



# Death In The Line Of Duty

Nigerians mourn as military aircraft, Dornier 228 reels into a mountain in Benue State, terminating the lives of 14 top officers

By Isioma Madike  
CORRESPONDENT, Lagos

The extreme cold at mount Ngokugh did not scare Detimbir Chia, a 14-year-old Junior Secondary School (JSS) 2 student of Government Secondary School, Shangev-Ya in Benue State, from climbing to the top of the mountain to find out what was responsible for the deafening sound that nearly sealed his eardrums moments earlier. His skill and determination paid off when, after about two hours of scaling the undulating peaks, he sighted a large fish-like object hanging between two trees. To satisfy his curiosity the more, the lad drew nearer. What he found was the remains of another crashed military aircraft and its occupants near his father's farmland.

"I saw a plane fly low over the village towards Obudu about 8:30 a.m., and a few minutes later, I heard a deafening sound in the direction of mount Ngokugh, suggesting that

perhaps the plane had crashed," Chia told journalists hours after he discovered the crashed Nigerian Air Force (NAF) Dornier 228 plane. The plane was going from Abuja to Obudu Cattle Ranch, Cross River State, where the 18 top military officers it was carrying were going to hold a week-long retreat. It had crashed into Ngokugh Mountain in Kutu-Mbakunu in Shangev-Ya District of Kwande local government area of Benue State in the early hours of Sunday. The cause of the crash has only remained a guesswork, even as initial reports said it developed an engine problem some 18 nautical miles from the border separating Cross River and Benue states.

"Then, I came upon crushed leaves and branches. There were bags and money and clothes strewn about. And when I looked further, I saw the plane. It had crashed into two trees and was hanging just there," Chia recounted. Bracing all odds atop the mountain, the lad, who was on Wednesday given a scholarship award by Benue

State government for his exceptional braveness, moved nearer the scene. At that time, Wing Commander Sunday Balogun, pilot of the aircraft, was struggling to make some calls with his handset. Chia collected the cellular phone from the pilot, and put a call through to his father. He told his father what he saw and asked him to come with other people and some cutlasses and axes.

"The information was alarming, as it sounded unbelievable," said Solomon Mbaayan-Gonna, Chia's uncle and one of those that heeded the distress call. Tears flowed like water in the ocean when Mbaayan-Gonna and other villagers, including John Akaaga Toryilla (a community health worker) and Rev. Moses Akem, a pastor in a local church in Hingir, arrived the scene of the crash and battled to retrieve 13 corpses, while the injured pilot made other phone calls. In the debris of the NAF plane, only three colonels and two hostesses survived, while 13, all senior military officers died.

Balogun later died on the way to Abuja where he and other survivors were being taken. The dead officers, Major Generals Nuhu Bamali, General Officer Commanding (GOC), 2 Mechanised Division, Ibadan; Olutayo Agbola, Military Secretary, Nigerian Army, and Joseph Adesunloye, General Officer Commanding (GOC), 81 Division, Lagos. Also were S.O. Otubu, Chief of Policy and Planning, Nigerian Army; Salihu Musa Lemu, Chief of Administration, Army Headquarters; Utu Ahmedu, Chief of Standard and Evaluation, Nigerian Army; Peter Haruna, Commandant, Army Signal Corps and School,

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Apapa, Lagos and B. Duniya of Army Ordnance Corps, Lagos. Also dead were Brigadier-Generals M.B. Bawa, Chairman Attitudinal Change Committee, and Y.J. Braimaoh, Brigade Commander, 3 Brigade, Kano. Lieutenant Colonel N. A. Mohammed and Wing Commander Abidoye, who was the co-pilot of the ill-fated aircraft, also lost their lives. Three lieutenant colonels cheated death in the crash. They were A.L. Dusu, O.C. Ajunwa, and N. J. Angbazo.

To many Nigerians, the latest air accident was a sad reminder of the September 26, 1992 crash involving a NAF Hercules C-130 plane, which plunged into the mud of Ejigbo, a Lagos suburb. The Ejigbo mishap consumed 170 young military officers, mainly majors. Most of them were undergoing a course at the Command and Staff College (CSC), Jaji. A number of school pupils, support staff and civilians, who had taken advantage of the free ride the aircraft offered, died with them. The discovery of the crash site and recovery of their bodies did not come easy, as it took some 48 hours to find the site, which was in the belly of the Ejigbo swamps.

In October 26, 2000, a similar incident occurred when a NAF

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training aircraft also crashed into a thick bush near the Niger-Delta, seriously injuring its six occupants. The Dornier-8 aircraft with five officers and one rating on board was said to be on a training flight when it crashed at Jedo village, some 300 metres from the Warri oil refinery. Commercial airlines have also wasted the lives of Nigerians in recent times.

On December 10, 2005, a private passenger plane belonging to Sosoliso Airlines crashed in Port Harcourt Airport, claiming the lives of over 60 school children and other promising Nigerians on board. It was barely six weeks after another passenger plane belonging to Bellview Airlines crashed at Lisa village in Ogun State, killing 117 people on board. These recurring crashes, have drawn attention to the poor state of the nation's aviation sector, with Nigerians seeking to know measures taken since 1992 to improve safety standards in military and general aviation.

The crash of the military aircraft again threw the nation into deep shock and mourning. President Olusegun Obasanjo actually captured the mood of the nation when he said at the special session of the Federal Executive Council (FEC) to honour the departed officers on Wednesday: "Even in war time, losing 10 Generals dying at a go by any country, would be considered a serious tragedy." He lamented that the tragedy had created a vacuum in the military that would take years to fill because of the time and resources spent to train them. Obasanjo, who earlier cut short his official visit to Japan, United States and Singapore, where he was attending a meeting of the World Bank/IMF, said there would be more questions than answers on why the crash took place. "Families will be asking why... why? They will be asking why we lost our father? Why did we become widows?" he said. He advised the military not to allow the passage of their colleagues to truncate their professionalism, which he said had ensured stability for seven years running.

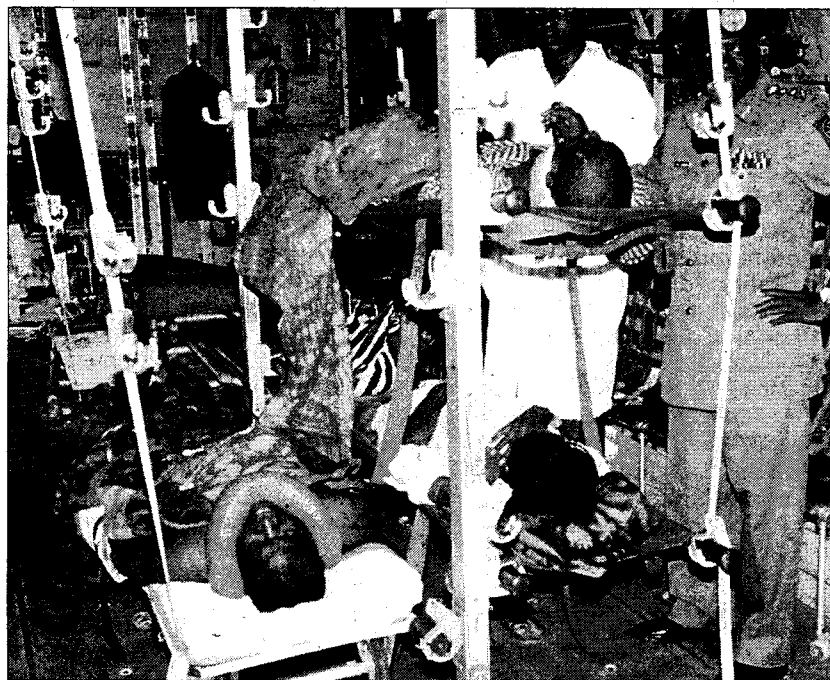
#### Rescue Operation

Last Sunday's tragedy has further exposed the country's rag-tag disaster management and brought it to the front burner once again. The mishap added a new dimension to the state of the country's military equipment. The question many now ask is: was the ill-fated aircraft in good condition to attend to the task assigned to it? Though the Kotu-Mbakunu villagers blamed the mishap on the weather, many still believe the age of the aircraft was the cause of the crash. The plane was said to have been acquired some 23 years ago, although it was said to have gone for a fitness certification of recent.

As in the previous crashes, rescue operation in the latest accident was slow. *Saturday Independent* gathered that the first set of military personnel arrived Mbakunu to complement the rescue operations of the villagers at about 6p.m. It was much later that men of the Fire Service, Civil Defence Corps and officials of the Federal Medical Centre joined.

It was at about 2:18p.m. Chief of Army Staff (CAS), General Andrew Azazi, arrived the

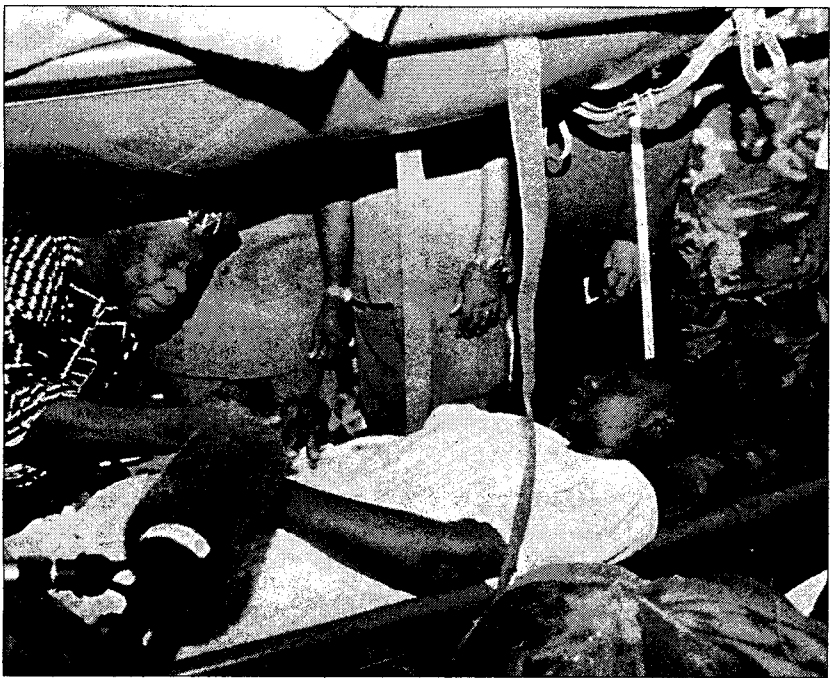
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•Chief of Defence Staff, Martin Luther Agwai (right), with some of the survivors



•Dornier 228 aircraft, the type that crashed



•Obasanjo and another survivor



•Wonder Boy: 14-year-old Chia, who found the crash site

community primary school in an helicopter belonging to the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) with registration number 5N BGY. At about 2:30p.m., the helicopter took off with four corpses.

Many have argued that more people would have been saved if NEMA had been on alert and moved to the spot of the crash in good time. They equally point to the poor state of navigational aids in the nation's air space, which some believe is mainly responsible for the frequent air mishaps. Former Director-General of Nigerian Civil Aviation Authority (NCAA), Fidelis Onyeyiri, stunned Nigerians when he revealed that the Lagos Airport radar was usually switched off at weekends.

The curious question by Nigerians as to what happened to the radar has not ceased to recur since that revelation. The radar, according to experts in airspace management, reduces the problem of locating an aircraft if there is an accident. Reports said the ill-fated plane lost contact with the control tower in Benue before it crashed into the hill. Radar experts say functional radar would have made the search and rescue work to begin the moment there was a communication breakdown between the pilot and control tower.

#### Nigerians React

Nigerians have reacted variously to the latest plane crash. As a mark of respect for the

departed officers, Obasanjo and Vice President Atiku Abubakar, who have been firing verbal salvos at each other since the report of the presidential panel set up to investigate the Petroleum Technology Development Funds (PTDF) deal with Trans International Bank indicted Atiku of corruption, decided to hold their peace for a while. Atiku was reported as saying the action was a mark of respect for the fallen military men.

Senate Committee on Aviation bemoaned the tragic air crash, noting that the incident came 48 hours before a planned dialogue with the Chief of Air Staff, Air Marshal Paul Dike, on the sorry state of aircraft in the military fleet.

Committee chairman, Senator Ben Obi, said Dike was to appear before his committee on Tuesday

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in response to the letter sent to him the previous week. He said the committee got wind of the bad aircraft in the Air Force fleet and decided to summon Dike for questioning. Obi said most of the military aircraft were a write-off, alleging that there was a deliberate attempt to ground the over 68 aircraft in the Nigerian Air Force. Obi, who described the crash as another major disaster in the land, noted: "We have to take a firm stand on whether or not to have an air force wing; every formidable nation in the world has an air force base".

Lagos lawyer and human rights activist, Gani Fawehinmi (SAN), blamed the crash on "mismanagement of the nation's resources". Fawehinmi noted: "From the age of the plane, which I learnt was purchased in 1970, I knew it must have been one of those old airplanes which one cannot guarantee its safety." He said Nigeria had become a dumping ground for old, rejected and abandoned air ships, noting: "Instead of our leaders to use our resources to buy new and safe planes, they are diverting them into their private pockets and businesses, we go to the dumping ground in America or Europe to pick those write-off planes, refurbish and repaint them. That crashed plane was a 'Methuselah plane' and it is a highly pitiable condition for the country."

The country's culture of neglect, he said, cost it the lives of the Generals. "We spent so much to train them and now they're gone.

Children lost their fathers, wives their husbands and dear ones. It is very unfortunate that the incident happened at a time when there are serious revelations on how our monies are being spent by the President and his vice," Gani lamented.

Lagos State Governor, Bola Tinubu, described the incident as a monumental loss to the nation. He said the officers were part of the nation's wealth by virtue of their ranks and experiences in the military. "Where is the wealth of the country if military aircraft which are supposed to be the best now crash suddenly?" Tinubu queried. He, however, called for a comprehensive probe of the crash. "Nigerians and families of the casualties demand answers to questions regarding the state of our military airplanes; the Federal Government should set up a panel of enquiry into the incident so as to examine in totality, the state of the military aircraft and the aviation industry as a whole with a view to preventing a recurrence," Tinubu said.

Director-General of Nigerian Civil Aviation Authority (NCAA), Dr. Harold Demuren, confirmed that the ill-fated plane was 23 years old. Demuren said in the paper he delivered at the ongoing first African Aviation Safety and Security Conference in Abuja, "Dornier 228 aircraft operating in Nigeria are 23 years old, while 17 Boeing 727 are 33 years old."

The dead officers were given a state burial in Abuja on Thursday.