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Felled By Robbers' Bullet

The gallantry of policemen in Onitsha on September 20, when they dislodged a gang of armed robbers and put them on the run has been the talk in town. That day, men of the police force once again rekindled the confidence of Onitsha residents in them. It was a day a seven-man robbery gang put the warning of the Onitsha Police Command to test. The command had earlier warned that the town and its environs was too hot for them to operate.

It all began in the early hours of the day; in fact, about 8.45 a.m. when the gang mounted an operation at the Upper Iweka end of the Benin-Onitsha Expressway. The first sign was that there was danger when they seized a vehicle belonging to a telecommunication company and put the driver inside the boot and settled down for a full operation. It was recorded as one of the recent robberies after what seemed to be a break in Onitsha since the town got new helmets in the police command.

However, the police got a distress call and rose to the occasion. It immediately mobilised and a hot pursuit of the robbers ensued. According to Rashidi Akintunde, the commander of Onitsha Area Command who talked with ***Daily Independent***, the police placed men in all its divisions in Onitsha on duty. From Okpoko, near Onitsha, Peoples Club to Fegge, Inland town and the Central Police Stations, the police came out to fight the robbers one on one. Much as the robbers' sophisticated weapons were an advantage, it was a matter of time before the heat was on them.

They fled the Upper Iweka area but could not rob elsewhere as the police pursued them, Akintunde narrated. In their bid to disguise themselves and escape, they resorted to snatching vehicles at each road intersection so that the police could not trace

them easily. In that process, a total of seven vehicles: four buses, two cars and one jeep were snatched in that manner. All the vehicles were recovered by the police when the robbers were eventually overpowered. As the struggle between the police and the robbers lasted, Onitsha was virtually in turmoil as the robbers drove around the town, shooting sporadically in a bid to escape.

What was more important, however, was that at the end, they were overpowered. Akintunde recounted that one AK 47 rifle, 14 magazines, 214 live ammunitions and some house breaking equipment were recovered from the robbers. That day was not just a day of celebration for the police. At the area command, policemen who took part in the operation said that the robbers wanted to test the police might and to see if its boast that the town was too hot for them could be proved.

It was also a day Onitsha residents had some measure of respect for the force. Akintunde also proffered reasons for the sudden tranquility Onitsha residents now enjoy. "There was a time when small armed robbers operating on bikes used to be a menace here. When we mobilised crack squad, they knew the game was over", he said in allusion of the story that robbers are in for a rough time.

However, behind the police gallantry, the family of Ekwealor is mourning the loss of their bread winner in that operation. That morning, their son, Chinedu Ekwealor, lost his life in the hands of the fleeing robbers. Chinedu was the financial secretary of the newly constituted Onitsha Drug Market at the Bridge Head.

His widow, Mrs Valeria Ekwealor, narrated that at about the time the robbers were shooting at anything in sight, her husband left for his business at

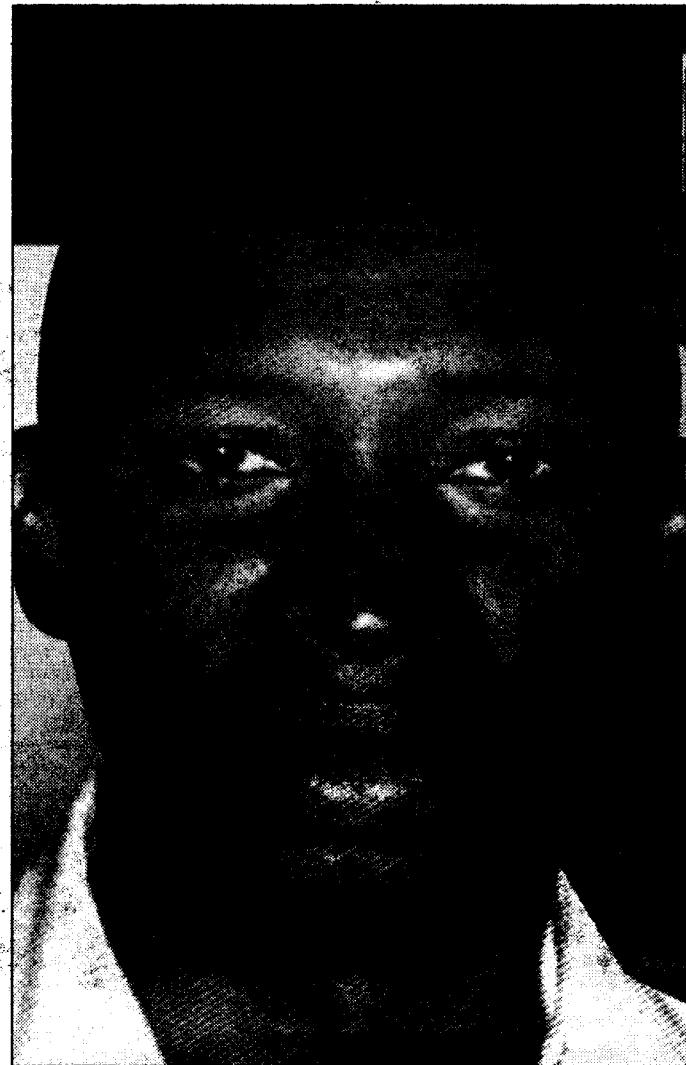
the Onitsha Drug Market near the Bridge head. They drove together until he dropped her at her own business place at Afor Nkpor, near new parts market and made his way to the bridge head.

However, as he drove down oblivious of what was happening, the robbers who took the wrong lane of the road to escape the police were shooting indiscriminately. By the time Chinedu realised what was happening and attempted to reverse and save his life, it was too late. The fleeing robbers sprayed bullets on his car hitting him at the rib and groin.

Chinedu would have been saved but for the turmoil the robbers created in the town because they were looking for an escape route. He was taken to a private hospital at Asaba, capital of Delta State.

Mrs Ekwealor narrated tearfully that when he was taken to that hospital and since it lacked the competence to handle the case, not much was done until she arrived much later in the afternoon. As all that was happening, however, Mrs Ekwealor was oblivious of what was happening. Earlier that morning, she narrated to *Daily Independent* that a customer who came to buy some goods from her told her stories of how residents around Savoy Filling Station had an encounter with the fleeing robbers. But she did not have any premonition that anything untoward had befallen her husband.

However, gloom took the other side of her when at about 4.30p.m., two men from the Bridge Head market arrived her shop to inform her that her husband had had an accident and was hospitalised and would want to see her. She wondered what kind of accident her husband would have been involved in that early morning.



•Late Chinedu

As she struggled with these thoughts, the men urged her to bring just two shirts and a pair of trousers and accompany them to the hospital, where her husband was receiving treatment. "I recalled that some one had narrated to me a robbery incident in the morning and I had prayed that God would lead my

husband safely before the robbery", she said. By the time they got to the hospital at about 4.30p.m., however, Chinedu was still alive, she said. But the problem was that he was not given a proper treatment and immediately she got an ambulance and took him to the Federal Medical Centre, Asaba.

It now took another 12 hours for surgical operation to be performed on him. Hope began to dim when he demanded for a reverend father's attention. In no time, Chinedu was talking about heaven, seeing vision of Jesus Christ standing by. By 4.45p.m. the next day, it was all over. Chinedu was dead.

His death elicited a deluge of reactions from his colleagues and relations. The chairman of the caretaker committee constituted after the Drug Market was reopened last June, Livinus Nwamebe, described him as a man of integrity who worked with sincerity. The chairman of Human Rights and Justice Organisation, Uzor C. Uzor, also described him as a man of honesty and called for inquiry on his death. It is only then, he argued, it could be determined whether he fell by police bullets or robbers' since there was an exchange of gun fire between the police and the fleeing robbers.

But Chinedu's elder brother, Raph, believed he "died in active service".

He said: "We found out that there was a lot of shooting in Onitsha that day and we believe that Chinedu was not particularly targeted in the incident. So, we take it like that. Being the financial secretary of the caretaker committee of the Onitsha drug market, we believe he died in active service. He was once the chairman of the drug market and he fought against fake and adulterated drugs before he was again picked to serve as the financial secretary."

"I call on the state government to do more to protect life and property in the state. Government should check crime," he said.

The Special Assistant to Governor Peter Obi on Media and Publicity, Val Obienyem, was shocked when he heard the story. But by the 17 of October, Chinedu's body will be committed to mother earth to join uncountable number of innocent men felled by bullets from hoodlums.