

“Our Challenges Were Our Best Teachers”: An Interview with Major Ghebremesqel Ghebregergish (“Fire”)



By : - Kidane Shimendi

Major Ghebremesqel Ghebregergish—known by his nom de guerre “Fire”—is an ex-freedom fighter and author who has published a book chronicling his life memories before and during the armed struggle for Eritrea’s liberation. His work illuminates the nature of the Eritrean family, culture, and history, with a particular focus on the Department of Transportation. Eritrea Profile invites you to read his vivid recollections of the armed struggle, especially those related to the transportation department, as preserved in his life story.

- *Please tell us about your childhood.*

I was born in 1955 in Adi- Hawesha. I attended school in Adi-Hawesha until I dropped out in the sixth grade to earn an income, working in building construction and vehicle garages. Before joining the armed struggle, I had seven years of experience in mechanical garages, particularly repairing leaf springs (locally called balistra).

- *How do you remember the circumstances under which you joined the armed struggle?*

While I was working in a garage, I was recruited into the ELF mass organization. I had a private rented house in Asmara where I lived and conducted the organization’s activities. Unfortunately, one day, the enemy captured the head of the mass organization and began hunting its members. At that moment, I was in

Adi-Hawesha visiting my parents. Enemy soldiers arrived at the house but missed capturing me. In the aftermath of this situation, I was recruited into the EPLF's mass organization in Adi-Hawesha and continued contributing to the revolution.

In 1977, several towns were liberated from the enemy during intensive battles in the vicinity of Asmara. During the fighting, EPLF garage units were collecting spare parts from the enemy's destroyed tanks. Following the mass organization's command, I joined the operation alongside my comrades. It was at this moment that I encountered the EPLF garage department and formally joined the armed struggle.



- ***What do you remember about the moment the EPLF captured its first T-55 tank, named “Commander Number 1”?***

It was in 1977. The EPLF captured the Soviet-made T-55 tank for the first time when freedom fighters hit its fuel tanker during the intensive battle for the liberation of Asmara in the village of Adem-Zemat. The freedom fighters, in their resourcefulness, extinguished the fire using soil and mud to preserve the tank for the revolution.

That afternoon, we reached the tank's location and strove to shelter it from enemy strikes. However, none of our comrades had any experience driving a tank. After a lengthy discussion, we encouraged one of our comrades—a former taxi driver—to give it a try. Abreham Berhe (Wedi Berhe) became the driver and thus Eritrea's first tank driver in the armed struggle. In that moment, we were all surprised and overwhelmed with the joy of victory. We secured the tank against persistent

enemy attacks and repaired mechanical issues. As the tank passed through the town of Dekemhare, people applauded, and tears of joy streamed down their faces.

Initially, we called the tank “Abrehet,” but it was later renamed “Commander Number 1” and was heroically sacrificed during the Fenkil operation. Nowadays, when I visit Massawa and see that tank displayed as a monument, I become emotional, remembering that historical moment when people celebrated its capture.



- *How would you explain the significant role the Department of Transportation played in the armed struggle?*

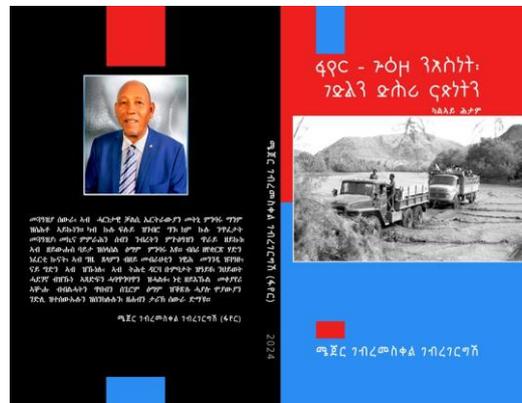
The department was the nerve centre of the revolution. It had various sections, including the garage. Adhering to the principle of self-reliance, the department made a profound contribution to the armed struggle while incurring heavy sacrifices. Despite enemy attacks, drivers executed their missions, traveling long distances through difficult terrain under the cover of night. To address spare part shortages, we modified the missing parts using available resources. Both in the department and throughout the revolution, our challenges were our best teachers.

- *Which of the department’s transformative works do you remember most distinctly?*

All of the department’s work was transformational and memorable. But if you insist, I can recall two examples.

First, we modified a shida-making machine. We manufactured a lifting spring system that made it easy to transport the machine by vehicle in combat situations.

Second, there were the 130mm artillery pieces captured during the defeat of the Nadew Command. These weapons were difficult to maneuver over difficult terrains, so we enabled their transport atop Mercedes trucks, ensuring the timely arrival to their destinations.



- *How did the department continue its work after independence?*

After independence, the department shifted its focus to the nation-building process and continues to execute numerous great missions across almost every national sector. As a memorial to our national history, we established the Asmara Tank Graveyard, collecting hundreds of destroyed and abandoned Soviet-supplied Ethiopian tanks, armored personnel carriers, and artillery weapons—even from other regions of the country.

- *What is the story behind your nickname, “Fire”?*

During the Red Star Campaign in 1982, I was assigned to a combat unit fighting on the battlefield. During this war, one of my comrades fired upon an enemy position, and at that very moment, I exclaimed, “The ground has turned into fire!” From this reaction, my comrades nicknamed me “Fire”—a name that has almost replaced my real name.

- *What inspired you to publish a book of your memories?*

In 1977, when we were repairing the tank Commander Number 1, one of my comrades asked, “Who will record our history?” I responded, “The time will come.” From that moment on, I kept thinking about his question until I decided to answer it practically by publishing my book. In my book, I attempted to reflect

Eritrean culture and history through my life story, both before and during the armed struggle.

- ***What final messages would you like to deliver to younger generations and to your comrades?***

To the youth, I would recommend cultivating a reading culture and working to record our national history through documentary films. To my comrades, I would encourage them to publish their personal memories and fulfill our life's mission. We all survived to narrate the history of our martyrs to our children.

- ***Thank you so much for your precious time. We wish you great success and look forward to your next book.***

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