

## **A cameraman at the theater of war**

**We have almost one million pictures  
that documented the armed struggle**



**By: Asmait Futusmbrhan**

If anyone knows the passion and emotions of the Eritrean freedom fighters, it is a sure thing that one would rather want to play rough in the arenas of war with guns and tanks instead of taking pictures. One would rather help his friend after being severely injured in action instead of taking the photo. I am sure he would rather pull the trigger to kill the enemy who had just killed his brother instead of pushing the capture key on his camera. Despite all the emotions piled up inside their hearts, the Eritrean camera men of the armed struggle did their absolute best to capture every moment of all the activities; the dreadful war times, the relaxing and funny moments during their rest, the unbearable injuries of the fighters and the loved ones that gave up their lives to bring peace and joy to their people.

Today, Q&A invites Tazaz Abraha, one of the cameramen of the armed struggle. Currently working as the head of the Photography Branch at the Ministry of Information, he is here to chat about the role of the camera at the fields.

***Thank you for your time. Would you please introduce yourself to our readers?***

I was born and raised in Asmara, Akria. Like most of the youth during my time, I joined the armed struggle in 77, when I was 17 years old. After getting military training, like everyone else, I was assigned to battalion 60, brigade 31. After participating in many wars with my division, I had a leg injury during the 7th offensive at *MaiKalashin*.

After my injury, since my injury wasn't that much challenging, and I didn't accept the fact that I wasn't doing anything I was assigned to the information branch. After taking some courses, I was then assigned to work at the exhibition and repairing section in photography.

### ***Photography in the fields....the challenges and benefits?***

It was hard for me to work at the repairing branch since I just started to know about the camera. That is why I worked so hard to know the instrument. Back then, all the camerapersons didn't have adequate knowledge of the cameras. All we had was each other and that is why we fixed and talked about the cameras together. We would note anything that happened to the camera, why and how it was damaged and then try to fix it.

In doing so, I became so much interested in photography. The cameramen did their best in documenting every activity that was happening during the armed struggle. We understood the value of documenting our history for future generations. That is why we never even thought about ourselves during the heated wars. Every division had its own cameraperson. That way the armed struggle would tell its story through the photos' of wars, meetings, and all kinds of activities the fighters did to get through the struggle.

There even were competitions among the photographers. We had various magazines published at the field, and in one of the magazines, *Sagm*, the best photo would be published on the back cover of the magazine. Every cameraperson would send their pictures from all over. I had my five pictures published. The magazines included updates on the armed struggle and motivational articles, and it was distributed to all the divisions and sent to foreign countries.



The challenge was that we were using analog cameras, which made our work difficult. We didn't have enough films to take sufficient number of pictures. We only got 36 shots in a film, which meant, we had to be very wise in using the shots. There was time when we had to be stingy with our shots and we would leave an incident to capture another incident which we thought was worth the shot. We had to come up with many solutions to save shots. For instance, for the passport-size photos we used to take a photo of two people with a single shot. That way we used 36 shots for 72 people.

Also, we didn't get to see the photos we took instantly, which meant we had to wait almost a week to find out how the photos came out. There were even times when the films didn't make it to the printing branch. It is when it got to the printing branch that you knew if the lighting was good or your autofocus wasn't. The undeniable benefit was we kept our history alive and lively through the cameras.

***Carrying only a camera in the battlefields....how was that?***

This is not an easy question, Asmait. The army had the guns, tanks, and the bombs to defend themselves and kill the enemy. All the photographers had was the camera. On top of that, the cameras we used weren't advanced. The cameramen had to get close to the enemy lines in order to take a good picture. Besides all of that, the only reason we were there was to bring freedom at any cost. If it was up to me, I would rather run at the battlegrounds with my gun. It was hard to take photos of friends being injured or killed in action. However, I

was there to document the history of my heroes and heroines. I was there to document the story of what we did to bring peace. I was part of many battles and I captured many of them. One of the most dreadful wars I documented and participated in was the *north eastern of Sahl*. I still remember it as if it was yesterday. We controlled every corner of Awget, and the war was almost over when an airplane came and dropped a cluster bomb on us. Almost the whole team was martyred and was buried in one hole. I was there to document the incident, and it was one of the most horrible moments. This is just a single incident; there are many photos which reflect the horrible times during the war for independence. We have almost one million pictures that documented the armed struggle.

### ***Keeping the photos after independence***

I am currently the head of the Photography division in the Ministry of Information. We have more than 50 years old analog films. We are now digitalizing the photos to keep them in the data base system. We believe that, those pictures tell our history, and they should be handled and stored carefully for posterity. It's because they were carefully kept that we have them today.

### ***You have many pictures which you have won awards for and other popular photos as well...***

I have won first prize three times among other awards. A photographer shouldn't put his/her camera in a bag while travelling. A cameraperson should carry the camera near his hand so as to take any photos along the way. That is what I do. I have many photos that are well recognized. I have one of a young shepherd with one shoe holding a stick. Another famous picture is of a mother with her twins, carrying one on her back and breastfeeding the other while holding her other two kids. That photo describes the harsh drought the people suffered from in the 180s. The woman was migrating with her children, and you can see that she was in distress.

Furthermore, I have my photos in the national currency Nakfa; in 5nkf the kunama man, 10nkf the Tigre and Tigrigna women, 20nkf Nara women and in 50nkf the Assab port at the back.

### ***Before we say our good byes***

Every governmental institution and ministry, every person who is interested in photography should support it. Competitions should be held in the name of any kind of event. That is how we can upgrade photography. Photography is a base, education and history. We all should value the importance of it and care for it.

### **Eritrea profile**

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