

## Chapter Eighteen: The Super Camp Strategy

Let me recap on the flow of events in Nigeria with regard to the insurgency and terrorism of Boko Haram and associated criminal extremist groups. In the few years leading up to the election of President Buhari in 2015, a rabble-rousing collection of rebels operating in Yobe and Borno State began to develop ambitions for a longer term strategy to create a land base, a "caliphate" even, which would give them the material and personnel support to offer potentially a serious opposition to the democratically elected Nigerian government. A number of factors assisted them in this plan: financial, weaponry and training support from external terrorist organisations such as Islamic State and al-Shabab; the undeveloped nature of much of the north eastern territories, making rapid terrorist attacks across rough terrain difficult for a traditional army to respond to; the porous nature of the borders with Chad, Niger and Cameroon, allowing the terrorists to escape when required; the high levels of unemployment and low income in the region, allowing the rebels the opportunity effectively to bribe peaceful citizens with offers of accommodation, basic food and material goods such as smartphones; the failure of our armed forces to construct a coherent strategy against this new and rapidly evolving threat.

By mid 2015, there was a real possibility that this cancerous growth in our country could evolve into a permanent rebel state based on land possession, and at the time of my appointment as Chief of Army Staff in July 2015, there were nineteen municipal regions within Yobe, Borno and Adamawa which had effectively fallen to the control of the rebels. By this time, the rebels had assumed many of the characteristics of a standard army, with armoured vehicles either stolen from government forces or supplied by foreign supporters providing the support for thousands of young men who had received basic infantry training in the extremist terror camps belonging to al-Shabab in Somalia. No longer were we facing continuous but irregular outbreaks of terrorist violence such as bombings and kidnapping; now we were presented with a terrorist army which had made clear its intention to hold on to its land bases permanently.

President Buhari had been critical of the response to this growing problem during his election campaign and, as soon as he took office, he appointed an entirely new team of Service Chiefs, myself included, and gave them an absolutely clear instruction: by the end of year, the terrorists needed to be uprooted from the insolent confidence they betrayed in their land strategy and their use of traditional military tactics to face up to the Nigerian armed

forces and those of the Multinational Joint Taskforce. And, as I have described in this book, that is exactly what we did. With a new Army strategy, a new will to win and a clear technique of leading from the front, I was able to lead my men to a series of crushing victories in the first few months which put paid to Boko Haram's dreams of establishing a permanent state within Nigeria. Over the months which followed, we continued to attack the enemy wherever they gathered, we significantly strengthened the fighting strength and morale of our army, and we brought back a sense of security to regions which had suffered the displacement of hundreds and hundreds of thousands of innocent people.

However, one of the results of that successful strategy is that the terrorists, having been defeated in their aim of establishing a permanent insurgency in a so-called "caliphate", fell back into their normal modus operandi of random and arbitrary terrorist attacks, making increasing use of suicide bombers, many of them young women who had been brainwashed into following this evil ideology. With no permanent base to call their home, the terrorists split up into groups operating in and out of Nigeria, with many of those who avoided death or arrest at the hands of our army taking temporary refuge in remote areas of countries bordering ours. With several groups now claiming ascendancy in the increasingly out-of-control Boko Haram hierarchy, rebel youths could be sent in to cause death and mayhem at short notice, often arriving at their chosen destinations in civilian cars to avoid being spotted. An old Volkswagon Polo might drive unnoticed into a small village in Borno or Adamawa or increasingly west in Kaduna or Zamfara, offload a team of suicide bombers and within minutes an atrocity would be underway.

In other words, having beaten the enemy when they chose to confront us in a more formal challenge in 2015/16, we were now faced with a familiar situation of asymmetric warfare: we, a revitalised, confident and well-resourced army were pitched against small units of young men and women who had no fear of dying who could spring out of nowhere to wreak havoc. In order to confront this reality, I had already developed a powerful response through the creation of Mobile Strike Forces (MSF) which were able to move far more rapidly than a traditional Brigade in order to attack terrorist groups when they were identified. But the fact remained that terrorism, by its nature, could be as difficult to handle as a snake, a subject on which as I have said, I can claim to be an expert. Our citizens, who had congratulated us for our initial victory, were understandably fearful of when they might expect an attack on their own town or village and the process of returning those displaced from their homes, most of whom were now living in refugee camps, was slowing down. It was time to develop a new strategic thrust to our battle plan.

I designed the Super Camp Strategy towards the end of 2018 to combine two urgent requirements: to continue the rapid deployment of my men against the terrorists which we had seen with the formation of the Mobile Strike Forces and at the same time to afford both soldiers and civilians a more secure temporary environment against the random but extremely violent incursions by lone terrorist teams. We pulled our smaller military units who were based further out in the field, some along the Chad border, back into Super Camps, well-constructed military strongholds where my soldiers would live close by civilians, both of whom would be guarded from being overrun. Having worked out the strategy, I announced it in Summer 2019 during the opening of the second and third quarters COAS Conference at the Command Officers Mess in Abuja. I announced: "The aim of the Super Camps is to ensure higher capacity for swift mobility to take on the adversary, take the fight to them and deny terrorists, bandits and kidnappers the freedom of action."

At a separate workshop, for Commanders, Commanding Officers and Staff Officers of Operation Lafiya Dole held at Headquarters 25 Task Force Brigade (Super Camp 2) Damboa, Borno State, I gave my men the opportunity to explore the ideas behind the Super Camp Strategy. The Theatre Commander for Operation Lafiya Dole, Major General Benson Akinroluyo, made clear that the new strategy would serve as a launching pad for mobile offensive operations to contain and deny the Boko Haram terrorists freedom of action in identified areas across the theatre. He also stated that the Super Camps would further boost protection of troops while on camps, as well as enable them to project force through long distance patrols and ambushes to dominate their areas of operation.

The first 20 camps, averaging about 200 soldiers in each, were set up in a ring around Maiduguri in Borno State, stretching up north as far as Bosso, west over the shores of Lake Chad, south down to Gwozo and east to Damaturu. By congregating my men in these camps, I was able to protect them more effectively against a random strike by a disguised suicide bomber; I was also able to gather together all our armour into safe places where rebels could not surprise us. By having all their equipment in one place, my men were able to continue their Mobile Strike Force methodology of attacking known rebel hideouts rapidly. My principle was to concentrate formidable fighting forces in strongholds that had the capacity for swift mobility and our aim remained to dominate the surrounding territory, to negate any attempt by the terrorists to lay claim to land as their own.

Let me provide an example of the effectiveness of the Super Camp Strategy from a recent, real-life incident. A group of marauding Boko Haram criminals mounted on gun trucks staged a surprise attack in the early hours of 4th March 2020 on Army Super Camp

Two, located in Damboa in Borno State. The camp held troops from 25 Task Force Brigade. The terrorists split into three groups and made their attack, but in a fierce exchange of fire lasting almost an hour, our soldiers were able both to resist and then overcome the attack, killing 19 terrorists and injuring many others in the process. We captured the enemy's weapons, including a rocket propelled gun tube and a general purpose machine gun. Sadly, we lost three men in the fight. But had this malevolent terrorist group attacked a smaller, more isolated base, it is possible that they could have inflicted more damage and killed more of our men. In addition, they might have gone on to terrorise nearby civilians. As it was, we were able to disperse them, inflict serious damage on them, protect our nearby civilians and at the same time maintain our operational readiness.

A similar scenario occurred three months' later, this time at a Super Camp in Mongonu, close to the eastern border of Nigeria with Chad. A similar collection of criminals arrived in gun trucks from across the barren terrain and immediately laid seige to the troops of Sector 3 Operation Lafiya Dole and also the citizens living close by. My men immediately responded, killed a number of the terrorists, sent others who were not arrested fleeing in their vehicles, while we impounded an arsenal of their weapons including ten AK 47 Rifles, two rocket propelled gun tubes, eight rocket propelled gun bombs, one General Purpose Machine Gun, two PKT Machine Guns, one Dane gun, one SPG 9 Gun, one Dushka Machine Gun, two Anti-Aircraft Guns, one Anti-Aircraft Gun barrel, four SPG 9 bombs, one Hand Grenade, one Tool Box, two transistor radios, 49 rounds of Anti-Aircraft Gun ammunition, 386 rounds of 7.62mm NATO ammunition and seven Gun Trucks.

While their support from external terrorist groups and malevolent actors continues to provide these disorganised but dangerous criminals with the means to make such deadly attacks, I can confirm that our armed forces, gathered together under this Super Camp structure at key locations across the region, continues to keep our land free, provides our citizens with protection and stamps on such outrages wherever they occur. The Super Camp Strategy is designed to create a military presence everywhere in villages and towns of the troubled areas of Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa states; as such, it has forced the terrorists to hide away in the border lands neighbouring Chad and Niger and has cut off their ability to strangle the Nigerian population by being a permanent presence amongst them. In addition, the introduction of the Super Camp Strategy has seen the presence of troops in remote communities, unlike in times past where soldiers were stationed in fewer military bases further inland.

In March 2020, the Coalition for Africa Liberation and Socio-Economic Rights (CALSER) stated that the Nigerian Army's Super Camp Strategy was the "perfect morale booster in the final push to victory against Boko Haram/ISWAP terrorists." The group gave the commendation after deploying a team of researchers to transverse the length and breadth of the North East. Speaking at a press conference in Abuja, the group's convener, Princess Ajibola, said: "This strategy has recorded massive dividends, especially since the Chief of Army Staff, Lt. Gen. Tukur Buratai, has made it a mandatory exercise to consistently pay routine visits to the theatre of operations to boost the morale of the troops." Princess Ajibola continued: "The Coalition for Africa Liberation and Socio-Economic Rights wishes to applaud the efforts of the Nigerian Army in the fight against terrorism in Nigeria with the introduction measures and strategies aimed at ensuring the return of peace and tranquility in the North East. We deployed a team of to put issues in proper perspective for members of the unsuspecting general public. This periodic assessment is in line with its strategic objective of appraising the operations of the Nigerian Army in the fight against terrorism in Nigeria. We consequently wish to state that the Super Camp Strategy of the Nigerian Army has indeed provided that needed boost in the fight against terrorism in Nigeria."

On Monday 13th July 2020, The Chief of Defence Staff General Abayomi Gabriel Olonisakin paid a scheduled operational visit to the Nigerian Army Super Camp 4 in Faskari, Katsina state. By this point, I had been able to extend out my Super Camp Strategy beyond the north eastern regions to the rest of the country in order to continue the advances the strategy was making in eroding the terrorist threat. I welcomed the General to the Camp, and pointed out to him the recent rescue of kidnapped victims, the neutralization of a large number of armed bandits and the recovery of arms and ammunition, as well as more than 700 cattle and over 500 sheep. These achievements, I explained, had not only damaged our enemies but had also helped the locals to go about their normal economic and agricultural activities without any hindrance. The General commended my men and the Super Camp Strategy for stamping out the curse of cattle rustling from the north west of the country and restoring peace to the civilian population.

The civilian strategy here was clear: we needed to provide as much security as possible both to residents and to those poor unfortunates who were living in camps as a result of being displaced from their homes by terrorist attacks. By locating my men close to civilians at these Super Camps, I was able to re-introduce a measure of stability to peoples' lives while at the same time ensuring my men were always operationally ready to take the battle out to the enemy at extremely short notice. As a democratic country with the genuine

potential to become one of the world's great economic powers in the future, it is imperative that we allow our people to flourish and grow without the curse of these criminal rebels.