

## **EVOLUTION OF NIGERIAN AIR POWER PRIOR TO THE 21<sup>st</sup> CENTURY**

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper examined the origin of the Nigerian Air Force and the circumstances surrounding its evolution from the onset of its establishment. The research also studied the sources, as well as the nature of Air Power in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The study relied heavily on documentary data and lightly on oral data. The oral data were based on unstructured interviews with some Air Force officer. The documentary data were sourced from correspondence, books and magazines. The oral data were transcribed for analysis. The documentary data were subjected to textual and contextual analysis.

The researcher found out that the emergence of the Nigerian Air Force was the result of interplay of forces between the Nigerian Army and Nigerian Navy prior to the Nigerian Civil War.

**KEYWORDS:** Origin, Air Power, platform, Nava lpower.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Public and academic attention has been attracted to the roles of the armed forces, which have increasingly overshadowed the law enforcement agencies in maintaining law and order in hot spots across Nigeria (Oyewole, 2018). Nevertheless, the involvement of the military in crisis management other than socio-political crisis is still begging for attention. Though many of the military operations in the country are joint tasks that involve the three services of the armed forces, the police and other selected agencies; the activities of the army and other ground formations have dominated public attention. Consequently, the contributions of other services of the armed forces (air force and navy) and related departments of other security agencies to warfare and national security are usually underestimated or overlooked in Nigeria. The situation in Nigeria is not an exception, although air and sea campaigns are important to warfare and constabulary duties. Air power is one of the underdeveloped subjects of military and security studies in Nigeria. It has received limited academic attention, despite its numerous contributions to defence, security and power projection of Nigeria. The Nigerian Air Force (NAF) was at its infancy in the war with Biafra but aided sea power to overcome the Niger Delta area of the war between 1967 and 1970. It was involved in the campaign against the Maitatsine in the northern region between 1980 and 1985 (Oyewole, 2018).

The aim of this paper is to discuss the evolution of air power and its significance in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Within the spectrum of armed conflict, three distinct types of warfare are identifiable – nuclear, non-nuclear and insurgent warfare.

#### **Background to the Research**

Sir Winston Churchill noted “air power is the most difficult of all forms of military force to measure, or even to express in precise terms” (Churchill, 1980). AG Sabin buttressed this view in his paper “Air Power in Joint Warfare” in this below statement thus:

*“...Technological advances have gradually but inexorably blurred the boundary between air and surface power, as more and more diverse military instruments have emerged which straddle the boundary concerned. Although the traditional manifestation of air power, namely the manned, fixed wing, land-based, combat aircraft, retains its primacy, it has now been joined by helicopters, carrier aviation, airborne and air mobile forces, cruise and ballistic missiles, surface-to-air missiles (SAMs), and a rapidly increasing range of unmanned*

*aerial vehicles (UAVs) and space satellites. Ownership of these new capabilities is spread more evenly among the armed services, with the precise pattern differing between different nations, and there is no longer any kind of straightforward equation between 'air power' and the capabilities held by any particular air force."* (Sabin, 1994)

**Hugh Trenchard defined air power as:**

***"The ability to do something through the air"* (Royal Air Force, 1993).**

The Royal Air Force however sees Air Power from this point:

*The ability to use platforms operating in or passing through the air for military purposes"* (Royal Air Force, 1993).

**The Australian Air force defined air power as thus:**

*"The ability to project military force in the third dimension by or from a platform above the surface of the earth"* (Kavanagh, 1991)

The advantage of air power can be summed up in speed, reach, concentration, responsiveness, and flexibility. Thirty percent of the world is covered by land, Seventy percent by sea and the whole space above the land and the sea is covered one hundred percent by air, then you will realize that with air power there are no restrictions thus there is hardly any hiding space. Air platforms are far faster and have greater reach than land platforms and sea platforms. Speed here means surprise, in quick time, and, enables military power to be projected over great distances in any direction unimpeded by surface barriers such as the mountain, manmade infrastructures on land and littoral spaces. The combination of speed and reach enables air power to concentrate military power in time and space to an extent which cannot be achieved by land spaces or sea spaces.

Speed and reach make air power highly responsive in the fastest way compared to other platforms. It can be generated within a few hours at any time of the day or night to counter or pose simultaneous threat across a far wider geographical area than is possible with surface or littoral platforms. However, it must be noted that sea warfare are esoteric but air platforms are glaring to military activities and even the civilians. This visibility of air power is indeed impossible to Land Platforms and Sea Platforms.

In the light of the above, some naval thinkers such as Gorshkov and Turner have submitted that the day of the large surface war ship (the man-of-war) was over, because there seemed to be very little that it could do to protect itself against this new and frightening Air planes (Gorshkov, 1974). In many ways, all this vindicates those who argued for the superiority of air-power in the course of the famous battleship-versus-bomb debate that had taken place in Western Europe and the United States during the inter-war period of the twentieth century. The view that the potential destructive power of air forces was growing to the point when air power alone would be able to force a powerful enemy to sue for peace was popular in the early 1930s (Harding, 2005). The growth of the Luftwaffe in 1934, and the recognition by the United Kingdom Defence Requirements Committee that Germany was the main potential enemy, with its growing air force within practicable flying time of London, pushed the Royal Air Force claims for superiority to the front burner in Britain's strategic analyses (Pugh, 2005).

The doctrine of the effective bomber force had major implications for defence decisions for the rest of the 1930s (Murfett, 2003). The bomb doctrine did not just cover the idea of strategic destruction of an enemy's capacity to make war but highlights the inferiority of the battleship itself in aspects such as the targeting of enemy air force planes. To hit an aircraft from the battleship with a shell was nearly impossible before the Second World War (Pugh, 2005). Conversely, it was only a matter of the ship getting a shell to explode in the right place and at the right time. The aiming problems of fleets against an opposing air force are highlighted as one of the possible weaknesses of the battleship by those advocating for air power. The Anti-Aircraft Gunnery Committee (in Britain) of 1931 examined the inter-war Royal Navy equipment and a wide range of proposals for its improvement came from firms and from individuals, both within and outside the service (Harding, 2005). After examining various proposals, the Royal Navy adopted the traditional means of optical range finding to target enemy airplanes during the Second World War. By this option of the Royal Navy, the battleships needed to adjust the firing power by measuring the flight time of the shell and the estimated course and speed of the target. The estimated target course and speed were refined and corrected via observation of the position of shell bursts in relation to the object or airplane been targeted.

The alternative form of targeting airplanes that would have been available to the Royal Navy was the tachometric system, which was used by the British Army and the United States and German navies during the

Second World War (Murfett, 2003). In the tachometric system, the range of the target was measured in the usual optical range finding way, but target bearing and elevation were measured directly as were rates of change of the target (Pugh, 2005). The aerial threats to the battleship had been for some time the subject of widespread debate both within military circles and beyond. Proponents of an enlarged, even predominant, role for aircraft pointed particularly to the sinking in 1921 of the ex-German battleship *Ostfriesland* by bombers of the United States Army Air Force (USAAF) (Pugh, 2005). This battleship of 24,701 tonnes full load displacement and ten years old withstood hits and near misses from some twenty-four shells and eighty bombs but then succumbed to 6 x 1000kg bombs from aircraft directed by Brigadier-General William Mitchell. Sceptics pointed to this demonstration as proof of what the aircraft could do even though it was carried out in perfect weather and with the target stationary and unable to fight back (Duyile, 2015).

Nevertheless, it had been demonstrated that an aircraft could now carry bombs of a size sufficient to sink a major warship (Pugh, 2005). Some defence against aircraft was therefore necessary. In new designs and during major refits, passive defence was added to many battleships in the form of heavier horizontal armour (Pugh, 2005). Active defence took the form of installing a number of guns for anti-aircraft purposes. These, usually of 76mm and later 114mm calibre, were changed slightly from the designs for surface action, their elevation to high angles, almost 90° in the case of the British MK1 anti-aircraft gun. Passive defence can only mitigate, not preclude altogether, damage from a hit in a conventional warfare. Essentially, this means that active defence was essential (Murfett, 2003). Ideally, this would prevent air attackers from getting into any position to make a hit and/or would inflict deterrent losses upon the aircraft.

The use of mathematics to summarize many variations of a tactical situation was first found to be of inestimable value in arriving at the best solution for placing ships in an anti-aircraft screen, in placing air combat patrols against incoming air raids, in placing helicopter for electronic warfare and many other similar situations. Air power was used to deliver the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. But as the nuclear age developed, naval power became more important in the strategic use of the nuclear weapon, specifically when it is viewed as providing a quick end to wars; yet, naval power was seen to be slow acting (Harding, 2005). The likely consequences of a nuclear war would be so grievous that military operations would need to be tightly controlled lest it would inadvertently plunge the world into a nuclear conflagration. However, prominent classical air power doctrinal theorists such as Giulio Douhet (1869 – 1930), Lord Hugh Trenchard (1879 – 1956) and William Mitchell (1878 – 1936), sacrificed their careers for their ardent belief in the proper function or application of air power in war. While Douhet was court martialled and jailed for one year but later reinstated, Lord Trenchard resigned as Chief of Air Staff only 20 days after his appointment over a disagreement with his Air Minister only to be vindicated and re-appointed (Waters, 1991). Billy Mitchell on his part was kicked out of the Army Air Forces.

These pioneer air power theorists shared the belief that air power would be the dominant military force in future wars. Gary Waters noted: “They brought a new perspective to military strategy and the organisation of a nation defence force and provided the catalyst for nations to develop their own doctrines for exploiting the air” (Mason, 1991) Though the three thinkers shared a lot in common, they did not always in agreement particularly on the military objectives of air attack. Douhet in his book, ‘*The command of the Air*’ (1921) advocated for an independent air force based on Italy’s experience in World War 1 and insisted that this was the only way to obtain decisive results for Italy in a future war with another European power. Douhet advocated strategic bombing as the key to this quick and decisive victory in any future war. Since aircraft were weapons for offensive action of incomparable potential against which no effective defence could be foreseen, a nation attaining “command of the air” could proceed to shatter the enemy’s war making potentials and its will to fight. The surface forces –land and naval – were only barriers outside his vulnerable civil structure and base.

The aircraft therefore can always get through this barrier to mount attacks on the enemy’s population centres, industry or the economy that supports his war efforts. Trenchard’s thinking on the employment of air power agreed with Douhet’s postulations in several respects. For instance, he believed in strategic bombing “insisting it is the inevitable aerial strategy” and the need to gain “air superiority” as a condition precedent in air operations. However, he did not share Douhet’s belief in the indiscriminate bombing of cities. Rather he advocated the “precision bombing” of legitimate military targets conceding, however, that such attacks were proper even where they caused incidental loss of civilian life and property. However, his theories for generating a state of panic in a population in a humane and legally acceptable manner were not proved in World War 2 because the precision bombing he hoped for could not be achieved. The last of the trio, Billy Mitchell, differed from Douhet and Trenchard in that he believed that air power could be used to destroy enemy surface forces. Thus in addition to strategic bombing he advocated for the tactical application of air power in surface battles. He also stressed the need for pursuit aircraft to gain “control of the air”.

If the first World War signaled the birth and infancy of air power, the second World War heralded its adolescence and maturity. It provided the proving ground for these air power theories which by this time had won converts in high place in governments. For example, Winston Churchill had in 1933 told the House of Commons that:

*“Air Power may either end war or end civilization.”*

He was to be proved right in 1945. The direct consequence of the general acceptance of these doctrines led to the development and the prominence of bombers during the Second World War both in the European and Pacific theatres (Okoiye, 1999). The Nigerian Air Force is to provide air mobility for the Army and Navy on land and at sea. The Air Force is also to provide air mobility for the Rapid Deployment of Nigeria's Defense Forces in support of government internal and external programmes (Duyile, *The Sea Factor in Nigeria's National Security*, 2015). It is to maintain air superiority always, and to serve as a deterrent force against possible internal and external subversion. Its concept of operation is to provide, primarily, air defense by detecting and destroying the enemy, before he reaches his target or his weapon release point. The Nigerian Air Force is to apply direct pressure on the enemy's military capability by attacking his vital military, industrial and economic centers. The Nigerian Air Force is significant to conventional and constabulary wars.

The Air Force option is important to preempt, deter, or retaliate against attacks; decapitate enemy forces; and eliminate the enemy. The Nigerian Air Force is required to destroy the motivations and capabilities of the enemy forces through attacks targeted at its facilities, and sanctuaries. The Nigerian Air Force can undertake covert and overt operations in the effort to protect the population and destroy the infrastructures of the enemy. Air power is an invaluable asset that enhances operation of strategic operatives with precision strikes, reconnaissance, and transportation. Air power is an appropriate measure that fits the tight time frames that characterize response to a fleeing target. Air power is one of the ways to make relevant, accurate, timely, and comprehensive information about the enemy available to ground operatives in on the front line. Advocates of precision air weapons have argued that wars can be won by selectively taking out an enemy's conventional structures, its communication systems, and the economic infrastructure of its major cities. Although air power cannot win wars, it retains a significant role in firepower, transportation and provides a constant presence in the operational theater. By permitting operatives to respond rapidly to warnings, to surprise the enemy, and to cover expanses of territory without requiring stationary positioning, tactical air mobility provides an operational alternative, or at least a complement, to the large scale, widespread presence of slow-moving forces in operational theater of war. It is also a useful asset in special operations, such as search and destroy or rescue missions. The contribution of air power can make a significant difference by eliminating land formations, sanctuaries, and supplies. This brings in the role that ground formations do perform to complement the Nigerian Army. The Army is organized to defend, on land, Nigeria's territorial integrity.

The Nigerian Army is required to keep and maintain a rapid deployment force proficient on land and during maritime operations. This contingent is to be part of a mixed force in which the Navy and Air Force would contribute and participate. However, it must be said that the Nigerian Navy and Nigerian Army had the luxury of gaining experience in the colonial period. They even participated in the First and Second World War whilst the Air Force did not. The Nigerian Navy was officered in its early history by British officers from the old Marine department it relied on old British ships (Duyile, *Historicizing the Development and Intensification of the Nigerian Navy between 1956-1958*, 2019). The Nigerian Navy can be traced back to 1894, from a force called The Southern Marine which took over from the Royal Navy the duty of patrolling the waterways of the Oil Rivers Protectorate with armed vessels (Duyile, Allison, Ediagbonya, Aluko, & Taiwo, 2020). The Nigerian Army also was an offshoot of the West African Frontier Force but was renamed The Nigerian Army in 1956. The Air Force did not draw from the colonial experience when it was established in 1964 it however was an offshoot of a Land Force (The Nigerian Army). Its first officers were from the Army.

In addition to this disadvantage, the paper, however, agrees and notes that Air Power has its limitation which includes:

- a. Difficulties in creating appropriate airstrips
- b. Airplanes don't come cheap
- c. Vulnerability – both on the air, sea and on the land.
- d. Cloudy weather (Duyile, *The Sea Factor in Nigeria's National Security*, 2015)
- e. Depends on land troops to do the mopping
- f. Air strikes could be damaging to civilian population

The Nigerian Air force needs good quality lifting Airstrips for effective combat operations. This imposes limitations in terms of reach and payload and this may sometimes necessitate the establishment of Forward



Operating Bases (FOBs). To add to this limitation faced by the Air Force is Aviation technology which is very sophisticated. Like all hi-tech systems therefore it is very expensive. An average multi-role fighter aircraft (MRCA) such as the MiG 29, F-16 or Mirage 2000 for example costs anything from 20-50 million US dollars. Air power is quite vulnerable to both ground-based air defence systems (AAAs and SAMs) (Okoiye, 1999). This is the reason why air superiority or control of the air is the paramount campaign in air operations. Visibility, clouds and other weather phenomena can sometimes impose restrictions on air operations. The issue of inability to hold ground is perhaps the greatest limitation to the employment of air power in war. In the Liberia and Sierra Leone civil war, for instance, air power and sea power virtually won the war but it took land action to give the psychological feeling of victory through the occupation of space. This inability to hold ground makes the effects of air power seem transient and impermanent. A growing limitation of air power in conflict is the phenomenon (Okoiye, 1999). This should be considered as “political counter-air”. This means any political action that tends to inhibit the unfettered employment of air power in war. A growing limitation to air power in conflict is political interference. ‘Political counter air’ may assume several restrictions imposed by public opinion of its citizens, arising from restrictions exacerbated by inter-service rivalry. The use of air power is sometimes restricted by political considerations because of its capacity to wreak havoc and because what is usually euphemistically referred to as “collateral damage” (Okoiye, 1999). The opposition to the massive bombing of Hanoi and the Port of Haiphong by the USAF during Operation Linebacker in Vietnam and the political furor that followed the inadvertent attack on the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade during Operation Allied Force are cases in point on this issue.

Political interference can also manifest itself when political or non-air commanders try to dictate the conduct of air operations.

### **Air Power in Nigeria Defense Strategy**

Nigeria as we all know is a maritime state with over 800nm of rich sea coast. The nation is abundantly blessed with vast land mass, beautiful scenery and topography, quantitative and qualitative labor force and good geography. Apart from oil that accounts for over 80% of Nigeria’s Gross National Product (GNP), there are large deposits of untapped minerals which should be protected. Nigeria in the twentieth century have key Vulnerable Points (VPs) of great national importance, such as oil refineries and installations, electric power generation stations, major bridges, aluminum and steel plants, and other vital industrial facilities. Considering the massive territory and the great distances therein that includes water bodies, it is unlikely that its surface forces, littoral forces and platforms would be able to provide timely and adequate surveillance, early warning and security essential for the protection of its vital assets. The researcher standpoints are that the Army should be a mopping force, no more, no less. The navy should support the air force in logistics and projection of power. This underscores the urgent need to accord air power development top priority in the nation’s defense strategy, this was not taken seriously by the military government that dominated governance in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Skeptic army governance however, denied the nation the necessary resilience and versatile air power capable of providing credible deterrence and optimum support to our surface forces. Evidences of insurrections appeared in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as described underneath by Okoiye, thus:

*“The volatility of the West African sub-region; the continuing prevalence of poverty, famine and natural disasters on the African continent; and indeed the proliferation of insurrections and other forms of low intensity conflicts on the continent will continue to impact on our geostrategic interests. This will call for recourse to air power in one of its many forms. Thus at every level from humanitarian aid to the risk of high intensity conflict, our military air power will have increasingly greater role to play in providing policy options to the government.” (Okoiye, 1999)*

However, if we look at the assets available to Nigeria in the twentieth century, it was clear an effective adherence to Air doctrine were neglected, hence the challenges faced by the country today. While the acquisition of a few medium life assets to supplement 20<sup>th</sup> century fleet of C-130 Hercules may give the Nigerian Army the airlift capacity (both tactical and strategic) required in the short to medium term, the same cannot be said for our offensive capacity. Offensive doctrine were denied the organization, some views trace it to the role some Air force officers played in the Vatsa coup. If this is true, it dealt a blow to the growth of Air Power in the Nigerian context. Land platform advocates had done a damage to Air Power, only to give an advantage to land platforms. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, required combat assets were not reactivated, some of them still do not fit into the picture of the twenty first century wars; a factor that made Air Power as a strategy remained in the back waters. It is in this regard that the Air Force in the twentieth century should have considered the induction of a Multi – Role Combat Aircraft (MRCA) as critical to the enhancement of our combat capabilities in the future. Air and Sea platforms were better compared to Land platforms. Nigeria remained unprepared and not ready for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, hence the subsequent calamity that engulfed it as Niger

Delta Militancy and Boko Haram insurgency. The Niger-Delta was one of the most volatile regions in Nigeria prior to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Despite the human, natural and materials endowments of this important part of Nigeria, what has become recurring decimal are restiveness, kidnappings, bombing of oil installations and disruptions in business activities. Series of interventions and programmes have been embarked upon by governmental and nongovernmental actors to improve the fortunes of the people and states. This later included the Ministry of Niger-Delta Affairs, Niger-Delta Development Commission (NDDC) and the presidential Amnesty Programme, and the derivation policy of the Federal Government. Apart from Lagos, no other state outside the Niger-Delta Region is rich compared to the Niger-Delta States. Damage done by the militants in the 21<sup>st</sup> century would have been suppressed by Air Power strategy. Same also applies to the later Boko Haram crisis;

Against the background of the twenty first century operational environment, the Air Force needs to enhance its helicopter capacity for more offensive role. The Air Force experiences in the twentieth century clearly indicated the need for an attack helicopter and a new utility helicopter. This will increase its ability to provide fire power and battlefield mobility in support of surface forces hence the argument whether it is necessary to establish separate air arms for land and sea services. While it is true that the more advanced armed forces of the USA, UK and the Russia, to mention a few, have air forces that are integral parts of their navies and armies, the question needs to be asked if a developing country like Nigeria can afford the luxury of following such a practice. No doubt, there are arguable reasons why the Army and Navy should have some air assets that they can readily call on to perform certain air power roles peculiar to their operations without recourse to the Air Force. The most convincing of these arguments is the example of the US where the doctrine is that helicopter operations come within the purview of the Army and the Marines since most helicopters operations are carried out either in conjunction with or in support of surface forces (Okoiye, 1999). The wisdom is that command and control and thus operational effectiveness would be enhanced if air assets are employed by personnel acculturated in the norms and doctrines of the Service concerned. At the other end of the spectrum, is the argument by the air power purists that the establishment of air arms by the Army or Navy amounts to an unnecessary duplication and dissipation of air efforts; that a more synergetic effect is achievable from the centralization of all air assets in a single independent air force. However, my position is that under the prevailing condition where the Nigerian Armed Forces are barely struggling to exist, small wars and conventional warfare would be difficult to prosecute. There is no supporting task that a balanced tactical air force cannot perform effectively for either the Nigerian Army or the Nigerian Navy with proper coordination and joint training.

## 2. CONCLUSION

This paper has traced the evolution of Air Power and its significance to Nigeria's Defense Strategy. How Air Power succeeded in protecting Nigeria's interests and provide leadership in developing new concepts and operational doctrines. He who want peace must prepare for war. Nigeria must think of how to fight wars more cost-effectively. The days when wars could be won by sheer bravery and perseverance are gone. Also, attrition warfare belongs to another age. We must think of how to conduct military operations in such a way as to give reasonable probability of accomplishing desired political goals speedily and at acceptable price. Nigeria can no longer afford the luxury of the ECOMOG operations where we were bugged down for years resulting in high casualties and huge costs. This is where air power will come to our rescue. There are indeed countless examples of the use of air power for humanitarian purposes that are often overlooked – Ethiopia, Somalia, Bosnia, etc. Back home, the supply of food stuffs to the Sudan as well as the airlift of Nigerians from Equatorial Guinea by the Nigerian Air Force in the Mid 1970s are some good examples of the peaceful use of air power. The Nigerian Air force doctrinal principles must include the recognition of the primacy of control of the air as a condition precedent to the conduct of any air operations whether it is in support of sea or land warfare. The remarks of Tedder on this point is quite instructive:

*“The outstanding lesson of the last war (i.e. World War 2) was that air superiority is the prerequisite for all war – winning operations, whether at sea, on land or in the air.”*

Another important lesson was the importance of joint planning and cooperation in the maximal exploitation of tactical air power. Allied to this, is the requirement to retain a centralized control of air assets at the highest practical level of the air chain of command.

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