

A MURDER MOST FOUL - THE KILLING OF BRIGADIER OKOYA

The murder of Brigadier Okoya and of his wife, Anna, who was also killed with him in the same assassination attack, is arguably the single most significant juncture in Uganda’s modern, post-independence history. Had this one heinous act not been committed, Uganda’s journey over the following two decades and beyond would undoubtedly have panned out very differently. The subsequent wars and coups would possibly have been avoided, and Uganda’s once-relatively prosperous position in the regional economy might not have been so tragically squandered. The hundreds of thousands of lives lost in the intervening years of turmoil and upheaval would probably have been spared too.



Brig General Pierino Yere Okoya

Born in 1928 in Gulu district, northern Uganda, Okoya joined the 4th (Uganda) Battalion of the Kings African Rifles (KAR) in 1950. Those who preceded him in joining the KAR included the likes of Idi Amin, Tito Okello, Shaban Opolot and several other well-known Ugandan soldiers of the era. At the time of independence in 1962, Okoya became a commissioned lieutenant, together with Omoya and Albert Langoya. The only other commissioned lieutenants in the army at that time were the

aforementioned Idi Amin and Shaban Opolot. Okoya’s rapid rise through the ranks was well merited and, by 1964, he had been promoted to captain, followed by further promotion through major, and then colonel in 1965.

By the time of his death, he had already achieved the rank of brigadier and was imminently due to be promoted to the rank of general.

On Friday, 23rd January, 1970, Okoya arrived in Gulu after a long drive from Masaka and spent the night at his private residence in Koro, a village just outside Gulu. The following day, he went to his bank and withdrew some money. He then proceeded to report to the local air force base commander in Gulu, Captain Smuts Guwedeko, to alert him of his presence as a senior army officer in the area, as was customary in the military. From there, he travelled to Palaro, his ancestral home, where he spent the night before returning to Gulu the following morning. That evening, on the 25th of January, he visited the Air Force officers' mess, where he encountered Guwedeko, Lieutenant Musoke, Lieutenant Mutono, and Warrant Officer Kasule. Having exchanged pleasantries, he requested Guwedeko to enable him to procure some beer and whisky. Guwedeko informed him that stocks had run very low and that the barman had gone into town to replenish the cellar, advising the brigadier to return home and send his driver later in the evening to collect the requested items. Okoya, having no other option, decided to do precisely that.

Later that evening, Okoya sent his driver and his bodyguard to collect the items from the officer's mess. Having dispatched both his immediate aides, he had now left himself, unknowingly, vulnerable to what was about to transpire. On arrival at the officer's mess, the driver found the same three soldiers still conversing. The driver and the bodyguard were both offered drinks, which they accepted eagerly, and were told they could collect the requisite items after finishing their beers. After consuming their drinks, the two collected the liquor for their boss, and after a good hour or so of social interaction with their military colleagues, they left for the brigadier's home.

On reaching his home at around 8 pm, they were confronted with a horrific scene. The lifeless bodies of Brigadier Okoya and his wife, Anna, were lying outside in large pools of blood. Independent Uganda's first political assassination had just been mercilessly carried out. The driver immediately returned to the officer's mess and described the gruesome scene to the base commander, who rushed to the barracks and reported the matter to the overall area commander. By midnight, a special announcement on Radio Uganda confirmed the untimely death of the brigadier.