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How NAF’s first female combat helicopter pilot died in accident

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...As Buhari, Aisha Buhari, CAS, Gov Bello, Senate, Reps commiserate with NAF, family

By Kingsley Omonobi , Johnbosco Agbakwuru & Tordue Salem

As the country grapples to come to terms with the shocking news of the death of the first female combat helicopter pilot in the Nigeria, Flying Officer Tolulope Arotile, Tuesday, commemorations have continued to pour in as President Muhammadu Buhari commended her bravery in the field to protect the country from the onslaught of bandits and terrorists.

Governor Yahaya Bello of Kogi State said at the age of 23, late Arotile has woven her own story into the Nigerian Folklore as a patriot who died in defence of her nation.

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The House of Representatives described her as “a heroine whose contribution in the war against terrorism and other criminal elements in the country cannot be wished away easily,” while Nigerian Air Force, NAF, described her career as one of “impactful service” that contributed “significantly to the efforts to rid the North Central states of armed bandits and other criminal elements.

When the Nigerian Air Force, NAF, on October 15, 2019, made history with the decoration of the first female helicopter combat pilot, Flying Officer Tolulope Arotile, with their pilot wings after 55 years, little did they know that eight months after, the celebrated pilot will be killed in such regrettable circumstances.

How she died

Arotile reportedly died Tuesday at the age of 24, when she was inadvertently hit by the reversing vehicle of an excited former Air Force Secondary School classmate while trying to greet her.

Announcing her death in a statement late Tuesday, spokesman of Nigeria, Air Force, Ibikunle Daramola, said Arotile died as a result of head injuries sustained from a road traffic accident at NAF Base in Kaduna State.

Arotile died barely a year after she was winged as a combat helicopter pilot in the Air Force following the completion of her course in South Africa.

Describing Arotile's career as one of "impactful service" who contributed "significantly to the efforts to rid the North Central states of armed bandits and other criminal elements, Daramola said the combat pilot flew several combat missions under Operation Gama Aiki in Minna, Niger State.

Buhari commiserates with NAF, Arotile's family

In a statement by Special Adviser on Media and Publicity to President Muhammadu Buhari, yesterday, Femi Adesina, said: "President Buhari commiserates with the Nigerian Air Force, airmen, airwomen and all friends of the deceased, recalling her deft skills in manoeuvring combat helicopters, which he had physically witnessed with pride.

"The President sympathises with government and people of Kogi State on the loss."

He prayed that the Almighty God will receive the soul of the departed and comfort the family she left behind.

It's heartbreaking —Aisha Buhari

The First Lady, Dr Aisha Buhari, also described the death of Tolulope Arotile, as heartbreaking.

The First Lady through her verified twitter handle, @aishambuhari, said she received the news with a heavy heart.

Mrs Buhari condoled with the family of the deceased Flying Officer, Nigerian Airforce and the country over the loss.

She was a very intelligent, disciplined—CAS

In his tweet after her death, the Chief of Air Staff @CAS-AMSadique said: “She was a very intelligent, disciplined, confident and courageous young officer who added value wherever she served. As a Squadron Pilot in Operation Gama Aiki in Minna, Niger State, she flew her quota of anti-banditry combat missions to ensure a safer, more secured Nigeria.

“Recall meeting her at Minna Airport while on operational visit, after one of such missions and seeing her eagerness to contribute towards the restoration of lasting peace to the affected areas.”

It's a national disaster —Gov Bello

Also yesterday, Governor Yahaya Bello of Kogi State , in a condolence message by his Chief Press Secretary, Onogwu Muhammed, Bello said the death is a national disaster, saying she was a fantastic aviator.

“It was with great sorrow and shock that I received the news about the passing of Flying Officer Tolulope Arotile, the first female combat helicopter pilot in the history of the Nigerian Air Force,” the statement added.

...Lawan too

On his part, the Senate President, Ahmad Lawan, while mourning her death , said despite her brief service, the deceased flying officer left indelible footprints as a dedicated officer and Nigeria's first female combat helicopter pilot.

Lawan said Arotile was a role model for young women and the Nigerian youths in general with her focus and dedication to service and calling.

She was heroine —Reps

The House of Representatives through its Chairman, Committee on Air Force, Shehu Koko, on behalf of his committee, said Arotile was “a heroine whose contribution in the war against terrorism and other criminal elements in the country cannot be wished away easily.

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“It is with great sadness that I learned today (yesterday) of flying Officer Tolulope Arotile passing. Arotile overcame incredible obstacles to devote her life to service —service to the nation, to the Nigerian Air Force, the women, and indeed all the people of Nigeria.

Her biography

Born on December 13, 1995 to the family of Mr and Mrs Akintunde Arotile in Kaduna, Flying Officer Tolulope Oluwatoyin Sarah Arotile hails from Ijumu Local Government Area of Kogi State.

She attended Air Force Primary School, Kaduna from 2000 to 2005 and Air Force Secondary School, Kaduna from 2006 to 2011 before she later gained admission into the Nigerian Defence Academy, Kaduna as a member of 64 Regular Course on 22 September 2012.

Flying Officer Arotile was commissioned into the Nigerian Air Force as a Pilot Officer September 16, 2017 and held a Bachelor of Science in Mathematics from the Nigerian Defence Academy.

Flying Officer Arotile was winged as the first-ever female combat helicopter pilot in the Nigerian Air Force on October 15, 2019, after completing her flying training in South Africa.

She holds a commercial pilot license and also underwent tactical flying training on the Agusta 109 Power Attack Helicopter in Italy.

Incidentally, she introduced the newly acquired Agusta 109 Power Attack Helicopter to the President, Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Nigeria, President Muhammadu Buhari, during the induction ceremony at Eagle Square in Abuja on February 6, 2020.

Flying Officer Arotile joined the Nigerian Air Force out of a passion for the job. In her words: "I joined the military simply out of a passion for it. Being a military personnel has been a long time ambition, the carriage and what it stands for are simply exceptional."

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