

**The Nigerian Civil War: The
Story of Corporal Ude, An
Unsung Biafran Soldier.**

By

Matthew Uzukwu

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Preface

John Ude was a trader who lived in the then Nigerian Capital City of Lagos for 15 years before the onset of the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970). Ude traded in used clothes. He bought the clothes from wholesale merchants who imported them from Europe. From a tiny kiosk in the center of town, he sold the clothes to all kinds of customers—women, men, boys and girls, fat and thin folks. He earned a pretty decent living from it and his decision, after being in the business for a number of years following an apprenticeship with a wealthy uncle that lasted for five years, was to stick with the trade for a few more years before trying his hands on something else. Then Nigeria became engulfed in a great political crisis that spawned a coup, a counter coup, and a Civil War.

In September of 1966, Ude was forced to relocate to the Eastern Region, whose government, led by the charismatic Colonel Ojukwu, was increasingly at odds with the Federal Government of Nigeria over a number of issues, including the death of General Aguiyi Ironsi and the shambles to military hierarchy his demise had brought on the Nigerian Army,

indiscriminate killings of Easterners in the North by Northern mobs, the structure of the political system in the aftermath of the coups, and the safety of surviving military officers of Eastern Nigerian origin. There had been several casualties of Eastern Nigerian officers during the counter coup of July 1966.

By June 1967, the intractable issues had started a full blown Civil War. Ude, following a couple of languid months in his village, had relocated to the Eastern industrial city of Port Harcourt in November 1966 to resume his used clothes business. But the war found him there and he joined in the great Igbo civilian exodus out of Port Harcourt in April 1968. Ude went back home and volunteered to fight in the Biafran Army. Over the course of 2 years, he fought at various theaters of the war. He saw children starve from kwashiorkor, and watched intense air raids on hospitals and Biafran troop positions. He was nearly killed by tank fire as his unit retreated from heavy bombardment at the Aba sector of the war. On home visits on military pass, he witnessed the harrowing existence of families deeply affected by the war.

The war ended in January 1970. Ude survived it. Fearing bodily harm from victorious Nigerian soldiers, since he was obviously of military age and

therefore likely to be assumed to have served in the Biafran Army, Ude hid in his remote village in the Igbo heartland for weeks. Two months after the war's end, he returned to Lagos to start life afresh.

I was in secondary school in Lagos in the 1970s when I met Ude. I would visit with him and he regaled me with exciting stories about the war. He wanted to put his war experiences in writing, but he was handicapped by his limited education. Over several years, I wrote copious notes of his war stories, intending to publish them someday. Ude passed away in 1996. He did not live to see his story published.

Most published books about the war were written by high ranking actors of the conflict, who were either senior military officers or top civilian leadership on either side of the war. This book is probably the only one published about the war from the perspective of a rank and file soldier. This book is in memory of Corporal Ude, an unsung Biafran soldier, as were thousands of others on both sides of the conflict, who gave their lives in the Nigerian Civil War, believing their cause in the deathly struggle to be the right one.

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Chapter 1

Before The Storm Hit

The year was 1966, about July of that year. The military had taken power from a legitimate democratically elected government six months earlier. A bunch of Majors had staged a coup during which top military and political leadership were assassinated. The Majors were half successful, for although they effectively decapitated the civilian government they so much loathed, they were unable to seize power. Instead, the Army Commander, an affable guy who had seen combat in Congo and had commanded United Nations Forces sent there to restore law and order and keep the peace, put down the coup and reestablished discipline in the army.

That Army Commander, General Johnson Umunnakwe Aguiyi Ironsi, became the Head of the Nigerian State, after it was confirmed that the Prime Minister had been abducted and presumably killed by the coup plotters. Ironsi tried mightily over the course of the next six months to hold the country together, as tribal and religious hatreds were unleashed across the country, particularly in the northern part of the

country, aggrieved at the elimination of their top military and political leadership during the coup of the Majors.

The Western Region went through a period of tension as well because it also lost senior military officers and the Premier of the region to assassination during the coup. For several months, tension as taut as strung up cable wire snapped a number of times and resulted in the deaths of innocent civilians caught up in the politics of the coup.

John Ude owned a small radio he depended on for the latest news. The dial on the radio was left permanently on the National Radio frequency. For the next several months, following the inception of the military government, he learned about the massacre of innocent civilians in the northern part of the country by rioting mobs seeking revenge for the murders of their leaders. Because most of the young officers who carried out the coup were Igbo, Igbo residents of Northern Nigeria, who numbered in the millions, were considered fair game for reprisal attacks.

Lagos where Ude lived was not a northern city, and so the Igbo who resided there were spared the ethnic

cleansing attacks. Still, Ude and his fellow ethnics did not take things for granted. They were constantly vigilant, for they did not want to be caught unawares. Lagos wore an ominous calm, perhaps because the Yoruba race was conflicted about what their reaction should be about the death of Akintola, the Western Region Premier, at the hands of the Majors.

Chief Samuel Akintola, the slain Premier, was a sworn enemy of Chief Awolowo, the widely accepted leader of the Yoruba people. Akintola staked claim to the Yoruba leadership mantle as Awolowo languished in jail. In 1963, Awolowo had been convicted of the crime of treasonable felony and handed a 10-year prison sentence. His supporters claimed the charges were trumped up, but before the whole saga, Awolowo and Akintola had engaged in a nasty fight for the political leadership of the Yoruba people.

The depressing news stories from Ude's radio kept him up at night. He feared for his safety, for in the deep recesses of his mind, he worried about his fate and that of the millions of his fellow Igbo, should the massacres spread to Lagos. General Aguiyi Ironsi himself could be overthrown, and all hell could break loose. At the market where his kiosk stood, he and several other traders often gathered in impromptu

sessions for several hours of discussion of the political, ethnic and religious tension in the land.

In hushed tones, they talked about the latest events and rumors—the killings in the north, rumblings about a possible counter coup by northern elements in the army, and the first wave of refugees fleeing the north. They often ended these discussions with a prayer for the military government to find a way to resolve all the crises.

Ironsi's broadcasts on national radio heavily emphasized the need to restore national trust and unity, and his appointments to the Supreme Military Council, the highest decision making organ of his government, reflected this. He and Ojukwu were the only Igbo in the 9-member Council which had the following non Igbo officers as members: Brigadier Babafemi Ogundipe, Lt. Col. Yakubu Gowon, Colonel George Kurubo, Commodore Akinwale Wey, Major Hassan Katsina, Lt. Col. David Ejoor, Lt. Col. Adekunle Fajuyi. There was no way the aggrieved north would not give Ironsi the time needed to mend the national fractures unleashed by the ill advised coup, Ude and his fellow traders thought. But the myriad of issues Ironsi faced and the actions he took were too

complicated for the understanding of Ude and his friends.

One day in July 1966, Ude sat by his kiosk reading the morning newspaper. The day had started out languidly because it was hot and humid. The skies appeared pregnant with heavy grayish clouds, the types that raced across the horizon, clashing and streaking lightening. The riotous clouds let up a light drizzle but that was it. The humidity was suffocating. Customers mingled and shopped. Loaders carried heavy bags of rice and garri on their backs to the waiting vehicles of market patrons for a fee. Feeling an urge to relieve himself, Ude walked a short distance to an open sewer, undid his pants buttons (in those days, zippers were rarities on pants), and let loose into the fetid water. Just about done, he looked up the road and observed a great multitude running in his direction. As they did so, he heard a staccato of rifle fire. Some of the runners fell on the hard and hot asphalt, others stumbled on the fallen and tumbled into stagnant poodles of water that filled up pot holes in the road. In a panic, Ude ran. He was still buttoning up his fly as he ran to his kiosk. .

What is it? What is it? People in the disrupted market asked the runners who had burst into the market to

seek safety. A young man, frightened and out of breath, answered excitedly. He spoke in short bursts. Saliva flew out of his mouth as he held a small crowd, which included Ude, gathered around him spell bound.

“The soldiers! I saw them in armored cars, They were shooting wildly. We heard there was a coup going on. Some civilians were shot...”

At some point Ude had heard enough. So the revenge counter coup has finally come, he thought. He feared for Ironsi’s life. He knew the nation was no longer the same after the Majors coup of January. Should Ironsi be consumed in this counter coup, Ude doubted if the Igbo would ever be safe in Lagos, the seat of the Federal Government, where power would inevitably pass into the hands of the instigators of the counter coup. Thus far, the massacres of the Igbo had been confined to the north, but should a northern leader succeed Ironsi, as would most likely be the case, all bets could be off, Ude thought.

Ude locked up his kiosk and headed home. As he left the market, he observed that many of his fellow Igbo had done the same thing. Traders from other ethnic groups however carried on with their commercial

activity. Arriving home at night after sitting in heavy civilian and military traffic on pot holed roadways, Ude turned on his radio, but the national radio was off the air. This wasn't good from the standpoint of what he had witnessed while buttoning his pants at the sewer by the market, and what the panting young man had narrated in the market. Through exhaustion and a tension headache, Ude made a light dinner of pap and buttered bread. Diving into the dinner, he only ate half of it before falling asleep.

As the night wore on, with Ude in deep slumber, a number of events were established as having occurred in several parts of the country. In Ibadan, General Aguiyi Ironsi had been abducted by mutinying soldiers; at Abeokuta Barracks and at several other barracks in the north, killings of several army officers of Igbo origin had been carried out; and the vacuum created by Ironsi's abduction and presumed murder was being heatedly addressed by civilian, military and diplomatic personnel, including foreign diplomats, in a secret meeting to select Ironsi's successor.

Ude woke up several hours later in the morning feeling refreshed. The tension headache was gone and he felt better. He looked around the room for the

radio. Switching it on, he tried the national radio's frequency on the radio dial again. It was working, but martial music played.

A couple of days later, Nigerians were officially informed on the radio that their Head of State, General Aguiyi Ironsi, was missing. Ude's heart sank. The radio announcement further stated that a new Head of State, Lt. Col. Yakubu Gowon, whom Ironsi had appointed Chief of Army Staff, had taken over. At that moment, it dawned on him that he had to leave for the east right away. He figured that Ironsi was dead, and that the missing status he was placed under was a ruse to prevent a reaction from the Igbo and stop further national bloodshed. Convinced that a destructive national politico-military tit-for-tat had set in, Ude immediately made a decision to return to his Eastern Region homeland. There, he would be safer than anywhere else in the country.

"I must get rid of my possessions. I can't go with my bed, furniture, pots and pans," he said aloud to himself.

Ude owned a Raleigh bicycle. This was a prized possession. He rode the bike 8 miles each way (16 miles daily) back and forth to his kiosk at the market

and his home on Lawanson Street on the outskirts of Suru Lere six days a week. He did not work on Sundays. He would need that bicycle in the East, and so he decided to go with it. Everything else he would sell off.

Ude remained in Lagos for another couple of months as he sent word around about the sale of his possessions. He ventured out to his kiosk about 3 times a week. Although a modicum of calm had been restored by Gowon, the Igbo in Lagos could not let go of the feeling of something sinister lurking somewhere that could descend upon them and lead to a wipeout. At this point, some had started going back home to the East. Others hedged their bets that the Christian Gowon, a co-religionist, even if not a fellow ethnic Igbo, would be an empathetic leader who would stamp out attacks on the Igbo and run a Federal Government that would be fair to all.

Gowon had an acrimonious relationship with Ojukwu, Ironsi's appointed Military Governor of the Eastern Region, over the rights of the regions under the military regime, respect for the hierarchical structure of the military high command, and the control of regional revenue and funding of the federal budget.

Disagreements among Nigeria's senior military officers, in the aftermath of the 2 coups, about the political way forward, led to the convening of a meeting in Aburi Ghana hosted by the Ghanaian Head of State, General Ankrah, and attended by the military leaders. The Aburi Agreements were signed after days of discussion by the military leaders. Nigerians then hoped for brighter days of national peace. But Ojukwu's feud with Gowon over the interpretation of the accords precipitated actions and reactions by both men that withered away any trust established at the parley in Aburi. All of this occurred between January 1967, when the agreements were reached, and May of the same year when Gowon cut up the federation into 12 states, setting off Ojukwu, who cried foul (he had no input in the decision although he was a member of the Supreme Military Council) and countered with a declaration of the Eastern Region under his control as the secessionist state of Biafra.

Way before the Aburi Accords and the ensuing events, Ude had left Lagos. He had done this on a rainy morning in September 1966. A week before his departure, he crated up his used clothes inventory and shipped it by lorry freight to the East.

Ude bade Lagos goodbye sitting in a lorry with wooden benches. Painted on the back of the lorry were the words, "Every Man Must Carry His Own Sword." And so with trepidation about what the future held in store for him, a feeling made worse by the fact that he had not visited his ancestral village for almost 15 years, Ude left the city he had called home for a decade and a half.

Ude thought for a moment about the words on the back of the vehicle. What must the owner of that lorry have been thinking about when he painted those words on his lorry? The words had a martial connotation to them, but only a clairvoyant could associate them with the future in the context of the ongoing national crisis and whether he would indeed need to carry his own sword to survive it. With a cluttered mind, he endured the rough ride in the lorry, which bumped into surprise pot holes at high speed, lifted his buttocks momentarily in the air and slammed them back on the hard, wooden bench.