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Naval Encounters of the Nigerian Civil War: Biafra's Brown-Water Navy and Federal Responses

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ABSTRACT

The Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970) has been examined primarily through its land and air campaigns, leaving its maritime dimension comparatively neglected. This article reconstructs the development, operations, and limitations of the Biafran navy, situating it within Federal maritime strategy and amphibious warfare. Drawing on archival material, memoirs, and triangulated sources, it analyses how foreign mercenaries helped fashion a makeshift brown-water force that conducted limited riverine raids but failed to challenge Federal naval superiority. By treating naval operations as a coherent operational theatre, the article repositions maritime power as a structurally significant, if ultimately asymmetrical, element in the war's trajectory.

Introduction

This article's significance lies in its contribution to the history of the Biafran Navy during the Nigerian Civil War of 1967-1970. It also raises questions about the challenges of realising even modest naval ambitions in new states – contrasting the capabilities of a navy established by a former colonial power to one whose creation was in the hands of non-state actors such as mercenaries. Along these lines, using accounts from former Biafran commanders, former mercenaries that assisted the Biafran Navy, and Federal Nigerian Naval commanders who engaged Biafran vessels in Biafra's littoral waters, this article analyses the Biafran Navy's early exploits, wartime

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NAVAL ENCOUNTERS OF THE NIGERIAN CIVIL WAR

activities, fleet vessels, riverine warfare challenges, and eventual demise. In piecing together the Federal Nigerian Navy's own origins, it employs original archival material.

As a conflict fought primarily by land forces, the Nigerian Civil War has been extensively interrogated whereas naval actors on both sides are under-examined, principally in the conflict's first two years from 1967 to 1968, when most naval activity occurred. Furthermore, even less emphasis has been placed on the operational history of the Biafran Navy. Seeking to help fill this gap, this article presents a historical corrective around the Biafran Navy, its exploits, and how the Biafran fleet fared against the Federal Navy.

The article begins with a broad background of the Nigerian Civil War which is essential for audiences unfamiliar with the conflict. As part of this analysis, the paper's opening sections also revisit the constitutional amendments made by the Federal Military Government (FMG) to bring the Federal Navy's capabilities in line with its expanded maritime duties and remit in a wartime context. Following this background to the navy's civil war preparations, including its role in the FMG blockade, the paper turns to wartime operations along the southern seaboard. It examines in particular the consequences of Federal forces capturing Bonny Island, a key crude oil export terminal located in what was then Biafra. The paper examines the Biafran government's apparent indifference to the FMG's naval threat, before taking a closer look at Biafra's own navy, which it is argued was a brown-water force that depended heavily on improvisation, white mercenary assistance, and commando-style riverine raids. Finally, the paper revisits the key features of the naval war, leading to the conclusion, which presents the late-war implications of the paper's findings.

Research Overview, Methods and Challenges

The naval dimension of the Nigerian Civil War has received comparatively limited sustained analysis. Earlier studies by Abiodun William Duyile, Chukwuma C. C. Osakwe and Lawrence Okechukwu Udeagbala, have addressed aspects of Federal naval operations, while Adeyinka Makinde's work provides useful treatment of the Bonny amphibious landings of July 1967.¹ Yet such contributions tend either to focus

¹Duyile, William Abiodun. 2024. 'The Nigerian Navy, 1956-1966: Manpower and Platform Development and the First Court Martial.' *Polit Journal: Scientific Journal of Politics* 4 (1): pp. 27-37. doi:10.33258/polit.v4i1.106.; Duyile, Abiodun William. 2020. 'From the Biafra war to the Liberian crisis: historicizing the contribution of the Nigerian Navy.' *Defence Studies* 20 (2): pp. 1-19; Chukwuma C. C. Osakwe and Lawrence Okechukwu Udeagbala 'Naval Military Operations in Bonny during the Nigerian Civil War 1967-1970,' *Advances in Historical Studies* no. 4 (2015), p. 234; 'A Comparative Study of the Nigerian and Biafran Navies During the Nigerian Civil War (1967-70', Lawrence Okechukwu Udeagbala in *African Navies: Historical and* 121

primarily on the Federal Navy or to treat maritime operations episodically within broader campaign narratives. The operational history of the Biafran Navy, by contrast, has remained largely fragmentary and anecdotal, appearing only in passing within memoir literature or general political histories of the war.²

More recent monographs on Biafra, including Samuel Fury Childs Daly's study of law and crime in Biafra, and Roy Doron's account of the war, offer important political and military insights but do not undertake sustained analysis of naval organisation, riverine strategy, or amphibious counter-measures.³ As a result, the maritime contest between Federal and Biafran forces has not been examined as a coherent operational theatre in its own right. This article seeks to address that omission by reconstructing the development, capabilities and limits of the Biafran Navy, while situating it within the broader framework of Federal maritime strategy and amphibious warfare. In doing so, it repositions naval activity from a peripheral subplot to a structurally significant element in the conflict's trajectory.

The relative neglect of the Biafran Navy is not confined to a single strand of the literature. Michael Gould's *The Biafran War*, despite its broad framing, makes no substantive reference to the Biafran Navy as an operational entity.⁴ Lawrence Udeagbala is among the few scholars to address the subject directly.⁵ However, his analysis relies largely on secondary historical material and adopts a comparative

Contemporary Perspectives, Timothy Stapleton (ed), (London: Routledge, 2022), pp. 91-108; Adeyinka Makinde, 'The Bonny Landing: A Question & Answer Overview of Black Africa's First Amphibious Operation', <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/00253359.2024.2371202>. Accessed 6 March 2024; Makinde, Adeyinka, 'The Nigerian Civil War: A New History of the Bonny Amphibious Operation, July-September 1967', <https://tinyurl.com/mwfmduxv>. Accessed 10 October 2024. doi:10.2139/ssrn.4531431.

²Recent monographs centred on Biafra, including Samuel Fury Childs Daly's *History of the Republic of Biafra* and Roy Doron's *Biafra*, provide valuable political and military analyses of the conflict but do not offer sustained operational examination of the Biafran navy. Daly's focus lies principally on law, governance, and crime within Biafra, while Doron's treatment concentrates more extensively on land and air operations than on maritime organisation or riverine warfare. See: Samuel Fury Childs Daly, *History of the Republic of Biafra: Law, Crime, and the Nigerian Civil War*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020) and Roy Doron, *Biafra: A Military History*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2025).

³Daly, *History*; Doron, *Biafra*

⁴Michael Gould, *The Biafran War: The Struggle for Modern Nigeria*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013).

⁵Udeagbala, 'A Comparative Study'.

NAVAL ENCOUNTERS OF THE NIGERIAN CIVIL WAR

framework that concentrates primarily on the Nigerian Navy rather than reconstructing the organisation, capabilities, and strategic limitations of the Biafran naval effort itself. Taken together, these studies underscore the extent to which the Biafran Navy has remained peripheral within the wider historiography of the war. Among the various domains of military activity during the Nigerian Civil War, it is arguably the least systematically examined.

Part of this historiographical lacuna stems from the uneven survival of primary sources. Unlike the Federal Navy, whose institutional origins were closely tied to British advisory and training structures and are therefore partially documented in British archives, the Biafran Navy left behind no comparable archival footprint. In seeking to address this imbalance, additional research was undertaken at the UK National Archives (TNA) where substantive holdings illuminate the development and operational posture of the Federal Navy but offer only fragmentary references to Biafran maritime activity. Colleagues within the Nigerian military assisted in identifying further material, and documents held at the Nigerian National Defence College (NDC) library in Abuja proved particularly valuable. Even so, significant gaps remained, necessitating careful triangulation with memoir literature, contemporary reportage, and foreign intelligence records in order to reconstruct as complete a picture as possible.

The lack of academic and official historical sources on the Biafran Navy specifically left mostly journalistic sources, media prints, and biographical accounts by Benard Odogwu, Rolf Steiner, Emeka Ojukwu, Nelson Soroh, Pascal Odu, and Alabi-Isama amongst others.⁶ These sources supplemented what little can be gleaned, specific to the Biafran Navy from TNA and, to a lesser degree, from the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and State Department archives. Where possible, the author has triangulated sources. For instance, in discussing the death of the Italian rebel mercenary, Pier Giorgio Norbiato, his biography was employed first, then a reference to the incident in the journal of Rolf Steiner, another mercenary, and finally, the account of Colonel Olusegun Obasanjo, one of the Federal commanders active in the sector when Norbiato was killed. Notwithstanding its limitations, this approach has informed and allowed a more analytical and evidence-based study.

⁶Bernard Odogwu, *No Place to Hide: Crises and Conflicts inside Biafra*, (Enugu: Fourth Dimension, 1985); Rolf Steiner, *The Last Adventurer*, (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1978); Frederick Forsyth, *Emeka*, (Ibadan, Nigeria: Spectrum Books, 1992); Nelson Bossman Soroh, *A Sailor's Dream: Autobiography of Rear Admiral Nelson Bossman Soroh*, Lagos, Nigeria: Crucible Publishers, 2001); Pascal Odu, *The Future That Vanished: A Biafra Story*, (Bloomington, Indiana: Xlibris Corp, YEAR); Godwin Alabi-Isama, *The Tragedy of Victory*, (Ibadan, Nigeria: Spectrum Books, 2013).

Military Rule & Dysfunction, Ethnic Violence & The Road to Civil War

By the mid-1960s, Nigeria's political system was in visible decline. Riots and disturbances, particularly in the Middle Belt and Western Regions, deepened the crisis. Two military coups, in January and July 1966 respectively, violently truncated the First Republic and installed the military in power. One proximate consequence of the coup, even as Nigeria's praetorians settled into an odious interregnum, was that the military disintegrated, with the effects of disintegration most evident in the Army as the oldest of the three service branches. Indeed, by July 1966, 'the Army on the whole looked like a loose bundle held together by a thin thread'.⁷

Stratified along ethnic lines and with a disastrous attempt at politics and governance since January, when it first came into power, the Army effectively imploded. The January coup led to the murder of the most powerful Northern politicians and the most senior Northern military officers. This coup, led by persons of predominantly Igbo ethnic extraction, cast the Eastern Igbo in conspiratorial roles.⁸ Moreover, that Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi, an Eastern Igbo and the Army's head, emerged in charge of the country deepened Northern suspicions. In many quarters, it was taken as confirmation of an Igbo conspiracy.⁹

In a second *coup d'état* that occurred in July 1966, Northern officers seized power, targeting officers and men of Igbo ethnic extraction, while looking also to avenge the January murders. The 'July Rematch', as the July counter-coup is cynically referred to, employs a metaphor that requires some reflection.¹⁰ Specifically, its significance lies in the overtones of a structured fixture – predictability that what occurred in January 1966 would, inevitably, be followed by a response driven by affected ethnic parties.

⁷Hilary M. Njoku, *A Tragedy without Heroes: Nigeria-Biafra War*, (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishing Co Ltd., 1987), p. 62

⁸Akali Omeni. 2025. 'Politics and the Nigerian Army (1965–1966): 'Nigerianization' and the Implications of Aguiyi-Ironsi's Appointment as General Officer Commanding (GOC).' *Journal of African Military History* pp. 1-39. doi:10.1163/24680966-bja10024. Accessed 23 January 2025.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰See, for instance, Isaac Olawale Albert. 1994. 'Violence in metropolitan Kano: A Historical Perspective', in Jinmi Adisa, Eghosa E. Osaghae, Ismaila Touré, N'Guessan Kouamé and Isaac Olawale Albert (eds.), *Urban Violence in Africa: Pilot Studies*, (Ibadan: IFRA-Nigeria, 1994), pp. 111-136, p. 92; Max Siollun, *Oil, Politics and Violence: Nigeria's Military Coup Culture, (1961–1976)*, (New York: Algora Publishing, 2009), pp. 97-116; D.J.M. Muffett, *Let truth be told*, (Zaria, Kaduna: Hudahuda Publishing, 1982), pp. 106-109.

NAVAL ENCOUNTERS OF THE NIGERIAN CIVIL WAR

In this instance, by the time the July mutineers were done, Ironsi and over a hundred other ethnic Igbos in the Army had been killed. Lieutenant Colonel Yakubu Gowon, a Middle-Belt Army officer, was promptly installed as Supreme Commander and military Head of State by the predominantly Northern coup plotters. Despite this shift in ethnic power, the anti-Igbo killings soon spread beyond the Army, with many thousands of Igbos living in the Northern Region murdered by Northern, predominantly by Hausa, mobs.¹¹

By January 1967 these pogroms, as they came to be known, led the country to the precipice of civil war.¹² In the following months, propaganda around the brutality of the pogroms and the idea that Igbos were unsafe anywhere in Nigeria, except in the Eastern region, became widespread as more Easterners returned home. Nor were the killings restricted to Kano – there were mass murder of Igbos in the Northern towns of Kaduna, Gombe, Jos, and Sokoto.¹³ Some estimates put the number of Igbos killed in the pogroms at up to 30,000.¹⁴ The Igbos were not the only victims. Other non-Igbo Easterners were also killed. And many Hausas, attempting to flee the East, were intercepted by Igbo soldiers and mobs and killed.¹⁵

Ethnic tensions worsened and military divisions deepened as the Eastern Region increasingly warned that it would secede from the Nigerian Federation, with negotiations to resolve these divisions coming up short.¹⁶ Armed hostilities between the former countrymen and brothers-in-arms now seemed inevitable. Yet even before the shooting war began in July 1967, the maritime space emerged as a conflict arena.

The Nigerian Navy at War

As the old English idiom goes, ‘it takes two to tango’. In investigating the Biafran navy’s wartime operations, it is necessary to shed some light on the capabilities, posture and

¹¹Michael Vickers, ‘Competition and Control in Modern Nigeria: Origins of the War with Biafra’, *International Journal* 25, 3 (1973), pp. 603-633; see also, John Naber Paden, *Religion and Political Culture in Kano*, (California: University of California Press, 1973), p. 333 and Albert, ‘Violence in metropolitan Kano,’ p. 91.

¹²Chinua Achebe, *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra*, (London: Penguin Books, YEAR)

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 48.

¹⁴Achebe, *There Was a Country*, p. 82.

¹⁵Steiner, *The Last Adventurer*, pp. 48-49.

¹⁶British Pathé, ‘Nigeria: Eastern Military Ruler Boycotts Benin City Meeting of Nigerian Military Governors (1967).’ 10 March 1967.

<https://www.britishpathe.com/asset/212846/>. Accessed 30 December 2024.; see also, Rex Niven, *The War of Nigerian Unity 1967-1970*, (Ibadan: Evans Brothers, 1970), p. 122.

actions of Biafra's opponent – the Federal Nigerian Navy. A relevant question at this juncture is what sort of navy did the Federation of Nigeria possess at the outbreak of the civil war in 1967? This section of the paper seeks to address that question, the answer to which helps identify, broadly speaking, the threat faced by the Biafran Navy.

By 1960, and after more than a half-century of colonial rule, Britain was set to leave Nigeria's affairs to Nigerians. In 1959, a year before Nigerian Independence, the British government left, as parting gifts to the newly-formed Royal Nigerian Navy, two naval vessels: the first was H.M.S. *Hare*, an Algerine Class Minesweeper, a Second World War vintage warship armed with one 4-inch QF gun and four Swedish-made *Bofors* 40-mm anti-aircraft guns; the second was a much smaller Seaward Defence Motor Launch (SDML), a small vessel armed with two *Oerlikon* 20mm anti-aircraft guns and machine guns. Both were obsolescent and surplus to Royal Navy requirements.¹⁷

In gifting the Nigerian government those vessels, Britain did not equip Nigeria with an offensive navy that might pose a regional threat and spark a regional naval arms race.¹⁸ Instead, the role of the Royal Nigerian Navy, formed in 1959, was said to be 'purely defensive and anti-submarine'. Along these lines, British officials, seeking to assuage neighbouring Ghana's security concerns that the Nigerian Navy would quickly be employed for war, noted that Nigeria's Navy was created 'to assist Nigeria to contribute to its own defence and that of the Commonwealth ... of which Ghana is a member'.¹⁹ Moreover, British officials were also adamant that, in helping Nigeria establish a navy, the institution served as a 'small defensive force' with no other purpose other than its obvious one – the beginning of Nigeria's own seaward defence.²⁰ However, was the Nigerian Navy strictly a defensive force? The Navy's capabilities by 1967, shortly before the outbreak of war, suggest otherwise.

Even before war came, the Balewa regime, cognisant that a navy came with a new and expanded range of maritime responsibility for the government, began revisiting the existing legislation. As part of this process, the 1964 Navy Act was pivotal. It repealed the 1958 Ordinance, abolished the three-mile restriction, and gave the service for the first time a mandate for the 'naval defence of Nigeria.' This mandate carried both

¹⁷TNA DO 35/10461 Dominions Office, Enclosure: Note on Gift of Ships to Nigeria, CRO, 1 June 1959.

¹⁸TNA DO 35/10461 Colonial Office, Ghana Department, M.E. Allen to Mr Snelling, Secret: Nigerian Navy, 28 January 1959.

¹⁹TNA CO 968/662 Colonial Office, Alan Lennox-Boyd (Secretary of State for the Colonies) to James Robertson (Governor-General of Nigeria), Personal No. 23, 30 January 1959.

²⁰TNA CO 968/662 Colonial Office, M.G. Smith, Esq. (Colonial Office) to M.E. Allen, Esq. (Commonwealth Relations Office), 27 January 1959.

NAVAL ENCOUNTERS OF THE NIGERIAN CIVIL WAR

strategic and operational weight: defending the coastline; conducting hydrographic surveys; training officers; and supporting customs and port enforcement. Between 1964 and 1967, further changes expanded the Federal Navy's Area of Responsibility. However, by far the most significant change to maritime law came during the military interregnum when the Gowon regime issued the Territorial Waters Decree of 1967.²¹ Anticipating war and the need to blockade Biafra's southern seaboard (see Figure 1), this FMG Decree extended Nigeria's territorial waters from three to twelve nautical miles. The change was made possible through the FMG's amendment to section 18(1) of the 1964 Interpretation Act.²²



Figure 1: Political Map of Biafra Showing the Southern Seaboard.²³

Still, laws on paper did not by themselves make a fighting navy. Expanded jurisdiction meant little without ships, weapons, and an organisation to back it up. Thus, alongside

²¹Duyile, "From the Biafra war," 6

²²Ibid.

²³Map of Biafra attributed to Eric Gaba. Used under GNU Free Documentation License.

these legislative reforms, Gowon's military government began to militarise its maritime arm in earnest. Key to this change in the Federal Navy, from coastal defence to one with a more offensive posture, was the frigate, *Nigeria*, which was ordered from Dutch shipbuilders Wilton-Fijenoord in 1963.²⁴ During the construction period, the Dutch government loaned Nigeria a U.S.-built PC-461 class patrol craft, the former HNLMS *Queen Wilhelmina* (ex-PC 468). Renamed NNS *Ogoja* it had originally been designed to counter German U-boats. *Ogoja* measured 52.9 by 7.0 by 2.2 metres, could make 12 knots, and carried a formidable set of weapons, most of which were fitted after transfer: a 76mm bow gun; a 40mm *Bofors* gun, five 20mm *Oerlikons*; two rocket launchers; four depth charge projectors and two depth charge tracks. In October 1965, the Dutch gifted *Ogoja* outright to Nigeria.²⁵

As the navy's flagship, and at £3.5m, the single most expensive piece of military equipment purchased by Nigeria at the time, the 104-meter-long *Nigeria*, with a draft of 3.5m and width of 11.3m, came with competitive weapons systems for its class. These included two 4-inch Mk 19 British-made low-velocity 40-calibre naval guns in a twin turret; four 40mm/60 Mk 7 Swedish-made *Bofors* 40mm guns, and one British-made Squid Anti-Submarine mortar. The *Nigeria* was also fitted with a helicopter pad in addition to its Royal Navy-pattern armament.²⁶

Aside from the capabilities of the NNS *Nigeria*, the navy's Ordnance Stores included a variety of weapons, equipment, munitions and bombs that warships across the fleet could employ.²⁷ Viewed in this light, the navy's pre-war Order of Battle (ORBAT) in 1967 tells its own story. The organisation and deployment of its forces suggest that, despite British officials' claims, Nigeria's new navy was not being created for strictly defensive purposes.²⁸ The navy could, if required, be deployed in offensive and interdiction roles beyond Nigeria's continental shelf.²⁹ Moreover, with conflict

²⁴Mazumdar, Mrityunjoy, 'Fleet Review - The Nigerian Navy: Making slow headway against heavy seas.' In *Seaforth World Naval Review*, edited by Conrad Waters, 51-63 (Yorkshire: Seaforth Publishing, 2021), p. 55

²⁵United States Foreign Broadcast Information Service, 'Dutch Gift of Warship', Daily Report: Foreign Radio Broadcasts No. 201, 1965, p. 113.

²⁶Gardiner, Robert, Stephen Chumbley, and Przemysław Budzbon, *Conway's All the World's Fighting Ships 1947-1995*, (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1995).

²⁷Duyile, 'From the Biafra war,'

²⁸*Ibid.*

²⁹Nigerian Navy, *History, Roles and Organization of the Nigerian Navy: Report for students of Senior Course 32*, (AFCS, Jaji-Kaduna: Armed Forces Command and Staff College, n.d.) pp. 7-8.

NAVAL ENCOUNTERS OF THE NIGERIAN CIVIL WAR

looming, the navy would soon be thrust into such roles on Nigeria's southern seaboard (see Figure 1).³⁰

By contrast Biafra had no naval resources at the time of its secession.

The Naval Blockade

On 30 May 1967, and after months of a political impasse with the Federal Military Government based in Lagos, Eastern Nigeria's military government declared its secession from the Federal Republic of Nigeria and declared independence as the Republic of Biafra. Actions which resulted in civil war.³¹ The FMG initially attempted economic statecraft rather than warfare to persuade the Biafran leadership led by Colonel Emeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, Biafra's declared Head of State, to abandon secessionist ambitions. Along these lines, and months before the FMG's land offensives began, the Federal Navy was already playing a central role in enforcing the government's initial wartime strategy. Specifically, by June 1967, a naval blockade was in place to smother Biafra's economy by preventing any access to the southern seaboard.

However, Biafra remained defiant. At a press conference held at Enugu in July 1967, Ojukwu ridiculed Lagos' 'so-called economic blockade' and, amidst suppressed laughter, pointed to Biafra's 'ability to run the blockade and break through it'. ... 'Ships have come in', Ojukwu added; 'ships have left'.³²

Whereas Ojukwu had overembellished Biafra's ability to evade the blockade in a way that presented an undisturbed economic lifeline, the Biafran Head of State was not wrong about the blockade having sufficient gaps to allow vessels to slip in and out. In short, despite successfully interdicting import and export shipping routes into Biafran territory, Lagos could not depend on a blockade and a blockade alone to isolate Biafra. Amphibious landings were required for the Army to establish a second Southern front, and naval support was necessary to meet this objective. Put another way, the Nigerian Civil War was always destined to be fought primarily on land, as the FMG sought to recapture rebel territory. In that struggle, it was the 'biggest and best battalions that were most likely to secure victory'.³³ Yet the Federal Navy's force-multiplier role, in supporting, transporting, and coordinating with those battalions, proved essential to

³⁰Reuters, 'Lt. Col. Emeka Ojukwu | Biafran Head of State | Press Conferences | Federal Blockade | Mid-July 1967,' <https://bit.ly/48rRb9T>. Accessed 28 October 2024.

³¹Michael Crowder, *The Story of Nigeria*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), pp. 272-273.

³²Reuters, 'Lt. Col. Emeka Ojukwu'.

³³Sunday Telegraph. 1970. 'Colonel Robert Scott's Report.', p. 11.

the outcome. And at the heart of the Navy's multiplier effect was its coordination with the Federal army to facilitate a series of amphibious landings on the Biafran coast.

The Navy Plays a More Direct Wartime Role

There were other reasons for the navy to play a more direct wartime role, aside from blockade duties. Early in the conflict, the Nigerian Army's land campaign struggled, with slow advances by the Federal 1 and 2 Divisions, which had sought to quickly retake the strategic Biafran towns of Onitsha and Enugu – the latter being the first Biafran capital – see Figure 1.³⁴ However, successful amphibious landings from the southern seaboard would relieve pressure on 1 and 2 Divisions and lead to a two-front war by introducing the troops of 3 Nigerian Army division, in the Southern front to create a second front.³⁵ This would force Biafra to split their already stretched land forces: between the Northern Sector advances of the Federal 1 and 2 Divisions and 3 Division, approaching from the south (see Figure 2).³⁶ The opening of this second front was where the Federal Navy's wartime role proved pivotal in ensuring Nigerian Army troops were safely transported, supported by naval artillery and thus able to establish a land presence.³⁷ This objective was to be achieved via a series of amphibious landings on Biafra's southern seaboard.

By July 1967, and while the blockade was in effect, it became clear that land operations originating from the southern coast were necessary to encircle Biafra, so Rear Admiral Joseph Wey, the Federal Nigerian Navy's Chief of Naval Staff, was presented a list of possible landing sites for the army by General Yakubu Gowon.³⁸ Wey began evaluating the landing site options based on concerns that Biafra's use of locally-made naval mines made the navigable routes into Port Harcourt too perilous to attempt without further intelligence.³⁹ Seeking to avoid an attempt at landing at Port Harcourt as the Navy's

³⁴TNA FCO 65/328 Ministry of Defence (UK). 1968. Secret: Report by Colonel P.H. Moir, 22 November 1968,. Whitehall, London: Ministry of Defence.

³⁵TNA FCO 65/328 UK Consul Ibadan. 1968. Confidential: Observations on Some Senior Yoruba Army Officers, Enclosure, 12 December 1968.

³⁶TNA FCO 65/328 Foreign and Commonwealth Office. 1969. Sir D. Hunt to FCO, 8 May 1969.

³⁷Adeyinka Makinde, 'The Bonny Landing'.

³⁸As Supreme Commander of the armed forces and Head of State, Gowon had promoted himself shortly before the onset of war in 1967, as otherwise he would have lacked seniority compared to more senior military officers including Brigadier Ogundipe, Commodore Wey, Colonel Robert Adebayo and even, potentially, Colonel Ojukwu. Such promotions were not unusual at the time. Ojukwu, as an example, also promoted himself to General, and many Biafran officers and mercenaries received accelerated promotions throughout the war.

³⁹Al Venter, *Biafra Genocide*, (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2018), p. 36

NAVAL ENCOUNTERS OF THE NIGERIAN CIVIL WAR

first option, on Wey's instruction, James, Rawe, one of his commanders, helped draft a paper that weighed the pros and cons of each potential amphibious landing site. The paper, 'Landing by sea on enemy-held territory', was eventually prepared for the Supreme Headquarters of the Federal Military Government of Nigeria in 1967.⁴⁰ In this plan, Bonny Island, a vital crude oil export terminal located off the southern seaboard, was selected as the site of the first amphibious landing. It was implemented by a naval task force transporting Federal infantry battalions from 3 Division.⁴¹

Aside from the NNS *Nigeria*, the Navy's new, full-sized, all-purpose frigate and de facto capital ship, eleven other vessels formed the naval task force, including the Navy's SDMLs, its Mine-Sweeping Motor Launches (MSMLs), and its sole Landing Craft Tank (LCT), the NNS *Lokoja*. Troops loaded onto the vessels came from the brigade-strength Lagos Garrison Organisation (LGO), composed of three infantry battalions. All Army formations were under the overall command of Lieutenant Colonel Adekunle as the LGO Commander.⁴²

Troops were to make a beach landing underpinned by several rapid manoeuvres and provided with covering fire by Vickers machine guns on enemy troops close to the beach, and naval artillery fire on dug-in positions further from the coastline. For the main troop landings, which were delayed by bad weather, the *Lokoja* LCT, commanded by Lt. Commander Hussaini Abdullahi, took point.⁴³

Whereas the Federal Navy's operational plans were developed by Commander J. Rawe, supported by Commodore J.E.A. Wey, the task force command was under Captain Soroh, with Commander Michael A. Adelanwa as his Second-in-Command.⁴⁴ Lieutenant Colonel Joseph Akahan developed the Army-side operational planning for the landing.⁴⁵ Meanwhile, actual operational command of own troops was delegated to Lieutenant Colonel Adekunle.

⁴⁰Alexander Madiebo, *The Nigerian Revolution and the Biafran War*, (Enugu, Nigeria: Fourth Dimension Publishing, 1980), p. 152, p. 190.

⁴¹Rawe, 'Landing by sea on enemy-held territory.' Paper prepared for the Supreme Headquarters of the Federal Military Government of Nigeria, 1967 cited in Makinde, *The Nigerian Civil War*.

⁴²Olusegun Obasanjo, *My Command: An Account of the Nigerian Civil War 1967-1970*, (London: Heinemann, 1980), p. 44.

⁴³Nowa Omoigui, 'Barracks: The History Behind Those Names - Part 5', 27 October 2007. <https://bit.ly/4g1QhnO>. Accessed 8 December 2024

⁴⁴Adeyinka Makinde, 'The Bonny Landing'

⁴⁵Ibid.

Thus, as part of the Federal Navy task force that sailed for Bonny from Lagos in July 1967, the Nigerian military demonstrated its advances in the combined arms approach that saw army and navy forces work in close tandem for the first time in Nigerian history. And without a Biafran naval presence to prevent the landing, and despite spirited coastal defence, Federal forces eventually secured a beachhead at Bonny between 26 and 27 July 1967.

The Significance and Consequence of the Bonny Landing

From the Federal perspective, the Bonny amphibious landing was hailed as a 'masterpiece in the history of warfare in Africa', as 'the first of its kind by any 3rd world country,' and as 'the African version of Omaha Beach landings that turned the tide of the Second World War'.⁴⁶ Indeed, such was the strategic importance of the Bonny landing to Nigeria's civil war campaign that it was the only battle in that conflict which, decades later, had a military barracks – Bonny Camp, Victoria Island, Lagos – named in its commemoration.⁴⁷

Even after the loss of Bonny, the Biafran Navy's troubles were far from over. On the contrary, as a direct consequence of the Federal beachhead established at Bonny, further amphibious landings followed at Escravos in August 1967, at Warri, Sapele and Koko in September 1967 and Calabar on 18 October 1967.⁴⁸ The final amphibious landing was at Oron in March 1968.⁴⁹ Each of these landings exerted further pressure on Biafra. This new Southern Front eventually allowing Federal troops from the Northern and Southern theatres to link up and encircle Biafra's land forces. It was an approach that was as obvious as it was unstoppable – unless the opening of a second front from the south could be prevented. Indeed, Nigeria's military attaché in Bonn, West Germany, was clear that this was precisely the FMG's strategy: to land troops from the south, using the Federal Navy, then 'encircle the rebels, slowly tighten the noose and strangle them'.⁵⁰ Moreover, the opening of a second front via amphibious landings not only isolates the enemy geographically in that area but also interdicts possible (re)supplies by sea and effectively removes maritime logistics and their potential multiplier effect on the enemy's land positions.

For such reasons, the loss of Bonny to Federal forces, and the opening of a second front as a result, was a massive blow to Biafra and an indication of how much Biafra

⁴⁶Awoyokun, Damola, 'Biafra: The Untold Story of the Nigerian Civil War - Part 2', <https://bit.ly/2y3vW1F>. Accessed 9 March 2026.

⁴⁷Omoigui, 'Barracks: The History'.

⁴⁸John De St. Jorre, *The Brothers' War: Biafra and Nigeria*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), p. 173.

⁴⁹Makinde, 'The Bonny Landing'.

⁵⁰Steiner, *The Last Adventurer*, 50; see also, De St. Jorre, *The Brothers' War*, p. 173.

NAVAL ENCOUNTERS OF THE NIGERIAN CIVIL WAR

had underestimated the Federal Navy's threat to the southern seaboard. It is unclear if the Biafrans genuinely believed that Nigeria lacked a navy or whether the Biafrans simply lacked accurate naval intelligence to that effect. Regardless it was quite a miscalculation.

How did Biafra bungle their threat assessment of the Federal Navy and the significance of Bonny? In his memoirs, Rolf Steiner, a German mercenary who fought for the Biafrans, and was eventually dismissed by Ojukwu, warned of the Federal naval threat which he noted was 'a tough proposition' to engage in battle'.⁵¹ Biafran gunboats, after all, had no ordnance that could match the *Nigeria's* 102mm guns.⁵² Yet, the lack of a credible Biafran naval counter-threat was not the only issue here. The Biafrans' limited coastal defences against the Federal naval threat point to both an overall underestimation of that threat and its consequences to Biafra's defence.

At Bonny, for instance, despite defensive positions being overwhelmed by Federal fire and troop numbers, no Biafran reinforcements were forthcoming. This was partly due to a lack of resources on the Biafran side, as well as a lack of preparation and even a demonstrable misunderstanding of Bonny's strategic value. With over 200 miles of vulnerable coastline, the southern seaboard should have had a planned and well-resourced defence covering multiple potential landing sites, including Bonny.

In this sense, Ojukwu and the Biafran general staff missed a significant defensive opportunity: they had full access to Bonny; and months to prepare defensive fortifications. However, in being so readily dismissive of the Federal Nigerian Navy's capabilities and the possibility of an amphibious landing on the southern seaboard, Biafra's forces failed to mount a well-planned defence despite the site's many defensive advantages. After all, the features that made Bonny potentially vulnerable, specifically its open access to the sea, also could have made it extremely difficult to access from a defensive standpoint if it had adequate coastal defences. However, the Biafran coastal defences, not just at Bonny but in general, were not commensurate to the threat faced by these coastal sites. More specifically, just one battalion, the Biafran Army's 8 Battalion, was tasked with defending the entire southern sector.⁵³ Moreover, the same force of around 500 troops was divided into smaller units, detached and deployed at the following locations: a company at Ahoada; a company at Calabar; a company at Oron; and only a single platoon at Bonny.⁵⁴ This meant that Bonny Island, one of the

⁵¹Odogwu, *No Place to Hide*, pp. 114-117; Steiner, *The Last Adventurer*, p. 53.

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³Together with the 9 Battalion, this constituted 52 Brigade of the Biafran Army by the start of the war.

⁵⁴Madiebo, *The Nigerian Revolution*, p. 99; In Nigerian Army nomenclature, a company is a military unit with anywhere from 100 to 200 troops, typically with a major, and

most important strategic locations in the southern theatre, was, quite simply, there for the taking – having far fewer troops left to defend it than at any of the other southern seaboard coastal towns. Indeed, as General Alexander Madiebo, the Biafran Army's Chief of Staff, would later observe, 'there was nothing the 51 Brigade or indeed 53 Brigade [supporting Biafran brigades] could do to assist in the south'.⁵⁵

It was not that the Biafrans were completely unaware of the Bonny landing plans. Rebel intelligence indicated that 'a Nigerian Armada was heading towards Bonny'.⁵⁶ Moreover, even before plans were made for the Bonny landing, shortly after Ojukwu's Independence Declaration on 30 May, he asked that 'the Navy Commander and the Command Headquarters at Port Harcourt be ... alerted' of the high likelihood of an invasion, such that Biafra's seaboard defences be fortified.⁵⁷ However, 'without an effective Navy, there was nothing much that could be done to stop the invasion'.⁵⁸ And with the fall of Bonny, Biafra's loss of the southern sector was assured, as a formidable Nigerian Army division now had a beachhead.

An Ill-advised Dismissal of the Federal Naval Threat

The Biafran's offhand dismissal of a Federal naval threat from the southern seaboard had been going on for months, with them casting doubt on the blockade. It also did not help that, with perhaps the exception of the white mercenaries, the men Ojukwu surrounded himself with failed to provide a more realistic assessment of the Federal naval threat.⁵⁹ During a news conference held in London shortly after secession had been declared, Matthew Tawo Mbu, Biafra's Foreign Minister, claimed that no Nigerian Navy ships had violated Biafra's twelve-mile limit – which they asserted was a part of Biafra's maritime territory. When challenged regarding the Federal Nigerian Navy's threat, Mbu dismissed it, 'What navy?' he countered. 'I was Minister for the Federal Navy'.⁶⁰

less commonly, a captain, in command. These are not hard numbers: the size and constitution of a company, and who commands it, can vary quite dramatically dependent on the nature of operations and the limitations of war imposed on a given formation.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, p. 152.

⁵⁶Odogwu, *No Place*, p. 20.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁵⁹For more on the sometimes-tense relations between Ojukwu and some of his mercenaries see Rolf Steiner's memoir, *The Last Adventurer*.

⁶⁰John J. Stremlau, *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977), pp. 72-73.

NAVAL ENCOUNTERS OF THE NIGERIAN CIVIL WAR

Mbu had indeed held the position of Minister for the Navy and had been present in conversations involving Lord Mountbatten, the British Chief of the Defence Staff, and Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, the Nigerian Prime Minister, 1960-1966, regarding the need to 'Nigerianise' the Navy by the cautious and gradual phasing out of non-Nigerian personnel across the institution's ranks.⁶¹ Therefore, of all people, he should have known the Nigerian Navy's organisation and capability building, including the acquisition of the *Nigeria*, and an LCT for amphibious landings, and SDMLs for coastal patrol and defence.⁶²

Viewed in this light, the Nigerian Navy was no longer a coastal defence force, nor was it the Anti-Submarine Force that had originally been envisaged at its inception.⁶³ The Nigerian Navy of 1967 posed a coastal threat internally and externally. However, the Biafran authorities were, apparently, convinced it was not a threat. Indeed, the prevailing wisdom amongst them at that time was that amphibious landings on the southern board were impossible as 'no black African nation has ever done that type of landing'.⁶⁴ Even the Biafran government in Enugu, which should have known better with the lives of millions in its care, insisted 'that the [Federal] Navy was scrap'.⁶⁵ And Ojukwu's advisers insisted 'that there was no way Nigeria could land at Bonny'.⁶⁶

As it turned out, the 'much ridiculed Nigerian navy' was far more competent at maritime warfare manoeuvres and amphibious landings more specifically than had been envisaged by Biafran forces.⁶⁷ Moreover, the Federal Navy's competence in effecting

⁶¹TNA DEFE 4/175 Ministry of Defence (UK), 1964. Record of Meeting Between the Chief of Defence Staff and the Prime Minister of the Federal Republic of Nigeria on 14 October 1964 and CDS Subsequent Call on Minister of State for the Navy, Appendix 4 to Annex to COS 3089/19/10/64, 14 October. Secret, London: MOD., pp. 2-3

⁶²TNA DEF 86/14/01 Colonial Office, A. Campbell (Colonial Office) to Governor-General Nigeria, Draft Telegram (Enclosure), 23 January 1959; TNA CO 968/662; also, TNA DO 35/10461, Dominions Office, Enclosure: Note on Gift of Ships to Nigeria, CRO, 1 June 1959; TNA ADM 1/27472, Admiralty, 1959. J.A. Sankey (Colonial Office) to Cullen Esq. (Military Branch II, Admiralty), London: Admiralty; *The Guardian*, 'Building Up Royal Nigerian Navy'; 3 November 1959.

⁶³TNA ADM 1/27472, Treasury. Copy of a Treasury Minute dated 12 January 1959, relative to the Gifts of the Algerine Class Ocean Escort, H.M.S. Hare and the Seaward Defence Motor Launch, S.D.M.L. 3515, with certain Training Equipment, to the Federal Government of Nigeria, Cmnd. 636. London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office.

⁶⁴Hafiz Brahim Momoh, *The Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970: History and Reminiscences*, (Ibadan: Sam Bookman Publishers, 2000), p. 806.

⁶⁵Ibid.

⁶⁶Ibid., p. 804.

⁶⁷De St. Jorre, *The Brothers' War*, p. 152.

the blockade was also made apparent by the capture of two ships seeking to smuggle goods into Biafra in early June 1967.⁶⁸ And on 5 July 1967, a few weeks later, another vessel, the Panamanian cargo ship, *Rigel*, was escorted into Lagos Harbour after being shelled by a Nigerian Navy vessel off the coast of Biafra.⁶⁹ The news of those seizures and broad international recognition of the naval blockade meant that shipping into Eastern Nigeria steered clear with several ships bound for the region rerouted to federal ports.⁷⁰

Part of the unusual dismissal of the Federal naval threat might have been a result of Biafra's own naval inadequacies. Early in the war, Biafra lacked a naval presence that could in most instances dissuade the Federal Nigerian Navy's plans and operations. Such was this naval deficit that the mercenaries employed by Biafra that were tasked with assisting the Biafran Navy came to the sobering conclusion that 'there was no navy'; they were also 'wasting [their] time' with the daily miracles of maintenance needed to keep that navy's gunboats operational.⁷¹ Along these lines, Pascal Odu, a Biafran navy commander, would later criticise the Nigerian Navy's hesitance in pressing its advantage after the successful amphibious landing at Bonny in July 1967. 'If they [the Nigerian Navy] had steamed up Bonny River that day', Odu would write, 'they could have occupied Port Harcourt without firing a single shot'.⁷²

Despite such initial pessimism among Biafran naval commanders, Port Harcourt proved a far sterner coastal target than many had assumed. Arguably the most strategic location in the Biafran heartland, apart from Biafra's capitals, its commercial status, significant oil production and export capacity, and well developed port made it difficult for the Nigerian Navy to recapture.⁷³ This was partly due to Biafra's attempts to reorganise along naval lines by the time war arrived at Port Harcourt. This reorganisation, the politics of Nigerian Army deployments that saw the Federal campaign stall for months on end, and the fact that the narrow waterways leading to Port Harcourt were heavily mined all led to a lengthy delay before Federal forces eventually attacked and took Port Harcourt in May 1968.⁷⁴

⁶⁸*New Nigerian*, 8 July, 1967; *Daily Times*, 13 July 1967.

⁶⁹British Pathé, 'Nigeria: Cargo Ship Fired Upon And Arrested As She Leaves Biafra. (1967),' 5 July 1967. <https://www.britishpathe.com/asset/127887/>. Accessed 3 January 2025

⁷⁰*Morning Post*, 3 June 1967; *Morning Post*, 6 June 1967.

⁷¹Steiner, *The Last Adventurer*, p. 54.

⁷²Odu, *The Future That Vanished*, p. 117.

⁷³Stremlau, *The International Politics*, p. 165.

⁷⁴TNA FCO 65/328, Ministry of Defence (UK). 1968. Secret: Report by Colonel P.H. Moir

NAVAL ENCOUNTERS OF THE NIGERIAN CIVIL WAR

Having learned a lesson from the botched Bonny defence, Biafran commanders placed more importance on the defence of Port Harcourt as a possible landing site for the Federal advance from the south. This was so much the case that one senior Nigerian Navy officer, Commander James Rawe, warned that, unlike Bonny, '[from a] naval point of view, to embark on an attack on Port Harcourt, direct[ly], would invite disaster.'⁷⁵

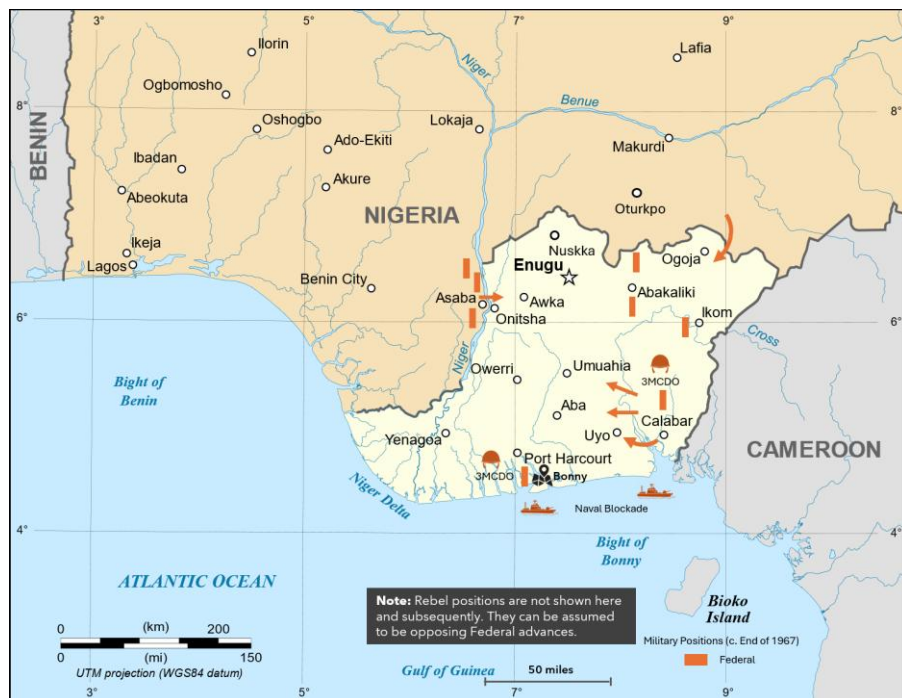


Figure 2: End 1967 Military Position.⁷⁶

The delay to securing Port Harcourt notwithstanding, Bonny's capture and the establishment of a second front from the south had by the end of 1967 put the Federal advance in good stead. The significance of the Navy's role in these proceedings was such that, when the military Head of State, General Yakubu Gowon, received news that Bonny had been recaptured, he sent a personal commendation to Captain Nelson Soroh, who oversaw the operation. In his note to Soroh, Gowon lauded the success

⁷⁵Makinde, 'The Bonny Landing'.

⁷⁶Source: Author's Custom Map based on Eric Gaba's reference material; Niven, *The War*, p. 122. The Federal movement from the south is highlighted.

of 'combined operations at Bonny, which was your responsibility to see' and added that he had been debriefed on 'how nobly well the Navy did in the conveying, landing, and support fire role which the Navy gave to the Army at the operations in Bonny'.⁷⁷ Figure 2 illustrates the military situation at the end of that year, with Federal movements from the south highlighted.

Biafra's Brown-Water Navy

By the end of 1967 and on the strength of Federal military advances, Lagos, and indeed the Nigerian public at large, seemed confident that the war would 'soon be over'.⁷⁸ Facing this bleak prospect, Biafra knew that, to stay in the war in 1968, it had to slow the Federal progress recorded the previous year – especially after the Bonny landings and the establishment of a second land front, in the south. However, so far as Federal ingress via the waterways and creeks was concerned, coastal defences alone were unlikely to suffice. Biafra needed a navy, or at least a semblance of one. Despite major territorial losses, and with key coastal towns still in Biafran hands, there was a chance that Biafran naval action could stem Federal advances in 1968.

Months before Port Harcourt's recapture in May 1968 had left Biafra landlocked, it still retained naval ambitions and sought to press any perceived advantage in that domain.⁷⁹ Early in the war, the German mercenary Rolf Steiner, in one of his first contributions to Biafra tried to persuade Ojukwu to establish a brown-water Biafran navy, although this initiative was soon aborted.⁸⁰ In its broadest sense, a brown-water navy is built to deploy and conduct military options in the littoral zone and in inland waters such as creeks, small waterways, and estuaries. Typically a brown-water navy consists of small patrol boats, and small gun boats, deployable in riverine areas, with supporting vessels of a larger size to patrol and operate in more open waterways such as estuaries.⁸¹ Best suited to defence a brown-water navy lacks the capabilities to conduct independent operations on more open blue water seas.⁸²

Viewed this way, brown-water navies contrast the top tier of naval forces, the blue-water navies that can independently conduct foreign operations and project power far

⁷⁷Soroh, *A Sailor's Dream*, p. 235.

⁷⁸TNA FCO 65/328, Ministry of Defence (UK), Secret: Report by Colonel P.H. Moir, p. 1.

⁷⁹Bernard Odogwu, *No Place to Hide*, p. 128.

⁸⁰Venter, *Biafra Genocide*, pp. 64-65

⁸¹Victor J. Croziat, *Brown Water Navy: River and Coastal War in Indo-China and Vietnam, 1948-72*, (London: Blandford, 1984).

⁸²American Battlefield Trust, 'Building a Brown Water Navy', n.d. 17 October 2024. <https://tinyurl.com/486zrz7u>. Accessed 8 March 2026.

NAVAL ENCOUNTERS OF THE NIGERIAN CIVIL WAR

beyond a state's own territorial waters.⁸³ Green-water navies, a naval tier where Nigeria's superior Navy was situated during the war, dominate brackish estuaries and littoral coasts and sit therefore between blue and brown water navies.

Realistically, a low-tier brown-water navy status was the most that the Biafran Navy could ever hope to achieve. Early in the war, Biafra thought it had a suitable flagship after the 30 May 1967 confiscation of the Nigerian Navy Ship *Ibadan*, which had been docked in Calabar Port, then in Biafran controlled territory. NNS *Ibadan* was an ex-Royal Navy Ford class seaward defence boat, which began life as HMS *Montford* (P3124). It was launched in 1957 and scarcely used before joining Britain's reserve fleet. It arrived in Lagos in October 1966 before transfer to Calabar and was crewed by Nigerian officers trained at Dartmouth. At Calabar, the *Ibadan* was seized by its crew of ethnic Igbo officers who had defected to Biafra, who were led by Federal Navy Lieutenant Ebitu Ukiwe.⁸⁴ The *Ibadan* was promptly renamed *Vigilance*.

Under the orders of the recently-promoted Commander Winifred Anuku, the Head of the Biafran Navy, Lieutenant Commander Pascal Odu, a senior Biafran naval officer also recently promoted by Ojukwu, relocated the *Vigilance* from Calabar to Kidney Island, Port Harcourt to establish the Biafran naval headquarters there. However, the *Vigilance* was not simply left moored at Port Harcourt but instead patrolled from Kidney Island to Bonny Island 'as often as possible'.⁸⁵

As part of its scheduled patrol duty, BNS *Vigilance*, with Odu in command, set off from Port Harcourt in the early hours of 26 July 1967 and headed for Bonny. At Bonny, where the Federal amphibious landings were in progress, the *Vigilance* was destroyed by Federal naval gunfire.⁸⁶ The hulk was later towed away by Federal ships,⁸⁷ With no shipyards in Biafra that could build new capable vessels, even the establishment of a brown-water navy now seemed ambitious for the Biafrans.

Instead Biafra converted local riverboats and tugs to produce makeshift 'gunboats'. By October 1967 Biafra had been encircled, following the seven amphibious landings completed on the southern seaboard. A glance at Biafra's geopolitical map (see Figure 1) indicates that Biafra was surrounded by the Atlantic Ocean on its southern seaboard

⁸³Ibid.

⁸⁴After the war, Ukiwe retained his rank, was readmitted into the Nigerian Navy, and later became the seventh Chief of Defence Staff (August 1985 – October 1986).

⁸⁵Odu, *The Future that Vanished*, p. 114.

⁸⁶Soroh, *A Sailor's Dream*, pp. 228-231.

⁸⁷British Pathé, 'Nigeria: Recaptured Federal Navy Minesweeper Back in Lagos From Biafra', 11 September 1967. <https://www.britishpathe.com/asset/144677/>. Accessed 3 January 2025.

and flanked between Enugu and Owerri by the great Niger River to the west. From Yenagoa further south, a series of creeks and Niger River tributaries flow all the way to the Atlantic Coast. With Federal forces gradually capturing Biafra's strategic coastal cities, it seemed only a matter of time before Biafra would be cut off from the sea and the rivers. By 1968 the German mercenary Rolf Steiner believed that Biafra, flanked on two sides by water bodies, urgently required a naval presence in the coastal areas and littoral zones.⁸⁸

Vessel-for-vessel, Biafra could not hope to compete with the Federal Navy. Suppose, however, that Biafra could seize some of the Nigerian Navy's vessels – thus weakening its naval functions while bolstering its own. In one incident aimed at addressing such thinking, the rebels sought to bolster their prospects of building a naval force by trying to confiscate one of the Federal Navy's SDMLs which was moored at Port Harcourt harbour. However, the operation failed when pro-Nigerian supporters intervened and instead sank the boat *in situ*.⁸⁹

Undeterred, Biafra employed floating docks and tugs with troops operating machine guns on them, to patrol the rivers and creeks. In a few instances, raids undertaken by these vessels were supported by fire provided by a French-manned Biafran helicopter.⁹⁰ Biafra attempted to retake Bonny from 25 September 1967 in an action codenamed Operation Sea Jack. This operation failed, largely because of the Federal SDML the NNS *Ogoja*, which was dubbed *Hot Iron*. Despite Biafran forces mustering sufficient ground forces to threaten the island and killing Federal several troops with the help of air support the attempt was repelled.

In other instances, Biafra's improvised approach to land warfare extended to seaborne operations in ways that temporarily gave Biafra some respite. For example, when NNS *Ogoja* attempted to land troops at the Refinery Jetty in Biafran held Port Harcourt, the makeshift Biafran vessel *Ikwerre* presented a stern deterrent. The *Ikwerre* was an ocean-going tug which originally had belonged to the Nigerian Ports Authority before being confiscated by Biafran naval personnel. It mounted a 105-mm howitzer supplied by the Biafran army.⁹¹

Hastily inducted into the Biafran Navy, the *Ikwerre* and its crew soon saw action. On 9 August 1967, the NNS *Ogoja* supported by one of the Nigerian Navy's SDMLs showed up at the Refinery Jetty as Federal forces began some early probing of Port

⁸⁸Al Venter, *Biafra's War 1967-1970: A Tribal Conflict in Nigeria That Left a Million Dead*, (Solihull: Helion & Company Limited, 2015), p. 95.

⁸⁹*Ibid.*

⁹⁰Makinde, Adeyinka, 'The Nigerian Civil War', p. 19.

⁹¹Odu, *The Future that Vanished*, p. 111.

NAVAL ENCOUNTERS OF THE NIGERIAN CIVIL WAR

Harcourt's defences. They were met by small arms fire from the *Ikwerre*. Up to 50 Federal troops were reported killed, with many injured, by the *Ikwerre*'s howitzer. The Nigerian Navy vessels were forced to retreat to BUOY 13 while ashore the Federal troops scrambled for cover. The corpses of Federal troops, cut down by the *Ikwerre*, were reported as floating in the Main Channel, and around the Refinery Jetty, for days afterwards.⁹² After this action Nigerian Federal Forces did not attempt another assault on Port Harcourt for several months.

Biafran Mercenaries: Improvisation & Commando-Style Riverine Raids

In parallel with efforts like converting the *Ikwerre* into a riverine combat vessel the German mercenary Steiner made separate plans with Pier Giorgio Norbiato, a former marine commando who had served with the Italian navy and had fought as a mercenary in the Congo. Described by Steiner as 'a swarthy tough little man of about thirty', Norbiato played a key role in Biafra's limited guerrilla-style naval raids and was well-positioned to plan and implement such commando-style missions.⁹³ Having served six years in the Italian *Marina Militare*, Norbiato specialised in riverine operations, before going to work as a diver for an Italian company in the business of recovering sunken ships. During the Congo Crisis of 1960-1964 Norbiato had distinguished himself in amphibious operations conducted on rivers an ideal terrain for the former *Marina Militare* specialist. The last of these Congo operations was called *Alfa* and had been coordinated by the French mercenary Bob Denard in an action against rebel forces on the river island of Boula Beba. The operation failed, but Norbiato reportedly helped save fellow mercenaries' lives after they ran into an ambush.⁹⁴

Like Steiner, whom Ojukwu granted an honorary officer commission, Norbiato was commissioned as a major in the Biafran army.⁹⁵ Such commissions were standard in Biafra's short-lived existence, as all mercenaries fighting for the rebels 'were treated as officers'.⁹⁶ The rationale for this preferential treatment is unclear – it did not sit well with the Biafran's own indigenous commissioned officers, who often left the mercenaries to their own devices. This was the case here, when the mercenaries took matters into their own hands and, instead of working with Biafran naval ratings trained as seamen, instead recruited and employed indigenous 'commandos' trained and loyal

⁹²Ibid.

⁹³Ibid., p. 83.

⁹⁴Robert Müller and Ippolito Edmondo Ferrario, *A Parà in Congo and Yemen: 1965-1969* (Milan: Ugo Mursia Editore, 2018).

⁹⁵Madiebo, *The Nigerian Revolution*, p. 215; Steiner was originally a lieutenant but by the time he was kicked out the Biafran army in December 1968, he had been promoted to Lieutenant Colonel; Federick Forsyth, *The Biafra Story: The Making of An African Legend*, (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2007), p. 132.

⁹⁶De St. Jorre, *The Brothers' War*, p. 326.

to them. For all the criticisms of Steiner's behaviour in Biafra, he certainly knew his way around field guns and explosives.⁹⁷ Steiner also had a demonstrable understanding of soldiering and military tactics, especially the ambush, and had soon motivated the large number of Biafran troops under his command.⁹⁸

Together, Steiner, Norbiato and their commandos began to stage some daring riverine raids – including an ambush of Federal 3 Division's resupply ships which routinely and secretly sailed from Lagos to Opofo in a convoy consisting of 'small freighters plus an escort of patrol boats which parted company with them at the river'.⁹⁹ Both men, along with a small group of mercenaries, confiscated three fast Chris-Craft Industries, luxury civilian powerboats from the Port Harcourt sailing club. Norbiato then helped convert the motorboats into a naval squadron with prow-mounted machine guns, crewed by a small complement of four mercenaries and a pilot.¹⁰⁰ While these improvised gunboats had no armour they were relatively light, manoeuvrable, and at short range possessed deadly fire. They were used to 'ambush small freighters moving upriver' once modifications were made to them.¹⁰¹

In its first riverine sortie around Port Harcourt on 7 April 1968 Norbiato's 'squadron attacked a vessel loaded with Land Rovers, rations and *matériel* for Federal troops that was being escorted by Nigerian Navy armed patrol boats. Camouflaged by the river's thick vegetation where they had waited to spring their ambush for three days since 4 April, the three Chris-Craft boats quietly started their engines and went into action against the much larger, but relatively unprotected Nigerian resupply vessels. Accompanied by his men, also mercenaries, Norbiato personally boarded one of the two Federal vessels. Two of the mercenaries were killed by a Federal soldier brandishing a British Sten gun before Norbiato returned fire with his Thompson gun, killing the Nigerian. The Nigerian pilot was also killed by Biafran commando gunfire, after which Norbiato personally took over the piloting role. The second Federal vessel was taken without incident, with the Federal sailors caught completely unawares and only realising they had been ambushed when the boat's pilot's hands went up. At that point the Federal sailors jumped overboard. The Biafrans, with both Federal vessels and their cargo now in their custody, had just recorded arguably their most significant naval victory of the war.¹⁰²

⁹⁷Steiner, *The Last Adventurer*, pp. 60-61.

⁹⁸Madiebo, *The Nigerian Revolution*, p. 215

⁹⁹Steiner, *The Last Adventurer*, p. 87.

¹⁰⁰*Ibid.*; Steiner, *The Last Adventurer*, p. 87.

¹⁰¹Venter, *Biafra's War*, p. 95; Hilary M. Njoku, *A Tragedy without Heroes: Nigeria-Biafra War*, (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishing, 1987), p. 133.

¹⁰²Rolf Steiner, *The Last Adventurer*, pp. 87-88.

NAVAL ENCOUNTERS OF THE NIGERIAN CIVIL WAR

In that instance, the successful raid meant that Norbiato and Steiner, from one of the Federal vessels alone had seized the five Land Rovers along with 'thousands of uniforms and millions of 7.62mm cartridges'.¹⁰³ And in even better news for the Biafran navy, the second of the confiscated Federal vessels yielded 'ten tons of Soviet mortar shells and a good supply of grenades as well as several 20mm *Oerlikon* cannons that had been mounted specifically to thwart such actions'.¹⁰⁴

By such accounts, and despite lacking a major warship, the Biafran Navy saw some success in its guerrilla-style night raids along the riverine and creek networks in the Port Harcourt area. Moreover, as the aforementioned raids by Steiner and Norbiato suggest, the Biafran navy's exploits also led to a brief injection of confiscated ammunition, armaments and small arms – all of which Biafra desperately needed. However, with just three makeshift gunboats and over two hundred coastal miles to patrol this Biafran naval force could not break the Nigerian Navy's blockade or stop the Navy's warships from dominating the southern seaboard.

The southern coastline was not the only impediment to Biafra's naval ambitions. Further pretensions of a naval counter-threat on Biafra's part were effectively aborted after Norbiato was killed in action in April 1968 by troops of Lieutenant Colonel Philemon Shande's 17 Brigade during the Federal advance on Umuahia, a part of the Federal forces' Port Harcourt campaign. Müller and Ferrario's biography of Norbiato suggests he was killed in a foxhole, while providing covering fire for his retreating men, supposedly firing to the last bullet of his FN MAG machine gun before being killed by advancing Federal forces.¹⁰⁵ Steiner would later write of Norbiato's demise that the latter was 'too impetuous ... a good captain, but he never gave any thought to the overall picture'.¹⁰⁶

It may seem as though Steiner and Norbiato were not entirely in sync with other Biafran military operations but this was largely the case across the mercenary experience. Their contributions were not effectively harnessed with any tactical gains made by the mercenary units not translating into strategic wins for the Biafrans. Unlike Nigeria, it should be recalled, Biafra could not afford to hire entire and large units of mercenaries, and so these actors tended to arrive individually, in pairs, or in small batches. Moreover, the rebels' mercenary contingent was essentially a hodgepodge of soldiers of fortune from different nationalities such as ex South African special forces, independent mercenaries, and Portuguese, French, German, Dutch, Polish, Italian, and

¹⁰³Ibid.; Müller and Ferrario, *A Parà in Congo*; Gianluca, *Un eroe italiano dimenticato*

¹⁰⁴Venter, *Biafra's War*, p. 95; Rolf Steiner, *The Last Adventurer*, pp. 87-88.

¹⁰⁵Obasanjo, *My Command*, 51; See also, Müller and Ferrario, *A Parà in Congo*

¹⁰⁶Rolf Steiner, *The Last Adventurer*, p. 91.

even British ones fighting for Biafra and providing technical expertise and battlefield advice.¹⁰⁷

Assessments of this mercenary contingent and its contribution to the rebel effort are, at best, mixed. As the conflict protracted, the image of the competent 'white mercenaries' and the mystique of 'the white man's superiority in the art of soldiering' relative to Africans, became tarnished. The racist tropes did not help. 'Those monkeys are shit', said one of the white mercenaries, referring to the Federal forces advancing on Biafran territory. Suggesting that just 'a hundred and ten whites' could 'wipe out' 4,000 black African troops; the same individual, a member of Steiner's party, bragged about the mercenaries' ability to turn back the Federal advance. 'One look at us', he said of the advancing Nigerian troops, 'and they are gone'.¹⁰⁸ There is no indication that Steiner himself held such views, but his general attitude was nevertheless disliked by the Biafran officers.¹⁰⁹

After the war's end, Ojukwu's deputy, Phillip Effiong, was asked whether white mercenary soldiers helped prolong the war. Effiong's answer was uncharacteristically blunt, 'they did not help, he said, indeed, it would have made no difference if not a single one of them had come to work for the secessionist forces. Rolf Steiner stayed the longest. He was more of a bad influence than anything else. We were happy to get rid of him'.¹¹⁰

The Demise of Biafra's Navy

With Norbiato dead by April and Steiner expelled from the ranks in November 1968, the Biafrans lost two of the leading foreign mercenaries who seemed to have a clear sense of how a guerrilla-style navy should function. Still, despite the abandonment of any plans to scale up naval guerrilla actions, Biafra's fighters used the Niger Delta, including the Great River Niger and its many tributaries, to conduct early-warning patrols using improvised gunboats.¹¹¹ Aside from naval raids by Norbiato and Steiner, the Biafran Navy also conducted limited 'joint operations' with the Biafran army, although the failure of the latter 'to follow through after bombardment' was a cause of much frustration for Biafran naval commanders who expected these actions to translate to land gains.¹¹²

¹⁰⁷Venter, *Biafra Genocide*, p. 133.

¹⁰⁸Steiner, *The Last Adventurer*, p. 54.

¹⁰⁹Odogwu, *No Place to Hide*, p. 117.

¹¹⁰Venter, *Biafra Genocide*, p. 133.

¹¹¹*Ibid.*, pp. 64-65.

¹¹²Odu, *The Future that Vanished*, p. 155.

NAVAL ENCOUNTERS OF THE NIGERIAN CIVIL WAR

Following these exploits and several successful landings by Biafran troops at the Port Harcourt wharf by the *Ikwere* and the *Bodo West*, a second armed vessel operated by the Biafrans, Federal troops took steps to disable both. In May 1968, following the Federal recapture of Port Harcourt, Biafra's final coastal stronghold, elements of the Nigerian Army's 3 Division were given a new task. Known as the 3 Marine Commando Division, or 3MCDO, for its 'peculiarly riverine and creek operations', the formation was charged with permanently eliminating the Biafran naval threat.¹¹³

Lieutenant Colonel Ipoola Alani Akinrinade, one of the 3MCDO brigade commanders led the hunt for what remained of the Biafran navy. However, Akinrinade's troops lacked the weapons to strike the elusive Biafran vessels, which were often hidden outside small arms fire range and protected by low visibility during heavy rains. To solve this problem, Akinrinade requisitioned a local fishing trawler and, with the assistance of troops from 3MCDO's reconnaissance unit, mounted a *Panhard* armoured vehicle on the trawler. Boarding the vessel in company with commando troops armed with self-propelled grenade launchers and machine guns, 3MCDO aimed to destroy the Biafran vessels in their hiding places.

In the early hours of 29 May 1968, Lieutenant Colonel Akinrinade's naval strike force made contact with the Biafran vessels at Buguma in the waterways around Port Harcourt. 'Sink the *Bismarck*!' screamed Akinrinade's excited men, who gave the Biafran vessel the same name as the Germany Navy's Second World War battleship.¹¹⁴ 'It was like the British Navy attacking the German ship', quipped one of the Nigerian Army officers.¹¹⁵

In a naval skirmish that lasted until morning, the *Panhard* mounted on the trawler eventually scored a direct hit on one of the Biafran vessels. Amidst the waves, rain and low visibility, the hit seemed fortuitous but was welcomed by cheering Federal troops. The Nigerian Air Force provided supporting fire against the second ship, which also took several hits from Akinrinade's trawler and was also disabled.¹¹⁶ These events were amongst the final acts of the functional Biafran navy. That one of the vessels defending a location as strategic as Port Harcourt was disabled by a mounted *Panhard* on a fishing trawler indicated the sorry state of Biafran naval options at that point in the conflict, even as Biafran troops continued to hold out in the now land-locked Igbo heartland for another 18 months.

¹¹³Obasanjo, *My Command*, p. 46.

¹¹⁴Stefan Draminski, *The Battleship Bismarck: The Anatomy of a Ship*, (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2018)

¹¹⁵Alabi-Isama, *The Tragedy*, p. 283.

¹¹⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 284-285.

From August 1968, Biafran naval officers had much time on their hands and no operational vessels or even non-contested waters to deploy to as seamen. Surprisingly, in November 1968, Ojukwu still allocated funds for the purchase of naval craft from 'various mothball shipyards in Germany and France'.¹¹⁷ At Bremerhaven, a coastal town in northern Germany, Biafran agents located a craft 'about the size of a torpedo boat that could have been adapted suitably for river patrol'. However, this purchase never materialised. Naval stores, including uniforms and peaked hats, were purchased instead; almost as though the Biafran navy could be resurrected to its former state.¹¹⁸

By such indications, the Biafran government now restricted to Owerri, seemingly refused to accept the reality that it had lost control its waterways and was now fighting for the shrinking, land-locked remainder of its territory. During the day, naval officers mostly engaged themselves with 'secretarial work' for Ojukwu's Joint Planning Committee (JPC), which was formed in early 1969 and was yet another attempt to suggest the rebels had a credible response to what was now the inevitability of a Federal victory. Evenings were spent socialising and enjoying what little comforts remained, any patrols were limited to the parts of the Imo River close to Owerri, and the Niger River areas close to Ndoni – to the west of Owerri and south of Onitsha.¹¹⁹ There were few complaints from the navy's officers and ratings, who, like most Biafrans at this time, were waiting for the end to come.

In June 1969, the remnants of the Biafran Navy were eliminated by the Nigerian Air Force which sunk six speedboats fitted with light machine guns for waterway patrols. The boats were still *in situ* at the Ndoni, Rivers State, boatyard, where several improvised barges and dug-out canoes were also destroyed. With Ndoni as the Biafran Navy's final base at a time when just one major city, Owerri, remained in Biafran hands, the navy would never rebuild or trouble Federal forces again.¹²⁰

Conclusion

With Bonny captured on 27 July, Enugu on 4 October, Calabar on 18 October Federal troops entered Port Harcourt on 19 May 1968. Weeks earlier in March 1968 Federal troops had also taken Onitsha. The capture of Port Harcourt, after the previous

¹¹⁷Odu, *The Future that Vanished*, pp. 181.

¹¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 182.

¹¹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 185.

¹²⁰*Daily Times*, 'Arms Flow From UK to Continue', 27 June 1969.

NAVAL ENCOUNTERS OF THE NIGERIAN CIVIL WAR

losses, shrunk Biafra's territory to a fraction of its original size at the start of the conflict.¹²¹ It 'left the outside world in no doubt of Federal supremacy in the war'.¹²²

By January 1970 Biafran resistance had collapsed on all fronts. Facing superior Federal forces, who were more numerous and gradually hardened by months of riverine operations, Biafra's divisions had been wilting in the months before this collapse.

In the end, despite its patchy organisation and modest capabilities, such that even brown-navy status seemed ambitious by the end, the Biafran navy, at points in the war, could stake a claim to limited deterrence – at least in littoral and brackish contexts. However, compared to Federal naval superiority, which translated to strategic gains on the southern front, the Biafran Navy ultimately had little to show for its effort.

The naval deficit on the rebel part was even more telling given Ojukwu's claims that 'his forces would line the bottom of the creeks of the Niger Delta with the ships of the Nigerian Navy if they ventured close to the coast'.¹²³ Such claims were never matched by reality. Not only did the Nigerian Navy 'venture close' to the southern seaboard, it also implemented a broadly successful blockade and, beyond that, played an instrumental role in amphibious landings, which led to the opening of a second land front which hastened Biafra's eventual capitulation.

The failings of the Biafran navy highlight not just the limitations of one secessionist movement under extreme pressure, but also the broader challenges faced by post-colonial African states in establishing effective naval power. For most of these new states, the most straightforward pathway to naval viability lay in assistance from the colonial principal. Yet this reliance came at a political cost: dependence on former imperial powers risked undermining the very independence that these states sought to consolidate. Ghana's own scepticism of Nigeria's reliance on the British Ministry of Defence underscores how deeply contested this dependency was in the first decade of independence. The Biafran case thus illustrates both the practical difficulties of naval development and the ideological dilemmas that surrounded it.

The alternative, however, proved elusive. Biafra's attempt to improvise a naval capacity from scratch demonstrates the challenge of developing even a modest brown-water fleet without pre-existing infrastructure, resources, or training pipelines. Whereas mercenaries offered short-term technical expertise and operational skill, their

¹²¹Central Intelligence Agency, Intelligence Memorandum, Washington, January 29 1969, p. 3. <https://2001-2009.state.gov/documents/organization/54571.pdf>. Accessed 19 December 2024,

¹²²Alabi-Isama, *The Tragedy*, p. 51.

¹²³Makinde, 'The Nigerian Civil War', p. 15.

contributions were necessarily limited in scope and sustainability. They could enhance tactics but not transform strategic capacity. In this sense, the Biafran navy remained peripheral to the overall trajectory of the war, yet its story reveals much about the limits of external stopgaps in building enduring military institutions.

At the same time, the naval dimension of the conflict had important, if indirect, consequences. Even if never decisive, Biafra's maritime efforts complicated Federal planning, forced Nigeria to allocate resources to coastal surveillance and interdiction, and drew in international attention through blockade-running and the contest over supply routes. In the smaller creeks where the Federal Navy had no initial presence, the Nigerian Army had to improvise using low-intensity naval tactics. Viewed in this light, naval warfare in this conflict mattered less as a conventional battlefield and more as a site of pressure on logistics, diplomacy, and perception. In this sense, it illustrates how sea power can matter asymmetrically in conflicts dominated by land campaigns.

More broadly, the Biafran experience raises questions about the trajectory of post-colonial African navies. To what extent could these institutions develop independently of external patrons? How central were mercenaries, contractors, and other external actors in providing not just capacity but credibility? And what does the Nigerian case suggest about the enduring marginality of naval warfare in African conflicts, where armies have generally been the decisive arm? Addressing these questions elevates the significance of this study: the failures of the Biafran navy should not be read merely as local setbacks, but as windows into the wider dilemmas of post-colonial state-building, military development, and the contested role of maritime power on the African continent.