

CONTRADICTORY ARTICLES ABOUT WHAT KILLED OYITE OJOK

**Bodyguard recounts the day Gen
Oyite-Ojok's helicopter went
down**

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Final journey. An illustration of the ill-fated helicopter and another army aircraft taking off from the Nile Mansions (now Kampala Serena Hotel) on December 2, 1983. ILLUSTRATIONS BY IVAN SENYONJO

In Summary

Anniversary. Last Sunday marked 35 years since the death of Maj Gen David Oyite-Ojok. The General was killed in a helicopter crash on December 2, 1983, in Luweero District. He was the chief of staff of the Uganda National Liberation Army (UNLA) at the time. Sunday Monitor's ***Tobbias Jolly Owiny*** caught up with Capt Rufino Akena (popularly

known as Kamanyola), his former bodyguard, to give an account of what happened on that day.

By Tobbias Jolly Owiny

It was 1983 and chief of staff Maj Gen David Oyite-Ojok was at the peak of his military leadership. I vividly remember that fateful journey that suddenly took our hero's precious life on December 2, 1983. That journey left a permanent scar on my life because whenever I'm asked to narrate the ordeal, I find myself shedding tears uncontrollably. Reports had reached chief (as Gen Oyite-Ojok was fondly called) that the National Resistance Army (NRA) rebels had poisoned water sources in Luweero District (epicentre of the Bush War), causing the death of many government soldiers.

Oyite-Ojok hired Franklyn, a European chemist to decontaminate the water.

It was mid-morning of December 2, 1983, and two helicopters were parked on the compound of the Nile Mansions (now Kampala Serena Hotel). One helicopter was bigger than the other.

Ten of us, including Oyite-Ojok, boarded the big helicopter and pilot Oringi was flying the small

escort helicopter.

With everyone's seatbelt buckled, we were ready to fly. The engine of the huge helicopter gunship in which I sat next to the chief roared and lifted off the ground.

But just as we were getting off the ground, the aircraft suddenly lost control and descended abruptly, pounded itself hard on the ground several times.



An illustration of soldiers aboard the ill-fated aircraft.

Mechanically, I doubted the helicopter, but I also

thought the incident was a sign of bad luck.

Immediately I turned to my boss (Oyite-Ojok) and expressed doubts over the safety of the helicopter. I told him I would not travel in that helicopter, but rather move in the smaller one.

Oyite-Ojok, always courageous and willing to dare any storm, rubbished my belief that the mishap was a sign of bad luck.

Thereupon, as I stepped out of the helicopter, he told me in Luo, ‘Ole Kamanyola yin ilwor pat. Mak file nani iwot kede kunu.’ (Kamanyola, you are such a coward! Well, take my file with you)

‘This is not about cowardice chief, it is about safety. If you feel safe flying in this helicopter, well I do not. Please, allow me fly with Mr Oringi in the other helicopter,’ I politely replied while receiving the file from him. I relocated to the smaller aircraft.

Oyite-Ojok remained in the fateful helicopter. We were up in the sky again and off we went to the Luweero warzone.

We landed in Kasozi, Luweero, where we were joined by Franklyn, the chemist who had travelled by road.

As we flew from Kampala to Luweero, we

constantly listened in on the conversation between the pilots of the two aircrafts.

Oyite-Ojok's pilot would, for instance, tell ours 'it's cloudy.'

'Correct,' Oringi often answered.

'We are now in location X.'

'Yes, noted.'

That went on until we landed at the military base in Kasozi.

Chief was so desperate to decontaminate the poisoned swamps. Immediately we landed, we were led to the contaminated swamps.

At the swamp, chief asked Franklyn to demonstrate to the soldiers how to decontaminate the water using the chemical he had brought.

We gathered around Franklyn and watched him. The moment he poured the chemicals in the swamp, the water surface cleared out, leaving visibly clean water.

To assure us that the water was now safe for drinking, Franklyn scooped and drank some, followed by Oyite-Ojok who then assured the soldiers that the water was safe to drink.

'Dear officers, from today on do not drink untreated

water. Make sure you treat your water before drinking it,' chief said while still holding the cup in his hand.

Strange communication

As the sun set, we boarded our helicopters and left for Kampala. Chief and his team went back into their helicopter as we went into ours.

Immediately we were in the sky, we heard a radio message instructing Col Wilson Okwonga, who was in the chief's helicopter, to the effect that: 'Tere wunu wa Owinykibul wek gingide matinotino, gited dano gucam wek tekwinnye bene okob bot joo-wa' (Take him up to Owiny-Kibul, cut him into pieces, cook and feed him to our people so that they may inherit his bravery).

Okwonga was the chief army surgeon and head of Mbuya Military Hospital.

When we heard that someone was to be cut into pieces, we all became more attentive to our radio gadgets. We wondered what the message meant. Pilot Oringi, also a Luo speaker (Alur dialect), was shocked.

'This is heinous! Cut somebody to pieces. Who do they want to cut to pieces?' he asked me.

OYITE OJOK

‘I am also shocked and perplexed by the sickening radio message,’ I replied.

Indeed the message had also bothered the others in the bigger helicopter.

‘Please chief, what is this message about? I do not understand the language,’ we heard Friday, Maj Gen Oyite-Ojok’s aide inquired. Friday was a Tanzania People’s Defence Force soldier attached to the UNLA.

‘Give me the signal,’ chief instructed Friday.



Journalists and aviation officials at the crash site in 1983. FILE PHOTO

When chief heard the same instruction still being emphasised, he asked Col Okwonga, ‘What is this message of cutting somebody to pieces about? And why are we headed north? Our destination is Kampala, to the south.’

‘Otto,’ chief continued, ‘Did I instruct you to fly us to northern Uganda? Why are you flying northwards? Change direction and fly southwards to Kampala.’ Lt Col Fred Otto was the director of Uganda Air Force.

As Oyite-Ojok fumed, Okwonga snapped, ‘Shut up!’ ‘What have you just said Okwonga?’ an enraged Ojok interjected.

‘Tin ibineno gin ma ayom oneno ipoto ngor.’
(Today you will be subjected to a harsh treatment, the way a farmer deals with a monkey caught destroying crops)

On hearing this and seeing the chief’s plane headed northwards, I felt too angry that I suggested to Oringi to fly in front of chief’s aircraft to compel it to change direction, or else they hit us and we all die together.

Oringi declined, arguing that his helicopter was too

small to force a gunship to oblige.

Subsequently, Oyite-Ojok made his last statement:

‘Since Otto and Okwonga are determined to fly us to an unknown destination, Friday kaa tayari ku kufa.’

(Be ready to die)

As soon as he said these words, the aircraft exploded.

Straightaway, we believed that Oyite-Ojok had taken a grenade and detonated it in his helicopter.

I am aware that pilot Oringi is still alive and living in the US. Certainly, it would be of great value to add his voice to this very important chapter of our country’s history.

When UNLA soldiers nearby rushed to scene of the crash, they couldn’t believe their eyes. The giant helicopter was consumed in fire.

There were no traces of human remains. In fact, what was filled in the coffin as the remains of Maj Gen David Oyite-Ojok was ash and his pip that was salvaged from the wreckage.

Oyite-Ojok together with all the other nine occupants perished. As we flew back to Kampala, I was boiling with fury against Gen Tito Okello and Paulo Muwanga and I wanted to shoot them on

sight.

When we landed at the Nile Mansions, I broke the sad news and accused Gen Tito and Muwanga of killing Gen Oyite.

I quickly arranged an emergency meeting with commanders Opon Acak and Peter Owili and suggested that we needed to revenge Oyite's death. However, while we pondered our next move and strategy, I realised that then president Milton Obote, who was in India, was not yet aware of Gen Oyite's death. I got on phone and called him.

When he picked, I told him it was me Cpt Akena calling and the sad news was that Gen Oyite was dead.

'He has died in a helicopter explosion. We are going to avenge his death, we are going to fight,' I said. Devastated as he sounded, Obote said in a begging tone, 'Please, Akena I beg you, do not fight.'

Next Sunday read about what the helicopter manufacturer, Bell Augusta, said was the cause of the crash

What Killed Oyite- Ojok.

On the morning of December 2, 1983, Oyite-Ojok prepared to fly to the Luweero Triangle. He was having some marriage problems with his wife, Bechi Oyite-Ojok and in a heated exchange she said, “Some of you are going but will not come back!” an angry but unwitting remark that she would regret for the rest of her life.

Oyite-Ojok then set off for the Parliamentary buildings to see the Minister of State for Security, Chris Rwakasisi, but did not find him there. Oyite-Ojok then joked with some presidential staff and asked whether any one wanted to go with him. They said they would have loved to but had much office work to do.

“I am sorry for you”, he said, “You have missed a free ride!”

About the helicopter

He then set off. The helicopter that he usually used -- a Bell Augusta 412 model equipped with an autopilot steering system --- was grounded at

Entebbe Air Force Base and so he was to use the Bell 412 belonging to Captain Peter Oringi, who was the commander of the helicopter squadron.

As was the custom, since Oyite-Ojok was a top dignitary, the director of the air force, Major Alfred Otto, flew him. On that day, the co-pilot was Captain Harry Oluoch.

Oluoch was not trained as a pilot but as a ground engineer and airworthiness specialist, he had learned to fly. On board the helicopter that morning were: Major-General David Oyite-Ojok, the Chief of Staff; Major Alfred Otto, pilot and director of the air force; Captain Harry Oluoch, co-pilot; Major Stephen Abili, the Hungarian-trained Chief of Logistics and Engineering in the army; and Lt. Godfrey Kato Kiragga, acting Director of Military Intelligence.

Others were Lt. Colonel Wilson Okonga, Medical Superintendent, Mbuya Military Hospital; Captain Charles Kamara, the Israeli-trained technician in charge of the air force helicopter squadron; an unnamed photographer with the Ministry of Defence; and a Tanzanian Corporal called Friday who had fought as Oyite-Ojok's aide in the 1978-79

Uganda-Tanzania war and who was the signaller aboard the helicopter that day.

At the time, there were rumours in Kampala that a tenth person on board the helicopter was a woman, a girlfriend of Oyite-Ojok, because Radio Uganda and the state-owned Uganda Times newspaper reported that in total, ten people died in the accident.

The helicopter set off for the Luweero Triangle. Oyite-Ojok had mapped out a strategic plan to defeat Yoweri Museveni's NRA guerrillas once and for all, and he was going to lay it out to the field commanders.

The helicopter squadron commander, Captain Oringi, flew another Bell 412 helicopter, with Captain Peter Nyakairu as co-pilot. Oringi and Nyakairu landed at 11am in a hilly area called Kasozi in Luweero, 150kms north of Kampala. The two pilots had been flying in small 12-barrel, 107mm Katyusha guns to be used in combat against the NRA guerrillas.

Oyite-Ojok's party landed shortly after and started a meeting with the field officers Lt. Col. John Ogole

who was the Brigade commander, and Maj. Eric Odwar the commander of the Buffalo Battalion and Maj. Michael Kilama, commander of the Air and Seaborne Battalion from Tororo, both of which operated under Ogole's overall command.

The fateful journey

The long meeting ended at about 6.30pm and the teams got ready to return to Kampala. Captain Kamara inspected the helicopters as he always did at Entebbe.

Kamara, who had trained for helicopters in Israel on maintenance and mainframes, always travelled with Oyite-Ojok on the same helicopter every time the chief of staff took to the air.

Some reports said the helicopters had carried large amounts of fuel on board, since there were no re-fuelling facilities. Captain Oringi and Captain Nyakairu took off first and the Bell Augusta 412 carrying Oyite-Ojok lifted off at 8.15pm.

However, within minutes of lifting off the ground, the aircraft suddenly nose-dived and plunged to the ground where it burst into flames, killing all on

board. All were burnt beyond recognition except for the acting director of Military Intelligence, Lt. Kato Kiragga who was seated to the left while the helicopter tilted toward the right. Kiragga's lower body was burnt but parts of his torso and upper limbs were intact.

The manufacturers of the helicopter, Bell of Texas in the United States, later sent investigators to Uganda who were joined by aviation safety crews from the Ugandan Civil Aviation Authority.

The combined investigation discovered that the rod, (the smaller propeller that rotates at the tail of helicopters and helps stabilise the craft during flight) had either been broken or damaged enough to later break off in the first few minutes of the return flight to Kampala.

HISTORY AND THE PUZZLE AROUND THE DEATH OF OJOK OYITE 34 YEARS DOWN THE ROAD

What Caused Gen Oyite-Ojok's Helicopter Crash?

On the morning of Friday, December 2, 1983, Oyite-Ojok flew to the Luweero Triangle area to inspect the army's counterinsurgency operations against the National Resistance Army (NRA) guerrillas.

The helicopter set off for the Luweero Triangle.

Oyite-Ojok had laid out a strategic military plan to defeat Yoweri Museveni's NRA guerrillas once and for all, and he was going to present it to the army's field commanders in Luweero.

The official helicopter used by the Chief of Staff had a mechanical problem and was grounded at Entebbe Air Force Base. It was decided that Oyite-Ojok flies instead in the Bell Augusta-412 craft usually flown by the Commanding Officer of the helicopter squadron, Captain Peter Oringi.

Flying Oyite-Ojok that day was Maj Alfred Otto, the director of the Airforce and his co-pilot Captain Harry Oluoch. Oluoch, although not trained as a pilot, was a ground engineer and airworthiness specialist who had learned to fly helicopters.

On board

On board the Italian-made Agusta Bell AB 412 Griffon helicopter that morning were: Maj-Gen David Oyite-Ojok, the chief of staff; Maj Alfred Otto, pilot and director of the air force; Captain Harry Oluoch, co-pilot; Maj Stephen Abili, the army's Chief of Logistics and Engineering, who received his training in Hungary; and Lt John Kato Kiragga, the acting Director of Military Intelligence. Others were Lt Col Wilson Okonga, the medical superintendent at the Mbuya Military Hospital; Captain Charles Kamara, the Israeli-trained technician in charge of the air force helicopter squadron; a photographer with the Ministry of Defence called Atei; and a Tanzanian Corporal known only by his first name Friday, who had served as an aide to Oyite-Ojok during the 1978-79 Uganda-Tanzania war and was the signaler on the helicopter that day.

Rumours in Kampala said a 10th person on board the helicopter was a woman, a girlfriend of Oyite-Ojok, seemingly confirmed by the Radio Uganda and the state-owned Uganda Times newspaper reports that a total of 10 people were aboard the helicopter.

Captain Peter Oringi, flew another Bell-412

helicopter with the late Captain Peter Nyakairu as co-pilot. Oringi and Nyakairu landed at 11am in the hilly area of Kasozi in Nakasongola, about 150kms north of Kampala. Oringi and Nyakairu previously had been flying in 12-barrel, 107mm Katyusha guns to be used by the army against the NRA guerrillas.

Arriving in Luweero

Oyite-Ojok's helicopter landed shortly after Nyakairu and Oringi and the Chief of Staff called a meeting with the field commanders Lt Col John Ogole, the overall counterinsurgency commander, Maj Eric Odwar the commander of the Buffalo Battalion and Maj Michael Kilama, commander of the Air and Seaborne Battalion Tororo, both of whom were under Ogole's overall command. The long meetings ended at about 6.30pm and the helicopter teams prepared to return to Kampala and Entebbe. Captain Kamara inspected the helicopters.

The crash

Captain Oringi and Captain Nyakairu lifted off first and the Bell Augusta-412 carrying Oyite-Ojok lifted off at 8.15pm. However, a few minutes after lift-off, Oyite-Ojok's helicopter started giving off noises that sounded like an engine or exhaust pipe problem,

according to some sources. It suddenly nose-dived and plunged to the ground where it burst into flames, killing all on board.

All on board were burnt beyond recognition except for the acting director of Military Intelligence, Lt Kato Kiragga, who was seated to the left while the helicopter tilted toward the right. Kiragga's lower body was burnt but parts of his torso and upper limbs were intact.

Some reports said the helicopters had carried large amounts of fuel on board, since there were no re-fuelling facilities. A special announcement was read on Radio Uganda on the morning of Saturday December 4, 1983 about the death of the Army Chief of Staff. It was received with shock across Uganda.

Obote's reaction

At the time of Oyite-Ojok's death, president Milton Obote was in India on a State visit. He left hurriedly, apparently on his way back to Uganda. However, the following day in the Indian city of Bangalore, a Ugandan student claims that he saw Obote at a local five-star hotel, seated by the swimming pool in a

deep discussion with two cabinet ministers, in a “totally relaxed” mood.

Even after Oyite-Ojok’s death, President Obote did not immediately fly to Uganda but travelled to Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania, then on to Uganda. It is this delay in leaving India and then traveling on to Tanzania rather than cutting short all overseas travel to rush back home, that has a number of skeptics still convinced that the then Uganda government might have had a hand in Oyite-Ojok’s death.

A source said in 2009 that just before Oyite-Ojok’s died, soldiers in key barracks in Kampala and other towns had been disarmed. This claim cannot be independently verified, but if true, it would bring another angle to that still unresolved helicopter crash.

Or at the very least, Obote — perhaps taking precautions out of fear of a possible army coup such as the one attempted by Brig Perino Okoya following the assassination attempt on Obote in December 1969 — might have delayed his return to Uganda until the situation became clear. In that case, it would suggest that the government

was unsure of Oyite-Ojok's death and that it might have been caused by Museveni's NRA and for the president's security, it was thought important to watch any developments from outside Uganda.

Oyite-Ojok had certainly by 1983 not only become extremely powerful but by some accounts, extremely wealthy from Uganda's coffee exports, he being the chairman of the Coffee Marketing Board.

A short while before the 1985 coup, prime minister Otema Allimadi visited London. It was rumoured at the time that he had been sent by the government to persuade the British government to freeze Oyite-Ojok's personal bank accounts, loaded with money from Uganda's coffee sales.

A Ugandan official at the Coffee Marketing Board's London office, who is said to have been the handler of Oyite-Ojok's accounts, became incredibly wealthy overnight following Oyite-Ojok's death, suggesting that he might have made a last-minute transfer of some of Oyite-Ojok's money to his own account.

Investigation

The manufacturers of the helicopter, Bell of Texas

in the United States and Agusta Bell in Italy later sent investigators to Uganda, joined by aviation safety crews from the Ugandan Civil Aviation Authority.

The combined Agusta Bell-CAA investigation discovered that the rod — the smaller propeller that rotates at the upper tail of helicopters and helps stabilise the craft during flight — had either been broken or damaged enough to later break off in the first few minutes of the return flight to Kampala.

Also Read: General Oyite Ojok, One Of The Best Soldiers Uganda Had

Because Captain Kamara regularly and carefully inspected the Bell-412 and Jetranger-3 helicopters at Entebbe before they flew, it is unlikely that the rod would have got so worn out over time as for him to fail to notice it.

Intrigue

There also appears to have been intrigue within the airforce involving Ugandan pilots and Canadian technicians at that time helping re-build the airforce after it was depleted by the 1978-79 war.

A Swiss citizen and two Canadians on the technical team to revamp the ariforce enjoyed lucrative expatriate salaries and lived a comfortable life, living at the Lake Victoria Hotel in Entebbe. One of the Canadians was found to be less than well trained.

In an incident in September 1983 during which Capt. Oringi and one of the Canadians flew the army commander Lt Gen Tito Okello to his home in Kitgum, Oringi tried to test the Canadian.

On the return flight from Kitgum, the Agusta Bell AB412 helicopter encountered a storm over the River Aswa and had to make an emergency landing in the papyrus swamp until the storm had subsided. Oringi had told the Canadian to avoid the storm but the latter insisted, saying it was not a threat and flew right into it. Oringi then concluded that the Canadians were not as qualified as they appeared. He wrote a report to the Ministry of Defence recommending that these Canadians' contracts be terminated.

Sabotage?

Sources with knowledge of the investigation say the helicopter might have been sabotaged by the Canadians with Capt Oringi as their target, not

knowing that Oyite-Ojok would fly on that same aircraft after his own was grounded at Entebbe.

Whatever the truth to all these rumours, conspiracy theories and reports, the full story of the death of Maj Gen David Oyite-Ojok remains as far from conclusive as it was 30 years ago.

He remains an enigmatic figure to Ugandans three decades after his death, as evidenced by the fact that he remains among the top 300 searches by Ugandans on the Google search engine.