

PART THE FOURTH

BENJY'S CRITICS TAKEN ON

We choose an oblique approach here in order to simply hasten matters. A definite *raison detre* for the Adekunle joint father and son publication is the need to answer once and for all and at a very opportune time, the controversial claims in Gen. Obasanjo's book **"MY COMMAND"** published by Heinemann at Ibadan in 1980. I am sure many people here would remember the furore that this publication caused just as with "Not My Will." The former was subtitled 'An Account of the Nigeria Civil War 1967-1970.' He dedicated the book thus "To my children born before and during the war, to their mother, and to the memory of the unknown heroes on both sides of the Nigerian civil war." Now this is all quite interesting. Incidentally, the child-bearing mother is strictly referred to in the singular, but why, for goodness sake, must we encounter unknown heroes like the unknown soldier again? In the final analysis, the real heroes are probably not Gowon, who was so meek and harmless, not Ojukwu, who partly started what he could not actually complete and had to flee, perhaps also not an Obasanjo who merely polished up the gem of a series of victories all set-up before him. As for Obasanjo in particular, it must be stated clearly that his version of 3MCDO and its theatre of action differ completely with BENJY's. Benjy for one thing, was a pioneer who raked up in an emergency at the utmost, a pastiche of some 35,000 men. The final push Obasanjo claims credit for involved over 100,000 men in JOINT assault with First Div for the crucial final thrust. We can leave Biafran Sandhurst, Col. Ude and Gen. A. A. Madiebo out conveniently. Many got done on the other side too ... Victor Banjo, Emmanuel Ifeajuna, Alale, Sam AgbamAgbam!

We wish to adorn this part of our lecture with excerpts from a review of the Adekunle book which Dr. Reuben Abati published on 15 July, 2004. Reuben wrote thus:

Benjamin Adekunle's civil war letters is from the outset, a response to General Olusegun Obasanjo's *My Command*. When this book appeared in 1980, Brig General Benjamin Adekunle had taken exceptions to it, and it is not difficult to see why. Obasanjo had taken over the Command of the Third Marine Commando from Adekunle in 1969. In *My Command*, he pays no tribute to Benjamin Adekunle's efforts as leader of the Third Division; instead he describes how he met a demoralised, disunited, quarrelsome troop, which he had to re-organise into an effective fighting machine which subsequently recaptured Owerri, and the Federal Government's command went on to win the war. Obasanjo shines like gold in *My Command* as the war hero who brought the civil war to an end. And the book races towards this denouement after Obasanjo had done a good job of suggesting that all former commanders of the troops were either distracted, or incompetent.

Throughout the Adekunle publication, Obasanjo understandably receives hard knocks. Abiodun Adekunle, being his father's true son fires the first shot in his "Introduction" when he writes, tellingly as follows: "It is legitimate to ask what role may fairly be attributed to my father in bringing the war to its conclusion. Nigerians and more particularly the Yorubas have been fortunate that Obasanjo has always been available to fill the roles of other fallen comrades, such as my father after his

loss of command, Murtala Mohammed after his assassination and again, MKO Abiola, after his premature death. Over the length of his career, from the very start until the present, General Obasanjo seems to have displayed an uncanny ability of reaping where others have toiled". (pp. 20-21).

The father fires his own shot on page 42 when he gloats over Obasanjo's failure to make a good grade at the Mons Officer Cadet School in the UK, on account of which he could not go on to the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst. He and Obasanjo were course mates. And now, *The Black Scorpion* writes: "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". The book is full of such other swipes at Obasanjo, particularly in subsequent sections where Ojukwu's comments on Obasanjo are used for illustration.

What follows this putting-Obasanjo-in-his-place is a fairly detailed documentation of Colonel Adekunle's leadership of the Third Marine Commando Division.

Written by Adekunle himself, this section of the book is a study in the art of war, with *The Black Scorpion* functioning as a strategist. He comes across as a professional soldier who was motivated by an overriding sense of patriotism. He takes us through the beginnings of the civil war, the issues at stake, and the strategies on both sides, and how from the first shot Biafra was bound to lose the war. But Adekunle is not necessarily a war-monger, he draws attention to the options which if they had been taken, would have set Nigeria on a different path. The narrative is spiced up with histrionic reports about Benjamin Adekunle in the foreign press, and his historical location as the soldier who built the Third Marine Commando Division into an effective team and as the mind that made the Federal victory of 1970 possible.

Thanks indeed to Reuben. For those amazed about Ojukwu still treating OBJ as a joke, see a recent repeat in *Saturday Sun*, March 21, 2009 front and pages 11-14.

Simply because of the international dimension accorded this tragic war, we end this part with a foreign commentator who covered the war extensively. Writing of divisional rivalries at the front lines, JOHN de St. Joree observed thus:

The capacity, character and style of the individual commanders at all levels, but especially at the top, were central to the conduct of the war. The three Federal Divisions varied enormously for a number of reasons but the imprint of their respective commanders' personalities gave them their distinctive characters. The III Division under Colonel Mohammed Shuwa was cautious and orthodox; the 3rd Marine Commando, led by Adekunle, aggressive and dynamic among its soldiers terror of the fiery and unpredictable 'Black Scorpion' often outweighed fear of the enemy and the 2nd Division changed from being rumbustious and chaotic under Murtala Mohammed to easy-going and plodding under the dilettante Haruna. It is probably no accident that the two most successful field commanders' (Adekunle in Nigeria and Achuzie in Biafra) thrown up by the war were similar in temperament, shared the same magnetism, employed identical fear-inculcating disciplinary

methods and rejoiced in crops or golf club handles (never seen in the more seasoned and orderly I Division) which were used liberally on the men for the small military misdemeanour and supplemented by loud shouting and incessant saluting, even in tricky places like the turrets of armoured cars. Achuzie, on the other side used to whip and beat his men into battle which, as with Adekunle, seemed to be acceptable partly because both commanders were known to be scornful of their own personal safety.

Adekunle is half Yoruba and half Bachama (one of Nigeria's most warlike minority tribes from the Middle Belt) and was trained at Sandhurst where he was regarded as something of a 'loner' and not above average ability. He served as a normal infantry officer and only came into prominence when he led the seaborne assaults on Bonny and the Mid-West early in the civil war. His Division was an amorphous mixture of old and new soldiers from practically every tribe in the Federation but with a large contingent of Yorubas. (Adekunle gradually came to regard himself as more Yoruba than Northerner as a result of his rivalry with Shuwa and Murtala Mohammed in the other divisions and because of Northern officers' alleged discrimination against him before the war.) His greatest achievement was to weld his Division into a recognisable though loose organisation shape and breathe something of his own sulphurous spirit into his men. The result was some spectacular successes (Calabar, Port Harcourt, Aba and Owerri) before overreaching himself in a desperate attempt to 'beat' to the main prize of Umuahia and Uli. He came a cropper and lost Owerri which was one of the reasons - though probably not the main cause for his removal in the complete change-round of Divisional commanders in May 1969. But he had in the meantime become a Yoruba and, to a lesser extent, a national hero. In the West, he was seen in the tradition of the Yoruba warlords of the nineteenth century and as a potential military leader if the West should ever decide to go it alone. He was made a chief and was immensely popular with the man in the street. (The Yoruba called him, delightedly, 'na cinema' pidgin English for 'a great show.')

He always denied political ambition (he told me once that he wanted to become a farmer when he retired from the army, but then most Nigerian officers tended to tell you that); however, it seems clear that his withdrawal to take over the directorate of training under the eye of Gowon in Lagos, was at least partly designed to head off any intentions he had in that direction and to curb his every-growing independence and unruliness in Port Harcourt. Rather like the allies' race with the Russians across Europe in the closing stages of the Second World War, the Federal Government did not want a victorious Adekunle in control of most of former Biafra. (After the war, however, Adekunle's remarkable talents for 'getting things done' were once again put to good use: this time in the more pacific area of relieving the appalling congestion in the Lagos docks, a task in which he was again immensely successful).

Colonel Joe 'Hanibal' Achuzie is a more mysterious figure since he had never served in the Nigerian Army. He claimed that he had fought in the British army in Korea and Suez but his has never been confirmed. Before the war, he ran an electrical business in Port Harcourt and before that, he had lived in Britain where he married his English wife, Ethel. His nickname is also a mystery there is nothing remotely resembling either the

Alps or elephants in Biafra but presumably it came as recognition of his general military prowess which was genuine enough. He was a rough and tough soldier who inspired the same fear and respect in his men as Adekunle did; he also had a good tactical sense and could move his troops around with more speed than most of the commanders on either side. He was responsible for the huge ambush at Abagana, and played a leading part in the recapture of Owerri. But, unfortunately for Biafra's military fortunes, Ojukwu pulled him back at about the same time that Adekunle lost his command and he was put in charge of petrol rationing, a waste of talent if there ever was one. He came into prominence at the end of the war when he was alleged to have declared that whatever happened, he would fight on. But, in fact, he supported Effiong in carrying out the surrender after **Ojukwu had flown away**

We must end this session with a bomb! I want to prick the conscience of some of my kinsmen. The fuse to my bomb is that despite the title supplied by the sponsors of this reception, if anything at all, the weight of evidence is that BENJY is inherently a hero, a national hero, a hero any day, anytime and a hero everywhere. He is not just an Ogbomoso hero or a Yoruba one. The Ogbomoso have chosen today to demonstrate their appreciation of his talents, skills and professional attainment. BUT WHAT ABOUT YORUBA AS YORUBA? At the time Benjy was enacting all the heroism that contributed promptly and stoutly to cementing and preventing further cracks in the body politics and territorial integrity of the country, Awolowo was in the Federal Government, he was given the 'Leader of Yoruba' title around this time; General Adebayo was Military Governor over the preponderantly Yoruba Western State; Wole Soyinka, the great writer was around along with younger ones like Kole Omotoso. All these persons wrote profusely and were written about concerning the civil war. NOT ONE OF THESE YORUBAMEN HAD A WORD OF APPRECIATION FOR BENJY.

Obasanjo, in '**NOT MY WILL**,' Awolowo in all his writings and the Oyelaran stint on him as well as General Adebayo's biography, '**Onward Soldier Marches On ..**' None had a word to spare!!! 'My Command' has already been treated. This eerie silence may be part of what Chris Ali calls a pretence, even official pretence. The silence I draw attention to here, speaks volumes about the Yoruba as a people. It is not about Benjy. I congratulate the OCF, ODF and all Ogbomoso for throwing this pathetic gauntlet to all Yoruba.

For some, this slogan of those days sounded more like: To Keep Nigeria Worn ... Thanks to people like Gowon, Benjy, Akinrinade, Adelanwa, Aduwo, Bajowa, etc for keeping the hope alive.