

Oral history on UN Peace keeping Operations: The Nigeria Legion

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The Nigerian Legion could be a potent source of credible oral history of the UN Peacekeeping Operations in which hundreds of Nigerian servicemen have participated over the past four decades and more. But capacity at the Legion is weak. Veterans who were spoken to for this report complained that they were unable to meet regularly with other veterans to exchange memories, experience and updates. Only the barest infrastructure is available to them at the Nigerian Legion Eastern Hq by way for communication or information-sharing—no functioning telephones, e-mail, fax facilities or internet connectivity exist.

At my request, the National Education Centre, Enugu undertook research among veterans for sources of oral history on UN Peace keeping operations in which Nigerian soldiers have served. Initial information has been gathered from the Nigerian Legion Eastern headquarters located at Enugu (at the address shown above). Below are summaries of interviews conducted with two members of the Legion.

1. Sgt Edwin Ozor Nigerian Army (rtd). Aged 69years.

Edwin Ozor served with the 4th Battalion of the Nigerian Army on peace keeping operations in the Congo in 1961. He recalled that his battalion was under the command of Capt. Murray with the then Capt. (later Gen.) Yakubu Gowon as the Adjutant. His tour of duty lasted 7 months.

Sgt Ozor served as a Signaler. Two incidents remain upper-most in his memory: First, upon initial deployment, his company was moving from the former Leopodville towards the Katanga Region when he and his colleagues were ambushed by the “natives”. He recalled that the local ambush party was quickly overwhelmed, some killed and others taken prisoner, only to be released a little later.

The day Patrice Lumumba was betrayed and killed was also to him unforgettable. According to Sgt. Ozor, a storm of indignation burst upon the Nigerian contingent, who on hearing the news of Lumumba’s betrayal, filed out unto the Parade Field with their rifles in silent protest over that infamous act of perfidy. After a while, the Nigerians who by now were joined by the Ghanaians, were persuaded to call off their protest.

Sgt. Ozor further recalled that prior to the arrival of the UN Peacekeepers, there had been substantial discrimination against blacks in the cities of the Congo, and Africans were denied access to certain hotels. This colour bar, Ozor claimed, was smashed by men of the UN Peacekeeping Forces. [The UN thus may have played an important role in the history of race relations]

Finally, Ozor observed that by the time his posting to the Congo was over, he was sorry to note that peace was nowhere in sight and that, above all, the majority of the Congolese citizens were unhappy about the death of Patrice Lumumba.

2. Corporal Godwin Ogbodo, Nigerian Army (rtd.).

Aged 43 years, retired Cpl. Ogbodo served as a peace keeping soldier in the Republic of Chad under the auspices of the Organization of African Unity (OAU). His tour of duty covered six months: 22 of December 1981 until June 1982. Upon deployment he and his company of approximately 180 officers and men under the command of Captain F.I. Orukpe moved from Maiduguri in Northern Nigeria to Ndjemina and thence to Ngwura in Chad. During the one week spent at Ngwura the company suffered untold hardship owing to its inability to source any form of potable water.

From Ngwura his company moved to Musoro in Northern Chad where they were to stay till the end of their deployment. While at Musoro, Capl. Ogbodo and his colleagues were detailed to road-block and patrol duties. Their duties were to separate the Gukini Wadaye forces from the Houseni Habre (rebel) forces with the later massed along the Faya lagoon area towards the border with Libya.

One highlight of his recollections was the incident when one early morning while on patrol with captain Orukpe the company was unexpectedly surrounded by the Habre forces in brigade formation. Upon surrendering, they were interrogated and released by the brigade commander Col. Idris, who said that he was once a Nigerian soldier now fighting with the Chadians, a fact that apparently eased the situation. Thereafter, there were no serious supply or combat problems for the company. Although the local population was generally friendly, the company lost two men through hostile fire from the Wadeye forces who became desperate when the Habre forces succeeded in taking Musoro and subsequently moving on to Ndjemina. Following this the peace keepers were recalled to Ndjemina and after a while moved back home to Maiduguri.

Cpl. Ogbodo's general impression was a mixed one; proud to have put his life on the line in the service of Nigeria, but sadness that the original intention of keeping peace did not materialize as envisioned.

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