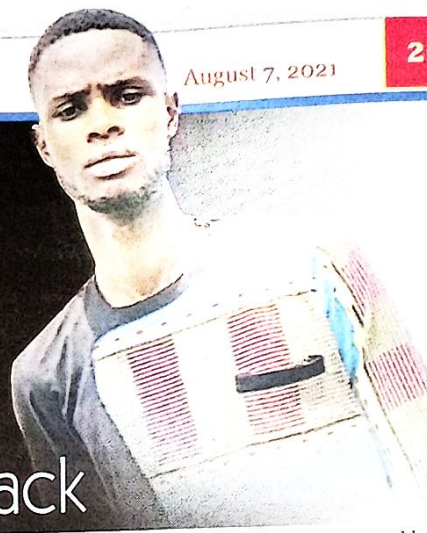




To ensure dad died painfully, hoodlums broke his skull, set him ablaze – Son of ASP killed in A'lbom attack



An Assistant Superintendent of Police, Ogueri Vitalis, 52, lost his life alongside other policemen during an operation to repel an attack by some hoodlums on Essien Udin, Akwa Ibom State. The 23-year-old son of the slain cop, Akachukwu, speaks to **GODFREY GEORGE** about the family's grief

What is your name?

I'm Akachukwu Vitalis. I am from Imo State. I am 23 years old. I'm the first of the six children of my parents. My siblings and I were all born and raised in Akwa Ibom State. I'm a 400 Level student of History and International Relations at the Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka.

Your dad who was a police officer died active service. What led to this?

My dad fell along with some of his military and paramilitary counterparts, during a brave, selfless act of service to the nation. It was so unfortunate that my dad's life ended while he and a team of brave men went to restore normalcy to the troubled land of Essien Udin, Akwa Ibom State, where some crisis erupted between some communities and police officers. My dad faced a bitter and painful death.

Given the nature of his job, did you always fear for his life?

I had for long had the feeling that something wasn't going alright. First, it was on January 23, 2021, on the last night I spoke with him face-to-face. I felt something unusual, that I began to cry for no reason. It irritated my dad and made him think what he hadn't done for eight years. He picked up a cane and whipped me. On February 1, 2021, I was in school and thoughts of him occupied my mind. I thought of how much I had hurt him in the past and how much he truly loved me, even though he didn't express it. I thought of his care, selflessness and his sacrifices which outweighed, far, my thinking that he didn't love me because of his stern, disciplinarian nature. I made a long post on Facebook the next day; an open letter to him, expressing my love for him and how much I was to have him as a father, and how I could love to make him proud and happy one day, regardless of the fact that he was unhappy with me at the moment. I wrote the post with all passion, with tears flowing down my cheeks. Then thought of me losing him came, but I waved off. It was towards the end of March 27, 2021, suddenly, I became restless and was even unable to concentrate in school. I began to call home to check after my dad, because his phone had been switched off.

How did you hear that he had passed?

I began to have this negative feeling on March 3, 2021, when I saw in the news the havoc caused by hoodlums in Essien Udin LGA, Akwa Ibom State. I quickly remembered that my dad is part of a tactical unit at the state's command headquarters and at once something told me that my dad's team would be deployed to fight these people. I became more restless because his line had been switched off for nearly two weeks. When I returned to my hostel that evening, I called my mom and asked after my dad again, and she told me he had been deployed along with some other members of his team to the troubled areas of Essien Udin to combat the hoodlums. It was then

that I began to cry. I prayed, but I couldn't help it. My mom seemed indifferent from the tone of her voice. To her, it was business as usual. To me, it wasn't alright. I didn't sleep that night. I kept calling my dad's number to see if he would pick up so I could hear his voice and find out he was okay, but his phone was off. The next day in school, I would not forget. It was at about 11am, beside the Multipurpose Hall at UNIZIK, I kicked a big stone, fell and bruised my feet. I returned home and called my mom, worriedly, asking if she had heard from my dad. She said no. She ended the conversation by saying he would come back, that that was his behavior. After the call, I logged in on Facebook, only to see pictures of the terribly burnt vehicles belonging to men of the Joint Task Force who had been deployed to combat the hoodlums. The sight was so gory. And the news had it that some ASPs and Inspectors were dead and CSP Ben Ajide, the Unit Commander, was also confirmed dead. Something told me my dad was among the casualties, but I rebuked the thought, with tears in my eyes, forcing myself to believe that he might have been displaced or had escaped or was among those missing. I called my mom but she was still indifferent.

It was a couple of days later, I called my mom and she began to cry, as the very few survivors had returned and dad wasn't back. I kept dialing dad's number each day, until one Friday evening, someone picked the call from the other end. The person spoke good English and sounded like an enlightened person, but his story scared me and made me suspicious of him. He claimed he was a farmer going to visit his farm when he saw the SIM card beside a burnt corpse. According to him, he was sure that the people who killed and dumped the corpse had taken the phone and left the SIM card there. He said he picked the SIM card and put it in his phone so that he would reach out to the relatives of the deceased. I rebuked him, telling him my dad wasn't dead. He sighed and told me he was very sure and unmistakably that the SIM belonged to a corpse. He then said he was sorry for the loss. That was when I began to ask him questions. "Why would you be going to farm at a period of unrest and gun battles when everyone has fled the village? Are you immune to bullets?" He then answered that he was running for his life as well and running to Uyo, but saw the corpse and the SIM card and had to pick it. So, I asked him again: "You're running for your life, and you had the time to stop by a corpse to pick up a SIM card?" But he replied that he had to because there were so many unclaimed corpses there. I then asked if claiming the corpses was more important than his life. He replied that he was in Uyo at the moment and was looking for how to give the SIM card to the relatives. After a series of other questions, the man said he was sorry for the loss of my dad. I ended the call crying, convinced that the person who had picked the call was connected to whatever had happened to my dad.

I told my mom about the phone conversation,

and my intention to get the appropriate personnel to get the caller tracked. But she warned against doing so as it could be dangerous. Then, she believed he had been held hostage by the hoodlums and hurriedly getting the caller tracked would compound the situation.

Did you feel he was going to come back at some point?

Two weeks passed and my dad wasn't back. We kept praying and fasting, hoping for his return. We strongly believed he was just missing. Other people kept calling my dad's number, and a different person picked the phone each time, telling a different story from what the previous person had said. Relatives and friends poured out their bitter emotions to the receiver, which infuriated one of the receivers into revealing his identity as one of the hoodlums and warned them from dialing the number again. It was already 16 days and my dad, was not found. By then, I prepared my mind for any outcome. My prayer then was to see my dad whether dead or alive. I prepared my mind for the worst. The thought of not finding him made me cry the more.

When did you finally gain closure that he was dead and was not coming back?

It was on April 20, a Tuesday by 7pm. One of my mother's sisters who lived in Lagos called to tell me that she called my mom but she couldn't make out what she was saying. She asked if I had heard anything. I hung up. My cousin in Benin called me and asked if I had heard from my mom, because she had called his own mom and cried out. "Our husband don go o!" He hung up. I went on WhatsApp only to see a status from my dad's youngest sister, about his demise. Mom's phone was switched off. I called a nearby neighbour and she harshly broke the news to me. In her words: "Your mom is just returning from the mortuary, they found your dad's corpse in the mortuary!" She then hung up. I threw my phone in disbelief. I reminisced on the moment we shared together, our moments as a family... (sobs).

How did the news affect you?

Physically, one would say I had absorbed the shock of my dad's death. But that wasn't so. I was affected psychologically. I couldn't bring myself to embrace the reality of his demise. I didn't do well in the continuous assessments that semester. Not that I didn't read. I tried to read but each time I did, I could assimilate nothing. My mind was grieving. I couldn't eat for days.

Dad's death happened at a period I was just recovering from a year-long depression. It was dad's messages during the time of my depression that had convinced me totally of his immeasurable love for me. It was two weeks after he sent those heart-melting messages that he died.

Was he among the officers who were burnt?

Yes. The hoodlums made sure he had a painful death. They set his body ablaze after they had ended his life. I couldn't help but imagine the kind of painful death he had to go through. An eyewitness,

a survivor of the incident, had recounted how he had heard and seen from his hideout when my dad was shot and burnt. The official post mortem, carried out on his decomposing body, revealed multiple severe musculoskeletal injuries. From the sight of the corpse, his skull was broken too. I cry the most when I remember that not only did he die untimely, but he had a slow, painful death. When I imagine and picture his death scene and how he must have cried, pleaded and prayed for mercy and also how he writhed in pain as he watched all his blood ooze away into burning flames, it makes me sadder. He died painfully, and his corpse was found three weeks later. It makes me shed tears.

How would you describe your dad?

My dad was very strict, principled and disciplined. He only smiled a few times. He was a selfless person who would think about others before himself. He had deprived himself of many things so that we, his children, could have the best. Though he had his own imperfections, he was a wonderful father.

What fond memories do you have of him?

The last time we conversed face-to-face was on January 23, a day before I returned to school. He gave me pieces of advice and then asked rhetorically how I would cope if he died one day. He reiterated how unafraid he was of death and how he only pitied us, who he would leave behind if he died. The very last phone conversation we had was on 21st March, about a week before his death. Then, the security situation all over the country was critical. He talked about corruption in all aspects of the Nigerian society, with emphasis on tribalism, nepotism and favoritism. He talked about the perceived marginalisation of our part of the country in the affairs of things.

How is your mom taking this?

My mom absorbed the shock though it wasn't easy. I learnt she went days without eating after she had beheld his corpse at the morgue. She had her hair unkempt; she became a shadow of herself within one month. A part of her was gone. She was affected emotionally and physically. She had never imagined she would become a widow even in the next 20 years. The reality that dawned on her was a painful one.

Have you seen his corpse?

I have only seen pictures of the corpse, not the actual corpse. I will see the actual corpse shortly before its interment. The sight from the pictures brought tears to my eyes. He had deformed. The pictures told of an excruciating death experience. My dad suffered slow death. My dad suffered in life and suffered in death. His funeral will be this Saturday (today) being August 7, 2021. My Dad died prematurely. He was just 52, still strong and agile. His life was cut short as a result of the security crisis in the nation.

Was your family given any compensation after his death?

I thank God for the caring governor that Akwa Ibom State is blessed with. He expressed his grief over the loss of the military and paramilitary personnel. He condoled with the families. He released about N60m to assist the families of the brave men who had fallen in the incident. We got our percentage and we are so grateful to the Akwa Ibom State Governor for his support to our family in this trying time. In all, I celebrate my dad, late ASP Vitalis Chima Ogueri. I would establish a foundation in his memory in the future.