

The Life And Death Of Radio Biafra

BY DON JENSEN

Biafran Backgrounder

Nearly a century ago, the colonial powers met in Berlin to divide the West African spoils. To Britain went Nigeria, an uncohesive land of feuding tribes. London provided the glue that held it together. But with independence in 1960, Nigeria became unstuck. Tribal jealousies triggered coups, assassinations and, in 1966, the mass murder of 30,000 ethnic Ibos.

The Ibos are a remarkable people, ambitious, industrious and educated. Convinced they were marked for genocide at the hands of rival political forces, eight million of them sought refuge in their traditional eastern homeland. There, in the city of Enugu, on May 30, 1967, Biafra's independence was proclaimed.

The Nigerian government promised to end the rebellion with "swift, surgical police action." But for nearly three years, the usually outgunned but seldom out-fought Biafrans held out, though driven into an enclave one-tenth its original size. Cut off from the outside world, the Ibo talent for improvisation paid off. From their home-refined gasoline — only a bit more potent than Biafran "survival gin" — to their hand-rolled cornsilk cigarettes, they proved necessity the mother of invention.

With an urgent need to influence the outside world, Biafra placed a high priority on radio broadcasting. This is the amazing story of that effort.

However, it was a lost cause. Eventually, Biafra was forced to surrender on Jan. 12, 1970. The aftermath of the war was surprisingly free of bloodshed and, within a few years, the ethnic Ibos were more or less reintegrated into Nigerian national life. Today, Biafra is again part of Nigeria, where the struggle for stable nationhood continues, as does a lingering mistrust among the tribal elements.

Hundreds of thousands had already died, mostly by starvation, in the 800-day Nigerian civil war. But against long odds and short rations, the Biafrans still fought on during the summer of 1969.

Day began early in Biafra. In Orlu, the provisional capital since April, truck convoys, loaded with supplies flown in during the night, rumbled in from the makeshift airstrip at Uli, 18 miles away.

Not far from town, radio engineers warmed up a shortwave transmitter. A rhythmic



tuning signal radiated across the African farmland.

In the tin-roofed town, Biafrans awoke to the sound of tramping feet and the abrasive shouts of drill sergeants counting cadence. Thousands of receivers were switched on.

"This is Radio Biafra, the home service of the Broadcasting Corporation of Biafra. The time is 25 minutes before 6, and we are broadcasting in the 41 meter band. We invite you to join in our morning devotional service."

That morning, as on hundreds of mornings before, Biafrans, two-thirds of them Christian Ibos, arose listening to hymns and prayers from Radio Biafra. Most would have no breakfast that day. Their faith would have to sustain them.

By 6 a.m., a second transmitter was on the air. It was the Voice of Biafra, the overseas service, beaming a newscast to the outside world. Most Biafrans, though, were listening to the domestic channel for the "Early Bird" program, a wake-up show with fanfares, pep talks and rousing music.

"Say it loud!" exhorted announcer Okoko Ndem. And throughout the still sleepy countryside, his audience shouted back

at their radio speakers: "I'm Biafran and I'm proud!"

For the BCB's chief engineer, A.S. Alaribe, formerly senior sound technician for the Eastern Nigerian Broadcasting Service in pre-revolutionary days, it had been months of scrounging spare parts in a dwindling local market, somehow keeping his transmitters together with spit, string and sealing wax. It was an equally tough time for program writers and announcers, veterans of broadcasting in Lagos and Enugu before the war. Probably not since World War II had a station tried to operate under such difficult conditions.

Broadcasting in Nigeria dated back to 1936, but the first station in the eastern region of the country wasn't installed until after WWII. When the civil war began, there were two stations in Enugu, the provincial capital; the central government's Nigerian Broadcasting Corp. outlet and a commercial station, Eastern Nigerian Broadcasting Service. With the revolution, both were taken over by the Biafran government.

When the paper rebellion became a real war in July 1967, Biafran radio had been operating for a month, with its home ser-

vice on 3980 kHz; the foreign service on 4855 kHz.

Nigeria's opening offensive stalled, and when it did, the hastily trained Biafran troops pushed forward, startling the world by moving to within 135 miles of the national capital, Lagos. Benin City, in adjoining Midwest State, was captured and, for a month or so, a newly proclaimed Republic of Benin allied itself with Biafra.

Then, in September, the larger and better trained Nigerian Federal Army surged ahead, recaptured Benin City and moved toward the Biafran capital of Enugu. The 33-year-old Biafran leader, Chukwemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu made plans to evacuate his revolutionary government to safer ground. The word came down to the Biafran broadcasters from Dr. Ifegwu Eke, the commissioner of information—"Pack up and move out!"

The three transmitters, two shortwave and one mediumwave, were big and bulky. But contingency plans for the move had been made in advance. Main switches were pulled and the dismantling work began.

Enugu would fall to the Nigerian army on Oct. 4, but a week earlier, a truck convoy left the city, headed for Aba, 120 miles south. With headlights dimmed, a string of lorries followed black-topped Highway No. 3 through Awgu and Okigwi. There the road bulged west and crossed the Imo River. Then it straightened southward again to Umuahia and, after a 37 mile stretch, the trucks rolled into Aba.

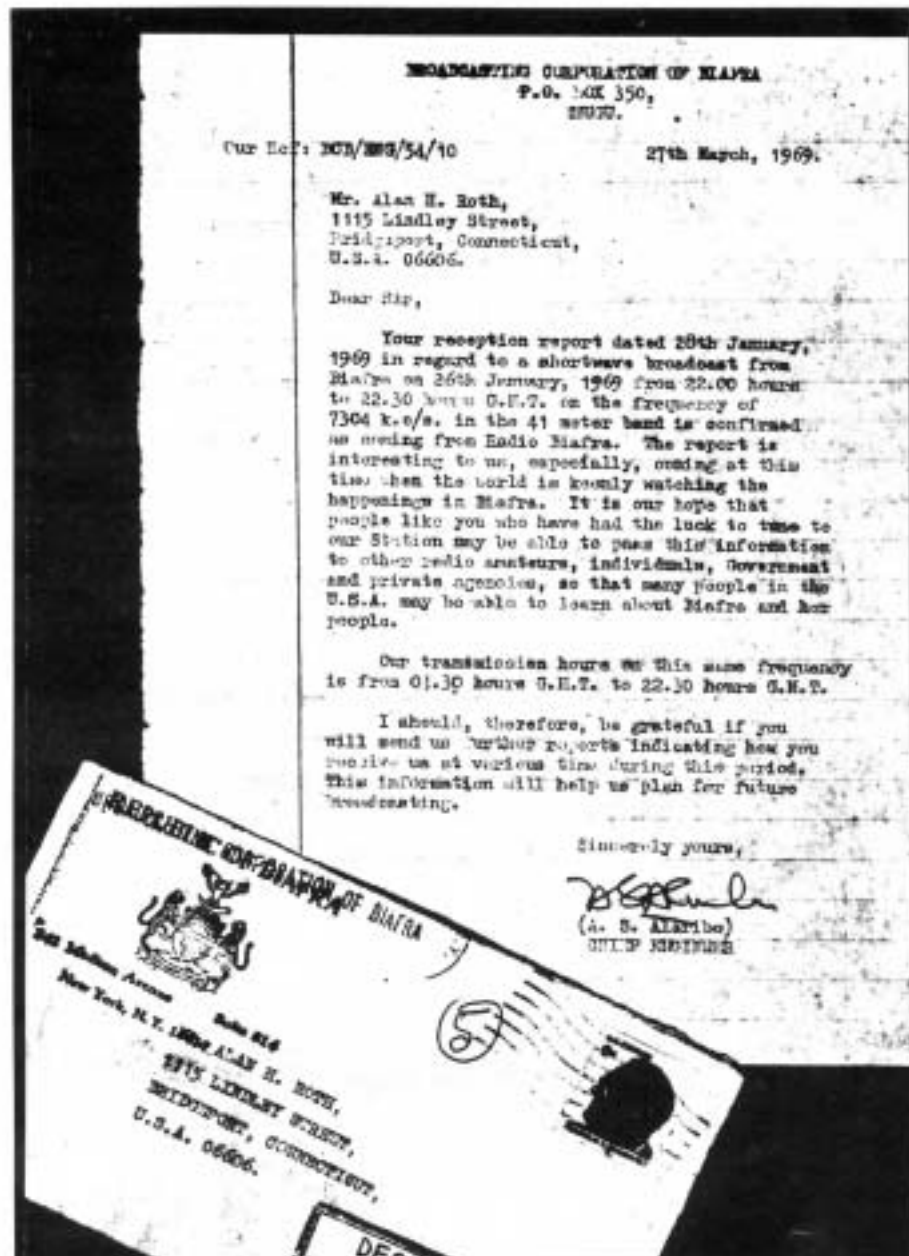
In the new capital, Biafran radio was rebuilt. Its new antennas already were up. The 4855-kHz station was back on the air just 72 hours after it had shut down. Two weeks later, the other shortwave station, its frequency now changed to 6145 kHz, was reactivated as the Voice of Biafra. However, this move, and two subsequent ones, were never announced. To the end, the BCB maintained the fiction that it was still located at Enugu.

Broadcasting continued despite problems. Tubes failed; tape recorders sputtered and stalled. Apologetic announcers broke in to advise that, "until we can continue with the broadcast, here are some records."

A major interruption occurred on April 4, 1968, and lasted two days. Nigerian Air Force Ilyushin jets dropped eight bombs on Aba, destroying buildings and killing 36. The station, which was scoring a propaganda impact abroad, had become a key military target. The Lagos government also tried, without much success, to jam the stations beginning in July.

The Nigerian Army was having more success though. On September 4, Aba fell. But, just one jump ahead, the radio stations were moved northward to Umuahia, a shift accomplished in just 36 hours.

For the young republic, things hardly could have been worse. Its territory had shrunk drastically. The rickety air force had long since been shot out of the sky. Its troops were lucky to go into combat with more than



Only known QSL direct from Biafra, received by Alan Roth, now of New York City. Roth took his report to the NYC office of Biafran delegation, which managed to get it flown into the breakaway nation, with other official correspondence, on the emergency airlift. Radio Biafra's chief engineer wrote the verification letter and returned via the same route. It was mailed to Roth from New York. A high-contrast photo was required to bring out the typing since a well-worn typewriter ribbon had been used.

a bullet or two each. Civilians were dying, thousands each week, from starvation.

Then two things happened to change the picture. International relief flights began arriving with food to stem the starvation, and France's president, Charles DeGaulle, decided to help Biafra. An officially unofficial French airlift, via her former colonies of Gabon, Dahomey and the Ivory Coast, brought in arms and ammunition to shore up the tottering regime.

One afternoon in October 1968, an antiquated DC-4, one of eight planes on the Gabon-to-Biafra run, stood on the tarmac of a military airport at the edge of the sea, seven miles from Libreville. Under the wat-

chful eyes of French security men, sweating Gabonese workmen loaded the aircraft. An hour later, the flight crew, three Frenchmen, drove up in a tiny Citroen. By 6 p.m., their plane was airborne, on its way to Uli in beleaguered Biafra, 450 miles away. Usually these flights carried long, rope-handled ammo boxes and army rations. That evening, the cargo was different.

A half-hour out of Annabelle, the code name for the Uli landing strip, cabin lights were switched off. Landing flaps lowered, the plane descended through the warm darkness. Parallel rows of runway lights flashed on below. The DC-4 settled bumpily on the widened strip of highway that served

as Biafra's emergency international airport. Immediately, the field's lights went out.

A Biafran ground crew skillfully and swiftly shifted the large crates from the aircraft to waiting trucks. Two hours and 60 miles later, the special cargo arrived at its destination, a hidden transmitter site just outside Umuahia.

In the wooden crates were a brand new shortwave transmitter and a gas-fueled generator to power it. The compact, 10-kilowatt transmitter had been purchased secretly by an intermediary company from the Swiss electronics firm of Brown, Boveri and Co., Ltd.

The Baden, Switzerland electronics manufacturer refused to divulge any information about the sale. Except for the covert French aid, Western nations remained neutral or supported the Nigerian government in the civil war.

Later there were reports that the purchase had been arranged by a couple of Zurich businessmen. Those two wheeler-dealers, by the way, later had a shortlived success with another broadcasting venture, a high seas pirate shortwave station aboard a ship in the North Sea.

The Biafrans were more talkative than the Swiss. The newly acquired transmitter, they explained, was converted to portable operation by their own technicians. Before long

it was operating on a new frequency of 7304 kHz (it would vary, in coming months, from about 7300 to 7312 kHz), replacing the outmoded home service station, which was retired from service in the 60 meter band.

The overseas service Voice of Biafra continued to use one of the remaining older transmitters. It operated briefly on 6100 kHz, but then returned to 6145 kHz. It was installed in what was supposed to be a permanent site, a converted home outside Umuahia, and was connected to a directional antenna, beamed west. The new transmitter, for the home audience, was linked to an antenna beamed eastward. The portable unit was parked nearby.

A mile away, studios and administrative offices were located. Broadcasts were written and prepared by no less than 40 separate groups, including prominent Ibo university lecturers. One group produced three different "Newstalk" shows a day. The "Outlook" committee turned out six scripts daily. Much of the material was recycled in the official "Biafra Newsletter" publication.

The favorable publicity Biafra received abroad was the result of a slickly operated propaganda effort.

It was reported that one volunteer on the staff was bestselling novelist Frederick Forsyth, author, in later years, of the based-on-fact thrillers, *The Day of the Jackal*,

The Odessa File, and *The Dogs of War*.

Forsyth had been sent as a BBC reporter to cover what was supposed to be "a small, ten-day war." His reports of the plucky efforts of the Biafrans "angered some mandarins in the (British) Foreign Office," he later told an interviewer from the French weekly, *Le Nouvel Observateur*.

Forsyth, who admitted to being a champion of just causes, was recalled from Africa by the BBC. He promptly resigned and returned to Biafra as "a freelance journalist."

Among the Biafrans were more trained broadcasters than could be used by the stations. Some joined the fighting forces. Others visited refugee camps to cheer the homeless. Unemployed musicians and performers formed a Biafran version of a USO road show.

On the Owerri front, one rainy afternoon, soldiers of the Biafran Mongol and Destroyer Battalions waited in a muddy marketplace in an obscure village. Eventually, two old buses plowed through the mire into the square. A cheer went up as a troupe of entertainers climbed from the vehicle.

For the next hour, a first class band, several singers and a chorus line described by a Radio Biafra staffer as "mouthwatering," entertained the Ibo GIs. Then it was back to the buses and a jolting 10-mile ride to the next town.

The long-expected federal push on Umuahia came in April 1969. Several weeks of fierce fighting forced the Ojukwu government again to move its capital, this time to Orlu. On the 14th of the month, the Biafran stations moved for the third time. Several days later, though, they were back on the air from Obodoukwu, near Orlu. It was the last move.

Though the rest of 1969, things went from bad to worse. Nigerian forces drew the noose tighter around Orlu. As the new year came, it was clear the revolution was nearly over. On January 11, 1970, Ojukwu went into exile. The next day, at 7:30 a.m., Radio Biafra announced the senior military commander would have an important announcement later in the day. Except for a few news bulletins, Radio Biafra broadcast non-stop music—including, this author recalls, a moving program of well-known Black spirituals.

At 3:40 p.m., Maj. Gen. Philip Effiong announced the surrender of Biafra.

Still a few loyal technicians and chief announcer Okoko Ndem kept the station going unofficially until federal troops took it over two days later.

At 2:50 p.m., Jan. 14, 1970, Ndem went before the microphone to make the final announcement: "Henceforth, the call sign for this station will be Radio Nigeria, broadcasting from Obodoukwu in Orlu. The identification signal, until further notice, will remain the usual xylophone drums."

Then the announcer concluded with a few reassuring words for his family anxiously waiting in the city of Calabar.

The incredible story of an incredible radio station was over. Radio Biafra was dead! **PC**



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