

Operation Fenkil: The unthinkable achieved in 59 hours



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On February 8, 1990, EPLF forces began their offensive attack by cutting off the critical supply route from Massawa to Asmara garrison. The surprise attack stunned the Ethiopian military and by the following afternoon the EPLF forces were in the suburbs of Massawa. On the third day of the offensive, February 11, 1990, the Eritrean forces captured the Ethiopian naval base near the town. The only remaining portions of the city to rid of Ethiopian troops were the islands.

To achieve this Eritrean forces used their nascent naval forces (mostly small gunboats) to attack from the sea during an artillery barrage. Using this artillery fire the Eritrean armor moved onto the causeways that connected the islands with the mainland. The first of these tanks was destroyed by the Ethiopian garrison that was eventually overcome by the EPLF. After this defeat the remainder of the Ethiopian forces retreated to Ghinda.

After their loss of Massawa, the Ethiopians continued their aerial bombardment of the city. The civilian population was hardest hit as the EPLF forces had followed the Ethiopian troops to Ghinda. Notable of this bombardment was the use of napalm and cluster bombs.

The Ghinda front, extending from Ghinda to Adi Roso and Northern Red-Sea, was baptized with names like 'Enda Bumba', "Feres sege", "Gahayat", "Enda

Kewhi”, “Enda Harestay”, “Enda Misayl” and “Shndwa”, signifying the struggle’s relentless march towards independence. The front withheld non-stop heavy military offence from the enemy from February 1990 up to May 1991, the liberation of Eritrea. This front was used as a final frontier to completely destroy the enemy and ensure the inevitability of Eritrea’s independence.

What made the operation a victory against all odds was the mismatch between the two forces. On one side, you had the largest army in Africa, which was well-equipped with all types of weapons bought at the expense of a starving people. The famine did not deter the enemy from arming its soldiers to the teeth to fight a long and bloody war. On the other side, you had Eritrean freedom fighters, few but tactical and determined.

Operation Fenkil took a good 59 hours to complete. The systematic coordination of ground troops and naval and mechanized units resulted in the surrender of 20,000 Derg soldiers, the destruction of two-third of a modern and well- equipped Derg military and the liberation of Massawa and Ghindae.

The resilient freedom fighters strode to the port with courage and determination. It was a time to no longer look back but to march forward; independence was within touching distance. The enemy did not know what hit them -- their tanks were dismantled and their ships sunk by the non-stop attack of Eritrea’s heroes. To the tegadelti(freedom fighters), an assault meant the sacrifice of lives. If they had to attack the enemy, it should be done when success seemed assured, and the resultant victory was worth the cost.

I do believe that what the Ethiopian army learned at various battles fought against the Eritrean freedom fighters was that the tegadelti could manifest superhuman endurance if they wanted. I have seen many pictures of Fenkil Operation when the freedom fighters poured their sweat to preserve their blood -- sturdy youth carrying heavy logs up along the narrow roads of Sigalet Ketan in a place where the temperature runs up to 50 degrees at times.

The enemy moved accompanied by tanks, Stalin organs, migs and bags of lies and propaganda.The Kitaw was supposed to punish the freedom fighters for their

insolence, the Nebelbal were supposed to consume with a blazing fire those who resisted; the Tewelwari was the panzer division or a deployment force. Alas, all disappeared in the hands of Sahel trained wonders, along with their bizarre names and funny ideas.

Resistance was the only Eritrean weapon that the enemy dreaded. What is the use of napalm and ten-barreled mortars if the one you are tackling knows how to resist? It is the resistance of the scorpion, which after an atomic blast in its surrounding continues to crawl stinging right and left.

Endurance, self-sacrifice and fortitude are commodities that are out of stock in this decadent world, but our tegadelti were made out of these traits. They proved it when they relentlessly defended Nakfa and Sahel. And in the battle to win Massawa, they redefined the art of war and made it their own creation.

A lot has been said about the endurance and fortitude of the Eritrean army in front of a superior firepower and huge army, aided and supported by superpowers.

The enemy, coming from more verdant and guest-friendly terrain, thought it was fighting on two fronts: the people and the land.

The Ethiopian soldiers wore boots, ate canned food, had helicopters to take them to the nearest hospital or clinic when wounded, drank beer and had sweethearts (at the point of a gun) in every village or town under their control.

The freedom fighters wore thong sandals, ate weddi aker (sorghum mixed with weevils), mostly walked to the nearest FSU (Front Surgical Unit) on foot when wounded, drank contaminated water and eschewed all kinds of frivolities and easy life.

It was simply a bitter pill to swallow for the Derg soldiers that they would never henceforth defeat the Eritrean freedom forces. "What do they have that we don't have?" shouted frustrated Mengistu. But nobody dared tell him that those boys and girls over there had endurance and fortitude in large quantity, something that he couldn't obtain by traveling to the Soviet Union or East Germany. Massawa

proved once and for all that independence was inevitable. When the Derg came to power in Ethiopia, Massawa and most part of Eritrea saw the harshest of colonial mistreatment. During that period two important events can be recalled, First Offence of Salina to liberate the port of Massawa in 1977 and the successful 1990 Operation Fenkil. Today the port city has monuments built to remember the two important and historical dates.

History has come to many places, has stayed awhile and, after its departure, has rendered those places famous. In Eritrea's saga, perhaps no place has taken on greater historic importance than the Northern Red-Sea city of Massawa. There, during three winter days, February 8-11, 1990, the Derg's fate was sealed. When the operation was over, Mengistu's circle of trust was in disarray, 'Operation Fenkil' would forever hold a place in the minds of all Eritreans.

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