the In on the ground knows best. That was excellent on Gowon's part. What he said the age-long, tried and tested truth. When again the GHQ top team assembled in Ibadan Barracks to see Gowon, he dispersed them politely urging them to avoid bad blood amongst them, the top hierarchy. In these two ways, Gowon stood firm with Benjy.

I would wish here to hold brief for Benjy in two ways concerning the OLULEYE and the GHQ advice which Benjy rebuffed. First: General Oluleye in theory and practice could have been correct. Later events seem to have said so. Two heads are better than one and thus Benjy could have been wrong, or was wrong and J. J. correct. Next, the attacking mode suggests that all told, all said and done, Benjy might well have been right. A defence of his choices could go thus: in the general theory of games, and here I speak of non-trivial games of strategy (not dice mess), there are usually more than one way of solving an intricate problem. This even already true of the art of solving mathematical problems. In war games, there are rules, precedents and canonical styles. Benjy, an admirer of the little Corporal Napoleon, might have believed in an amalgam of mobility, concentrated force of firepower and the element of surprise which are some key ingredients in a blitzkrieg. In Clausewitz famous treatise of 1832, "On War" available to BENJY at Sandhurst and thereafter, BOOK III, Chapter IX was titled "THE SURPRISE." We need not repeat the great author here. Rather, I present you, my own cryptic summary of the chapter in the form of an equation  $S = S_1 + S_2$  where S is surprise,  $S_1$  Secrecy and  $S_2$  Speed.

In other words, to spring a surprise, you must concoct a secret plan and execute it speedily. A Napoleonist Benjy will always relish Austerlitz and never dream of Waterloo. The suspiciously open corridor or space has lessons for everyone about traps. The Ashanti campaign, the strategic brilliance of Edo army at the so-called Benin massacre and the open road trick used by the Agbekoya when they slaughtered some sixty or more policemen in 1968 at Ibadan, all have something in common. The 1944 invasion of Germany by MONTY, Bradley and Eisenhower with Montgomery joined by Major Lewis Brereton could have been much in Benjy's mind. The Allied effort at Arnhem, Nijmegen and Eindhoven was heroic but Germans dealt adequately with them. Benjy must have remembered too that Biafra had a few Sandhurst and other bright boys. Monty and Bradley's conviction was that a single thrust, furnished with unlimited support, would end the war. Rivalry set in, as anywhere in the world. Benjy might just have finished off the war. He had done some seventy per cent of the essential work. A little rest as J. J. suggested, he could have, if returned, polished off the rest. There is an analogy from the game of cricket. When a speedster of an opening bowler is set against the opponents' batting innings, he knows implicitly that he has a series of mandates. I was at school, GCI in 1952 a very successful opener. He must break the defence of the usually cautious, calm, orthodox opening batsmen and the early order 1,2,3. He also must crack the backbone of the middle order 4,5,6,7 REST and return to wipe out the tail-enders 8,9,10,11: Benjy was not beside himself. JJ too knew and knows his onions. He was brought up early to plan carefully, write notes of lessons, keep diaries, registers, performance records for those beside him and under him. Such men have a lot to offer and to teach. Spontaneous geniuses like Benjy supply rare needs, irrespective of antics of rivals, denigrators and envious practitioner.