Interview with Lt. Gen. Joseph Olorungbon Owonibi, Former Force Commander, United Nations Mission in Liberia

The following is an edited transcript of an interview with Lt. Gen. Joseph Olorungbon Owonibi, conducted by Joyce Neu on Oct. 23, 2007.[1] Due to the fires affecting the San Diego region and the closure of the University of San Diego the week of Oct. 21, 2007, the Distinguished Lecture Series planned for Oct. 23 was officially cancelled. The three distinguished panelists – Priscilla Hayner, Joyce Neu and Lt. Gen. Joseph Olorungbon Owonibi – instead gave their presentations during a private session of the Women PeaceMakers Summit held at the Hacienda Hotel in Old Town, San Diego. The summit report, part of the 5th anniversary publication of the Women PeaceMakers Program, will be published in the coming weeks on the IPJ Web site: http://peace.sandiego.edu/reports/ConferenceReports/ IsPeacePossibleSummit.html.[2]

JN: You were not born a military man. When was it that you decided you wanted to join the military?

JO: I got into the military, I would say, by a design that was not my own plan. While I was growing up, the emphasis was on a degree, education. The expectation was that as soon as you leave high school, you were to proceed to the university. I had my admission into the university and I needed to go in with a scholarship, which I was denied because those who were in charge of the educational scholarship were not too fair. They wanted to enforce a government policy on those going to the university, which meant you could have an admission to study law and you would be told that the priority of the state government was agriculture. So, you either go back and get an admission that would enable you to study agriculture or you forfeit the scholarship. And that's what happened to me. I had wanted to study economics and I was told clearly that the government priority was not economics, but agriculture. That meant I had to go back to my university to change my course for a fresh admission, and that could not happen within that year, which meant I had to wait another year.

JN: This is different than what happens in this country. In this country, the university accepts you as a student no matter what your discipline. It's just one admission process. It sounds like each faculty or each department in Nigeria accepts you, so if you're accepted in economics, it doesn't mean you will be accepted in agriculture.

JO: The procedure is about the same. There is one central admission, but you are admitted for a course in a particular faculty. Once you are accepted for a particular course in one faculty, that's the course you have to study. If you want to change that course, you have to go back to the university and your admission has to be reviewed and a fresh admission given to you on a different course of

[1] Joyce Neu is the executive director of the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice and was a Jennings Randolph Senior Fellow at the United States Institute of Peace for the 2006 to 2007 academic year.
[2] The following interview was transcribed and edited by Emiko Noma, editor at the IPJ.

your choosing. The state government did not realize those administrative problems and I couldn't wait for another year. I was a young man – wait for one year to do what? Just at that point, the adverts for the Nigerian Defence Academy [NDA] came up, and I applied and was admitted. In any case, at the cadet training school I discovered that I had the opportunity to also do some academics. That is how, essentially, I got into the military. It was not a top priority for me, but it was because I couldn't get a scholarship. Looking back now, I am glad I joined the military.

Let me say here that one may be wondering, why were you waiting on a scholarship? I come from homes where the families are large in Nigeria and there's a lot of burden on the parents. Already my father had my two elder brothers at university and he just couldn't add a third one.

JN: What state are you from?

JO: At that time I was from Kwara state. But I am now in Kogi state. It's located about the middle of Nigeria.

JN: So, you went to military school and you weren't so happy with this?

JO: Of course, initially, it was like my dream was going away. But then, this was an alternative. I looked at the alternative and how best I could make use of this alternative. And when I had a briefing on what the military training could give me, I thought that worked. I was not losing that much. So, I put in all my effort to the training.

JN: How many years were you there?

JO: I spent two and a half years in NDA military training and I was commissioned as an officer, a 2nd Lt.

JN: Where was your first assignment or first posting? How long were you there?

JO: My first posting was to a reconnaissance squandron. The 1st Squandron is the family of the Armoured Division and it was in the southeast of Nigeria. I was in that unit for about two years.

JN: And what did you learn, what did you take away from that?

JO: The basic thing there was leadership and command. Another aspect was resource management, because you need to manage human, materiel and financial resources to achieve some goals. What the Nigerian military does is to deploy a young officer to serve under a commander for grooming – just the same way as is done in the U.S. Army – to develop the officer's ability to lead men, to command men and to bring out some qualities in him or her. The officer is subjected to so many tasks.

Sometimes you are given a task without adequate resources. The aim is not to embarrass you, but to see how you can manage the limited resources and still achieve the objective. So, there are several aspects. You are then asked to go through what we call discipline within military. You need to know what disciplinary powers exist and how those disciplinary powers are employed for justice, because you are expected to be fair but firm in dispensing justice and disciplinary powers.

JN: You are describing in a way a code of conduct, which we'll come back to when we get a little further with U.N. peacekeeping experiences. But, was there a code of conduct that was given to you as a young officer, or was this something that you helped develop?

JO: There was. As soon as you move from the cadet training, you are exposed to military law and terms and conditions of service for officers, where all the codes of conduct are listed out there: offenses, punishment, the boundaries you must not cross. You are subjected to two laws, both civil and military law. But they concentrate on the military law because all along you are supposed to be aware of the civil law of the country. If you also contravene any of these laws, disciplinary action will be taken, so that shows you are not above the law yourself.

Apart from that, each command, for the purpose of administration, can formulate other instructions to guide the behavior of soldiers and officers, and we call those types of instructions regimentation. Regimentation is actually the life of the unit: from the rising of the sun to the setting of the sun, all those routines that you have to do and all the action you have to carry out are regulated. So, those are added to the terms and conditions of service and military law. You could call it a code of conduct. You are expected to abide by all of them. From the word "go" you begin to learn to follow specific instructions strictly. It's done in such a way that there's hardly anything that is not covered, so you don't have an opportunity for a loophole that you can exploit.

JN: Did you find that was something you responded well to? Going from your disappointment in not being able to study economics at the university to now having your life regimented – a series of rules which guides everything you do – how did you respond to that?

JO: I didn't have problems in adapting to this environment because I attended a school where we had very strict rules and regulations and a very tough disciplinarian as a principal. Also in the school, I was a member of the boy scouts and some other clubs which were more or less like military training. Therefore, it was not a transition. When I got to the unit, it was better because you see yourself also administering instruction. You are not just there to be a part of it, but you are also administering it on others. So, it's a lot of fun doing that. You see people comply with it and you can see the improvement in the lives of those you are asked to command. So, I didn't have much problem.

JN: When you joined the military, what was the reaction of your parents?

JO: Of course, initially it was, "Oh, what are you doing? What are you doing this for?" My dad was a chief, above average, so he was enlightened. He invited me and asked my reasons why, and I told him my reasons. It was something he couldn't have helped much because probably if he had enough resources, he would have said, "Forget about this. Go to your university, son. I will sponsor you." But he didn't – too many demands. So, what he did next was to invite one or two officers, those who were already officers in my own community, to brief him on what the military is all about. "What's this my young son is doing? What is it all about?" And they gave him a thorough rundown of the opportunities, and he was now convinced that was a good thing. So, he encouraged me.

My mother was not too receptive. It took me a lot of time to convince her. What was in the back of her mind was military, soldiers, war. And that was it, until I told her it wasn't every time you go to

war, and, in any case, people were not thirsting to go to war. I had to hand her over to my dad and say, "Dad, we've got a problem. You need to convince her, we have to convince her that it's OK. Just give her the good side of it." But it took her quite a while to get over it.

JN: Were you in the military during the war in Biafra?

JO: The war in Biafra ended before I even went for my training. I was still in high school.

JN: That was fortunate, I think.

JO: And you could see the reason why my mother had her thinking.

JN: That's right. The military had a particular role in Nigeria that it doesn't have in many countries, which was as rulers and governors, and Nigeria was ruled for so long, until very recently, by the military. I wonder whether the reaction of the people, including your family, to you going into the military might have had different meaning than it would have to people in other countries.

JO: The time we went in was about the first of the military rule. Nigerians were just experiencing military rule for the first time, and therefore, we were hopeful that it would not take so much time. Unfortunately, it continued for so long, so it was better to accept the realities around you. But even then the question was, did the military have any political role? I was one of many who didn't play any political role throughout. While the military was in government, a large portion of the military was going about its business, the military job. Those who were in politics were just a handful; the majority in government – the cabinet, commissioners, civil servants – were civilians. So, a lot of us didn't have the opportunity, and didn't even want such opportunity, because for as long as you begin to mix that with your profession, it's diluted.

JN: You were in the military during the rule of [Ibrahim] Babangida, [Sani] Abacha, Gen. [Yakubu] Gowon. Especially under Babangida and Abacha, did you ever do any kind of introspection or thinking about whether the military was helping them to remain in power?

JO: After the first five or so years, every Nigerian knew that there was supposed to be an end to it, even those of us who were in the military. But unfortunately, a pattern had been set, and it was the order of the day within the African region as a whole. So, whether it was helping us or not was not the issue. The norms were there. Otherwise, a lot of Nigerians knew it was not the best we should have for the country. Gradually there were those in the military who began to say that it was high time we got back to our base and leave the civilians to do their thing.

JN: Back to your family, were your father and your mother terribly influential in your life?

JO: Yes, the both of them were quite influential. I was quite close to them, especially my dad who was a chief. I learned a lot of wisdom as he was administering justice to people in the community. I respected him, so I allowed him to do a lot of guidance, direction. My mother is still alive and I am still very close to her. I derived a lot of benefit from the two of them.

JN: Do you think some of the leadership skills you have you learned from him?

JO: Yes, I did, especially his administering justice to people. For example, if Mr. A reports an issue concerning B, my dad will not call B in isolation. He would call both A and B, and then let B know that A reported this concerning him. Initially, I thought, why would he do that? Later on, I realized that was a very good tool for me when I had troops under command. There are those who want to be close to you, and they may not actually be telling you exactly the truth. They may deliberately be running down somebody else in order to win your favor. If you want to deal with him, you have to be sure what he said is correct. I learned that lesson early, by the age of 15. There were several other things I got from him. He was a good listener; he listened very well. That has helped me, especially in peacekeeping negotiations, to have the ability to listen well.

JN: Why is that ability so important in peacekeeping?

JO: It is important because a lot of people come with problems or complaints in peacekeeping. If they are not given opportunity to explain exactly what the problem is and you are in a hurry, you get a wrong interpretation of the problem. And once you have a wrong interpretation of the problem, the solution will be wrong. What you don't want to do in a crisis area is to think that when a person is talking, you already know where he is going and you take off from there. There are those who want to offer you valuable information. The moment you keep cutting in, they get discouraged.

JN: These lessons from your father have served you well. Did your father live long enough to see you in peacekeeping?

JO: Yes, he was around when I participated in my first mission. He died while I was in Kentucky state on a military course in 1981. I just came back from Lebanon.

JN: I'm so sorry. Did you ever have a chance to tell him how you had learned from him?

JO: Oh yes, because I visited home a lot of times. He was always proud of his children. Whenever we came home, he'd ask us what was going on and how we were doing. He influenced my marriage at an early age. He insisted that we must marry at an early age so that whatever number of children we wanted to have, we could have them and train them quickly.

JN: Did he have a say over who you married?

JO: He didn't actually insist on who I must marry, but he had to advise on how to choose a wife so that I didn't go out there and start looking for the wrong reasons – because as a young man, you mostly go out looking for the wrong reasons. She may be beautiful, but you don't know whether you can live with this fellow, because it's not the beauty you are going to live with, it's actually the character you are going to live with. So, when I made up my mind, of course, he did a thorough investigation. That's what we do back home in Nigeria: an investigation into her character, into her family.

JN: Was she from the same area and the same ethnic group?

JO: Yes.

JN: And so the decision was a good one?

JO: Yes, it was a good one, and I'm glad I listened to my dad.

JN: You have two older brothers. Do you have any younger?

JO: Oh yes. I come from a very large family. I think we are about 28.

JN: Twenty-eight children? But not the same mother?

JO: Not the same mother. Same father. He had about six wives. And that is something I learned, too, because I knew how hard it was. He had to carry on the ancestry: the boarding, and the management and administration of a very large family. So, I didn't need anybody to tell me that I should just stick to my wife.

JN: You saw how difficult it was. How many children do you have?

JO: Four.

JN: Well, let's move into how you went from serving in Nigeria to being deployed with a U.N. peacekeeping force.

JO: My first experience was in Lebanon. I was a captain. I was in the reconnaissance unit. The Nigerian contingent in Lebanon needed a reconnaissance unit to support the operation there. So, our commander was asked to raise a unit that would go and support the contingent, so I got selected to command it. We had to go buy reconnaissance vehicles, which as of then we couldn't transport by air. It was going to be quite expensive. So, we had to opt to transport them by sea using our naval ship, and that's how the entire unit had to go. It was quite a slow trip. It took 28 days because we had a stopover in Dakar, a two-night stopover in Gibraltar, another two-night stopover in Malta. The Mediterranean Sea can be quite rough. But it was good training because a lot of the troops under my command were not exposed to sea life, so that gave them a lot of experience, and it was useful when they got to the operational area. We spent six months there and then had to be rotated.

JN: Had you ever commanded outside of Nigeria?

JO: That was the first.

JN: And that was the first time you left Nigeria?

JO: No. I left Nigeria on military training. I was in Pakistan, I think, twice before that time. I was in Britain once. But this was an operation and not just military training.

JN: What year was this?

JO: 1979 to 1980.

JN: So, this was a very difficult time in Lebanon.

JO: It was very useful, because I was exposed to a lot of peacekeeping issues: reconnaissance, patrol, checkpoints. And I had the opportunity to be relating with the headquarters at Naquora – that's the UNIFIL [United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon] headquarters. And I was the administrative welfare officer, as they say, and that gave me the opportunity to go into Israel, to organize a guided tour for the troops. That was quite a useful experience.

JN: Was this the first time that you had had an opportunity to focus on peace, on the role of the military in actually promoting peace?

JO: Yes. Back home in Nigeria, we were deployed in support of the civil authority and police. That was the first experience I had in peacekeeping outside the country.

JN: Following that, did you serve in Nigeria again or were you continuously deployed in U.N. peacekeeping missions?

JO: No, I came back to Nigeria to serve. The only opportunity I had in relation to peacekeeping was the time I was in Maiduguri, another part of Nigeria, when the OAU [Organization of African Unity] was deploying peacekeeping troops into Chad. I was not part of the troops, but my unit, located in Maiduguri, had to offer a lot of logistics and administrative support to the troops. And then there was another time that I had to serve on the staff at our headquarters, where we were dealing with peacekeeping operations and administration – until I went to Liberia.

JN: So, from the time you were in Lebanon until Liberia was 20 years. During those 20 years were there certain lessons you learned that helped prepare you for the deployment in Liberia?

JO: We kept on having opportunities to visit mission areas to see the troops, and I had opportunity to go on a few such visits. It was good for me because I could relate it to when I was part of it, and see where peacekeeping had reached, see where the problems were, especially the operational, logistic, administrative, troop welfare and environment problems. All these were good lessons for me. When I was going to Liberia, I looked for those reports I got from that time. I was also fortunate to have served as deputy force commander under Gen. Daniel Opande, and as chief military observer for a year.

JN: So, you had kind of on-the-spot training. What were the biggest challenges you faced in Liberia?

JO: The biggest challenges in Liberia were in the areas of disarmament, violations of the ceasefire agreement, and elections. The mission somehow had a bad start, a faulty start on disarmament which was essential to the success of other mandates, and, therefore, that brought a lot of challenges. In relation to disarmament, we had to deploy troops in locations with very, very challenging terrain: the roads not passable, weather concerns. We had to put troops in all these places in order to make sure that we covered the entire area. You need that in peacekeeping before you start any disarmament, so instead of having the ex-combatants move all over the country, you can address them in their locations and confine them.

The election was one other challenge. I think because we had concluded disarmament successfully and there was relative peace, the election didn't demand so much security. Rather it demanded so much logistics – our logistics had to be stretched to the limit.

JN: Did everyone speak English?

JO: Not everyone. There were contingents where we had problems with language. For example, Ethiopia. The majority of them did not speak English, so we had to ensure that we had somebody within the unit or sub-unit, two or three, who could speak English – so that was a problem. But by and large the others were OK.

JN: The idea of a commander commanding troops from 51 countries is somewhat incredible. One assumes that you have troops who come there who are very well-trained, very well-equipped, and yet you have others who come there very poorly trained, very poorly equipped. What kinds of challenges did you face while trying to command such a diverse group of people?

JO: It was a challenge. But what a commander does is first to assess his capability and weakness in terms of the type of force he has. Once you are able to do that, it enables you to deploy them adequately based on those strengths and weaknesses. For example, the Irish and the Swedish formed our quick-reaction force because they were well-trained, well-equipped. It would be wrong for anyone to use another contingent that is poorly trained, poorly equipped as a quick-reaction force. They will not be mobile, they will not be there when you need them to be there. So, that's the first thing. Then, you also look at the terrain, the areas we need to deploy them, and the areas that are more sensitive, more problematic than others. So, you begin to look which contingent would fit that particular area. You need to do that, otherwise you have the wrong deployment and you find that in a particular area a contingent may not be able to cope, and there will be some other contingent somewhere that's probably just on holiday.

We also look at which of the contingents are larger in size, so that you can put some of the smaller ones with them. Once you do that and you let the commanders also realize the reason why you deploy them in certain areas for certain purposes, you see them making a lot of effort.

JN: Let me ask you a question again about this diversity. We talked a little bit about a code of conduct when you were a younger soldier, and, as you know, we're convening a summit of our Women PeaceMakers while you're here. One of their concerns, along with the United Nations and many, many women in conflict zones, is the conduct of some of the peacekeeping forces in those conflict zones. Can you address some of the gender-based violence that has occurred by some of the peacekeeping forces? How did you address that in Liberia?

JO: The first thing is when you have troops of that size, you are likely going to have abuses. The troops are so large. I'm not sure whether we, as of today, can achieve a standard where you have 15,000 troops deployed all over the country and you think everybody's going to be clean and neat – no. We realize that there are likely going to be abuses. So, there's been the Secretary-General's

Bulletin, which stipulates zero tolerance.[3] It is not acceptable at all. It's a no-go area. And that is quite useful, because as a force commander, I have an instruction to work with.

But, it's not as easy as that, certainly. So, what do you do? You must get a message down to the soldier, you must enforce it, you must monitor it. Therefore, the DPKO [Department of Peacekeeping Operations] has formulated a preventive measure in order to prevent anything from happening, and enforcement measures when things do happen. And it also has some remedial measures. So, what DPKO sent to us in the field includes training and awareness instructions.

What do we do when they come to the mission area? We have to assume that they have not been told, because the various countries' commitment to this differs. So, as soon as they get to the operational area, we carry out induction training and awareness, and we also try to check if they all have copies of the code of conduct in the language they can understand. If that is not done, we quickly contact DPKO or sometimes their own government to arrange for the copies.

Then, the SRSG [Special Representative of the Secretary-General], who is the head of mission, gives his own instruction, in addition, on how the Secretary-General's Bulletin should be enforced. As a force commander, I also send out my own instruction, as the third instruction, on how these first two instructions must be enforced, and insist that contingent commanders must now translate this to practical terms.

The public information office and division also assist in sending out a lot of bulletins, and over the radio we have jingles all over the country for public awareness. Then we established a focal point at the mission headquarters, the force headquarters and the contingent level. There is also within the mission a Conduct and Discipline Unit that has been set up by DPKO. And that's the team that collates all the allegations and forwards the allegations to OIOS, the Office of Internal Oversight Services. The OIOS has been given the mandate by the General Assembly to investigate all cases of sexual abuse. So, the OIOS categorizes them, and there are some cases that have no merit, so those are dismissed. There are those with merits, and those are investigated.

Apart from this, the contingent commander is mandated to carry out his own local investigation and disciplinary action. His disciplinary action must be reported to the force commander because that has to be tied into what the mission is doing, otherwise there's a conflict. In most cases, a contingent commander who thinks that a soldier cannot be allowed to hang around any longer in the mission – who wants him to be repatriated immediately – can't do that until we have permission from the SRSG. Sometimes permission comes from New York to repatriate him, because the OIOS investigation must not be hindered.

Now, there are problems. The major problem is TCC, troop-contributing countries. The mission cannot discipline the soldier. In fact, his contingent commander has more powers of discipline than even the SRSG. Reports of all the investigations are forwarded to the country, and the United Nations now expects the country to carry out its own investigation, but it must conclude the case and notify the United Nations. A lot of countries are doing it now, with a lot of pressure on them.

---

[3] The Secretary-General's Bulletin on special measures for protection from sexual exploitation and sexual abuse was issued on Oct. 9, 2003. The document can be found at http://www.peacewomen.org/un/pkwatch/discipline/SGBonSEA.pdf

The DPKO now has a bank where all the names [of soldiers suspected of abuse] are kept, so that the country does not re-nominate them for any further peacekeeping operation.

JN: Do you think these kinds of control are working?

JO: Yes. They're working.

JN: And do you think the instances of rape and sexual exploitation and abuse have diminished?

JO: They are diminishing because there are very strict actions taken. Two contingents of police in Congo were repatriated completely. Before I left,[4] one thing that I asked the United Nations to do was to make sure that the outcome or whatever action is taken by the country comes back to the mission, so that the mission can publish it for all the others to know that the United Nations is not merely joking about this issue. And I believe they're getting there. The important thing is that offices have been opened now, the office of conduct and discipline team and the OIOS offices. But, that doesn't mean the United Nations can reach 100 percent easily, because of the large size of troops and cultural differences.

But, the most important thing is the issue that I think the United Nations is now looking at: peacebuilding needs to start as early as possible. There are some victims of crises who, for survival, offer themselves. And this is an area we must look at. It's not just that task forces need to assist victims of rape and all those things; that has happened. These women and young girls have no means of income. They must survive. And they see soldiers, young men, collecting allowances – so they go out there and offer themselves. Some of them have gone through their own crises, where combatants have messed them up – it's not new to them. So, the soldiers are put under extreme stress. I have seen where some of them have told me, "Sir, we have to drive them away, physically drive them away." That's a problem.

[4] Owonibi retired from military service in 2006.