

How Ethiopian General Tsadkan Cried During the 1998-2000 Border War

By Bereket Kidane,
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Ethiopian Lt. Gen. Tsadkan Gebretensae (L) during the Border War

Translated from Tesfaye Gebreab's recently published memoir of the 1998-2000 border war.

".....We had anywhere from 250,000 to 300,000 of our soldiers killed on the war effort in Eritrea during the Haile Selassie and Dergue era. But if we compare that to the Weyane era, in just one year we had 98,700 of our soldiers killed and 194,300 wounded. These are figures I got from our Ministry of Defense in Ethiopia.".....

Colonel Alebel Amare

***The Ex. Ethiopian Soldier, who was interviewed by Tesfay Ghebreab, was Colonel Alebel Amare. The **94,700 died** and **198,300 wounded** Ethiopia Soldiers during the TPLF adventure to reoccupy Eritrea in 1998-2000 was occurred only in one Year. So, the above account does not included the whole loss of another year of the war.

Berhane Habtemariam

“Good morning Colonel?”

“Greetings Mr. Journalist”

“I appreciate your punctuality.”

“Well, I am a soldier aren’t I?”

“So let’s get to it. You had said that you were going to tell me all about General Tsadkan and the Tsorona Front. So where should we start? Should we start from the beginning or middle?”

“I will just tell you things as they come to me and as I remember them.”

“Great! Tell me things as they come to you and I will write them down and make sure they are passed on to future generations.”

“Weyane took 10 divisions to the warfront against Eritrea. Of those ten divisions, one was a fully mechanized division. There was also one brigade of commandos among them. When war broke out in 1998, Weyane’s armed forces were ready to attack on four fronts, namely Burre, Zalambessa, Tsorona and Badme. The first round of the 1998 war was extremely screwed-up and gruesome. Looking back on it as a commander and a military professional, it was an extremely inept and embarrassingly flawed war plan from the beginning. It was badly planned. It is very sad that no one to date has been held accountable for the wasted treasure in blood and national resources that was expended on the war effort. We had anywhere from **250,000 to 300,000** of our soldiers killed on the war effort in Eritrea during the Haile Selassie and Dergue era. But if we compare that to the Weyane era, in just one year we had **98,700** of our soldiers killed and **194,300** wounded. These are figures I got from our Ministry of Defense in Ethiopia. The figures I retrieved from the records of Ordinance Command is that two-thirds of our heavy weaponry was destroyed during the first round of Ethio-Eritrean border war. The field generals of this nihilistic and meaningless war were Seare Mekonen, Samora Younis, Yohannes Gebremeskel, Tadesse Werede, Quarter (Abraha Woldemariam) and Berhane Negash. The Central Command leaders were Meles Zenawi, Siye Abraha, Tewolde Woldemariam, Alemseghed Gebreamlak, Tefera Walwa, Tsadkan Gebretensae and Kife Gebremedhin.

The Ethio-Eritrean War archive is still not open to the public. We may hear some really surprising stories in the future. We can easily list some very basic military errors that were committed during the first round of the 1998 war. Tadesse Werede was assigned to the Burre Front. The commands given to him were once he captures Assab, he would go up the Red Sea coastline destroying the Eritrean forces along the way and

seize Massawa. Abraha Woldegebriel was assigned to Tsorona while Berhane Negash was assigned to Zalambessa (the front that General Tsadkan closely supervised). They would both attack from two directions and meet up in Segeneiti to combine forces and proceed to Asmara under a single command. Seare Mekonen, Yohannes Gebremeskel and Abebe Tadesse were to lead the Badme Front under close supervision from Samora. They were instructed to capture and control the entire lowland of Eritrea. Extensive military exercises and preparations were held for this military effort. The ultimate mission of the war effort was also communicated at all levels to the military leaders. There were many disagreements and debates on the final mission of the war. For instance, the Commander of the 23rd Division, Colonel Berhe Gebremariam, had asked many questions regarding the political loss and condemnation that would follow if they invade Eritrea, whether the Ethiopian Armed forces had any motivation to fight or if they could even be trusted. He had asked for a revision of the war plan. The response he received from General Tsadkan was “Unless we destroy Shaebia, we can not exist. Shaebia is weak. Eritrea’s economy is weak. We have the upper hand when it comes to armaments. This is a decision made by the government so everyone has to follow it.”

The lower level commanders were doubtful whether the mission could be accomplished. They were doubtful whether success could be achieved. Questions and doubts were also raised in the Badme and Burre fronts. But just as in the Adigrat meetings, the response received was “This is a government decision and has to be followed.”

So the war was carried out.

The war started with the Badme front. The three divisions that

opened the attack suffered great human and material losses so an additional mechanized division and a commando brigade had to be added to the Badme front. Two additional divisions were also sent later to try again but the attack failed again. The human and material losses were adding up. It became clear to General Tsadkan that things were not going according to plan in the Badme Front so he ordered to continue the attacks on the Tsorona Front instead.

The battle plan briefings were given at a place called Infara. Separate preparations and exercises were held in the Tsorona front. 12,000 Tigrayan militias, 5000 plus civilians that would carry food and drinking water for the infantry forces as well as thousands of donkeys and horses were commissioned for this battle plan. All of the militias, civilians and thousands of donkeys and horses that were assembled for this offensive in this small patch of land were wiped out within a week.

The large 20th mechanized division was completely destroyed and turned to ash at Igri Mekel. Tanks and locomotives were all burnt and turned into charcoal. Shaebia easily received and killed our forces by firing heavy artillery from cannons placed in Zalambessa, Mai Ayni and Adi Quala. This is not necessarily a matter of heroism on Shaebia's part but rather the ignorance and incompetence of our military leaders. Our troops were completely liquidated and made to drop like leaves. The ones spared of this slaughter and the Militia Sirnays retreated back to Adwa.

After the 1-week battle plan failed miserably and concluded with great military losses the general who was in charge of the war, Tsadkan Gebretensae, called a meeting at Infara, the place that was serving as the Command and Control Center. General Tsadkan tried to call the meeting to order but he could not hide

his emotions and broke down crying. He wept. All of the meeting participants cried with him. Infara was like a funeral home. Once he gained his composure, he tried to comfort the meeting participants. Everyone was crying. General Tsadkan said the following to the meeting participants, “I have led many battles in my career. I have fought in many wars. I have seen a lot. I have never experienced this kind of utter failure. It is bad.”

The reason the meeting was called was to assess the situation and find solutions to the problems. Meeting participants agreed that there were two basic problems. The challenging landscape and defective battle plans were equally to blame. The landscape is favorable to the enemy because the enemy is in a defensive position. Also, there was no adequate preparation on our part. We didn't size up the enemy and its strength correctly. We underestimated the enemy's capabilities. The enemy is using the landscape to his advantage and rotating forces and battle plans as he wishes. Without going into great details, we concluded the meeting at that. Using that as a starting point, we collectively decided to discard the offensive battle plans for Zalambessa and Burre. In order to beef up our fighting capability, it was decided that a committee led by General Abebe Teklehaymanot would go on a shopping spree for the air and ground forces. Bereket Simon was to lead the conscription of massive number of troops. Aba Dula was to supervise the training of the conscripts. The number of divisions was to increase from 12 to 30 in a short period of time. Until then, the troops would stay in a defensive position.

Tsadkan communicated to the senior commanders gathered at Infara (division level commanders and up) that the latest decisions were made at the Central Command level. We were told to prepare according to those battle plans handed down

from Central Command. We were trained for a full year accordingly. In April of 1999 Tsadkan, Jebe and Aba Dula gathered us in Makele and shared the general battle plan with us.

The 1998 and 1999 plans differed in one respect. The mission of the 1998 plan was to capture the entire Eritrea. The 1999 plan was a scaled back version and simply stated to continue the war as long as our ammunitions and capabilities would allow us to last. The 1998 plan explicitly stated once we enter Eritrea we would destroy Eritrea's natural resources and properties. It also mentioned that the people should not be trusted since they are Shaebia supporters. The 1999 plan did not make such explicit pronouncements. It did, however, say in one sentence that since the people are Shaebia supporters we have to be cautious.

At the end of April 1999, the war re-started in the Badme front. Even though we suffered great losses, we were able to reach Barentu. But the commanders were communicating to Tsadkan that Shaebia had preserved its entire troops and fighting capability through strategic withdrawals and that its losses were minimal. The commanders were warning Tsadkan that Shaebia was lulling us to a place inside Eritrea where it would encircle and liquidate us. Moreover, the commanders were telling Tsadkan that the deeper we got into Eritrea the farther away we were from our command centers and supply lines, lacking organizational support and that the only option was to retreat.

After the Badme Front, without assessing the results and analyzing the problems experienced in that front we hurriedly opened simultaneous attacks on the Tsorona and Zalambessa fronts. The rationale being if we start with the Badme Front

Shaebia can bring most of its reinforcements quickly to that front so other fronts had to be explored. However, nothing went according to plan for us.

Even though the battle plan was not going according to script and not achieving its goals in any of the three fronts that were opened around the same time, another front was to open within a short period of time. Some of the leaders started thinking if we capture Assab through the Burre Front, we can score a huge moral and psychological victory. The main reasoning that led to this idea of capturing Assab was that it would be a surprise attack and that the enemy would be unprepared because it wasn't expecting an attack on that front. Since we have already had discussions with the Djibouti Government, we can bring our forces through Djibouti and launch our attack from there and create very ideal circumstances for the battle plan. However, there were many questions that popped up during this initiative's briefings. For instance, the 36th Division Commander Colonel Mohammed Isha, the 39th Division Commander Colonel Wondesen Teka and the 14th Division Commander Colonel Wedi Abate raised the following question: "The only thing we have done so far is have Shaebia go into a strategic withdrawal but have not accomplished any of our goals. We have no concrete achievements to speak of. And we have paid a huge price for this and suffered tremendous losses. As a result of the losses we suffered, our troop's morale is very low. Burre's climate and landscape are very difficult. We do not have enough logistics or preparations. We can not count on luck because we can just as easily have bad luck and get wiped out. So far, everything we have been told about the enemy has been wrong." The question raised by the colonels led to some heated discussions. In the end, even though no convincing argument was put forth in favor of proceeding with the battle plan, we were told that it was an irreversible decision made by the

government to capture Assab so we had to proceed. The Assab Campaign was carried out and fought for five consecutive weeks. The results turned out to be even worse than we had imagined and worse than any of the setbacks we previously experienced in the other fronts. Our forces experienced the worst and greatest defeats at the Burre Front. Shaebia's method of leading its enemy to places where it can liquidate them was used extensively again in the Burre Front and forced us to suffer tremendous losses and abandon our plan of capturing Assab.

>From the very beginning , the Ethio-Eritrean turned out to be.....