

What Could Possibly Go Wrong?

A Peace Corps Story



Harold Crawford
Training Group 21
Nigeria, 1966 - 1968

This kind of story is best told over a pitcher of beer, but it is what it is, so we will have to make do with coffee. Is anyone here today from group 21? Anyone who was in Nigeria during the war with Biafra? Excellent! Let's catch up later.

Bill Schrieber (training group 29), who some of you may know, is the only other PCV that was present for these events, and he is travelling abroad right now, so he is not here to correct my reminiscence.

I am not a scholar of the war between Nigeria and Biafra, so the following story is merely my (probably faulty) recollections from 50 years ago.

I will just start by reviewing a little bit of historical context so that the story will make sense.

Also, for the sake of narrative clarity, I have simplified (perhaps over-simplified), certain historical and military threads.

And this was, of course, long before the advent of digital photos. So, having taken my pictures on 35 mm slides, they are faded almost to oblivion by the passage of time and many are scattered to god knows where (much like my memory itself).

So I have used some of my photos that seemed serviceable and appropriated some images from the internet to help illustrate this story.



After spending 3 months training in St Croix and practice teaching on Barbados, I finally arrived in Nigeria. Which was then under military rule.

My assignment was to teach secondary level math and chemistry at Stella Maris College in Okitipupa, western region.

Okitipupa is in the rain forest about 130 miles by road from the nearest cities, Lagos and Ibaden.



**A simple plan:
What could
possibly go
wrong?**

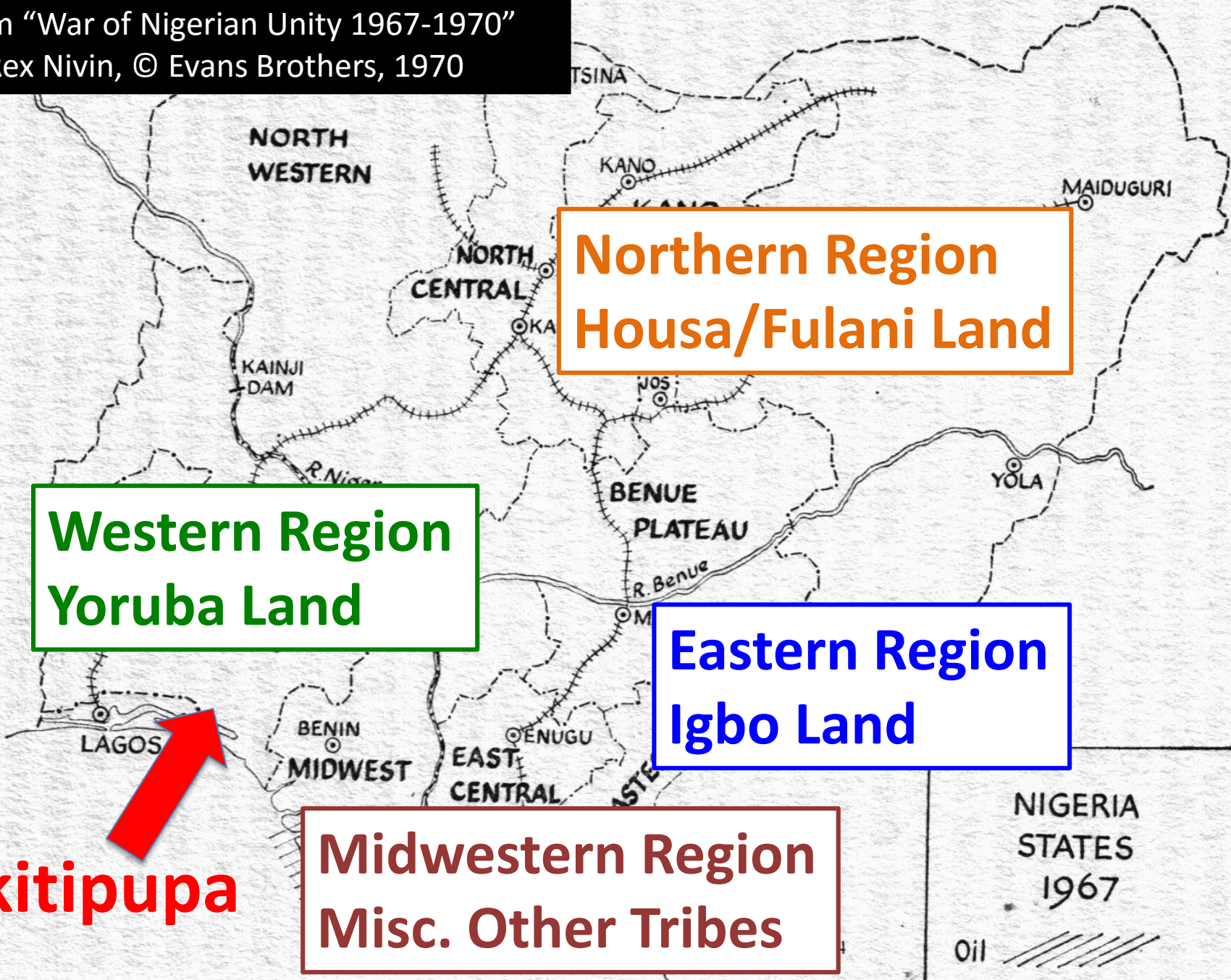
As you know, during the age of colonization, Nigeria came under rule of the British rule, who divided up west Africa as they thought best.

But, the partitioning did not make cultural sense -- differing cultures, languages, and religions are lumped together.

When Nigeria was granted independence in 1960, this division turned out to be problematic.

There were issues.

From "War of Nigerian Unity 1967-1970"
Sir Rex Nivin, © Evans Brothers, 1970



Northern Region
Housa/Fulani Land

Western Region
Yoruba Land

Eastern Region
Igbo Land

Midwestern Region
Misc. Other Tribes

Okitipupa



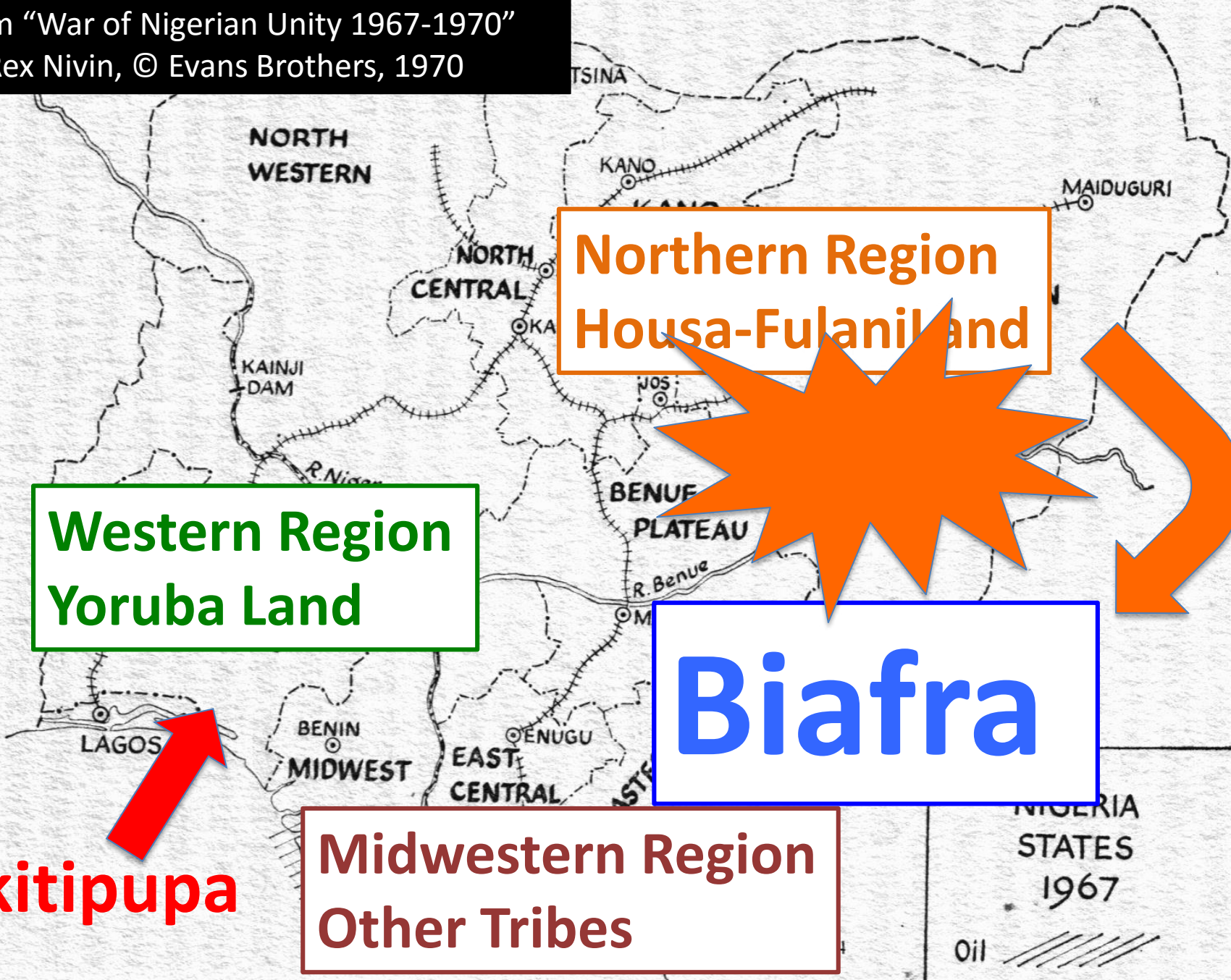
1966 – Military coup, counter-coup, etc.

1967 – Ethnic strife and war.

This is a period map showing the broad political divisions from “War of Nigerian Unity, 1967 – 1970”, by Sir Rex Nivin.

And my station in Okitipupa is here.

From "War of Nigerian Unity 1967-1970"
Sir Rex Nivin, © Evans Brothers, 1970



**Northern Region
Housa-Fulaniland**

**Western Region
Yoruba Land**

Biafra

**Midwestern Region
Other Tribes**

Okitipupa

NIGERIA STATES 1967
Oil

Enmity had developed between the northern tribes and the Igbo people of the east.

In 1967, there were riots in the north in which many Igbos were killed.

Soon 1-2 million Igbos who lived in other regions moved back to the east, to their homeland.

Obviously, things were tense in Nigeria in 1967.

Igbo leadership, under Lt Col. Odumegwu Ojukwu, decided to secede from the federation and form their own country.

Which they called “Biafra”.



Major General Yakubu Gowon (L), leader of the Nigerian federation mobilized his forces to oppose Ojukwu's plan (R).



We heard persistent rumors of “white mercenaries” being recruited to fight with the Biafran rebels.

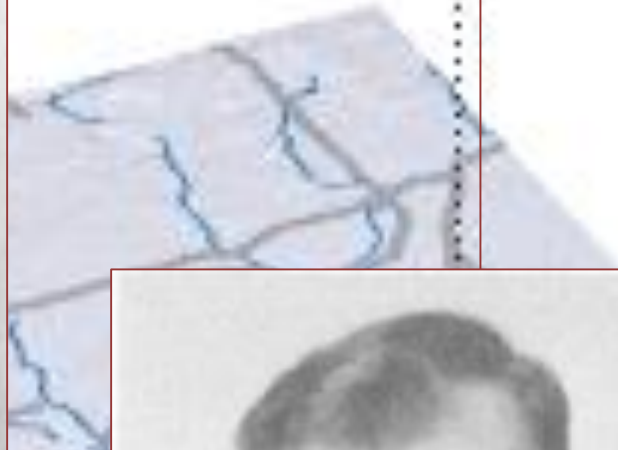
This is the mercenary soldier, Rolf Steiner, Colonel in command of Biafra’s Fourth Commando Brigade.

Here, he is seen wearing the rising sun insignia of Biafra.

Other rumors that we heard from Nigerian staff members at our schools reported that the soldiers were stopping buses on the roads, pulling anyone who looked like they might be Biafran sympathizers off and marching them off into the bush, never to be seen again.

Once, when I went to a movie theater in Ibaden, a newsreel was shown of villagers desecrating a body, said to be a mercenary pilot for Biafra who had been shot down while dropping --- WHITTINGCALL? --- improvised bombs on Nigerian towns.

OKITIPUPA



As regards other ex-patriots in our area: besides me, there was one other PCV Okitipupa:

Bill Schreiber (I don't have a period picture of him, so this was taken from a recent FON gathering).

And my good friend (the late) Pete Schneider a few miles up the road.

And PCV, Mike Schall, who arrived about a year earlier than me was also stationed in Okitipupa and was in and out of the area as a community development worker.

In addition, there was one CUSO (canadian volunteer) at my school, one VSO (UK volunteer) nearby, two Israelis working on a water project, and a half dozen Irish priests staffing the school.

The nearby logging camp had a couple of Englishmen and a Scot on their staff.

We had no reliable communication with Peace Corps Staff. The nearest long range radio was at a logging camp about 15 miles away, in Irele.

We listened avidly to BBC radio for news on the progress of the war.

As the war got closer to our area, the ex-pats began to disappear, one by one. The VSO and CUSO were soon gone, as were the non-Nigerian staff at the logging camp.

Then the Israelis left.

The Irish missionaries would never leave!

During this time, Bill Shreiber and I visited an old disused concrete bridge one day and made pleasant conversation with a local fellow on a bicycle.

I mention this because, as it turns out, we would see him again soon.



One evening in August, 1967 Bill and I were drinking beer (Star, of course), with some Nigerian friends at a tavern in Okitipupa, when we were visited by a driver from the logging camp.

They had received a message on their radio from the Peace Corps office that we were to evacuate our post at once – as best we could.

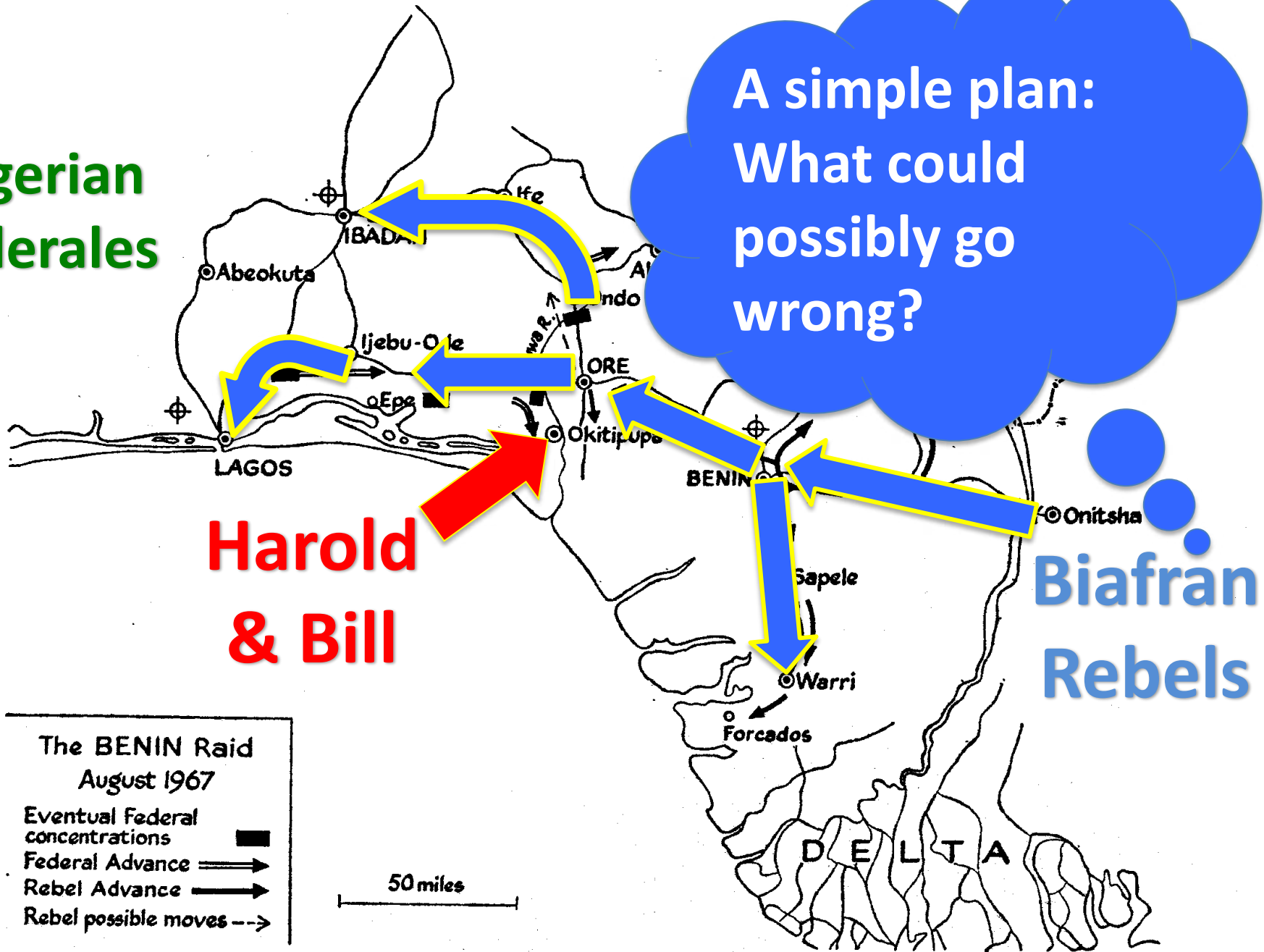


We went home to pack. When I arrived at my compound, there were soldiers in battle dress guarding my compound and setting up a machine gun on the road leading to my duplex.

What to take with us and what to leave behind? I put clothes, a couple of books, and other essentials into my Hausa bag along with money and a roll of shillings to be used as dash (to bribes officials if necessary) and went to bed.

After a restless night, we arose early and went to the motor park in town to catch a lorry out of the area.

**Nigerian
Federales**



**A simple plan:
What could
possibly go
wrong?**

**Harold
& Bill**

**Biafran
Rebels**

**The BENIN Raid
August 1967**

Eventual Federal concentrations ■
Federal Advance ==>
Rebel Advance ->
Rebel possible moves --->

Unbeknownst to us, at that time, the Biafran army was making a major strategic move into Nigerian Territory.

They had over-run Benin City, and were now in Ore, way too close for our comfort.

The Biafran commanders plan was for one group to move down the main highway to Lagos and another group to head north to Ondo, then to Ibaden.

They had already sent troops south of Benin City to Warri, in the Midwestern Region.

According to Sir Rex Niven, they were hoping that a quick display of force in the western region would bring the Nigerians to the negotiating table.

A simple plan – yes?



Nigerian
Federales

Biafran
Rebels

A simple plan:
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Notes

So, obviously, the Nigerian army was in Okitipupa already.

And the Biafrans are somewhere out here.

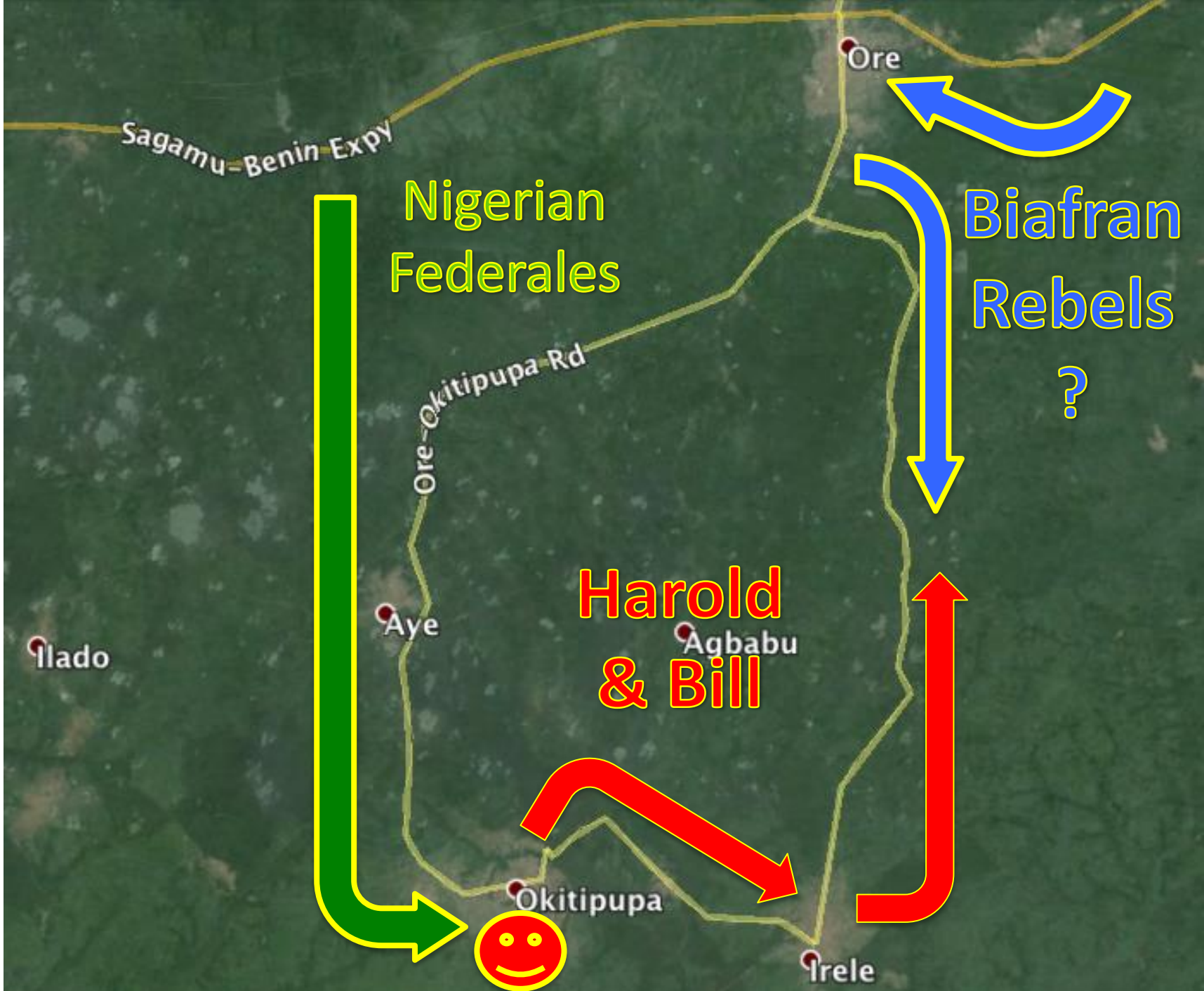
Our plan was to take a lorry that would head north and hit the main east-west highway to Lagos (the capitol of Nigeria at that time).

What could go wrong?



So we boarded a vehicle loaded with market women, children, chicken, goats and us and started out.

But, the lorry driver had other ideas.



Sagamu-Benin Expy

Ore

Nigerian Federales

Biafran Rebels ?

Ore-Okitipupa Rd

Aye

Harold & Bill

Agbabu

Ilado

Okitipupa

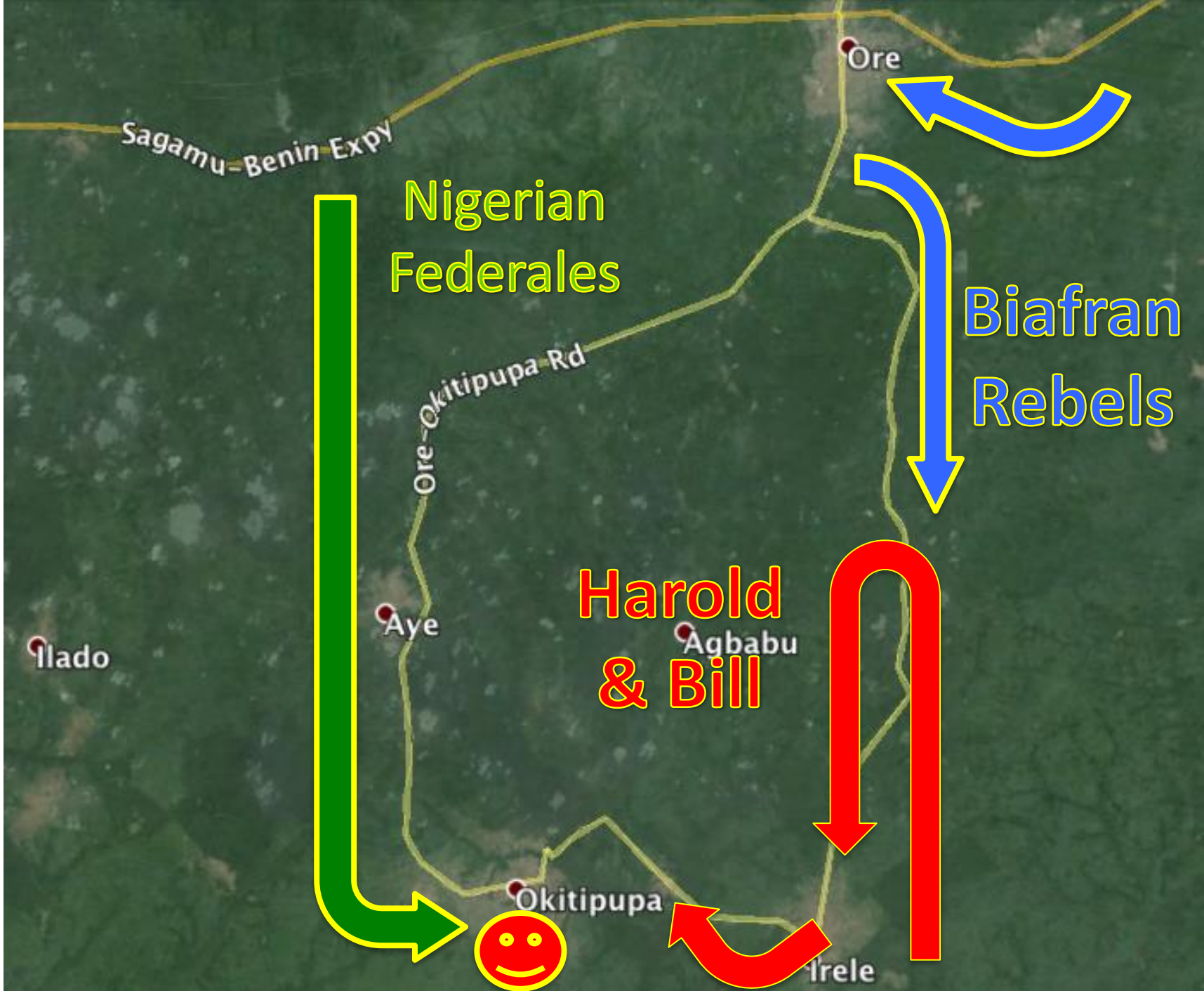
Irele



Instead of going north, he headed east, so as to pick up other passengers from Irele.

After we passed Irele and were finally going north, we were flagged down by villagers with a warning

There were Biafran soldiers ahead of us on the road.



Sagamu-Benin Expy

Nigerian Federales

Biafran Rebels

Harold & Bill

Ore

Ore-Okitipupa Rd

Ilado

Aye

Agbabu

Okitipupa

Irele



So we turned around and headed back south.

When we came through Irele, we were stopped again by the remaining Nigerian logging camp staff and told that they had consulted with the Peace Corps office on the radio, and they had agreed to give us transportation to Lagos in one of their trucks.– but, we would have to wait for two more expats (an Englishman and a Scotsman) who were evacuating on the river by boat and should be coming “real soon now”.

They fed us lunch. We waited.

Late in the afternoon, the boaters arrived and we boarded the truck, heading back to Okitipupa (from whence we had started that morning).

The truck was a two seater with a covered back bed. I rode in the passenger seat beside the driver, and Bill was in the covered bed along with the two logging camp guys.

All was well until we got about half way back to Okitipupa.



As we were driving west through the forest toward Okitipupa, soldiers jumped out of the bush on either side of the road brandishing automatic weapons. We were ordered out of the truck. Bill and I and the other two were lined up on side of the road for questioning. The driver prostrated himself on the ground begging for his life and saying that he did not know us – he was only the driver.

The soldiers were young. They kept looking nervously down the road for signs of enemy approach. After all, they were expecting Biafrans when we came along. And with all the talk about “white mercenaries”, they could not be too careful.

We pulled out our IDs and other paperwork. We tried to explain who we were and what we were doing in English and Yoruba and even Pidgin. They were unsure what to do with us. They were twitchy and kept us covered with their weapons.

Then a local guy came along riding his bike. It was the fellow that we had seen a few days before at the old disused bridge.

“Excellent!” I thought, “Maybe he can vouch for us.”

“I saw them at the bridge before”, he told them. “They were inspecting the bridge. I think they might be spies.”

Rats! Things were not going well.

Then an older soldier came along to see what was the hold-up, a sergeant, I think. He listened to our story and examined out paperwork. Finally, he sighed and said “Let them go on.” And we were on our way again.

We rolled through Okitipupa without stopping and headed north.

Once we were on the main highway, we were stopped several times at military checkpoints, but we had no further issues.

**DO NOT URINATE
DO NOT DEFECATE
DO NOT DUMP REFUSE
KEEP LAGOS CLEAN**



COURTESY:-

ROTARY CLUB OF FALOMO
IKOYI - OBALENDE L.G.A

After a couple of hours we were entering the outskirts of Lagos.

We did not have a clue what was going on in the country. For all we knew, we might be the only expats still in country.

But when we showed up at the door of the Peace Corps office (after hours and after dark), there was a note on the door announcing a party that evening at the directors home.

We were debriefed by Peace Corps staff on what we had done and seen and we were able to talk to other evacuated PCVs, some who had evacuated by boat from the eastern region.



A couple of days later, we were transported to Ibadan and lodged in the home of the new peace corps doctor (Don Spigner) while waiting for the military situation to be resolved.



One of the newly arriving PCVs had brought a copy of the recently released Beatles album: “Sergeant Peppers Lonely Hearts Club Band”.

We were enthralled.



We volunteered to assist with a medical team that was part of the effort to eradicate smallpox from the earth. Our cultural and language skills were applied to marshal villagers to the inoculation stations.

Once, we were stopped at a checkpoint and had to talk our way out of a problem. Our trans-dermal injection set looked like a weapon to the young soldiers manning the checkpoint.



Finally, after a month in Ibadan, we were able to return to Okitipupa ... just in time for the next semester of school to start.



We found an improvised armored vehicle about 12 miles east of Okitipupa.

It had been burned and brass bullet casings littered the ground.

One lone boot remained on the ground – it had a piece of foot in it.



Oh, and the fellow on the bicycle, who disowned us when we were held by the soldiers, a few months later, I was riding a bus back to Okitipupa from a trip to Ondo, and I saw him again.

I looked directly at him with a quizzical look on my face, but he would not meet my gaze.

Thanks for your attention.

If you were in Nigeria during
this time, perhaps we can
get together later over that
beer and talk.

Thanks for

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