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## Front Line Dispatches

ASMARA, Eritrea

December 1999

By Marc Michaelson

### The Nakfa Front — Eritrean War of Independence — Active: 1978-88

30 September 1999 — Asmara to Nakfa

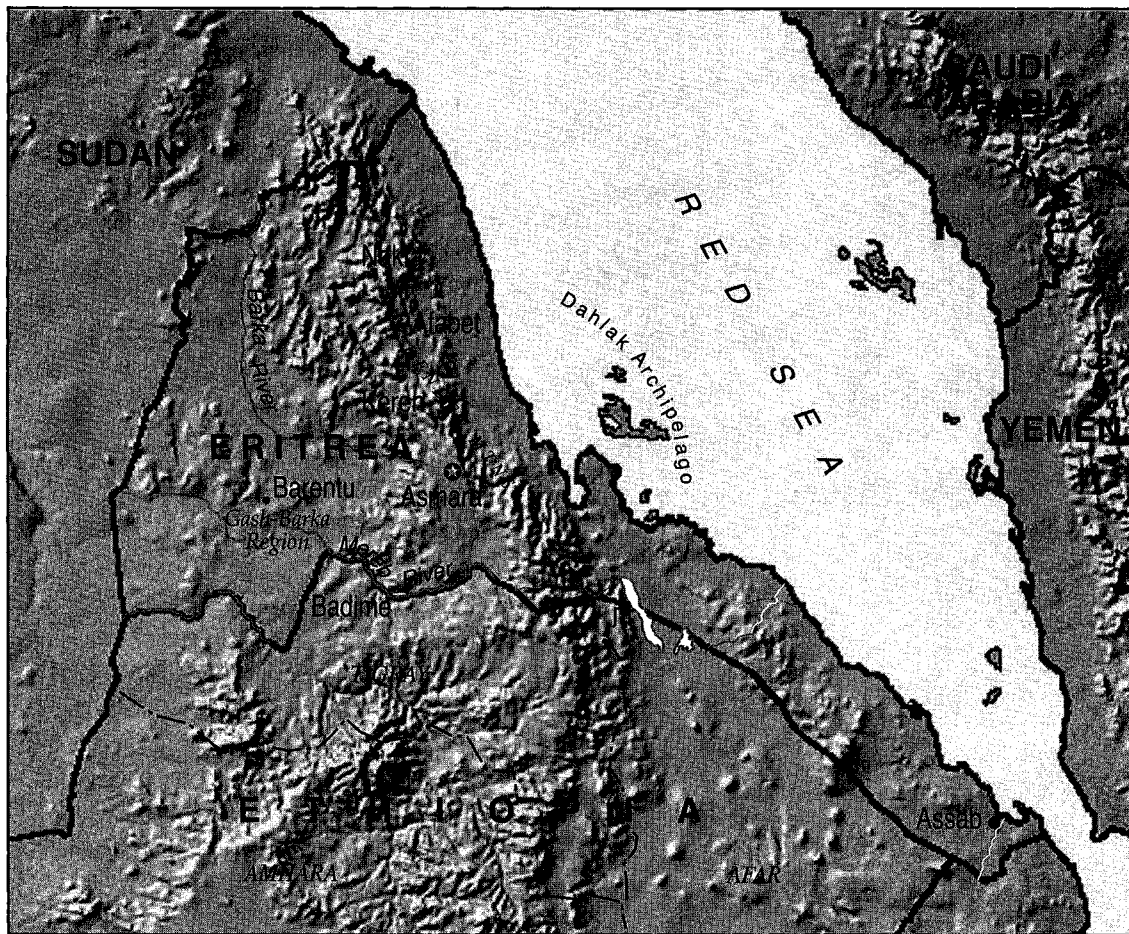
Through the Savannah Hotel's tinted lobby windows, I watch a maroon Toyota Landcruiser jerk to a sudden curbside halt. Robel bounces out of the driver's seat and jogs light-footed up to the front door. We greet, toss my daypack and camera bag into the back seat, and off we go. Fifty meters down the main road, around a traffic circle, the Landcruiser sputters a series of dry coughs before coasting to a halt. Robel presents a good-natured, apologetic smile, revealing a mouthful of braces. The hotel is still in sight, and we've had our first breakdown. Not a reassuring portent.

"Sorry, I should have filled up the tank *before* I picked you up."

I offer a half-hearted, "No problem" and Robel goes bouncing down the street to buy a few liters of benzine. Actually, it wasn't a big deal at all. I was just worried about the three-day road trip ahead, out in the harsh, northeastern Sahel. If we can't get out of eye-shot of the hotel without a gaffe (minor though it may be), what's destined to happen when we reach the middle of nowhere? Is Robel going to smile and jog off 65 kilometers to the nearest village in search of a spark plug?

Robel returns, twists an old rental-car invoice into a funnel, and skillfully pours in the fuel. He pumps the gas pedal, starts her up, and off we go, leaving Asmara on the Keren road. Immediately I feel better. I'd been in Asmara for the past ten days, cooped up in offices, meeting government bureaucrats, tracking down old friends and colleagues, interviewing deportees and generally trying to get a temperature reading on the state of the nation. How is the economy? (*lousy*). What is happening on the war front? (*minor shelling*). What does everyone expect from the peace process? (*failure*). Mildly interesting stuff, but I was eager to hit the road.

I had made a few futile attempts to coordinate this trip with locally-based journalists (Reuters, BBC, *Agence France Presse* and a visiting correspondent from, of all papers, the *Village Voice*). Several of them had recently returned from summer holidays (the Ethio-Eritrean border war kindly pauses annually for the rainy season, providing journalists much-needed vacation time). They were slowly shaking off memories of London pubs and distant family turmoil, dusting off their notepads and reconnecting with their professional lives. Most of them live in Asmara, and thus were unencumbered by the type of time pressures impinging on my one-month visit. I had ants in my pants, and expressed this travel bug in several *kvetchy* efforts to pin down travel plans amid early evening beers at the downtown Bar American. For Sami, Alex, Jason, Steve — my old and new



All boundaries are approximate and unofficial

Asmara friends — my endless prodding and planning was beginning to echo annoyingly.

I decided to head for Nakfa, and ask Robel, a 28-year-old ex-fighter for Eritrean independence to be my guide. Robel frequently drives, guides and translates for foreign correspondents, primarily at the war front, but occasionally to other destinations as well. We had traveled together before, with a larger group; this would be our first solo journey. I was especially interested in visiting Nakfa with Robel because it's where he spent much of his childhood.

Nakfa brims with memories and ghosts and holds great nationalistic significance for all Eritreans. Nakfa is a liberation-struggle-era symbol of Eritrean strength, determination, fortitude and cleverness. Since victory in 1991, the town has begun rebuilding itself. Now it is rising from the scorched earth into an expression of Eritrea's self-reliant spirit and tenacity. Even the nation's new monetary unit, introduced in late 1997, is called the Nakfa.

A brief history illustrates Nakfa's emotional content

and strategic importance. In 1978, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) controlled the vast majority of Eritrean territory and were on the verge of taking Asmara. To rein in the unruly northern province and avert an embarrassing defeat, Ethiopia's ruler, Col. Mengistu Haile Mariam, turned to his new Cold-war patron. Russia responded with generous helpings of military aid — artillery, fighter planes, advisors and commanders. More than 100,000 Ethiopian troops, mostly conscripts, were mobilized for a massive offensive — to crush the trouble-making EPLF once and for all.<sup>1</sup>

In the most brilliant tactical move of the civil war, Isaias Afewerki and other high-ranking EPLF leaders engineered what has come to be known as the "strategic withdrawal." To avoid a crushing defeat at the hands of superior Russian technology and weaponry, the EPLF rapidly relinquished control of its territory and retreated to the rugged mountains of Nakfa. Many fighters disagreed with the decision and dug in to fight to the end. Isaias convinced most, however, to take a longer-term view. The EPLF had to weather the impending offensive; they

<sup>1</sup> Dan Connell, *Against All Odds: A Chronicle of the Eritrean Revolution*. Lawrenceville, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1997. Chapters 10 and 11 discuss the EPLF's "strategic withdrawal" during the series of Ethiopian offensives.



*Burnt-out tank in the valley near Asherum*

convoy was trapped on the road and in the valley. They couldn't go forward and couldn't go back. The panicked Ethiopian troops abandoned their tanks and fled. Fearing the Eritreans would use the captured vehicles against them, Ethiopian commanders called in a desperation air raid on their own equipment. Planes dropped napalm on the valley to destroy the equipment, but not before EPLF forces escaped with more than 60 armored vehicles.

The momentum had shifted; Ethiopian forces were in trouble. Less than three years later, the EPLF and their southern partners, the TPLF (Tigrayan People's Liberation Front), collectively overthrew Mengistu's regime. Ironically,

would need to give something now to gain more later.

Robel and I pass Keren, leaving the asphalt road and heading toward Afabet and Nakfa. The countryside hardens, becoming hotter and drier as we progress northward. The EPLF lived in these inhospitable, scrub-brush-covered mountains for ten years, patiently repelling Ethiopian attacks, and establishing a sophisticated network of trenches, supply lines, industries, schools and hospitals. The Eritrean liberation movement literally moved underground. Within the complex social networks they built and managed, the seeds of Eritrean self-reliance sprouted and the soul of the nascent nation coalesced.

Shortly after Afabet, we traverse a narrow mountain pass at Asherum. Robel stops the vehicle near some burnt-out trucks and tanks balancing precariously on the steep hillside. The midday sun hammers relentlessly (there are no trees or shade around) as Robel explains what happened here in 1988.

"The Ethiopians used to call this place *tesfaya beri*, the door of hope. If they made it back past this point, they had survived hell and could safely get to Afabet. North of here, they were trapped. There was no escape from this valley — all the way up to Nakfa and beyond, it is surrounded by high mountains."

In 1988, Ethiopian forces, handily defeated in Nakfa, were retreating in a long convoy of tanks and armored trucks toward Afabet. But they never made it through the "door of hope." As they scaled the narrow mountain road, EPLF anti-tank gunners hit the two lead tanks. The

these two liberation-movements-turned-governments are now fighting each other in a self-destructive war along their common border.

We continue the drive toward Nakfa on sandy riverbed roads. Soon we arrive at a trickling stream where a woman is washing clothes and her children are watering the family goats. She watches us with equal parts suspicion and curiosity as we stop the vehicle and walk over to a cluster of boulders just off the road. Robel, wearing the trademark black-plastic fighter sandals, (a.k.a. Congos), a continuing symbol of Eritrean strength, tromps through the stream. He bends down, funnels water into his cupped hands and pours it over his head to cool off.

"This spot — it's called Ruba Hadai — was a Prisoner of War camp. We kept eight thousand Ethiopian POWs here; most were captured in Massawa. During the day we kept them camouflaged under trees; sometimes we'd play football or other games. After some months, the farmers were sent home; the others were kept until independence." He points to a mountain just to the west, "That's Haraz Harmaz, the site of the first big battle when the EPLF moved from Nakfa." Robel says Ethiopia had 80,000 troops on that front, and the fighting was fierce.

We begin to drive away, but after 200 meters Robel stops the vehicle, briefly turns to me and smiles wistfully. "See that small tree over there? That's where I used to meet my girl friend. Now, every time I pass it, I think of her...."

The final climb to Nakfa is grueling, the stony road

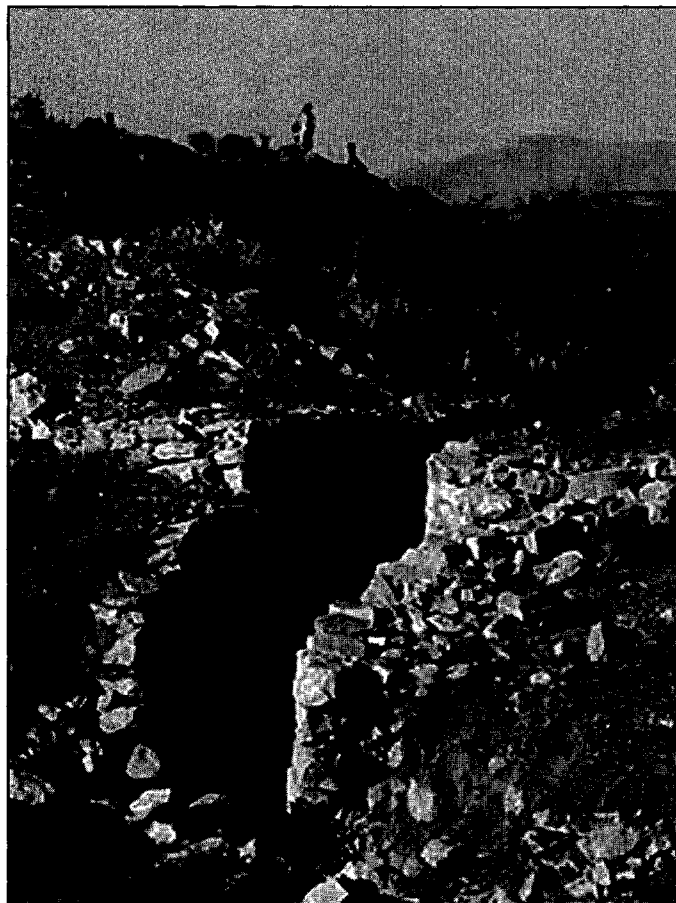
uneven with juts and bumps. Just before the ascent, Robel lights a Rothmans cigarette. The stereo cranks out the blues:

*Papa was a rolling stone  
Wherever he laid his hat was his home  
And when he died  
All he left us was alone...lone.....lone.*

It's an appropriate tune, and we are thrown from side-to-side in synch with the beat. I grip the handle just above the window, but it's hopeless — I'm tossed about like a tiny sailboat on a churning, stormy sea. The next song seems equally appropriate: "Ramblin' Man."

At the top of the plateau, we veer off to the left, pass the construction site of a new school, and park in front of the trenches. During the liberation struggle, the town of Nakfa was abandoned due to the continuous air barrage. EPLF fighters built and lived in an extensive network of trenches, stretching more than 400 kilometers (all the way to the Red Sea). The trenches are 1.5 to 2 meters deep, the walls fortified with large rocks. Covered sections dot the front line trenches, the thick, tree-trunk roofs (camouflaged with dirt) provided extra protection during periods of heavy shelling and air bombardment.

Some children are playing in the trenches, following



*Trench in Nakfa*

me around and begging to have their photos taken. Rusted, empty ration cans, shrapnel, empty shells and other war detritus litter the ground. Recently planted eucalyptus seedlings dot the ridge. Farther down the mountainside, a young shepherd follows his goats and sheep.

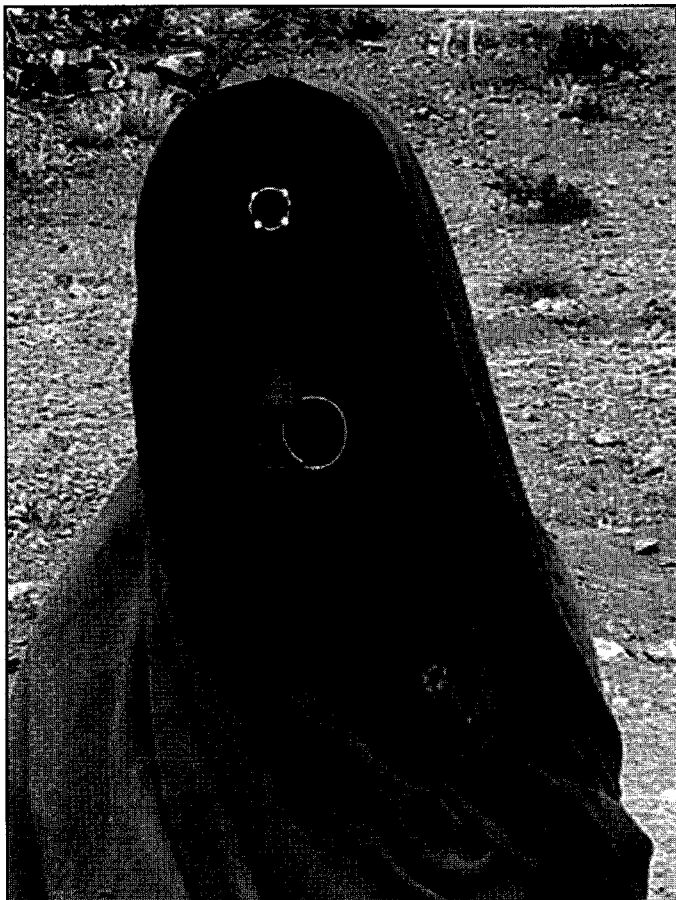
Robel leads the way as we walk along the labyrinthine trenches. He stops at a particularly scenic vista. I'm admiring the rugged beauty of the surrounding mountains when Robel bangs home the most fundamental change wrought by the liberation victory: "I first came here in 1982, when I was eleven. My teacher Fatima peeked over the top of the trench and got shot in the eye. I lived in this area for six years, but I never knew what this view looked like. You couldn't stand up or leave the trenches; if you did you could be shot."

Most striking to me was the shrewdness, the patience, the determination and the long-term vision Nakfa represented. The EPLF lived in this harsh mountain fortress for 10 years, from 1978-88, waiting for the opportunity to break out and resume their struggle to liberate the rest of the country. It took unwavering commitment to withstand the nonstop pounding of heavy artillery and the daily air attacks. The EPLF and its supporters believed deeply in their struggle; nothing could stop them from pursuing their ultimate ends.

Herein lies a crucial military lesson for the current war on the border. Despite fighting alongside the EPLF for years, the TPLF-led Ethiopian government seems to be suffering from collective amnesia, or perhaps selective memory. They are repeating all of the same propaganda, and using the same rationales as the Derg before them. True, Ethiopia is a country of 60 million, while Eritrea is only 3.5 million. True, Ethiopia can field a much larger force, and procure more high-technology military hardware. True, Ethiopia's economy can better weather the trials of war. But can Ethiopia obtain a total military victory in Eritrea? I believe they can not.

With great human sacrifice and at considerable economic expense, Ethiopia can inflict serious damage on Eritrea. They may be able to regain control of the disputed territories. They can destroy Eritrean infrastructure and much of the rebuilding and progress of the past eight years. But can Ethiopia squelch the Eritrean spirit? Can they remove the extremely popular government of President Isaias Afewerki, and replace it with a "friendlier" regime? Can Ethiopia destroy the Eritrean military to humble Eritrean arrogance and ensure against future military confrontations?

I wouldn't count on it. Eritreans are extremely sensitive about their sovereignty, territorial integrity and hard-won independence. They also possess a



*A Tigre woman*

highly trained, skilled and disciplined military machine. Nearly ten percent of the Eritrean population is mobilized, and if conditions deteriorate, others vow to join the fight.

Eritreans may lose battles and sustain heavy losses, but they are unlikely to compromise on core issues that affect their freedom. It would be surprising and extremely out-of-character if Eritrea were to surrender. In the short-term, Ethiopia may be able to get some land, or impose a settlement, or even temporarily oust the Eritrean government. But that will only extend the conflict. Eritreans seem prepared to take to the bush yet again — they will fight another guerrilla struggle if necessary to regain control of their country. They will not be satisfied with a puppet government with strings manipulated from Addis Ababa.

\* \* \*

At sunset, tired from the long journey, we sit outside a bar on the hill in Nakfa's town center and sip ice-cold beers. The center is a sprawling circle, as yet largely undeveloped, ringed by long rectangular buildings housing small shops,

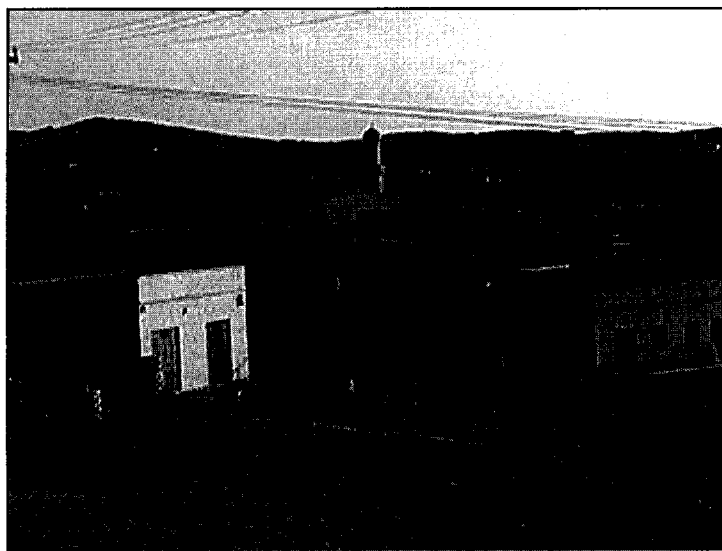
cafes, restaurants and hotels. As daylight wanes, Muslim Tigre women, colorfully but conservatively wrapped in flowing fluorescent fabrics, stroll across the circle on their way home.

*And when he died  
All he left us was alone...lone...lone*

Robel's parents were both fighters. He barely knew his father, who was killed late in the war. Like many Eritreans, Robel carries ghosts from the struggle. He still seems haunted by one childhood incident: "I was in an EPLF school near the coast, and my dad's platoon passed by. He recognized me, but I ran away from him." Robel pauses for a pensive moment, and then continues: "Our teachers told us never to stop and talk to *anyone* unless we have permission." It was the last time he saw his father, his last recollection.... running away from him.

One of Robel's four brothers was also killed during the liberation struggle. His mother, three brothers and a sister survived. The mother now runs a small business in Asmara, but all four surviving siblings are actively involved in national military service — one brother is in the navy (in Massawa), two are on the front lines (in Tsorona and Badime) and his sister, an engineer, just completed military training in Sawa.

As a child, Robel desperately wanted to join the EPLF fighters. In his starry eyes, they were heroes. At the age of 12, he ran away from the Revolutionary School to join the fighters. Four times Robel tried to enlist, but was sent back because he was too young. He used to cut the long pants of his school uniform into shorts, to resemble the trademark uniform of the fighters. After fin-



*View of Nakfa town. The faintly-visible Mosque in the background was the only building left standing after the liberation struggle.*





*Robel*

ishing school, he trained as a radio operator and reported intelligence to commanders from tanks and lookout posts.

After independence, Robel hoped to start a new life. The government tried to convince him to stay in the army, but he refused, and after four years of lobbying, he was finally decommissioned.

*1 October 1999 — Nakfa to Tsabira, Denden and Afabet*

Early the next morning we head north again, following the narrow river valleys that served as the main EPLF route to Sudan. Throughout the liberation struggle, the Eritreans maintained close relations with the Sudanese — supplies entered Port Sudan and were transported over the border at night. As many as half a million Eritrean refugees fled to Sudan during the most brutal periods of the war.

Interspersed within this valley was a vast network of social, military and economic infrastructures. As we drive toward Tsabira, Robel points out several remnants tucked into the mountainside — over there a maternity ward, here a technical training school, down that path a tank-repair site. Most of the valuable wooden roofs have been dismantled by locals, leaving stone building skeletons as gutted reminders. Just a decade ago, this area bustled with urgent activity. Functionally, this was the first independent mini-state of Eritrea.

The buildings were camouflaged and tucked inside slender valleys and steep rock cliffs, making them virtually invisible to Ethiopian planes flying overhead. Structures were also scattered to spread risk and minimize destruction and loss of life from

bombing. Outside movement was permitted only at night — to avoid detection by Ethiopian Mig fighter-jets on their daytime sorties.

In Tsabira, we park beneath a tree at the end of a sandy patch where young Robel and his friends played soccer. From there we walk along the banks of a trickling tributary, and come to the Tsabira field hospital. During the Nakfa years, the main EPLF hospital was in Orotta, some 80 kilometers farther north. Tsabira served as a field hospital for casualties from the Nakfa front.

Robel was never wounded during the war, but passed through Tsabira several times. A series of mini-wards (2-3 rooms each), entrances hidden beneath sprawling acacias, dotted the river banks for a 3-kilometer stretch. "This ward was for mouth and jaw injuries, that one was for stomach, and over there chest wounds."

Most of the doctors and nurses were trained at a nearby medical training site, but some, educated in Europe, the United States and Russia, had returned from the Diaspora.

There is not much to see in Tsabira, but I close my eyes and soak up the atmosphere, imagining what it must have been like during the war. During heavy fighting, packed wards attended to 40-60 patients; at night the less seriously injured would sleep outside under the trees. My mind's eye pictures thin, afro-topped fighters nimbly zipping about on home-made crutches; another, one arm in a sling, uses her good hand to cup water and drink from the stream; muffled moans of the more seriously injured echo from the distance.

Today Tsabira is extremely peaceful and relaxing — the babbling brook hums softly and birds sing in the



*Skeleton of an EPLF hospital ward in Tsabira*

trees. The soothing environment seems ideally suited to healing; after our rocky, body-thrashing ride, I feel better myself after a few quiet moments here.

We return to Nakfa for lunch and coffee, and then leave for Afabet. *En route*, we stop at the base of Denden mountain, the highest peak in the Nakfa area. Denden is another enduring symbol from the struggle. It provided EPLF scouts an excellent, eagle-eye view of the front lines, and gave commanders a superior vantage point from which to monitor fighting and communicate tactics.

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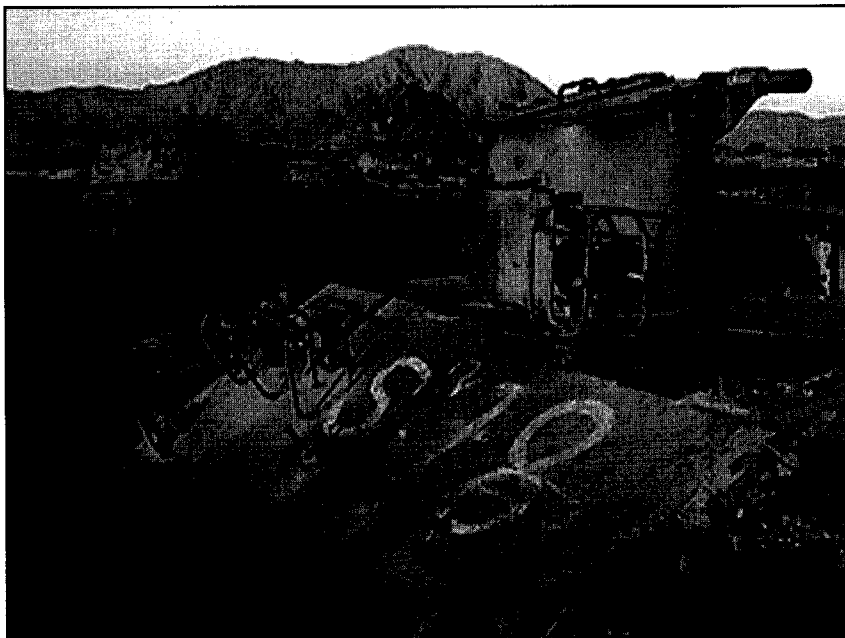
After breaking out of Nakfa in 1988, the EPLF scored a bold victory in Afabet, destroying a major garrison and ammunition depot. Nakfa and Afabet represented psychological turning points in the war. Once Afabet was captured, Eritrean military victory (and eventual independence) seemed imminent.

Today Afabet is a peri-urban growth center. The war left Afabet decimated and nearly empty — most inhabitants had fled to less dangerous areas. Since independence, some 30,000 people have resettled in Afabet and architecturally uninspiring cement rectangles are sprouting out of the rubble. Like most small Eritrean towns, Afabet is quite calm and unremarkable except for its dramatic history.

In Afabet, we experience two minor disappointments — not including the scruffy, water-less hotel that has lights, but no switches to turn them on or off. Some Ethiopian Prisoners of War (POWs) are being held at Afabet's military base, so we test our luck to see if we can meet and interview them. I present my general permission letter from the Ministry of Information, but to no avail. The commanding officer says he would be happy to grant me such access — to show the world how well the POWs are treated — but first I must obtain special permission specifically from the military.

Fair enough, so instead of chatting with POWs we opt to leave town early and return to Asmara via a longer, scenic coastal road. All we need is an extra 30 liters of fuel, and off we'll go. Not so fast. There is no gas for sale in Afabet, even on the black market. The military has a supply, but not one that's accessible to us. Frustrated, we head back toward Keren, the gas gauge firmly hugging "E" as we pull into town.

Back in Asmara, I immediately begin planning an-



*Destroyed tanks in Afabet*

other trip. My destination, the southern Gash-Barka area, is a popular topic of conversation these days — not for being the nation's golden-green breadbasket, but for a small, unimportant village called Badime, the emotional epicenter of the border dispute with Ethiopia.

#### **The Badime Front — Ethio-Eritrean Border War — Active: May 1998 - Present**

*5 October 1999 — Asmara to Unnamed Trenches*

Again, early logistical problems. This time we don't run out of fuel near the hotel. No, this time, we don't even get that far. One member of our group (who shall remain unnamed) has had a late night of drinking and debauchery... and never came home. He is Missing in Action, and the rest of us wait impatiently for him to surface. He phones at 8:20 am, groggy, hoarse and apologetic. Robel laughs heartily, we pick up our hung-over colleague and hit the road.

We are a substantial crew — two Landcruisers teeming with journalists and photographers (mostly those I tried unsuccessfully to rally for the previous week's jaunt). Last week I had to compete with child-care complications and a delicious buffet at the Chinese Embassy's "50 years of Communism" celebration. This week our trip comes together nicely. Everyone is eager; no need to prod and drag.

Despite the late start, we arrive in Barentu, capital of Gash-Barka Region, by about 2:30 p.m. The trip is much shorter and less painful than I'd remembered from a year ago. Now the Agordat-Barentu section of the road has been asphalted to within 10 kilome-

ters of Barentu, and the ride is smooth.

I hadn't really planned to visit the front lines. My main missions for this trip are to track down the rural deportees I interviewed last year, and interview farmers for a possible article on Eritrean agricultural reforms. Our group plans to part ways in Barentu. Jason and Patrick (from the *Village Voice*) are eager to sample the warfront atmosphere and snap some not-too-posed-looking pictures of soldiers with tanks and big guns. Alex and Sami of Reuters are off to meet farmers for an Africa Journal television piece. I'm caught in the middle of two attractive possibilities.

On an impulse, I decide to go with Jason, Patrick and Robel to the front. I figure such an opportunity is unlikely to surface again, whereas local farmers will be planting and harvesting according to cyclical seasons forever. Plus, access to the front lines these days is scarce. On the Ethiopian side, journalists (I'm registered as one of them) are forbidden to travel to the entirety of Tigray and Afar regions, much less tour the front lines. And of late the Eritrean government has also become increasingly stingy with permission.

Actually, we don't have "official" permission for this trip. We have Robel.

I'm not sure we'll get past the military checkpoints without a letter from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but Robel seems confident. We have two entry points. First, Major Tewolde, a front-line commander, has accompanied us from Asmara. He was on leave and we are innocently delivering him back to his post (which just so happens to be on the back side of a mountain where some of Eritrea's front line trenches are located). Second, we have Colonel Yohannes, Robel's commander during the liberation struggle, who we find a few kilometers behind the front lines. When he sees Robel, he welcomes him like a long-lost brother. Bear hugs all around. We are in.<sup>2</sup>

To get to the front lines we drive in and out of mountains and valleys. We pass abandoned Ethiopian trenches, on land several kilometers inside Eritrea, that Ethiopia occupied after breaking the line at Badime in February 1999. The Ethiopians held these positions for a few months, and in April, Eritrea retook them during an unsuccessful bid to recapture Badime.

As we head for the new front line, three Tigre women from our previous

week's trip to the Tsabra valley enter my mind. Sporting the characteristic Tigre big-loop nose rings, these women had lived in the hotbed of the previous war, so I asked them how life had changed since independence. One explained, "Our lives improved greatly — our husbands got work in construction and such. But now with the new war with Ethiopia, we fear things may get worse again. Our sons and daughters are fighting on the border. Some have already died."

I wonder whether any of their children are posted at our destination — the Badime front.

It is 5:30 p.m. by the time we arrive. We spend a few moments at Major Tewolde's cave-like one-room house and hear the rhythmic popping of not-too-distant machine-gun fire. Surprisingly, I'm not nervous. Even though I am about to enter the frying pan, I feel comfortable, relaxed.

On later reflection, I attribute this safe, relaxed feeling to the unassuming confidence and competence of our hosts. The Eritrean military is highly professional, well-trained and disciplined — not caught up in showy machismo. They undertake the drudgery of their daily existence with such an easy matter-of-fact manner that it feels almost normal to be there. Strange, since I've never been so close to a warfront, and never seen or heard people firing guns *at* each other.

My colleagues are eager to visit the trenches while there's still ample light for photographs. We politely refuse an offer of tea and walk for five minutes along a back path into the trenches. Just before entering, Major



*Eritrean troops relaxing at dusk*

<sup>2</sup> The names of the military personnel in this section have been changed.





*A female soldier boiling tea for the troops*

Tewolde stops suddenly, turns and calmly imparts a final pearl of advice: "Keep your heads down. Don't stand to look at the other side, and you'll be fine." We hunch over and continue, but the trenches are deep (1.5-2 meters) making crawling unnecessary (except through the fortified covered sections in 20-meter intervals).

The Badime trenches appear eerily identical to the Nakfa trenches built two decades earlier. The same depth, same rock fortification, same covered sections. The only major difference: here there are uniformed soldiers bearing AK-47s, sniper rifles, grenades, machine guns and rounds of live ammunition. Some peer cautiously through lookout crevices. And only 50-100 meters away, behind their own trenches, the Ethiopian army is watching and shooting at us.

An exchange of fire, and it sounds to be quite close. A few shells are launched from the Ethiopian side, but land far away on a distant hillside. Then, silence... the type of uncomfortable silence laden with anticipation, uneasy expectation. This occasional shelling and gunfire characterizes the tense unofficial cease-fire along the border.

We snap a few photos and retreat to Major Tewolde's base. Twenty troops mingle as the sun sets and darkness envelopes the mini-camp. Among them are two female soldiers. In Eritrea, national military service is mandatory for both sexes, although fewer women are posted at the front than men (about 1:3). Women played a central role in the liberation struggle, fighting alongside men and earning a mythical reputation for toughness.

Times have changed. Most of these women (and their male age-mates) did not enlist by choice. They were sent to Sawa for mandatory military training and then posted to the front. Throughout our visit, we often find the female soldiers immersed in domestic work — making tea, cooking, washing clothes, clean-

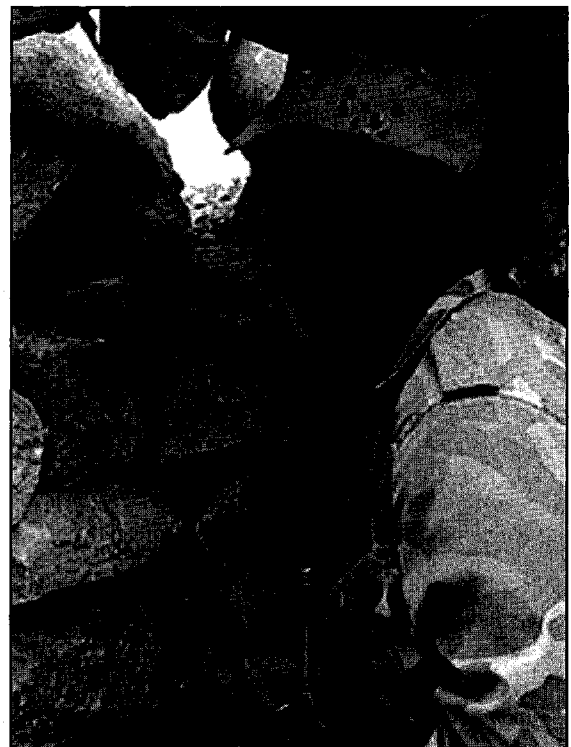
ing bowls. I wouldn't dispute that many of them are tough, but during the lengthy lulls in the fighting, traditional gender roles emerge.

Dark sets in and a series of shells breaks the silence. A gunfire burst and then the whoosh of a rocket. Just after the rocket whizzes overhead, Major Tewolde says, "Time to go inside" and I stomach the first pangs of nervousness and apprehension. A dim kerosene lamp casts eerie shadows inside the Major's one-room mud-and-rock house. Along the far wall rests his bed and a fancy new portable stereo (just brought back from Asmara). Beside the bed stands a simple wooden table stacked with papers and notebooks; along the other wall are a few squat stools.

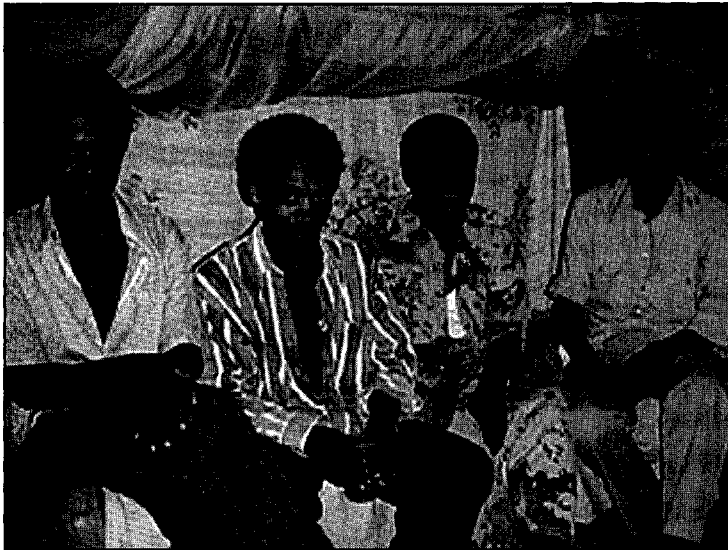
One of the young female soldiers, Zebib, brings us tea and then tells of her war experiences. Zebib grew up in Addis Ababa before returning to Eritrea a few years back. She is a radio operator, and was one of the 30 women in Major Tewolde's unit who fought in the heavy battles in Geza Gerlassie last year.

"I speak Amharic so I was put in charge of the POWs. During the battle, I recognized one of the POWs who surrendered to our platoon. His name was Habtom and he was one of my neighbors in Addis Ababa. I was shocked to see him there and I told him not to worry, we would take good care of them. We gave them water and milk, and washed their clothes not long after the battle ended."

The plot reeks peculiarly of Hollywood — a drippy,



*Watching the Ethiopian side through a lookout nook*



*Romadan, Robel, Col. Yohannes and Mikaeli*

tear-jerking modern war flick: Old neighbors caught in the momentum of history, driven to war. In a tense, climatic moment, an orchestral crescendo building in the background, they confront one another at gunpoint. Their minds whirl with memories, confusion and a split-second ethical dilemma. What to do next?

This scene and the broader war may stink of parody — brother fighting brother — but it is horrifically real. The guns don't carry blanks and the casualties aren't oozing ketchup from their wounds. Poignant moments — like Zebib giving milk to her old neighbor Habtom — are few. This war is real, and it's the nasty stuff of modern tragedy.

\* \* \*

By the time we leave for Colonel Yohannes' place, a thick darkness and peaceful quiet muffle the front. We gingerly grope our way down the hillside and Major Tewolde sporadically lights the way with a small flashlight. When we arrive at the Landcruiser, we find one tire flat, change it quickly and head out.

Col. Yohannes is a big sturdy man with a contagious smile. This friendly demeanor counterbalances his militaresque, don't-mess-with-me air of inner toughness. Shortly after our arrival, Weina, another young female soldier, brings a hefty plate of spaghetti and local *anbesha* bread. I am tired and hungry; I eat ravenously. After dinner, Patrick, Jason, Robel and I settle back on a canvas army cot as Weina and two of her friends prepare a traditional coffee ceremony.

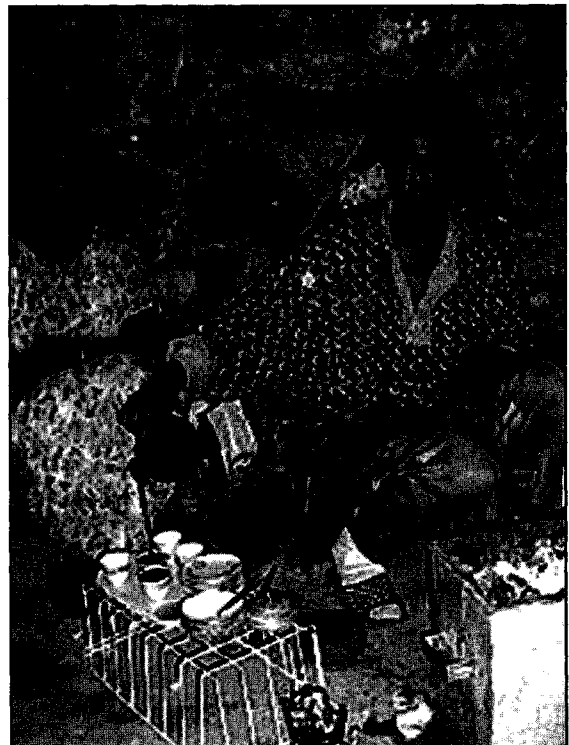
Col. Yohannes's base camp is about five kilometers from the front lines, and the hum of a generator drowns out the sound of any distant shelling (which, we are informed the next morning, did occur further north). Weina

and her colleagues are medics, providing the first level of care and stabilization to the wounded. More serious cases are then transferred to hospitals throughout the country.

As we drink the first mini-cup-'o-java, two other troops join us, including Romadan, a boyish-looking radio operator. He says he's 18, but looks closer to 15. Robel brings out some cakes for the second cup of coffee and Patrick heads for bed. Drinking coffee at night gives me instant insomnia, but we are having fun, chatting and goofing around, so I stay up. The Colonel forces cup number three on me, firmly explaining that he's the commander and I'm his guest, so drink up. I bring out some cookies from Asmara for cup number four. Then come cups number five and six. Granted, they are small cups, but nearly as potent as espresso. With all that caffeine, I am wired like a power station.

At midnight, we retire. Our hosts have set up some army-issue cots outside, and the cool breeze promises perfect sleeping conditions. Unfortunately, my cot is unstrategically located directly between Patrick and Jason, two world-class snorers. I lay down and stare helplessly at the heavens. The two of them are honking in stereo, and I've got enough caffeine flowing through my veins to kill a small laboratory rat.

A few hours later, I manage to catch some restless slumber. I awake near 6:15 am to pesky flies buzzing about



*Weina pouring coffee*

me and a gorgeous sunrise of wispy clouds painted in pink and orange pastels.

6 October 1999 — *Unnamed Trenches on Badime Front*

A wash of the face, morning tea, some quick greetings, and we return to the front lines. Patrick needs credible action shots, so Major Tewolde guides us on an abbreviated tour of his command area. First, we find a team of soldiers digging a large bunker, about 4 meters square and 2 meters deep. The Eritrean army digs continuously, fortifying positions with such care and diligence it appears they plan to live there forever. If fighting resumes, and the front line moves forward or is pushed back, they will start the same grueling process again — constructing trenches, bunkers and stone homes. Robel says, “Even if they are only there for one day, they will dig deep trenches. The Ethiopians just stack some rocks a meter or so high, but we are always digging.”

Next we revisit the trenches. Tsega, a female soldier, is preparing a machine-gun firing demonstration. Tsega looks about 20 years old and packs a sturdy frame. She handles the equipment proficiently, and sets up to shoot through a lookout crack. Four male counterparts watch from behind. Patrick and I prepare for the photo op, dramatic caption: *brave female soldiers fight for Eritrea*. She opens fire and is jerked back by the power of the gun. Patrick and I click away. The round sprays up and around, certainly missing its target (whatever that might have been) by a great distance. The other soldiers stifle a laugh. Tsega turns and smiles. Unfazed and unembarrassed, she organizes her equipment and takes her place amongst the others, posing for more photos, guns pointed at the enemy.

We walk farther along the trenches and Major Tewolde warns us to keep quiet. The front lines are frighteningly close at this point (about 30 meters). If the Ethiopians hear voices and activity, they might try to lob a grenade into the trench. Sometimes at night, the two sides bring their stereos into the trenches and play music for each other. Just another reminder that these two bitter rivals are actually brothers... brothers engaged in a deadly family squabble.

Leaving the trenches, we visit a few more mini-camps along the back side of the front-line mountains. Eritrea keeps its troops and supplies scattered throughout a vast area. This is strategic — concentrations of personnel, armaments and equipment are more vulnerable to attack. Likewise, small, highly-mobile platoons are flexible — they can respond quickly wherever needed. The Badime front spans more than 40 kilometers — when heavy fighting erupts in one section, reinforcements are called in.

This mobility and adaptability has served the Eritrean army well — during the liberation struggle and the current conflict. However, Eritrea’s vulnerability to massive human-wave attacks was demonstrated in February 1999



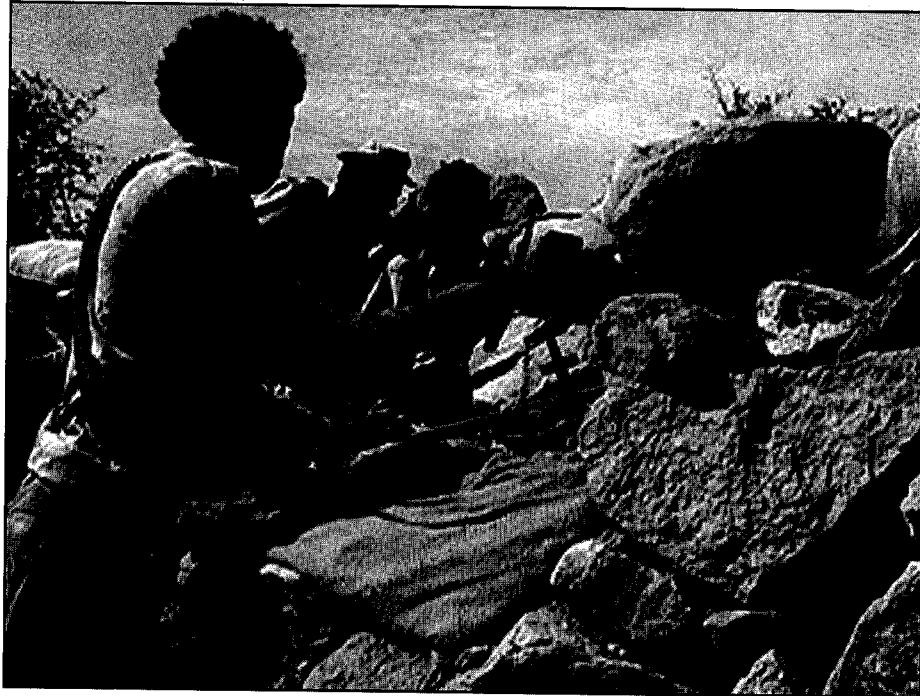
*Lentils for breakfast on the front line*

when Ethiopian forces breached Eritrean lines and regained control of Badime. The defeat and retreat in Badime was a humbling experience. The Eritrean military failed to anticipate the sheer numbers and overwhelming amount of force the Ethiopians were prepared to use. According to some sources, the Eritreans had left their trenches to counterattack, and after a few minor successes, were routed. Supply lines also failed — after days of non-stop Ethiopian wave attacks, Eritrean soldiers ran out of bullets and were forced to retreat from their trenches.

Shortly after the Badime debacle, Eritrean forces managed to repel a massive attack further east near Tsorona. This successful defense restored some pride and confidence in the nation’s military capabilities. Still, Badime had a psychological impact on Eritrea, and catalyzed changes — a rethinking of strategy, the procurement of more and better weaponry (including improved air defense systems) and the recruitment of more troops.

\* \* \*

Both sides have reassessed strategy, retooled their arsenals with larger amounts of even more deadly weaponry, and recruited thousands of additional troops. Should fighting resume in early 2000, it is likely to be even more deadly than the last round, estimated to have cost in the range of 40,000-70,000 lives. As of this writing, Eritrea has accepted the Organization of African Unity



*Front line gunners pose for photos*



*Digging a bunker*

(OAU) peace framework and the two supporting documents (Modalities and Technical Arrangements for Implementation). Ethiopia has refused, claiming the latter proposals have been unfairly altered to appease Eritrea. This is a diplomatic about-face from a year ago, when Ethiopia accepted and Eritrea rejected the OAU peace plans.

The legacy of Nakfa should not be forgotten. It does not mean Eritrea is invincible. It merely serves as a reminder that, when determined, Eritrea will fight on indefinitely. Eritrea will not crumble over short-term military setbacks. They will retreat, regroup and return.

Both Ethiopia and Eritrea have some legitimate (and some illegitimate) claims within this conflict. But their disputes can not ultimately be resolved on the battlefield. My (unsolicited) advice to both governments is simple. Set aside the self-delusions of military grandeur; stop the principled posturing and inflexibility; quit blaming the United States, the United Nations and everyone else. Instead, enter the peace process and declare a moral victory to massage the ego of your domestic constituencies.

Why? Because who is right and who is wrong is becoming more clouded and less relevant. Because both countries are losing — squandering lives and scarce resources. And because in the long-term, a durable solution must be mutually acceptable and negotiated, not imposed on the battlefield. □

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