



Britain and Airpower Assistance to the Nigerian Air Force during the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970

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INTRODUCTION

The application of airpower in modern conflicts has taken the center stage since the First and Second World War.¹ Airpower was used more aggressively in both Korean and Vietnam Wars in the areas of interdiction and support of ground troops.² Following its success in global conflicts³ the combatants of the Nigerian Civil War acknowledged the airpower as a highly efficient means of achieving complete dominance over air and ground battle.⁴

The Federal Military of Government of Nigeria under Major-General Yakubu Gowon strengthened the Nigerian Air Force to sufficiently contend against any internal security threat in the country amid the outbreak of civil war.⁵ Biafran leaders led by Lieutenant Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu quickly organized an Air

¹ August Okpe, *The Last Flight: A Pilot Remembers the Air Force and the Biafran Air Attacks*. Lagos: Aeromax International Ltd, 2009), ix. See also, John, Marr E. and USAF. 1988. *War in the Falklands: Perspectives on British Strategy and Use of Air Power*. Alabama: Air War College & Air University.

² Merrick, E. Krause. 2005, 44.

³ August Okpe, “*The Last Flight*” ix).

⁴ Kent Roberts, Greenfield. *American Strategy in World War II: A Reconsideration*. (Baltimore & London: The John Hopkins Press, 1963), 121.

⁵ AFCSC Jaji, History, Organization and Roles of the Nigerian Air Force. Accessed

November 22, 2017 from

<https://www.scribd.com/mobile/document/316734971/Nigeran-Air-Force-History-Roles-and-Organisation>, 1.

Force in 1967.⁶ Describing the mission of Biafran Air Force, the Biafran leader declared:

Our air operations have been precise and strictly in accordance with the international code and conventions of civilized warfare. In spite of all the destruction of human life inflicted upon us by the mercenary air force of the enemy, our aim is not to take revenge or to follow their savage example. We do not wish to compete with them... the aim of our air operations is to destroy the enemy capability... to destroy that which has made him spur all moves towards peace, and that which goads him on in his futile quest for a military solution to this conflict.⁷

Britain was a strategic military partner and traditional supplier of

⁶Madiebo A. Alexandra, *The Nigerian Revolution and Biafran War*. (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishing, 1980), 100-101.

⁷Address to the Members of the Biafra Armed Forces and the Police by his Excellency General C. Odumegwu Ojukwu, Head of State and Commander in Chief Biafra Armed Forces on the Occasion of the Second Anniversary Parade at Owerri, 30 May, 1969. *Biafra News* Vol. 2 No. 24, June 6, 1969.

arms to the Federal Government of Nigeria.⁸ In line with 1962 abrogated Anglo-Nigerian Defence Pact where the United Kingdom Government pledged to assist in equipping and training military officers from Nigeria,⁹ a decision was taken by Gowon regime to approach the British Officialdom to request for defensive equipment like military aircrafts for counter-air operations in the civil war with the conviction that Britain stands ready to assist Nigeria during the conflict. However, the British officialdom realized that if they supply the Federals military aircraft they would be left alone fighting its consequences.

The essence of this paper is to discuss how Britain jettisoned the idea of supplying military aircrafts to Nigeria to the Federal Air Force during the Nigerian Civil War but had rather concentrated on providing for them technical assistance and related equipment needed to execute the air operations of the war. The paper discusses the air interdiction of *Uli* Airstrip and official visitation of the British Royal Air Force Officers to Nigeria as major components of the British technical assistance to the

⁸ Confidential: Minute on Meeting between N.R.E. Browns and The British High Commissioner in Lagos Sir David Hunt on 3rd August, 1967 from Brown to Norris File No. TX 10/16/Part A/6C1066/West and General African Dept./Title: Nigeria: Defence, Military Operations Against Biafra, July 1967-31st December 1969, Foreign and Commonwealth Office 38/284, The National Archives Kew London (Thereinafter TNA).

⁹ Ade Adefuye, *Culture and Foreign Policy: The Nigerian Experience*, Vitoria Island Lagos: Nigerian Institute of International Affairs, 1992), 35-36.

Nigerian Air Force. The study adopted historical and analytical approaches. The analysis was based on primary sources mostly archival materials obtained from the British National Archives, Kew London. The study has the potential of contributing meaningfully to the global discourse of airpower particularly in Africa.

The author argues that Britain was reluctant to approve the export license application for the acquisition of military aircraft of British origin made by the Nigerian government being a sophisticated political decision taken to resist public criticisms and Biafra's propaganda in Britain. Despite abandoning Nigeria's applications for military aircrafts Britain consistently supplied other arms and technical assistance to them. Doing so was intended to decrease Federals' alliance with the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia, maximize British influence with the Federal Government of Nigeria and thwart growing Biafra's resistance in the conflict. Not supplying military aircraft to Nigeria was hinged on justifying British policy of delivering strictly limited small arms to the Nigerian Armed Forces during the fighting.

Britain: Military Aircraft for the Nigerian Air Force's Air Operations During the Civil War

As a way of trying to equip the Nigerian Air Force to perform maximally in such a way that it could be able to downgrade the imminent Biafra's air capability during the civil war, the Nigerian Head of State and Commander-in-Chief of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Major-General Yakubu Gowon took a historic step on July 1, 1967 in an official letter sent to the British Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, to request for

the British military aircraft to enable the Federal government denigrate the efficiency of the Biafran Army and Air Force. This official appeal was made based on the intelligence report that Ojukwu had acquired offensive military aircraft in preparation for war an action that constituted a grave risk to Nigeria.¹⁰ Gowon explained in his letter to the Prime Minister:

Your High Commissioner in Nigeria would no doubt have passed on to you the latest acts of Ojukwu in acquiring offensive military aircraft. In particular, the possession by the “illegal regime” at Enugu of at least one B26 bomber had been confirmed. They already possess a number of military helicopters. These developments coupled with the Ojukwu’s declaration of total war against the Federation of Nigeria constituted a grave threat to this country. We are faced with a new development with the introduction of the bomber aircraft and other offensive weapons acquire by the “illegal regime” at Enugu. I therefore appealed to you to permit the sale from the British sources among other equipment to the Armed Forces of the Federal Military Government: Jet fighter-bomber aircrafts.¹¹

¹⁰ Confidential: Text of Letter from General Yakubu Gowon to the British Prime Minister, July 1, 1967, FCO, 38/265, TNA.

¹¹ Text of General Gowon’s Letter to the British Prime Minister from Lagos to

Even though request for military aircraft was made as part of the wider demand for the British military assistance in the war, the inclusion of the aircraft in the lists of the defense equipment needed revealed the eagerness of the Federal government to assert its control of the air war component of the conflict. As a renowned military officer and strategist Gowon knew the importance of airpower as the leading component of any modern conflict. He was worried about the report of the move by the Biafrans to effectively possess as many military aircrafts as possible to bomb any strategic targets within the range of the Nigerian side once the war started. While being very optimistic that Her Majesty Government would accede to his request Gowon noted that “the aircrafts and anti-aircraft guns should be made available to Nigeria within forty-eight hours meaning latest on 3rd July, 1967”.¹²

The appeal for military aircraft from Britain presented the British officialdom with a great problem which according to the Prime Minister Harold Wilson was to be us for over two years. When the British High Commissioner in Lagos, Sir David Hunt, heard about the Nigerian government’s request for military equipment including aircrafts he confirmed that Ojukwu had acquired one or two bomber from the United States thought to be demilitarized versions but it was possible that they could be rehabilitated to perform offensive role. If so, they could be used

Commonwealth Office, July 1, 1967, FCO, 38/265, TNA.

¹² From Lagos to Foreign Office, July 1, 1967, TNA.

to prevent the seaward watch by the Nigerian Navy on prohibited zone in Eastern waters and could be used also in strike role elsewhere in the Federation. He was not convinced, however, that Biafrans have the necessary bombs to carry out the air operations. However, if Ojukwu had acquired offensive bomber potential it would be harsh to reject out of hand FMG's request for legitimate defensive material of nature now sought.¹³

Assisting the FMG in the conflict was very important for the protection of British interest at stake in Nigeria. Failing to do so would make Her Majesty's Government to lose so much influence in Lagos thereby paved the way for other external forces such as Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia to increase their alliance and cooperation with the Federal government in the military operation of the war.¹⁴ According to the British Prime Minister, Harold Wilson ... "as the traditional supplier, a refusal would have meant not a lurch neutrality but a hostile act against

¹³Confidential: Minute on the Assessment of Nigerian Request for Military Equipment from Sir David Hunt to Commonwealth Office, 1st July, 1967, FCO, 38/265, TNA.

¹⁴Confidential: Minute on Arms Supplies to Nigeria from the British High Commissioner in Lagos Sir David Hunt to E.G. Norris in Commonwealth Office London No. 10/12 15 June 1968 File No. TX 10/1/Part H/6C1066/West and General African Dept./Title: Nigeria, Defence, Arms, Legal Importation and United Kingdom Policy 1st January 1968-31st December, 1968 FCO 38/272, TNA.

a fellow Commonwealth country whom we recognized, and whose integrity we support. Moreover, the Russians were in the wings ready to supply everything Nigeria needed but at the price of a growing grip on Nigeria's internal life. There was the problem, too, of British interests in Nigeria..."¹⁵

On July 2, 1967 based on the assessment regarding Gowon's request for arms and the motives behind it the British Foreign Office was very cautious to approach the matter because of its sensitive nature. Its position was that, "Britain should not take any action that would justify General Gowon seeing the British government as endorsing the Federal government's subsequent arms purchases from any military source."¹⁶ Further investigation on the B-26 helicopter which the Biafran government acquired revealed that it was a civilian converted plane and that the Biafran Armed Forces did not have bombs to execute the air operation. So, no statement was made that would encourage Gowon to press his arms request on Britain or sought to obtain military aircraft elsewhere.¹⁷

Having spent some months in Nigeria before the war began and

¹⁵ Harold Wilson, *The Labour Government, 1964-1970* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson & Michael Joseph, 1971), 556.

¹⁶ Confidential: Minute on Nigerian Request for Military Equipment from Commonwealth Office to Lagos, July 22, 1967, FCO, 38/265, TNA.

¹⁷ From Commonwealth Office to Lagos, July 22, 1967, FCO, 38/265, TNA.

had monitored the fragile situation in the country with strong intelligence gathering on Biafra's acquisition of military aircraft from Europe and the Federal willingness to counteract against it, the British High Commissioner in Lagos, Sir David Hunt was convinced that it was necessary for Britain to assist Nigeria in the event of outbreak of war with military aircraft which had the potential of attacking strategic operational bases of Biafran armed forces. Therefore, on July 6, 1967, which was the day the fighting started, he suggested to the Minister of State at the Commonwealth Office, George Thomson, British government should authorize to offer immediately, less offensive weapons and a quantity of ammunition to the FMG. Britain must expect a demand for military aircraft which was the FMG's greatest need. The Minister must be fully briefed to deal with the development. If agreed, some form of light trainer equipment which had offensive capability and certainly not jets should be provided. This should be a commercial deal that would not require Britain supplying training teams.¹⁸

On 14 July 1967 during his visit to Lagos the Minister of State for Commonwealth Affairs, George Thomas confirmed that, "the British government had agreed to sale anti-air craft guns to the FMG, but not the other items, such as military jet aircraft and fast boats. The question of arms supply would be further considered in London, in view of the fact that, the war was still at its early stage, as at the time, the request was

¹⁸ Confidential, Record of a Meeting between Sir David Hunt and British Defence Advisers, 6th July, 1967, FCO, 38/265, TNA.

made.” The Minister relied on the July 1967 recommendations of G.G. Forster, the Private Under-Secretary to A.M. Palliser, which stated that, “neither jet aircraft nor fast patrol boats should be supplied to the FMG. But, the whole question of Nigerian arms purchases from Britain needed to be reviewed.”¹⁹

The FMG was very anxious of quick victory through the use of airpower to knock the Biafran Air Force out of action. When Enugu fell to the Nigerians in October 1967, followed by Calabar, there was general conviction that Biafran resistance was crumbling, and this impression was reinforced by authoritative Nigerian pronouncements on the progress of the war. On several occasions the Nigerian government had predicted victory in the war. The British policy including decisions on the supply of arms was bedeviled at each stage of the conflict by these confident predictions that the Federal forces were on the verge of success. In accepting the Nigerian theory of a short sharp police action, the British policy-makers had no reason to deal with the situation. Thus the British Government was not required to take any immediate decision on the question of arms. A Nigerian request for sophisticated military aircraft was turned down.²⁰

Thus, the British government was not required to take any

¹⁹ From Foreign And Commonwealth Office To Lagos, 16th July, 1967, FCO, 38/265.

²⁰ Suzanne Cronje, *The World And Nigeria: The Diplomatic History Of The Biafran War 1967-1970* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1972), 40.

immediate decision on the question of arms. After careful consultations and consideration of Gowon's letter the British Ministers turned down the Nigeria's request for sophisticated military aircrafts even before and after the war started fully.²¹ On July 16, 1967, The British Prime Minister replied Gowon's letter on arms supply. The High Commissioner, Hunt, delivered the letter to Gowon at Dodan Barracks in Lagos on July 17, 1967. The Prime Minister told Gowon that, "I have looked most carefully into the request of military supplies which you made. There was nothing I could do to help over the Jet aircraft these could not be made available at this time for it would affect the critical situation in Nigeria..."²²

The Prime Minister's reply came as a surprise to the Federal government that was looking anticipating a holistic British assistance in the civil war. According to Joe Garba "the Federal government had expected Britain's support as a matter of right. Such decline to the Nigerian demand was very more painful and it signaled the beginning of the refusal of the British Government to sell to the Federal Government sophisticated weapons apart from the small or conventional arms."²³ What had underscored the Prime Ministers' rejection of purchasing the type of aircraft demanded by the Nigerian government was the notion

²¹ Suzanne Cronje, "*The World And Nigeria*," 40-41.

²² Confidential: Text of British Prime Minister's Letter to General Yakubu Gowon, July 17, 1967, FCO, 38/265, TNA.

²³ Garba, Joe, J., *Diplomatic Soldiering: The Nigerian Foreign Policy, 1975-1979*. (Ibadan: Spectrum Books Limited, 1987), 167.

that allowing them to purchase Jet aircrafts in Britain might produce strong reactions and criticism that might outweigh political dangers of decision of even going ahead to deliver other types of arms.

Consequently, the FMG undeterred by previous declines continued to ask for the British provision of fighter aircraft to be used for counterinsurgency activities. The requests were predicated on the fact that “if they could not get it there was the danger of the Nigerian Armed Forces getting booed down which might lead to the prolongation of the war.”²⁴ The Permanent Secretary in the Nigerian Ministry of External Affairs, Edward Enahoro once said that, “in view of the increase in French arms supplies to Biafrans General Gowon would like Her Majesty’s Government to provide fighter aircrafts for which the Nigerians themselves could supply pilots”.²⁵

The resolve of the FMG to get high quality military equipment like aircrafts in Britain was rekindled following Biafra’s resistance that had been emboldened as a result of the substantial number of arms they had acquired by airlift from Libreville in Gabon and Abidjan in the Ivory Coast with the French assistance. Although, the French government had on a number of occasions refuted the accusation of having supplied arms

²⁴ Confidential: Memorandum on Nigerian Arms Supply from John Wilson to Sir Leslie Monson, 22nd October, 1968, FCO, 65/330, File No. JWN 10/1/1/Part A/5A/368, Nigeria: Defence Supplies and Policy, 1st January, 1967-31st December, 1968, TNA.

²⁵ From the British High Commissioner Sir David Hunt to Foreign Office, 12th October, 1968, FCO, 65/330, TNA.

to Biafran government, but it believed that it had done so through clandestine means.²⁶

Consignments of weapons and ammunitions were trans-shipped from the airports of Abidjan and Libreville at night and under conditions of exceptional secrecy in parts of the airfield restricted to locals and their French advisers, sometimes under the direction of officials of French nationality. All these had occurred amid the French diplomatic support for the Biafran government since General de Gaulle's statement of July 31, 1968.²⁷

The increased arms supplies by air which have been reaching Biafrans have toughened their resistance and encouraged them to fight on rather than sought for a negotiated peace settlement.²⁸ It was in the aforementioned circumstance that General Gowon sent another official letter to the British Prime Minister on November, 5 1968. While reminding the Prime Minister on the need to grant the Federal government's request to purchase aircrafts of high military capability Gowon explained that he caused enquiries to be made from the British High Commissioner in Lagos as to whether it would be possible for your

²⁶ From the British Foreign Secretary to Lagos, October 23, 1968, FCO, 65/347, TNA.

²⁷ From Foreign Office to Lagos, October 23, 1968, FCO, 65/347, TNA.

²⁸ Confidential: Talking Point Prepared for the British Secretary of State's Visit to Pakistan and India, 25th November and 10th December, 1968. FCO, 65/178, File No. JWN 1/6/Part A/5A/368/West African Dept/Nigeria: Internal, Civil War Briefs, 1st January, 1967-31st December, 1969, TNA.

government to supply fighter aircraft to enable my Air Force intercept the planes involved in the airlift and sometimes airdrop of arms supplies to the Biafrans. Unfortunately, the response was in the negative with the explanation that fighter aircraft were in very short demand. Gowon asked whether it would be possible for Six Jet Provosts BAC.167 to be supplied to Nigeria. The increasing French threat to Anglo-Nigerian mutual interests, prompted him to urge the British government to relax its policy of not supplying military aircraft to his Air Force to enable them put crush the non-stop arms traffic to Biafra.²⁹

²⁹ Confidential: Text of General Gowon's Letter to the British Prime Minister, November 5, 1968, FCO, 65/330, TNA. British Aircraft Corporation BAC.167 Strikemaster is a British jet-powered training and light attack aircraft. It was a development of the Hunting Jet Provost trainer, itself a jet engine version of the Percival Provost, which originally flew in the 1950s with a radial piston engine. BAC.167 Strikemaster is essentially an armed version of the Jet Provost T.Mk.5; it was modified with an up rated engine, wing hard points capable of carrying 4,500 pound Mk2 bombs, two machine guns under the intakes, up rated flap system with two jacks, larger airbrake jacks, new communication and navigation gear, different electrical fuel system, canopy breakers on the ejection seats, and a revised fuel system including conformal fuel tanks on the wings tips. BAC.167 Strikemaster was capable of embarking on counterinsurgency operations. History of BAC.167 Strikemaster. Accessed March 12, 2018 from https://www.wikivisually.com/wiki/BAC_Strikemaster.

The British government was tempted to yield to Gowon's advice at this time to approve the purchase of military aircrafts because of the Anglo-French strained relationship and French support to Biafra. Britain had viewed French policy in the war as very unhelpful, attempting to break up the Nigerian Federation as a British creation, to cause its disintegration on tribal lines, in the hope that this would in the long run be profitable to French interests in West Africa, and, as a by-product, to promote French oil and general commercial interests in Nigeria at the expense of Britain.³⁰ Despite the French challenge of British diplomatic and military supremacy in the conflict³¹ no attempt was made to allow the Nigerian government to purchase military aircrafts from Britain. Instead, they regretted not having jet fighters to be delivered to Nigeria.³²

³⁰ Confidential: Minute on Unattributable Diplomatic and Propaganda Exercise Against France from John Wilson to E.G. Willan, 14th October, 1968, FCO, 38/248, File No. TX 3/27/Part E/6C/1066/West and General African Dept/Nigeria: Political Affairs, External, Bilateral, Relations with France, 1st January, 1968-31st December, 1969, TNA.

³¹ Confidential: Note of Conversation between the United State Deputy Chief of Mission in Paris and Figaro Correspondent on French Involvement in the Nigerian Civil War, 14th February, 1969. FCO, 65/277, File No. JWN 3/334/1/5A/368/Nigeria: Political Affairs, External, Bilateral, South African Attitude towards the Nigerian Civil War, 1st January, 1968-31st December, 1969, TNA.

³² Confidential: Minute on arms supply from Foreign Office to Lagos, October 23rd,

Britain jettisoned the idea of providing military aircrafts to the Nigerian Air Force, because of its potential of attacking civilian centers such as hospitals and refugee camps, hence, result into series of accusations of the British military of being complicit to genocide in the fighting. The West African Department, in a memorandum released on 22 October 1968 considered it a “big mistake” to supply the FMG military aircraft.³³ Also, the British Foreign Secretary, Michael Stewart raised the argument in a message to the British High Commission in Lagos on October 23, 1968 that:

We still found it politically impossible to supply British military aircraft to the FMG even if, as is not the case, they were immediately available. There would be an overwhelming outcry if a Nigerian or Egyptian pilot in a British aircraft shot down a relief aircraft. Furthermore, supplying British aircraft would not in our view enhance the FMG's chances of putting remaining Biafran airstrips out of action. FMG already have a number of sophisticated Soviet Union bombers and fighters which had failed to do this and have had a

1968. FCO, 65/330, TNA.

³³.Confidential: Memorandum on Arms Supply to Nigeria from John Wilson to Sir Leslie Monson, October 22, 1968. FCO, 65/330, TNA.

negligible effect on the war.³⁴

The decision was in resistance against the copious Biafra's propaganda which had successfully influenced reactions in Britain and other Western European, and North American countries regarding the civil war particularly within the press and parliamentary circles.³⁵ Biafra's propaganda had persistently accused the Federal government of planning and carrying out genocide against Biafrans using different media platforms such as the Markpress based in Geneva.³⁶ It was because of this type of accusations that the British officialdom declined to supply military aircraft of British origin to Nigeria.

Parliamentary and media pressure on the British leadership rekindled the verdict to withheld military aircraft for Nigeria. The parliamentary battle was waged with great persistence by Biafra's supporters.³⁷ The British press interests and coverage of the conflict was something never allowed Britain to make any move of granting Nigeria the needed aircraft to execute the civil war. Following the invasion of the

³⁴ Confidential: Minute on arms supply from Foreign Office to Lagos, October 23, 1968. FCO, 65/330, TNA.

³⁵ John Stremalu J. *'International Politics,'* 116.

³⁶ Confidential: Background Note on the British Policy in the Nigerian Civil War from West African Department to British High Commission in Lagos, 1968, FCO, 65/178, TNA. See, Karen, E.S. 2014. The UK and Genocide in Biafra. *Journal of Genocide Research*, Volume 16, No.2-3. Retrieved on 7th December, 2015 from <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/5926/>.

³⁷ Suzanne Cronje, *"the World and Nigeria"*, 63.

Midwest across the Niger River and Benin in August 1967 Britain jettisoned her policy of neutrality and confirmed her willingness to offer military assistance to Nigeria since then reports about arms flows from Britain to Nigeria began to appear in the British press alongside with the dramatic Biafra's counter-attack against the Federal forces which rekindled Nigeria's eagerness to acquire more war equipment from Britain but not military aircraft as it was a rejected offer by the British government.

The decision was taken on humanitarian grounds in view of reports of indiscriminate bombing of civilian targets and shooting down of air planes belonging to humanitarian relief organizations which contravened the Geneva Conventions of 1949. So not approving the FMG's request was a careful move made to exonerate Britain from the charges of genocide and indiscriminate bombing of civilian targets in the war.

Supplying the Nigerian government military aircrafts was something that was viewed must be avoided at all cost so as not to further jeopardize the British arms supply policy. Instead, while license were approved for a wide range of infantry weapons such as machine guns and mortars, and for the larger quantities of ammunition required and for those previously supplied weapons there was no change in the refusal to supply military aircraft or offensive weapons of mass destruction such as bombs and rockets...³⁸ Throughout the civil war, arms supplies from

³⁸ From Foreign Office to Lagos, November, 27, 1967. FCO, 38/268, TNA.

Britain to Nigeria increased according to the needs of the Nigerian Armed Forces except the supply of military aircraft to Nigeria.³⁹

The British Ministers were convinced that taking the decision to allow the FMG get military aircraft from the United Kingdom would cause a political storm which might endanger their whole Nigerian policy in the civil war.⁴⁰ It was as a result of this that on November 7, 1968 the British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Michael Stewart, informed the Nigerian Commissioner for Information and Labour, Anthony Enahoro, that, “Her Majesty’s Government would have great political difficulties in supplying military aircraft to the Federal government and that, they had already explained in the Parliament the British government position about the supply of aircraft.”⁴¹

A similar position was maintained by the Minister of State at the Foreign Office, Lord Shepherd, on November 8, 1968 when he told the

³⁹Williams A. Ajibola, *Foreign Policy and Public Opinion: A Case Study of British Foreign Policy over the Nigerian Civil War*. (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1978), 44.

⁴⁰ Confidential: Speaking Note Item No. 2 for Overseas Affairs and Cabinet debate on the Nigerian Civil War from John Wilson the Head of West African Department to D.C. Tebbit, 11th November, 1968, FCO, 65/178, TNA.

⁴¹ Confidential: Record of Meeting Between the British Secretary for Foreign Affairs and Anthony Enahoro, November 7, 1968, FCO, 65/330, TNA. Anthony Enahoro was among the think tank of General Yakubu Gowon. He played a very strategic role in galvanizing global support for the FMG’s war efforts. He was also, the choice personality among Gowon’s Federal Executive Council members for the Federal government’s diplomatic activities and foreign engagements. For instance, he led the Federal Government Delegation to London, Kampala and Addis Ababa Peace Conferences in May-August 1968.

Nigerian Deputy Under-Secretary Ministry of External Affairs, Edward Enahoro, that on the issue of supplying military aircrafts to Nigeria, “I had nothing to add from the position of the British Prime Minister and instead the best answer was for the Federal government to hire or rent military aircrafts from Sudan or Southern Yemen.”⁴²

Throughout the civil war, Britain was subjected to intense domestic attacks or criticisms for its arms supply policy and support for the Federal Military Government of Nigeria. The most vigorous opposition came from the British mass media as well as pressure groups organized in support of Biafra. According to Athur Nwankwo, “the UK group played an important role in world opinion and elicited sympathy from some government officials by lobbying mostly against arms supplies to Nigeria.”⁴³ Seeing through press and television that people were suffering appallingly in the conflict, the British reacted very strongly. In the next six months, it did everything it could within constitutional limits to change the government policy over arms supply to Nigeria. ⁴⁴However, the Labour government refused to succumb to the

⁴² Confidential: Record of Meeting Between the British Minister of State at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and Nigerian High Commissioner to United Kingdom, and Nigerian Deputy Under-Secretary Ministry of External Affairs and November 8, 1967, FCO, 65/330, TNA.

⁴³ Arthur Nwankwo, *Nigeria: The Challenge of Biafra*. (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers, 1972), 77.

⁴⁴ Frederick Forsyth, *The Making of an African Legend: the Biafran Story*. (England: Penguin Books Ltd, 1969), 186.

domestic pressure by rejecting the Nigerian government request to supply military aircraft to the Nigerian Air Force for doing so was envisaged to weaken the opposition propaganda that served as the trigger of domestic demonstrations and criticisms against the Labour administration in Britain.⁴⁵

From the foregoing, while Federal pleas for British military aircraft was indeed unsuccessful, the UK government made their decision according to a broader set of geopolitical considerations and cost benefit analyses. Although, the British decisions may have run counter to the Federal government's interests, they have to be framed and taken in the context of British interests at that time. Indeed, British officials' views on the sales of military aircraft did not appear monolithic but varied across the bureaucratic and military apparatus.

British Technical Assistance and Air Interdiction of *Uli* Airstrip

Uli airstrip became the lifeline Biafrans following the blockade of the territory by the Federal authorities. *Uli* airport was of such importance to Biafra and even Nigerians, so much so that the Federalists landed a marine-borne invasion force at “Oguta II”, which was only

⁴⁵ Oladapo Olusola Fafowora, *Pressure Groups and Foreign Policy: A Comparative Study of British Attitudes and Policy towards Secessionist Moves in the Congo 1960-1963 and in Nigeria 1966-1969* (Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books Nigeria Ltd, 1990), 108.

about 20 – 30 odd kilometers to *Uli*, so as to bring the Airport within artillery range.⁴⁶ Austin Okpe revealed that “the *Uli* airstrip was very strategic. It was majorly used for arms deliveries and relief landing. In fact, by 1968, *Uli* was said to be the second busiest Airport in the world, especially in the night, after Chicago O’Hare.”⁴⁷ To underscore the significance of *Uli* to Biafrans Francis Nnamdi Elekwachi argued:

Uli was so indispensable to the survival of Ndi Igbo; *Uli* Airport was such a fortress, the federal air force jets and their pilots contrived to jettison their rockets, bombs and cannons at targets and bushes as far away as possible from *Uli* Airport. And all the neighbouring communities, including mine paid dearly in lost lives and damaged buildings, farms and economic trees. That was how powerful *Uli* Airport was.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Francis, Nnamdi Elekwachi, *Uli Airport and Survival: Biafran War Memorials*. Biafra Memorial, 2015, Retrieved 7th July, 2019 from <http://www.biaframemorial.org/uli-airport-and-survival/>. 1.

⁴⁷ Austin Okpe “*The Last Flight*,” 399.

⁴⁸ Francis, Nnamdi Elekwachi. “Uli Airport and Survival,” 5.

The need to effectively annihilate *Uli* airstrip was of crucial importance because Biafran military had successfully made use of the airstrip to wreak havoc on oil facilities being a major British economic interest in the conflict. How to get the Federal government to carry out efficient air action that would lead to the extinction of the Biafran Air Force was very essential. On March 30, 1969 during a brief diplomatic conversation with General Yakubu Gowon, the British Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, said that “from what he heard the *Uli* airstrip was of crucial importance to the Biafran government.” It would presumably be a major objective of the Federal government to render the airstrip unusable.” Gowon told the Prime Minister that “the bombs presently in use by the Nigerian Air Force were of the wrong type to do the kind of damage that would be required to put *Uli* out of use.”⁴⁹

Gowon asked whether it would not be possible for the British government to supply Nigeria with more appropriate bombs. The Prime Minister then said that “this possibility must be completely rule out.”⁵⁰ Due to the common Anglo-Nigerian objectives within the context of downgrading the Biafran Air Force capability, Gowon anticipated a situation where the British government could assist Nigeria to

⁴⁹ Confidential: Record of Conversation between the British Prime Minister and Nigerian Head of State, March 30, 1969, FCO, 65/333, TNA.

⁵⁰ Confidential: Record of Conversation between the British Prime Minister and Nigerian Head of State, March 30, 1969, FCO, 65/333, TNA.

permanently get rid of *Uli* Airport been the most useful link between Biafra and the outside world.

Furthermore, on April 23, 1969 the Prime Minister held a meeting with the Nigerian Commissioner for External Affairs, Okoi Arikpo. The Prime Minister asked Arikpo about an update of the military situation in the civil war. Arikpo said among other things that the Federal forces had succeeded in capturing *Umuahia* but their most serious concern was how to put *Uli* airport out of action. A most serious development that warranted such military action was the renewed increase in French arms supplies to the Biafran government after their military reverses suffered a setback. The Nigerian intelligence also indicated that the French Air Force aircrafts had flown arms into *Uli* airstrip from Libreville.⁵¹

On several occasions, how to obliterate *Uli* airstrip were discussed by the British and Nigerian government officials for it was realized that militarily the Biafrans could not do without the airstrip, hence the need to cut it down. At a meeting with the British Parliamentary Under-Secretary, Maurice Foley on April 24, 1969 Okoi Arikpo said that the Federal government felt the need to do everything they could to neutralize *Uli* airstrip in view of the continued arms flight there. The federal troops as at the time of the meeting were 25 miles

⁵¹ Confidential: Record of A Conversation Between the British Prime Minister and Nigerian Commissioner for External Affairs, April 23, 1969, FCO, 65/333, TNA.

from the North and the Eastern part of the airstrip. A British official, P.D. McEntee said that, “at that range they could have little chance of neutralizing *Uli* since they had no artillery of sufficient long range. To do anything effective, the Federal army would need to advance to within about ten miles and even then sophisticated aerial ranging would be necessary if the fire was to be effective. A commando raid was unlikely to be able to put the airstrip out of action permanently.”⁵²

The most effective method towards the interdiction of arms flight at *Uli* was either slow flying aircraft which could remain over *Uli* for fairly long periods to scare off arms flights, or bombs with delayed action fuses to create continuing uncertainty.⁵³ The artillery of types required was physically non-existent in the United Kingdom.

When the British High Commissioner in Lagos held a conversation with Gowon on August 4, 1969 Gowon told him that concerning the threat posed by the new Biafran Air Force, the main need of the Federal government was to try and find out their base and destroy them on the ground, and any help the British government could give them, intelligence or otherwise, would be most valuable and any assistance through any channels to get some more good pilots. Gown mentioned the

⁵² Record of a Conversation between the British Parliamentary Under-Secretary and Nigerian Commissioner for External Affairs, April 24, 1969, FCO, 65/333, TNA.

⁵³ Secret: Minute on Arms Supplies for Nigeria from Foreign Office to Lagos, July 25, 1969, FCO, 65/334, TNA.

need for slow-flying Aircraft to keep over *Uli* for long periods particularly from 11: PM to 4: AM. While he complained of having some difficulties in getting serviceable aircraft of the DC-3s type Gowon accepted the High Commissioner's suggestions of supplying the Federal government with more flares for constant use.⁵⁴

It was not until August 7, 1969 that the British High Commissioner in Lagos suggested to the Foreign Office that the key towards curbing the air menace of Biafran Air Force remained the prevention of arms flow and ammunition into *Uli* and *Uga* airfields. There seemed little hope that the inadequacy of the Nigerian Air Force could effectively restrict the flow of aircraft into these airfields, or that the Nigerian Army would be able to capture the airfields very quickly. The capture of the high ground around *Orlu* and the use of Medium Artillery from there appeared to have offered the most effective method of inhibiting the use of the airstrip within a reasonable period. If the Nigerian Air Force could obtain Artillery within the range of about twelve miles, they would then be in a better position to stop the flow of aircraft into the airfields and thereby shorten the war.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Secret: Minute on the Nigerian War and Arms from Lagos to Foreign Office, August 4, 1969, FCO, 65/334, TNA.

⁵⁵ Secret: Minute on Medium Artillery from Lagos to Foreign Office, August 7, 1969, FCO, 65/334, TNA.

Uli Air Interdiction and Visitation of British Royal Air Force Officers to Nigeria

On July 17, 1969 the Foreign Office wrote an official speaking note on the possible approach to General Yakubu Gowon. Gowon was advised to consider the capability of the British government in providing people who could advise the Federal government on how to mount an effective air attacks against *Uli* airstrip and the kind of aircraft, and weapons including such things as Delayed-Action bombs which would continue to discourage the use of the airfields. This suggestion was not definitive. Thus, the Federal might like to establish with the officialdom a small body of experts to consider other means of disrupting the Biafra's air war efforts.⁵⁶

On July 31, 1969 the British Foreign Secretary, Michael Stewart, told the Prime Minister that following the assessment of the likelihood of the continuance of air attacks and the Biafran Air Force capacity to mount them, it was clear that the small-scale attacks were likely to be taken in the near future. But even these might do considerable damage, particularly if the aircraft were flown by white pilots.⁵⁷

The Ministry of Defence was clear that the only effective way of

⁵⁶ Secret: Speaking Notes on Possible Approach to Gowon on the Improvement of Federal Government War Effectiveness, from John Wilson to D.C. Tebbit, July 17, 1969, DEFE, 24/589, TNA.

⁵⁷ From John Wilson to D.C. Tebbit, July 17, 1969, DEFE, 24/589, TNA.

removing the threat to Shell/BP oil installations was by taking counter-measures against the Biafran Aircrafts that would destroy or deter them from attacking. The incapability of the Nigerian Air Force to carry out the action was observed by the Ministry of Defence. The Secretary of State for Defence, Dennis Healey, who suggested the need to offer General Gowon a visit of Royal Air Force Officer, named, Air Commodore Evans, to see whether there was anything he could do to advise the Federal government on how they could better prosecute the air war.⁵⁸ On August 6, 1969 the Foreign Secretary informed the British High Commission in Lagos that:

the British Ministers have decided that the High Commissioner should ask General Gowon whether in the light of the anxieties he had expressed about the Biafra's air attacks, he would find it helpful if he could endorse the official visitation of Royal Air Force Officers to Nigeria, namely, Air Commodore Evans accompanied by Captain Austin Smith to see whether there was any useful professional advice to be given to the Federal government on how they could better prosecute the air war.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Secret: Minute on Nigeria and Air Attacks on Shell/BP Installations from R.N. Noyes to Ministry of Defence, August 1, 1969, DEFE, 24/589, TNA.

⁵⁹ From R.N. Noyes to Ministry of Defence, August 1, 1969, DEFE, 24/589, TNA.

The need to avoid a situation where the British government might be blamed for failure to equip the Nigerian Air Force and lack of experience was the real reason for the visitation. They would therefore ensure that, the Officers were carefully briefed before they return from their visit. If there was any objection to such a visit Gowon should be asked whether he would welcome a visit to place professional advice at his disposal. If necessary, he would be made to understand that such visit never implied any change of British arms supply policy. The officers would be in plain clothes and pay a visit to the High Commission Office in Lagos. The Federal government should do their utmost to ensure that the presence of the Officers escaped press attention.⁶⁰

On the other hand, the British High Commissioner in Lagos, on August 7, 1969 informed the Foreign Office that “the idea of the two Senior RAF officers visiting Nigeria was a constructive one. For he very much welcomed a high level firsthand assessment of the air war together with an opportunity to get good professional advice on the matter to the Federal government.”⁶¹ The High Commissioner mentioned some possible issues to look out for in the cause of the Officers’ visitation. First, the Nigerian government would likely to be sensitive to any

⁶⁰ Secret: Minute on Aid to Nigeria from Foreign Office to Lagos, August 6, 1969, DEFE, 24/589, TNA.

⁶¹ Secret: Minute on Air War from Lagos to Foreign Office, August 7, 1969, DEFE, 24/589, TNA

suggestion that the British government was coming in from outside to criticize their prosecution of the air war and suggest to them what to do. Secondly, to offer advice in the air war while at the same time stocked strictly to the policy of not directly providing airplanes, pilots or bombs to them.

Thirdly, provision of air equipment was in any case a field in which the major supplies were the Russia. The High Commissioner noted that the visit of the Officers did not imply any change in the British government's policy of arms supply. Gowon might wonder what there was in it for him to expect sophisticated advice. He believed that Gowon thought he had a fairly good idea of what ought to be done and was aware that his major difficulty was the incapacity of the Nigerian Air Force. The project therefore required delicate presentation to Gowon.⁶² When on August 9, 1969 the British High Commissioner saw the Nigerian Commissioner for External Affairs, Okoi Arikpo, he was informed that Gowon had agreed to the visitation of the RAF Officers to Nigeria and that the sooner the visitation could be arranged the better.⁶³

The Royal Air Force Officers left for London and landed in Lagos on August 20, 1969. On August 23, 1969 a meeting was arranged

⁶² Secret: Minute on Air War from Lagos to Foreign Office, August 7, 1969, DEFE, 24/589, TNA.

⁶³ Secret: Minute on Air War from Lagos to Foreign Office, August 9, 1969, DEFE, 24/589, TNA.

with them by the Nigerian Commissioner for External Affairs. The meeting had in attendance, Colonel Shittu Alao, the Commander of the Nigerian Air Force; Permanent Secretary Ministry of External Affairs, Baba Gana; Permanent Secretary Ministry of Defence, Yusuf Gobir, Chief of Defence Staff, Hassan Kastina; G.1 Army Staff, Army Headquarters, Lieutenant Colonel Oluleye and Director of Planning and Training, Army, Colonel Adekunle.⁶⁴

The recommendation agree at the meeting of the Nigerian government military and Royal Air Force officers were first; the importance of selecting a single aim for air operations by the Nigerian Air Force and then, concentrate all available resources on the selected task, thereby, permit no diversion of effort except in dire emergency was the first recommendations provided. As the Biafran Air Force were entirely dependent on supply by air cargo for their armaments, and even the fuel for the MFI-9Bs aircraft was reportedly siphoned from the incoming air craft, the selected aim of the Nigerian Air Force should be to prevent the arms supply aircraft from landing. Moreover, it was emphasized that resources should be concentrated for this task and all operations should be coordinated by a single Commander. To succeed in this aim, continuous cover of the Uli/Ihiala area by night was very essential; this would entail only two or three sorties by DC-3s aircraft

⁶⁴ Secret: Minute on Visit of RAF Officers to Nigeria, from E.G. Wilan to John Wilson, August 23, 1969, DEFE, 24/589, TNA.

per night supplemented by periodic attacks by MIG-17s whenever conditions permit.⁶⁵

Besides concentration on a single aim, it was also recommended that the Nigerian Air Force should concentrate their operational aircraft on a single base. Taking into account of such factors as distance from the operating areas; availability of fuel; runway conditions; security; availability of logistics support and main electricity. It was suggested that Benin in the Mid-western Nigeria was most suitable for staging a base. The advantages of concentration of skilled maintenance personnel; spares; ground equipment and airfield facilities were also considered. Selection of one main operating base would enable more of few experienced pilots, being employed on administrative and supervisory duties to be released for operational flying.⁶⁶

To overcome the problem of weather and night operations, improvements to navigational and airfield recovery facilities were considered necessary. However, the Nigerian Air Force needed expert advice on this as their knowledge of what was required was very poor. Also, flares were also noted very necessary for a successful offensive

⁶⁵ Secret: Report on Visit to Nigeria by RAF Officers/ STC/S18411/9/2/CTTO/DCDG (1)/34 from Air Commodore D.G. Evans to Foreign Office, August 25, 1969, DEFE, 24/589, TNA. MFI-9Bs Minicoins (Biafran Babies): is the brainchild of Carl Gustav von Rosen, a Swedish pilot who having seen the acute shortage of jet fighters in the Republic of Biafra brought the idea of Minicoins with the Biafran leader Ojukwu when he visited him.

⁶⁶ From Air Commodore D.G. Evans to Foreign Office, August 25, 1969, DEFE, 24/589, TNA.

night operations against *Uli/ Ihiala* airstrip.⁶⁷ The problem resulting from possessing too many different types of aircrafts particularly in small numbers were emphasized and this was considered in long-term plans.⁶⁸

Apart from the refusal to supply military aircraft to the Nigerian Air Force, the British government did all they could to meet up with the request of other military equipment meant for the execution of the air war such as the anti-aircraft guns and other air defense equipment. This became expedient due to the threat of Biafran Air Force to her economic interest such as oil facilities in the conflict. In a draft Cabinet paper dated November 27, 1969 it was argued that to change British arms policy would encourage Biafrans to fight on, undermine British capacity for exercising restraint in Lagos, put at risk their great investments and British subjects in Nigeria and achieve nothing. This was not a practicable option. It would be equally unwise for Britain to become directly involved even on a small scale. In these circumstances it seems that among the main elements of a viable policy must continue to be to carry on with the existing arms policy as essential means of exercising

⁶⁷ Secret: Report on Visit to Nigeria by RAF Officers/ STC/S18411/9/2/CTTO/DCDG (1)/34 from Air Commodore D.G. Evans to Foreign Office, August 25, 1969, DEFE, 24/589, TNA.

⁶⁸ From Air Commodore D.G. Evans to Foreign Office, August 25, 1969, DEFE, 24/589, TNA.

any helpful influence on the course of events in Nigeria.⁶⁹ Britain was driven by economic motive in assisting the Nigerian government to boost her air capability in the war. For failing to do so would have resulted to great damages to the critical investments of the British companies in Nigeria that were already vulnerable to the air attacks unleashed by the Biafran Air Force.

Conclusion

Even though the case behind the Nigerian government request and application for the supply of military aircrafts and bombs sounded very reasonable, the series of letters written by the Nigerian Head of State, General Yakubu Gowon, to the British Prime Minister in that regard were totally discarded. The British government unwillingness to make available military aircrafts to the Federal government was in resistance against Biafra's propaganda which proved very difficult to counter and in taking cognizance of political squall such military action would cause in Britain. As at the time the Nigerian government began to demand from the British military equipment like aircraft Biafra's propaganda had

⁶⁹ Secret: Draft Paper setting out the background of British Nigerian Policy and used for Cabinet Meeting with the British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs from J.B. Johnston to Graham, November 25, 1969, FCO, 65/201, File No. JWN 1/11/5A/368/Annex/West African Dept./ Nigeria: Political Affairs, Internal, Cabinet Papers, 1st January, 1968-31st December, 1969, TNA.

already gained ground in Britain and even resulted in widespread reactions to the civil war by different facets of the British society particularly the press so the British arms policy would further be subjected to criticisms if the Her Majesty's Government accede to the Federal demands. In spite of the cautious political move made regarding the FMG's need for aircrafts and other related military facilities from Britain there still developed a highly contentious political reactions and criticisms of the British policy in the civil war. On the contrary, Britain never jettison her arms policy in the conflict instead went on a strong defence of the policy as based on the supply of conventional arms and ammunitions rather than weapons of destructive nature such as military aircrafts and bombs. Thus, non-supply of military aircraft to the Nigerian government was only a reactionary move against the domestic cum public distrust created in Britain in view of the British government involvement in the Nigerian conflict. Rather than providing military aircrafts, the British only came to the aid of Nigeria in the air war due to the perceived French covert influence on Biafra's arms buildup and the growth of Biafra's air attacks on oil installations a major British economic interest in the civil war. It was considered that the key strategy towards downgrading the capability of the Biafran Air Force was stopping arms supplies from reaching the Biafran military through the air interdiction of *Uli/Ihiala* Airstrip, thus, various course of action adopted towards achieving this objective were attacking the supply aircraft at their dispatch airfields; intercepting the aircrafts en route to the terminal airstrips; attack it while unloading supplies and neutralize the

airstrips.

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Abstract

Britain and Airpower Assistance to the Nigerian Air Force during the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970

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The essence of this paper is to discuss how Britain jettisoned the idea of supplying military aircrafts to the Nigeria Air Force during the Nigerian Civil War. The paper discusses the air interdiction of *Uli* Airstrip and official visitation of the British Royal Air Force Officers to Nigeria as major components of the British technical assistance to the Nigerian Air Force. The study adopted historical and analytical approaches. The study employs primary sources mostly archival materials obtained from the British National Archives, Kew London and secondary sources such as books, journal articles and internet source. The author argues that Britain was reluctant to approve the supply of military aircraft of British origin to the Nigerian Air Force. While Federal pleas for British military aircraft was indeed unsuccessful, the UK government made their decision according to a broader set of geopolitical considerations and cost benefit analyses. The British government was tempted to yield to Gowon's advice to approve the purchase of military aircrafts because of the Soviet Union incursions and French support to Biafra. But, Parliamentary and media pressures solidified the British government verdict to withheld military aircraft for Nigeria. Although, the British decisions may have run counter to the Federal government's interests, they have to be framed and taken in the context of British interests at that time. Despite abandoning Nigeria's applications for military aircrafts Britain consistently supplied other arms and technical assistance to the NAF mainly offering technical advice on the demolition of *Uli* airstrip in Biafra.