

Quest for Internet

In the 103rd installment of our weekly series at emeagwali.com, we present letters pertaining to Philip Emeagwali's war memoir "THUNDER ROAD TO BIAFRA." One million people died during that 30-month Nigeria-Biafra Civil War during which Emeagwali lived from refugee camp in Awka-Etiti to an army barrack in Ndoni to the war front in Oguta.

Memorable Quote

"I have seen things in Biafra this week which no man should have to see. Sights to search the heart and sicken the conscience I have seen children roasted alive, young girls torn in two by shrapnel, pregnant women eviscerated, and old men blown to fragments, I have seen these things and I have seen their cause: high-flying Russian Ilyushin jets operated by Federal Nigeria, dropping their bombs on civilian centres throughout Biafra ...

At Onitsha - the 300 strong congregation of the Apostolic Church decided to stay on while others fled and to pray for deliverance. Col. [Murtala] Mohammed's Second Division found them in the church, dragged them out, tied their hands behind their backs and executed them."

["Nightmare in Biafra," *Sunday Times* (London, 4/26/68, p.12), by a war correspondent]



Egyptian pilots flew Soviet Jets that blasted several homes in Emeagwali's neighborhood. [Photo: Nigerian bombing raid, General Hospital, Aba, Nigeria, *Life Magazine*, July 12, 1968]

General Phillip Effiong and the Biafran War

This piece is in response to the comments by Phillip Effiong, Jr. I agree with him that his father (General Phillip Effiong) was a hero of the Biafran war. However, I think he contradicts himself somewhat when in one breath he laments that General Effiong "remains largely unacknowledged, even spurned", and in another he admits that Igbos "have honored and continue to honor him. Locally he has been honored and internationally he has been honored". If the latter has been the case, what then is he complaining of?

I think Phillip needs to understand that marginalization and disdain have been the fate of all the other "Biafran" actors who distinguished themselves in the war, including the heroic field commanders and the ingenious inventors. The Nigerian state still harbors an aversion to these people, except for a few lucky civilians like MT Mbu who have been fully reabsorbed into Nigeria's political economy. For obvious reasons, even Igbos despite their admiration of the Biafran heroes have not found the political courage to honor or immortalize them - no streets, no monuments, no institutions have been named after any of them in any Igbo town or city. The best effort so far was the controversial pan-Igbo honorary chieftaincy title bestowed on Emeka Odimegwu Ojukwu on his return from exile in the early 1980s. So, if General Effiong has been unacknowledged and spurned, he is not alone in that situation.



Soldiers Standing

Original Caption: Agwu, Nigeria: A federal government soldier, wearing camouflaged helmet and with ammunition belt draped about his torso, stands with other soldiers recently. Agwu, south of breakaway Biafra's capital of Enugu, is the point through which Nigerian authorities say they will open a "mercy corridor" to permit the entry of food and medicine to the stricken rebel state. 7/17/1968 © Bettmann/CORBIS

One might also add that the General was a victim of unflattering circumstances that were not his making, but which overshadowed his legitimate claim to heroism in the war. The first was that he was effectively Biafra's Vice President, and very few VPs in history ever had the spotlight beamed on them for good. The second was that fate thrust on him the prudent but unenviable role of taking the decision and signing the instrument of surrender. History rarely dwells on such men, much less smile on them. How easily and in what manner does anyone remember the man who signed the instrument of surrender for the Nazis or in any other modern war? This is one of the hard, unfair realities of life that make this world a challenging place to live in.

By the way, I think Philip's lengthy reaction to Leo's rash comment on General Effiong was unnecessary, and the petty and abusive manner he chose put him in the same category as Leo, and may have done more damage to his dad's reputation. My impression of General Phillip Effiong is that of a fine gentleman who would not blow his own trumpet in search of honor. Unfortunately, the evidences Phillip chose to cite to establish his dad's heroism (service in a UN peacekeeping force, life threatening situation in Kaduna, signing Biafra's instrument of surrender, postwar detention by the Federal Government, and unemployment since after the war) hardly come across as extraordinary acts of heroism for any soldier, much less for a war time General.

I did sense some bitterness against Ojukwu and Igbos in Phillip's response to Leo. I am not surprised because having lived in Nigeria since after the war and studied the pattern of political alliances among its peoples, I know that the sentiments that ran through his comments reflect the mindset of a vast majority of the non-Igbo speaking Easterners. I am disturbed only because Phillip sounded like he is very close to his dad, and one would naturally suspect that his views on Ojukwu, the Biafran project and Igbos have benefited from privileged discussions with the General. I hope this is not the case.



Biafrans Running For Military Training

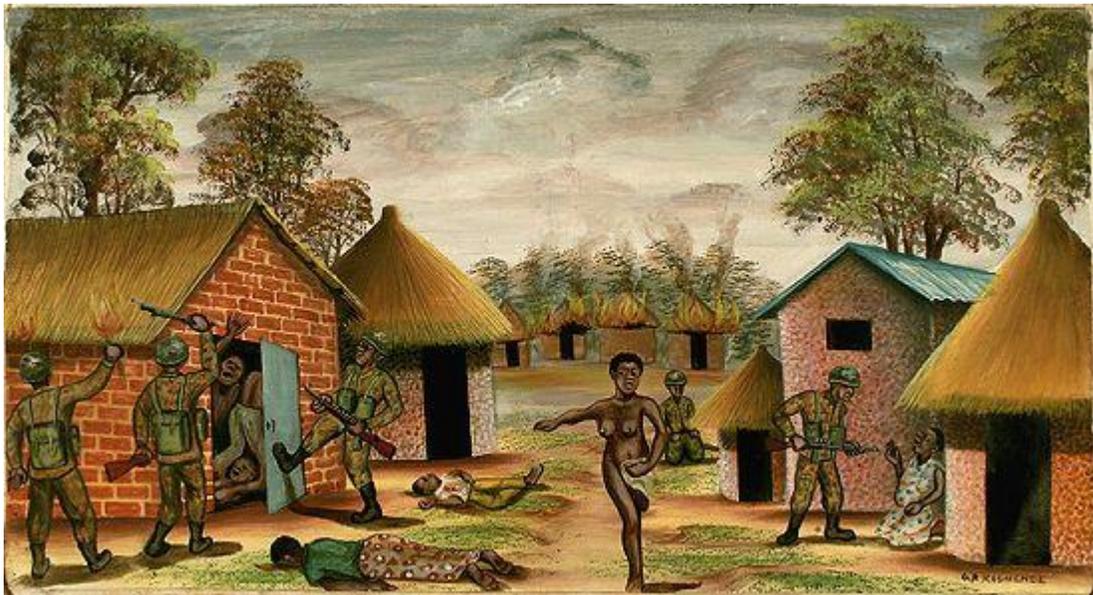
Original Caption: 8/7/1968-Biafra, Africa- This is military training Biafran style. These recruits go through the paces somewhere in Biafra. Nigerian spokesmen have been meeting with a delegation from secessionist Biafra in peace talks in Ethiopia in a bid to end Nigeria's 13-month-old civil war. Meanwhile starvation threatens many in besieged Biafra. © Bettmann/CORBIS

I am glad to note, however, that General Effiong is still living. I think the world would like to know his views in retrospect. So much has been written and said about the war by people on both sides, a lot of which is either self-serving, revisionist or full of myths and legends. Thankfully Emeagwali's efforts, though quite limited in scope, is insightful especially because of its verbatim transcription of the Aburi deliberations (from the very horses' mouths) which is key to understanding the root causes of the war. General Effiong's reticence about the war has not been helpful. I believe he and others in the inner caucus of the Biafran side (all of whom have been much maligned) owe it to themselves, to the entire victims of the war and to history to write honest memoirs explaining the circumstances and facts that made the war imperative, that sustained the war effort for three long

years, and that led to the eventual vanquish of Biafra. Ojukwu's 'Because I Am Involved' does not seem to satisfy this need, and I hope he will fulfill his promise of a much more detailed book. With most of the Biafran actors already over 70 years, time is running out on them and they will have to work extra hard to discharge this vital responsibility. I think Phillip should prevail on his dad on this issue, rather than blame Emeagwali and other secondary sources for neglecting the good old General in their commendable, albeit much constrained, efforts at telling the story of the war.

I believe it is important for us Nigerians to continue to discuss the Biafran project and subsequent war in an objective manner. It is a major landmark of our national history beneath which is buried much insight into and maybe solutions to the problems that stifle our aspiration for nationhood and development.

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An artist's rendition of the genocidal killings of civilians in African wars