

## Afabet, March 1988: The Decisive Battle for Eritrean Indipendence.

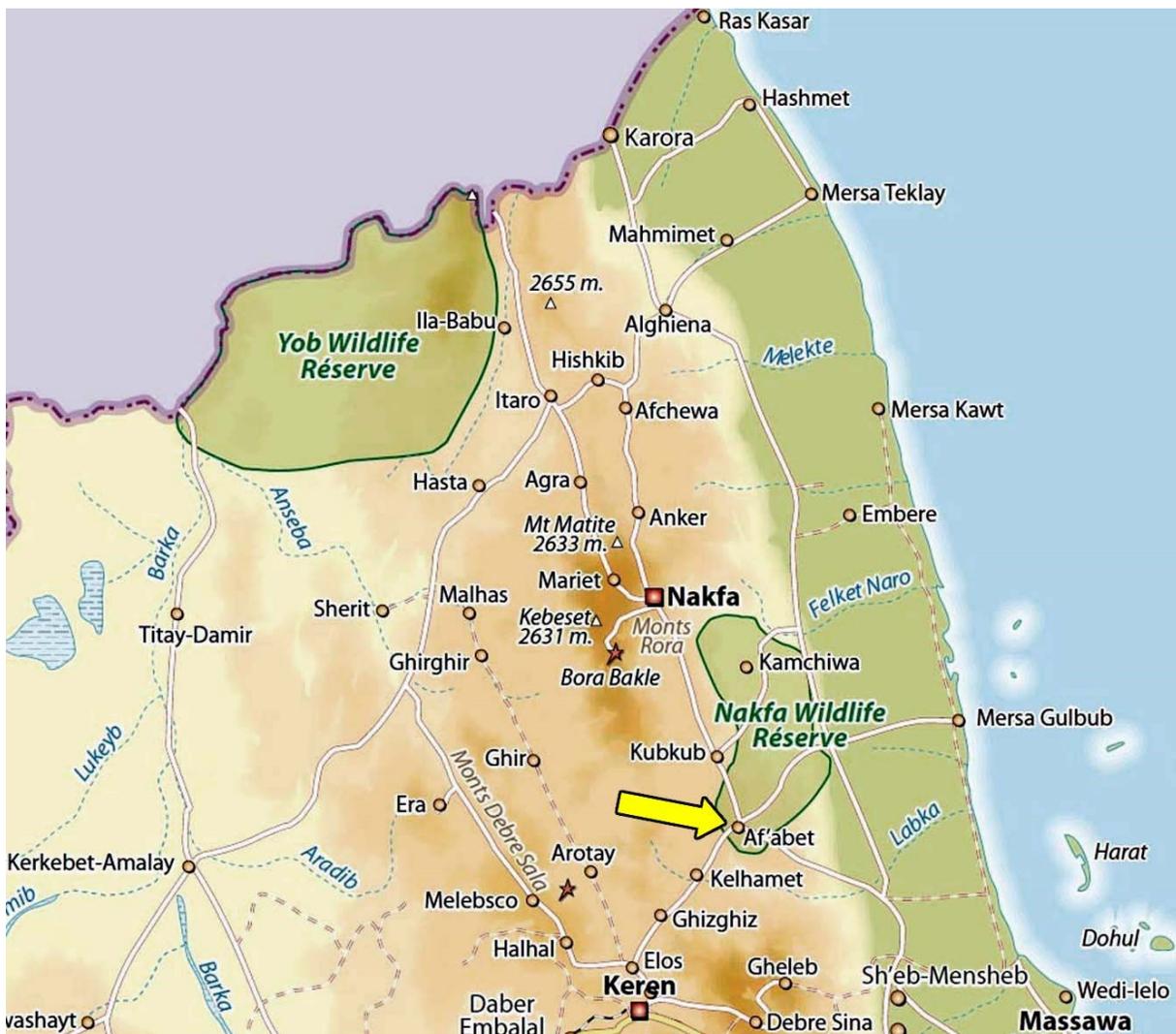
Vincenzo Meleca

Translation by Maria C. Zummo

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Among the few who know how Eritrea conquered its independence after as well as thirty years of war against Ethiopia (first governed by Emperor Haile Selassie and then by colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam), fewer are those who know how the conflict (which nowadays would be defined as "asymmetrical") was fought by most of the Eritreans not only with guerrilla techniques, but also in actual battles, where armored forces and heavy artillery were employed.

One of the most important was that fought near the little town of Afabet in March 1988.



*On the map of the Eritrean Region of Northern Red Sea it is possible to locate Nakfa, Afabet (marked by the arrow) and, below, Keren*

## The Background

After a 27-year-long war, in 1988 the situation of the opposing forces had substantially changed: on the one hand the Ethiopian army and air force, supported by Soviet military "advisors" and what remained, of the 15,000 Cuban "brothers"<sup>1</sup> and, on the other, the EPLF (Eritrean People's Liberation Front) fighters.

Discouragement was spreading among the Ethiopian soldiers, while the Soviet "advisors" started feeling the first gusts of that stormy wind which in a few months' time would bring the USSR to collapse and dissolution.

One of the first meaningful signs of the extent to which things had changed was the attack launched on December 8th by the EPLF to the 22nd Division of the so called "Command Nadew", which collected all the units of the Ethiopian Army in Northern Eritrea<sup>2</sup>. The Eritreans were forced to withdraw only after the intervention of other Ethiopian units (the 19th Infantry Mountain Division and the 45st Infantry Brigade).

The behaviour of the soldiers of the 22nd Division, which had a remarkable number of casualties, some 1500 men what with the dead, the missing and the wounded, was thought to be so bad that the division was withdrawn from the northern front and moved to Keren. The Commander of Command Nadew, General Brigadier Tariku Ayne, was relieved of his position under direct orders of Mengistu and then arrested and sentenced to death on February 15th 1988<sup>3</sup>.

After that episode, Mengistu, in early March 1988 ordered the new commander of "Command Nadew", Colonel Getaneh Haile, to organize and realize what should have been the last attack to Nafka, the EPLF's stronghold. The forces Haile could rely on were some 20,000/22,000 men, what with infantry, mechanized infantry, armoured troops and logistics, besides, obviously, the support from the air forces.

On the other side, the Eritreans, who now could avail themselves of heavy armaments (field and anti aircraft artillery, armoured combat vehicles, all of them taken away from the enemy) were more and more convinced victory was at hand.

Not only had Nafka<sup>4</sup>, the EPLF stronghold, excellently stood out against many attacks

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<sup>1</sup> Re the number of Cuban soldiers coming from Angola , almost all sources are in agreement. Just to mention one, cf. The Washington Post, June 22nd 1978, on [https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1978/06/22/eritrea-is-not-for-cubans/699e5725-813b-47e2-a138-5b910227c101/?utm\\_term=.8780a0770e14](https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1978/06/22/eritrea-is-not-for-cubans/699e5725-813b-47e2-a138-5b910227c101/?utm_term=.8780a0770e14)

<sup>2</sup> According to different sources, the "Command Nadew" (which in Amharic means "destroying force") was made of three divisions. According to Gebru Tareke the exact figure of the Eritrean soldier was 15223. Cf Tareke Gebru, "The Ethiopian Revolution : War in the Horn of Africa", Yale University Press, p. 251.

<sup>3</sup> Ayne was one of the most highly esteemed officers of the Ethiopian army, therefore his execution surprised not only the soldiers, to whom it was communicated with a circular from The Ministry of Defence. Cf Ayele, Fantahun "The Ethiopian Army: from Victory to Collapse, 1977-1991", annex VII, Northwestern University Press, 2014 and "The Diary of Terror: Ethiopia 1974 to 1991", Dawit Shifaw, Trafford Publishing, 2012, p. 149, but also many outstanding members of the Derg. The EPLF commented that the Derg had "cut their right hand with their left hand".

<sup>4</sup> Nafka had been the objective of as many as eight offensives from the Ethiopian forces, the first in March 1977, the last from October to December 1985

from the Ethiopian troops, but it had become an important base from which to launch a mass attack.

Also the EPLF fighters (Tegadelti in Tigrinya) under the command of colonel Mesfin Hagos<sup>5</sup> were estimated to be between 5,000 and 20,000 men, most of them on foot. The Eritreans, seemingly informed about the preparations of the enemy, could get ahead by organizing a well publicized sporting event during the first week of March, in order to take in the Ethiopians and their allies.

## The Battle

As mentioned, the Ethiopian troops were going to attack Nafka and several units had already set off from the bases of Afabet and Kamchiwa<sup>6</sup>, but they could not get near their target because on March 17th 1988 between 5.00 and 5.30 am the EPLF launched their counteroffensive.

To the East, a column of armoured combat vehicles moved towards Kamchiwa, where an Ethiopian armoured brigade was based, trying to block them in the area of Felket She'eb and the Azahara canyon and prevent them from moving westward, where they could have joined other troops of the DERG people's army coming from Keren.

The fight was so hard and with such an uncertain outcome that as well as three times the high Eritrean Command ordered colonel Hagos to withdraw, but he refused to obey, since he was convinced success was at hand and, according to some sources, he interrupted any radio connection in order to avoid their reiterating the order.

Hagos was right, and after more than sixteen hours of fierce resistance, the surviving Ethiopian troops<sup>7</sup> left Kamchiwa and moved towards Afabet, at first following the course of the Hedai river, along the homonymous valley and then passing through the tiny village of Kub Kub. The withdrawal became dramatic when the column of a hundred

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<sup>5</sup> We can't be sure about his rank. When the conflict was over, Hagos held the office of the Chief of Defence Staff, Minister of Defence and Governor of the Southern Region. In September 2001, together with other representatives of the EPLF he wrote an open letter to President Isaias Afewerky, asking him to promulgate the constitution, to allow the institution of political parties and fix the date of free elections. President Afewerky answered by having all the signatories of the letter arrested except for Hagos who was on his way to Germany, where, on his arrival, sought and got political asylum.

<sup>6</sup> Since the toponymy is often uncertain and different sources use different names for the same places, ( e.g. Afabet is also Af Abet or Af Abed; Kamchiwa, Kemechiwa, Cam Ceua; Hedai, Hidai or Edai; Adi Shirum, Ad Shirum, Ashirum, Ashurum or Asciorum), to make it easier for the reader to locate the main urban settlements and geographical locations mentioned in the article, their GPS coordinates are provided below: Adi Shorum Pass 16°16'19,68", 038°39'34,27", 1.042m; Afabet 16°11'40,46"N-38°41'22,52"E, 960m; Hedai Valley 16°33'00" N- 38°33'00"E, 1.144m; Kamchiwa (Cam Ceua) 16°27'01,11"N-38°44'59,52"E, 478m; KubKub 16°20'23,49"N-38°38'11,35"E, 810m; Nakfa 16°39'54,46"N-38°41'35,42"E, 1.715m

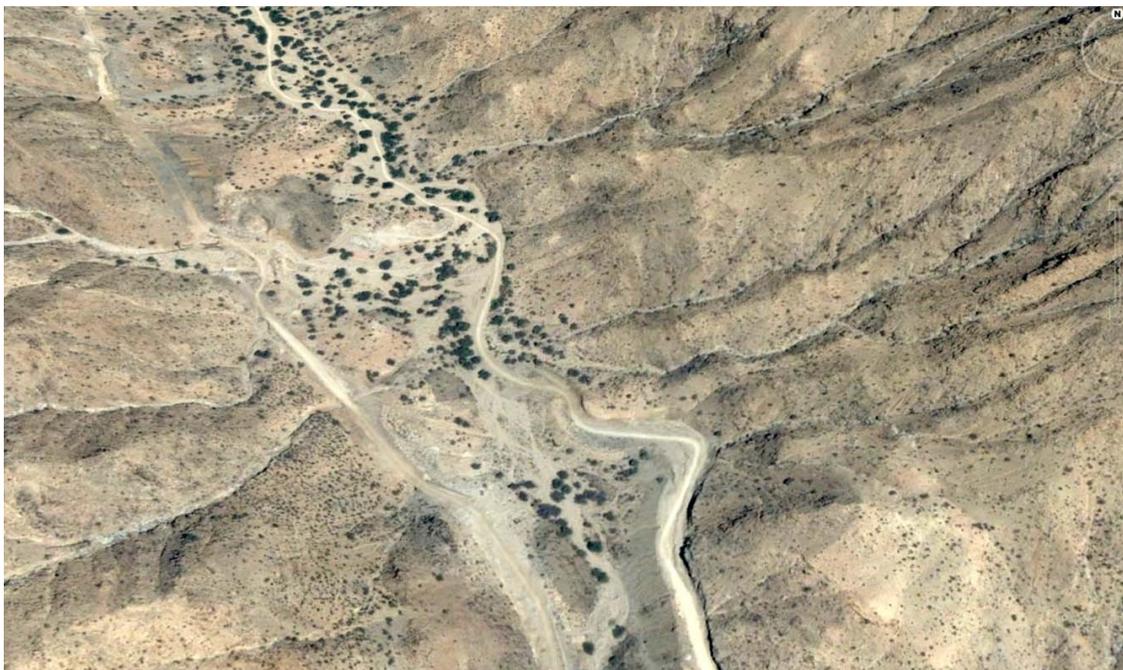
<sup>7</sup> The information about the Ethiopian units involved in the battle is highly contradictory: at times the Divisions 4th, 14th, 19th, 21th, 25a, 29th and 85th are mentioned. The column blocked at the Adi shirum Pass should have been the 29th Mechanized Brigade, but other sources mention it as the 24th Mechanized Brigade. It should also be noted that the term "division" was sometimes used to indicate a brigade (cfr. Dawit Shifaw, "The Diary of Terror Ethiopia 1974 to 1991, cited above, p.151).



following March 19th, leaving in the hands of the EPLF thousands of soldiers and an impressive booty of weapons: about fifty tanks and armoured means, a hundred motor vehicles, sixty pieces of artillery, twenty heavy air defence machine guns, some launch rocket systems, a remarkable amount of light weapons and ammunitions.



*Eritrean fighters recovering equipments from the armoured column destroyed at Adi Shorum*



*Recent satellite view of the Adi Shorum Pass*



*Peter Worthington among the wrecks of the Ethiopian tanks destroyed at Adi Shorum*

Peter Worthington, a journalist and the editor of Toronto Sun, who visited the fighting scene on March 21st, defined the battle as "the greatest victory ever achieved by a liberation movement after that of Dien Bien Phu"<sup>11</sup>.

### **The Epilogue**

It is not easy to know for sure the exact amount of losses suffered by either warring parties during those three days' fightings. The figures are often either under or over estimated, depending on the source of information.

That said, the forces of the DERG are thought to have had between 8,000 and 9,000 dead and missing and an indefinite number of wounded, as well as about 5,000 soldiers taken prisoners<sup>12</sup>, while the Eritrean casualties seem to have been between 4,000 and 5,000 dead and more than 5,000 wounded.

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<sup>11</sup> The same sentence is attributed to journalist and historian Basil Davidson. Cf. Dan Connel, Tom Killion "Historical Dictionary of Eritrea", Scarecrow Press, October 14th 2010, p. 42 and Mussie Tesfagiorgis G., "Eritrea", ABC-CLIO, 2010, p.67

<sup>12</sup> Some sources also mention the losses of the Cuban soldiers, 28 were killed, 7 caught prisoners.

The advance of the EPLF was so fast that it did not permit about fifteen Soviet military "advisors" to take refuge in Keren. Twelve of them were later rescued by a daring operation of the Soviet special forces under the command of colonel Yevgeny Sokurov, while the remaining three, colonels Yury Petrovich Kalistrov and Yevigniew Nicholayevich Churayeg and lieutenant Alexander Victrovich Covaldin (who acted as their interpreter) were taken prisoners<sup>13</sup>.



*The three Soviet officers taken prisoners. From left: Lieutenant Alexander Victrovich Covaldin, Colonel Yuri Petrovich Kalistrov and Colonel Yevigniew Nicolayecich Churayef*

After losing Afabet, on the following days the Ethiopian troops abandoned the towns of Tesseneiei, Barentu and Agordat, since they thought they could not defend them any longer, and concentrated most of their forces on Keren.

Exactly from that town on May 19th they set off on an attempt to recapture, deploying an elite unit, the 102nd airborne division, but their attempt failed.

In their bulletin of May 23rd the EPLF declared they had blocked and destroyed it, killed its commander general Temesgen Gemechu and the commander of a brigade, colonel Daniel Tesfaye, and taken prisoners several hundreds of soldiers.

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<sup>13</sup> The surnames of the three Soviet officials have sometimes been differently reported, as for instance: Kalistratov, Cjuriaev and Kovaldin. Some sources also mention a fourth official killed in battle. According to journalist Wrong, the three mentioned above were released in March 1991, only after the USSR committed to withdrawing the ships of their navy from the naval base of Nocra, in the Dahlak Islands and no longer supplying the Ethiopian armed forces. The Soviet navy had actually left the base in 1989. See the article "Eritrean Rebels Claim Big Victory Over Ethiopia" by Sheila Rule in the New York Times, May 27th 1988.



*Eritrean soldiers marching towards Afabet*

The battle of Afabet was a turning point in the conflict.

The "Tegadeltis" had proved themselves able to defeat the big and well equipped Ethiopian units, which had only been withdrawing since then and progressively leaving behind the Eritrean region until the two decisive battles of Massawa and Decamere.

The former, from the 8th and 10th of March 1990, brought to the conquest of the town of Massawa and its port, with the " Fenkil Operation "; the latter was the final battle, in May 1991 .

Moreover, the battle, after the reportage of the few western journalists who could reach the fighting scene<sup>14</sup>, draw the attention of the mass media to the ongoing conflict, and raised growing sympathy for the Eritrean cause.

That was the beginning of Mengistu's end: the military defeat at Afabet added up to those suffered in Tigray at the hands of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) ,as well as the progressive withdrawal of the economic and military support of the Kremlin, due both to the first signs of change in the domestic policy of the USSR<sup>15</sup> and to the

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<sup>14</sup> Among them Basil Davidson from BBC, Peter Worthington from the Toronto Sun and Pietro Veronese from La Repubblica should be mentioned.

<sup>15</sup> In 1986, at the XXVII Congress of CPSU, Gorbacëv pointed to the need for a lighter party apparatus and a decrease in its intervention in the functioning of State organs and other structures of society, after the previous

reports of the Soviet military "advisors" in Ethiopia.

As already said, the booty made by the Eritreans was remarkable, which allowed them to enormously strengthen with a view to future offensives.



*Eritrean fighters on an Ethiopian truck equipped with a 23mm machine gun, caught undamaged*

Many were the T-54/55 tanks, the BTR-60 armoured troop carriers, the pieces of heavy field artillery , mostly 122mm D.30 howitzer cannons, the BM-21 launch-rocket systems and the Ural trucks which were caught almost undamaged, some of which still had ZU-23 twin machine-guns on<sup>16</sup>.

Some T-54/55 , modified on the field and converted into self-propelled vehicles, like the one in the picture on the previous page, were employed in the fightings of the Eritrean army against the Ethiopian one in 1998 in the area of Badme.

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year he had managed to get important changes in the Soviet economic system adopted, such as a more efficient use of technology, the devolution in the managing of economy, and the widening of corporates' rights. The following year the party Secretary during the XIX Conference of CPSU , which took place in June 1988, after a heated debate with the depositaries of Marxist orthodoxy, could go on with the reorganization of the institutional framework towards rule of law.

<sup>16</sup> These 23mm gunners were mostly anti-aircraft weapons. It is a mystery what use they were for the Ethiopians , since the Eritrean army did not have any aircrafts.



*Eritrean fighters recovering artillery ammunitions*



*A self propelled gun made by assembling a 122mm MI 1963D30 gun- howitzer on the hull of a T54/55*