

**Operation Flame and the Destruction of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division**

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*Abstract*

*The Third Division was one of the eminent army units of the Ethiopian ground forces. Since its creation in the 1940s, it was based in the Ogaden for many years to repulse possible Somali invasion. Following the defeat of Somali in 1978, it was involved in many counter-insurgency operations in Eritrea, Tigray, Wollo and Northern Shewa. In May 1990, the high command worked out a plan known as “Operation Flame” to wipe out the insurgents based in Northern Shewa and southern Wollo. But the operation miserably failed and that led to the destruction of the Third Division. Using untapped archival and oral sources, this paper attempts to investigate the main reasons for the failure of the operation.*

**Key words:** Operation flame, army division, military, Derg, command.

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### **Introduction**

Following Ethiopia's liberation from the Italian occupation in 1941, the Ethiopian army was reorganized along modern lines by foreign military missions. The British Military Mission to Ethiopia (BMME) was entrusted to train and equip the regular army and then the Territorial Army. In the early 1950s, the task of training and equipping the army was taken over by the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) of the United States and American assistance to the Ethiopian army continued until 1977. Between 1977 and 1991, the Ethiopian army was heavily dependent on Soviet military assistance. As Soviet assistance began to decline in 1988, the Ethiopian military government tried to acquire new arms from Israel and North Korea. In the mean time, the army was losing major battles in Eritrea and Tigray between 1988 and 1990 as the northern insurgents launched a coordinated assault. Although huge campaigns like "Operation Flame" were mounted by the army, they failed to reverse the military situation. Finally, the army crumbled in 1991 following the flight of Mengistu H. Maryam to Zimbabwe.

### **Research Objectives**

The overriding objective of this research is to investigate the fundamental factors for the failure of "Operation Flame." The study also has the following specific objectives:

- To chronicle the history of the Third Division;
- To look into the strengths and weaknesses of the division; and
- To critically examine the command structure, logistics and intelligence of the army as well as its combat capabilities.

### **Research Methods**

The study involves several methods of data collection. The researcher has extensively used the untapped archives of the Ministry of National Defence (MOND) based in Addis Ababa. In order to corroborate the archival evidence, the researcher has also interviewed many members of the army ranging from privates to senior commanders. In addition, attempts were made to gather all available written evidence about the Third Division.

The information gathered from various sources were cross-checked, re-examined and analyzed in order to reconstruct the history of the Third Division in general and "Operation Flame" in particular.

### **The Background**

The 3<sup>rd</sup> Division was organized in 1941 as one of the earliest army units organized in the immediate post-liberation period. Originally, it consisted of seven battalions and was based in the Ogaden. It was primarily entrusted with the protection of the Ogaden from possible Somali incursions. After beating off the Somali force at Danot on January 6, 1961, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division came to be called "Lion of the Ogaden." True to its name, the Division scored a brilliant victory over Somali forces in February, 1964 as the Somali government made its audacious attempt to take the Ogaden.<sup>1</sup>

On the eve of the 1977 Somali invasion, the artillery, mechanized and infantry units of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division were scattered throughout Härärgé and were based in Härär, Diré Dawa, Jijiga, Chinaqsän, Dägä Habur, Qäbri Dähar, Godé, Gäladin, Mustahil and Wardér. Ethiopian army units stationed in isolated garrison towns of the Ogaden were thus outgunned and outnumbered by the Somali forces. In the first six months following the July 12 1977 full-scale invasion, Somali forces enjoyed superiority especially in tanks, artillery guns and infantrymen. As a result, not only did the Somalis manage to overrun most of the Ogaden, but also threaten to capture the most strategic towns of Diré Dawa and Härär.<sup>2</sup>

Following the fall of Jijiga into Somali hands on September 12, 1977, units of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division were ordered to dig themselves in the Qoré defence lines. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Division at Qoré was soon reinforced by new militia units as well as Cuban and South Yemeni contingents.<sup>3</sup> The Ethiopian forces then launched a large scale counter-offensive on January 22, 1978 against the Somalis. After weeks of fierce fighting, they scored a decisive victory at Mt. Karra Mara on March 5, 1978 and liberated Jijiga on the same day.<sup>4</sup> Between March 8 and 17, 1978, several motorized and infantry battalions of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division liberated Dägä Habur, Awaré, Wardér and Godé. Then, the Division set up its headquarters at Dägä Habur. However, due to the growing threat from the northern insurgents, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division was ordered to turn to northern Ethiopia in early May 1978.<sup>5</sup>

In an attempt to stamp out the insurgency in northern Ethiopia, the government created the Second Revolutionary Liberation Army consisting of seven task forces, 501-507. Task Force 501 was made up of the 3<sup>rd</sup> and the 7<sup>th</sup> Divisions, three artillery battalions, two anti-tank battalions, and a tank battalion with a total of 23,753 combatants.<sup>6</sup>

Since Task Force 501 was assigned to advance to Täsänäy through Humära and Omhajer, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division moved to Gondar in May 1978. After a brief stay at Azäzo, the Division reopened the Tekel Dengay-Humära road by routing the forces of the Ethiopian Democratic Union (EDU) and triumphantly entered Humära town in June 1978. Following a brief rehabilitation, the 92<sup>nd</sup> Militia Brigade of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division advanced to Omhajer and reinforced the 17<sup>th</sup> Brigade which had been fiercely fighting with the insurgents of the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF). The 3<sup>rd</sup> and the 7<sup>th</sup> Divisions then mobilized the inhabitants of Humära and rebuilt the bridge over the Tākäzé River which had been destroyed by the insurgents.<sup>7</sup>

Although the road leading to Täsänäy was highly fortified by the ELF insurgents, units of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division carried out a highly coordinated offensive and swept across south western Eritrea. Between July and October, 1978, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division captured Galoji, Ali Gidär, Täsänäy, Haykota and Go✱i. Soon afterwards, it broke the siege around Baréntu and captured Aqordat. Following a brief rehabilitation, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division resumed its advance to Kärän in November, 1978.<sup>8</sup>

As the army surged forward, it met stiff resistance from the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF). Even then, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division in collaboration with other army units captured Kärän town on November 27, 1978. The advance to Afabét proved harder. The EPLF insurgents had dug themselves in the strategic passes at Gäsamit, Mäsahlit, Gezgeza and Qälämit. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Division and other units fought ferocious battles before taking control of Afabét on January 30, 1979. But the repeated attempts to capture Naqfa failed and the task of storming the last stronghold of the EPLF was postponed.<sup>9</sup>

After a large scale preparation that lasted for about 30 months, the long-awaited and much-advertised Red Star Operation was launched on February 15, 1982. The government deployed three commands namely Mäbräq (lightning), Nadäw (demolish) and Weqaw (thrash) to capture Naqfa through a three-pronged offensive. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Division was placed under the Nadäw Command and it was assigned to storm Naqfa from the north after severing the Naqfa-Algéna road. Among the 10 divisions deployed on the Algéna, Kärkäbät and Naqfa fronts, only the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Divisions of the Nadäw Command came very close to victory. But the collapse of the Kärkäbät front helped the EPLF to transfer fighters to the Naqfa front and eject the two divisions from the strategic heights they had captured. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Division lost its commander, Colonel Täshagär Yemam in one of the fierce engagements of the operation. Despite immeasurable tenacity and sacrifice, Operation Red Star finally failed to achieve its goal.<sup>10</sup>

The failure of the operation led to desperation and mutiny in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division. The first to go on mutiny was the 10<sup>th</sup> Brigade. In July 1982, the mutineers demanded that they should be given a fortnight respite. Brigade and division commanders tried in vain to placate the mutineers. Commanders had to concede to their demands and allowed the 101<sup>st</sup>, 102<sup>nd</sup> and the 103<sup>rd</sup> battalions to move to Asmara for a

brief respite. Once in Asmara, the ringleaders of the mutiny were detained in the Qagnāw station while others were given political indoctrination.<sup>11</sup>

However, the mutiny soon spread to other brigades of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division. Troops of the 93<sup>rd</sup> Battalion of the 9<sup>th</sup> Brigade and 924<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the 92<sup>nd</sup> Brigade arrested their commanders and moved to Afabēt from Kāmchāwa. However, as they tried to force their way to Asmara, they were intercepted by other army units and forced to surrender. The mutiny was finally quelled.<sup>12</sup>

After some indoctrination, the government managed to rehabilitate the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division and made it ready for other operations. In an attempt to weaken the Tegray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and prevent it from reinforcing the EPLF as it did during Operation Red Star, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division swept across western Tegray in late 1982. The Division temporarily controlled TPLF base areas including Dādābit, Addi Hagāray, Addi Da'ero and Sheraro. Then in early 1983, the Division swiftly marched to Eritrea and took part in what was known as the "Stealth Offensive" on the Mālābso front under the Mānter (clear up) Command. During that operation, the army managed to make a deep thrust into EPLF-held areas around Naqfa in a U-shaped offensive. But, in June 1983, the EPLF regained the areas it had lost during the Stealth Offensive.<sup>13</sup>

In recognition of its fighting capability shown during Operation Red Star and the Stealth Offensive, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division was awarded a first rank feat of bravery medal in September 1983. Likewise, the division commander Colonel Yāmata Meseker, and the division's political commissar Captain Gétachāw Saleleh were promoted to the rank of Brigadier General and Major respectively.<sup>14</sup>

The awards and promotions were expected to boost the morale of commanders and combatants and make them more resolute for the challenges ahead. Indeed, the army had still enormous challenges. The EPLF had already taken the strategic initiative in June 1983 and begun surprise attacks on isolated army units. On January 14, 1985, for instance, it displaced the 15<sup>th</sup> Brigade and captured Tāsānāy. Subsequently, on July 6, 1985, the insurgents launched a surprise attack on the three brigades stationed at Baréntu and captured the town for the first time.<sup>15</sup>

With the intention of dislodging the EPLF from Baréntu and Tāsānāy, the government launched a successful counter-offensive named Operation Red Sea in August, 1985. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Division was one of the five divisions deployed for the operation. In a matter of days, the army regained Baréntu, Tāsānāy, Haykota and even captured the EPLF training camp, Sawa Forto, in August, 1985.<sup>16</sup>

In order to maintain the strategic initiative and capture Naqfa, the government once again launched another huge offensive known as Operation Bahrā Nāgash in October 1985. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Division took part in the operation on the Mālābso front. Although a total of 45,843 combatants were deployed on the three fronts, the costly operation ended in failure and 14,442 men were put out of action.<sup>17</sup>

Across the Mārāb River, the TPLF intensified its insurgency in Tegray. In February, 1986, it mounted a nocturnal raid on Māqālē prison and freed many political prisoners. In an attempt to curb the insurgency in Tegray, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division was deployed to the region. After setting up its headquarters in Māqālē, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division in collaboration with the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Divisions carried out a series of operations named "Nābālbāl," "Alula," "Mānter," and "Mābrāq," between April and August, 1987.<sup>18</sup>

While the 3<sup>rd</sup>, the 16<sup>th</sup> and the 17<sup>th</sup> Divisions were carrying out counter-insurgency operations in Tegray, the army in Eritrea remained in its defence lines. It seemed unprepared for the impending disaster. In March 1988, the EPLF insurgents launched the largest offensive ever around Afabēt against the Nadāw Command. Within 48 hours, the Nadāw Command disintegrated and Afabēt, the largest garrison in Eritrea, fell into EPLF hands along with its ammunition depots and heavy weapons.<sup>19</sup> Two days after the fall of Afabēt, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division was swiftly moved to Karan to reinforce the army there. For the next 18 months, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division stayed in Eritrea.<sup>20</sup>

Meanwhile, the military situation in north central Ethiopia was also getting worse. As insurgents of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) threatened to capture Dässé, the capital of south Wollo, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division was rushed to the town in October, 1989.<sup>21</sup> Then, the high command worked out an operation plan named "Zāmācha Māket" (Operation Defend) in December, 1989. The operation aimed at regaining the strategic heights along the Dässé-Worä Ilu road. The two renowned strike units, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division and the 102<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division were to be reinforced by three Special Commando (Sparta) brigades.<sup>22</sup>

Two days before the 3<sup>rd</sup> and the 102<sup>nd</sup> Divisions began their offensive, the government announced its decision to award medals of gallantry to seven units of the armed forces. Of these, the First Revolutionary Army (FRA), the Air Force, the 3<sup>rd</sup> and the 102<sup>nd</sup> Divisions received medals for greatly distinguished feats of bravery. Since then, the state media and compilers of operation reports began to use the term "jāgnaw" (which means "the brave" or "the lion-hearted") while referring to the 3<sup>rd</sup> and the 102<sup>nd</sup> Divisions.<sup>23</sup>

The awards and decorations seemed to have a direct effect on the operation awaiting the 3<sup>rd</sup> and the 102<sup>nd</sup> Divisions. Within a couple of days, the two divisions captured all the strategic heights as far as Kabé along the Dässé-Worä Ilu line including Mts. Yāwol and Gugufu.<sup>24</sup>

A month later, EPRDF forces mounted an offensive on the Hayq front and captured the town on January 14, 1990. Several brigades arrived soon and drove the insurgents out of Hayq on the next day. The insurgents once again mounted a fierce counter-offensive on January 15 and recaptured Hayq at 2100 hours. Then, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Para Commando Brigade were rushed to Hayq. They beat off the insurgents and regained the town on January 16 at 1200 hours.<sup>25</sup>

Before turning to the Dässé-Worä Ilu line, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division, in collaboration with the 8<sup>th</sup> Division pushed the insurgents back as far as Ninni Bär, a highly strategic pass between Märsa and Wurgéssa towns. Soon afterwards, however, the two divisions were thrown back to Hayq in early February 1990 by the insurgents.<sup>26</sup>

### **Operation Flame and the Demise of the Third Division**

Between March 25 and 30, 1990, EPRDF forces overran all government defences between Täbasit and Alām Kātāma forcing army units to retreat in two directions. As the insurgents took control of the more strategic Yāwol and Gugufu mountains, they captured among other weapons six tanks, two artillery guns and two BM-21 rocket launchers.<sup>27</sup>

In order to annihilate the whole EPRDF force stretched between Täbasit and Alām Kātāma, the high command worked out an ambitious operation named "Zāmācha Nābālbāl" ("Operation Flame."). The operation was to be executed in four phases and it was supposed to involve a total of 21 brigades (10 in southern Wollo and 11 in northern Shāwa). The first phase of the operation was actually a preparation time involving reconnoitering of adjacent areas, positioning and repositioning of infantry, airborne, and special commando units. Accordingly, while the 4<sup>th</sup> Division was supposed to carryout reconnaissance in Lalo Meder, Wägäre and Dängāz, the 1<sup>st</sup> Division would seep through Rabél in northern Shāwa. Meanwhile, the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> Divisions were poised to advance along the Dässé-Worä Ilu line from Dässé and Kombolcha respectively. The high command anticipated that while the two divisions marched to northern Shāwa, the insurgents might mount an offensive around Dässé and possibly capture the town. As a precaution against such danger, four special commando brigades were brought to Dässé. In order to further tighten the security around Dässé, the 505<sup>th</sup> Brigade was moved from Bati to Kombolcha and the 152<sup>nd</sup> Brigade was transferred from Millé to Bati. In the mean time, the 26<sup>th</sup> and the 27<sup>th</sup> Divisions were assigned to exercise vigilance in the areas west and north of Dässé.<sup>28</sup>



In the second phase of the operation, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division was expected to eject the insurgents from Kabé, Worä Ilu and Dägolo. The 8<sup>th</sup> Division would follow the footsteps of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division as a reserve force. On the northern Shäwa sector, the 1<sup>st</sup> Division would be entrusted with the security of Rabél, Mähal Méda, Zärät, Molalé and Tarma Bär. During the same phase, while the 4<sup>th</sup> Division was expected to advance to Kolash and Zoma, the 102<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division would reconnoiter the Jäma Valley and make a faint offensive toward Fitra and Aläm Kätäma.<sup>29</sup>

In the third phase, the 4<sup>th</sup> Division was expected to make a deep thrust into Aläm Kätäma, Märagna and Karra Mesheg from Kolash and Mt. Zoma. At the same time, the 102<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division would sweep through Aläm Kätäma, Rima and Därra. Likewise, the 8<sup>th</sup> Division was supposed to overpass the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division and take control of Karra Mesheg and Märagna. On its part, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division would ensure the security of the supply line from Dägolo to Kabé and Mt. Yäwol.<sup>30</sup>

The last phase of the operations would involve consolidation of army units and maintenance of law and order in the areas of operation. Accordingly, the 4<sup>th</sup> Division would set up its headquarters at Aläm Kätäma and ensure the security of Rima, Karra Mesheg and Därra. Then, the 8<sup>th</sup> Division would return to Worä Ilu and safeguard the supply line between Karra Mesheg and Kabé. Finally, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division would return to Dässé and exercise vigilance.<sup>31</sup>

In accordance with the plan of Operation Flame, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division managed to capture Mt. Guguftu, Kabé Worä Ilu and Dägolo without fighting. The insurgents had already rolled back to Karra Mesheg to dig themselves in that formidable fortress and concentrate their forces between Aläm Kätäma and Märagna. Meanwhile two brigades of the 26<sup>th</sup> Division captured Gimba with minor skirmishes. As the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division advanced to Dägolo, the 8<sup>th</sup> Division was ordered to ensure the security of the Guguftu-Worä Ilu supply route.<sup>32</sup>

While the operation in southern Wollo was being executed with much ease and speed, the insurgents launched a surprise attack on the 102<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division based at Lämi. The insurgents seemed to have planned to disrupt the whole operation by mounting a preemptive strike on the country's strategic force.<sup>33</sup>

At this critical moment, the high command committed a strategic blunder. Instead of allowing the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division to march to Karra Mesheg and overstretch the insurgents, it was ordered to stay idle at Dägolo. That helped the insurgents to concentrate their forces around Lämi and strike the Airborne Division with full force.<sup>34</sup>

The battle raged for three days (22-24 May, 1990). In order to reinforce the Airborne Division the government rushed three special commando brigades, a mechanized brigade and three infantry brigades to Lämi.<sup>35</sup> Even then, the Airborne Division suffered nearly 50 percent casualty (i.e., 95 killed, 381 wounded and 2,653 missing in action), probably the worst damage in its entire history. In other words, out of the 6,421 paratroopers, 3,128 men were put out of action.<sup>36</sup>

After inflicting heavy damage on the Airborne Division, the insurgents retreated to Fitra and Aläm Kätäma so as to face the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division.<sup>37</sup> Because of the unexpected damage inflicted on the Airborne Division, the high command modified the third and fourth phases of Operation Flame. By doing so, it helped the insurgents to consolidate their forces around Aläm Kätäma. Instead of attempting to launch a three-pronged offensive into Aläm Kätäma from Fitra, Kolash and Dägolo, the high command ordered the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division to make a deep thrust into Karra Mesheg and Märagna.<sup>38</sup>

Since the insurgents had already entrenched themselves at Karra Mesheg, storming the fortress was a daunting task and it required careful planning. The skilful and capable commander of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division, Colonel Säräqä Berhané, gathered his staff officers and brigade commanders to map out a workable plan of storming the Karra Mesheg fortress with minimum casualty. Accordingly, 17 infantrymen who volunteered to storm Karra Mesheg with hand grenades through a nocturnal operation were gathered from the vanguard unit, the 92<sup>nd</sup> Brigade of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division. Each volunteer was armed with eight

grenades, an AK-47 assault rifle and 120 bullets.<sup>39</sup> On May 27, 1990, at 0200 hours, the 17 volunteers lurked to the fortress under the cover of darkness. They were closely followed by an infantry company moving along the Dägolo-Märagna road. While the 17 infantrymen stormed the fortress with hand grenades, the infantry company attacked the insurgents from behind.<sup>40</sup> At 0820 hours, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division captured Karra Mesheg with minimum sacrifice.<sup>41</sup> In the next night, the insurgents made 17 attempts to recapture Karra Mesheg. But the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division successfully defended its position and forced the insurgents to retreat to Ahya Fäj and Aläm Kätäma directions.<sup>42</sup>

Although the army had controlled Karra Mesheg, marching along the 16 kilometer plain to Märagna was not an easy task. The insurgents put up stiff resistance in an attempt to halt the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division's advance. But the Division managed to capture Märagna on May 29, 1990 at 0730 hours.<sup>43</sup>

Following the capture of Märagna, the high command once again committed a grave strategic mistake. Instead of ordering the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division to advance to Aläm Kätäma immediately on the heels of the retreating insurgents, government troops were left idle at Märagna for several days. That helped the insurgents not only to rehabilitate from earlier losses but also to gather reinforcements from other areas for the planned war of annihilation against the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division.<sup>44</sup>

While the insurgents were concentrating forces around Aläm Kätäma, Märagna and Karra Mesheg, the high command was still designing another campaign named "Zämächa Nābālbāl 02" ("Operation Flame II"). The operation was planned to involve seven divisions, six infantry and five special commando brigades.<sup>45</sup> The high command wanted the operation to be executed in two phases. During the first phase, the 4<sup>th</sup> Division, the 19<sup>th</sup> and 89<sup>th</sup> infantry brigades and the 3/82/3 Special Commando Brigade were to be assembled at Märagna and would capture Rima, Aläm Kätäma, Därra, Dängoré Maryam and Gānda Bārbāré. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Division was expected to give support to those units whenever necessary. In the mean time, while the 8<sup>th</sup> Division was supposed to advance to Gimba and control Ajbar, Tanta and Tare, the 26<sup>th</sup> Division would block insurgent movements from Borāna to Aqāsta and Gimba.<sup>46</sup>

In the second phase, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division would hand over the task of safeguarding Märagna, Karra Mesheg and Dägolo to the 605<sup>th</sup> Corps and then move to Mts. Yāwol, Guguftu and Tābasit. According to plan of the operation, the army was to move to its targets on June 4, 1990 at 0100 hours.<sup>47</sup>

A day earlier, the insurgents mounted a preemptive offensive and captured Gimba displacing the army stationed there. In the next few days, the insurgents managed to sever the Dässé-Worä Ilu-Karra Mesheg road. Government forces stationed at Märagna were then cut off and could not get supplies or reinforcements either from Dässé or Lāmi. To make matters worse, the high command that had already failed to position capable units along the main supply route did not take urgent measures to reopen the Dässé-Worä Ilu road. The insurgents were now poised to launch a war of annihilation against government forces stationed at Märagna and Karra Mesheg. According to the Third Revolutionary Army (TRA) Intelligence Department, the EPRDF gathered units of the Awrora, Awash, Alula, Ag'azi, Lab Adär, May Day, Ma'ebāl and Mäqdāla Divisions to encircle and destroy the government forces around Märagna and Karra Mesheg.<sup>48</sup>

At this crucial moment, the army at Märagna faced a critical shortage of rations and ammunition. Since the main roads leading to Märagna were cut off, supplies could only be delivered by helicopters. Colonel Sārāqā repeatedly requested his superiors to urgently send the much needed supplies to the army at Märagna. But officials in the Operations Department seemed to have been sabotaging the army. Instead of swiftly sending the required supplies, they dispatched shoes and uniforms to Märagna by helicopter. On June 11, 1990, at 1400 hours, the insurgents attacked the army from all directions. On the next day at 0830 hours, they managed to capture Karra Mesheg. Despite the enormous challenges, the starved and under-supplied troops of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Para Commando and the 92<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Brigades regained Karra Mesheg following a ferocious fighting that raged until 1730 hours.<sup>49</sup>

Although it was too late, the high command rushed the 10<sup>th</sup> Brigade from Dässé to Mt. Zoma, the 6<sup>th</sup> Mechanized Brigade from Enäwari to Lämi and two other brigades from Diré Dawa to Addis Ababa and then to Lämi. The 10<sup>th</sup> Brigade temporarily captured Mt. Zoma. But it was soon repulsed by the insurgents. Then on June 15, 1990, at 0230 hours, the insurgents made some readjustments and re-launched the war of annihilation against the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division from all directions.<sup>50</sup> The insurgents soon recaptured Dängoré and Karra Mesheg and then tightened the noose around Märagna. At 1230 Colonel Säräqä disconnected his radio communication with his superiors. As the insurgents came closer to Märagna, the army destroyed its tanks, artillery pieces and military vehicles. Colonel Säräqä, his staff officers as well as the remaining troops of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division retreated in the direction of Kolash and Ahya Fäj. But Colonel Säräqä fell into the hands of the insurgents before crossing the Wonçhet River.<sup>51</sup> Between June 11 and 15, 1990, 3,858 troops of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division were put out of action. The table below shows the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division's casualty:<sup>52</sup>

3 <sup>rd</sup> Division	Officers	NCOs	National Servicemen	People's Militia	Total
Killed	10	267	17	29	<b>323</b>
Wounded	30	857	61	69	<b>1,017</b>
Missing in action	60	2,202	110	146	<b>2,518</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>3,326</b>	<b>188</b>	<b>244</b>	<b>3,858</b>

In addition, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division also lost among other weapons ten 122 mm artillery guns, thirteen T-55 tanks, thirty 82 mm mortars, eight Zu-23 anti-aircraft guns, 17 heavy machineguns, 76 RPG-7 launchers, 122 PKM machineguns, 162 M-14 and 3840 AKM assault rifles.<sup>53</sup>

### Conclusion

The 3<sup>rd</sup> Division was one of the oldest army units in the country. Several members of the Därg including Mängestu Haylä Maryam were drawn from the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division. Classified documents of the Ministry of National Defence (MOND) indicate that no special privileges or favours were given to the Division as writers like Dawit Wolde Giorgis tried to tell us.<sup>54</sup> Rather, it was always rushed to flash points and suffered the brunt of fighting in many battles. It suffered heavy casualty during Operation Red Star and Operation Flame II. With regard to its composition, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division was not homogenous. It included in its ranks regulars, militiamen and national servicemen. This composition later affected the division's cohesion. Since militiamen were not given leave of absence and received much lower payments than the regulars, they were disillusioned and demoralized. As a result, they were on the forefront in the 1974 mutiny. Since then, the fighting capability of the Division was diminishing until it was destroyed in June 1990. Remnants of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division were rehabilitated and deployed on the Ambo front in May 1991. By then, the fighting capability of the division was reported to be 33.2 percent.<sup>55</sup> Finally, the flight of Mängestu H. Maryam on May 21, 1991, to Zimbabwe and the fall of Addis Ababa a week later into the hands of EPRDF forces brought about the collapse of the army.<sup>56</sup>



**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Ministry of National Defence (MOND) Archives, Administration 1713, Yä Sostägnaw Keflä Tor Amäsärarät Enna Tägadlo (Emergence and Struggle of the of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division), 1982 E.C., 2.

<sup>2</sup> MOND Archives, Operations 518B, Adhariw Yä Somalia Mängest Selakahédäben Gelts Worära Atäqalay Zägäba 1966 – 1971 E. C (A Comprehensive Report on the Flagrant Invasion of the Reactionary Somali Government 1974 -1978), 1970 E. C., 1-3, 6-11.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 11, 14 – 16.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 31, 38.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 42-43.

<sup>6</sup> MOND Archives, Operations 168, Bä Ertera Keflä Hagär Bä Hulätägnaw Abyotawi Särawit Yätäfätsämu Wotadärawi Enqesqaséwoch (Military Activities Carried out by the Second Revolutionary Army in Eritrea), 1979 E.C., 7-8. For other task forces see Fantahun Ayele, *The Ethiopian Army: From Victory to Collapse 1977-1991* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2014).

<sup>7</sup> MOND Archives, Administration 1713, Anbäsaw Sostäгна Keflä Tor Selä Fätsämächäw Gedajochena Selä Agägnachäw Akuri Deloch Acher Riport (A Brief Report on the Engagements Carried Out and the Brilliant Victories Scored by the Lion 3<sup>rd</sup> Division), 1976 E.C., 1.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-2.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 2-3.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6; MOND Archives, Administration 4635, Yä Aser Amät A Zämächa Riport (A Ten Year Operation Report), 1977 E. C., 19-21; Gebru Tareke “From Lash to Red Star: the Pitfalls Counter-Insurgency in Ethiopia, 1980-1982,” *Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 3, 2002, 483-485; Gännät Ayélä, *Yä Létäna Colonel Mängestu H. Maryam Tezetawoch (Recollections of Lt. Col. Mängestu H. Maryam)*. (Addis Ababa: Mega Publishing Enterprise, 1994 E.C), 252.

<sup>11</sup> MOND Archives, Administration 1223, Bä Sostägnaw Keflä Tor Yä Tänäsaawen Amäts Lämämärmär Yätäquaquamä Buden Riport (Report of the Committee Formed to Investigate the Mutiny in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division), 8/2/75 E.C., 1-4.

<sup>12</sup> MOND Archives, Intelligence 295, Bä Sostägnaw Keflä Tor Selä Täfätsämäw Adma Yätädärägä Mermära (An Investigation of the Mutiny that Occurred in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division), 12-23/2/75 E.C., 1-8.

<sup>13</sup> MOND archives, Operations 168, Bä Ertera Keflä Hagär ... 25; Administration 1713, Yä Sostägnaw Keflä Tor ..., 8-9.

<sup>14</sup> *Addis Zaman*, Amharic Daily Newspaper, 6/13/75 E.C., 6; 19/01/76 E.C., 1; see also MOND Archives, Administration 1713, Yä Sostägnaw Keflä Tor ..., 9.

<sup>15</sup> MOND Archives, Operations 168, Bä Ertera Kelä Hagär ... , 30-31.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 31-34.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 36-39.

<sup>18</sup> MOND Archives, Administration 1713, Yä Sostägnaw Kelä Tor ..., 12-13; Operations 431, Yä Zämächa Alula Yä Wegya Te'ezaz (Operation Alula Combat Order) 15/11/79 E.C., 1-4; Yä Zämächa Nābälbal Riport (Report on Operation Flame), 3/9/79 E.C., 1-3. Yä Zämächa Mäbräq Yä Wegya Riport (Combat Report of Operation Lightning) 21/8/79 E.C., 1-3; Yä Zämächa Mänter Riport (Report on Operation Mänter), 27/12/79 E.C., 1-5.

<sup>19</sup> Gebru Tareke, "From Af Abet to Shire: The Defeat and Demise of Ethiopia's 'Red' Army 1988-89," *Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 2, 2004, 239-281; D. Connell, *Against All Odds: A Chronicle of the Eritrean Revolution* (Lawrenceville: The Red Sea Press, 1993), 228; Dawit W. Giorgis, *Red Tears: War, Famine and Revolution in Ethiopia*. (Lawrenceville: The Red Sea Press, 1989), 365.

<sup>20</sup> MOND Archives, Administration 1713, Yä Sostägnaw Keflä Tor ....., 13-15.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 15-16.

<sup>22</sup> MOND Archives, Operations 418, Zämächa Mäket (Operation Defend), 14/3/82 E.C., 1-4.

<sup>23</sup> *The Ethiopian Herald*, December 17, 1989, 6.

<sup>24</sup> MOND Archives, Operations 262, Yä Särawitoch Enna Yä Koroch Yä Zämächa Riport (Operations Report of Armies and Corps), 9-15/04/82 E.C., 1.

<sup>25</sup> MOND Archives, Operations 262, Yä Soasä Samentawi Yä Zämächa Riport (Weekly Operations Report of the Third Revolutionary Army (TRA)), 6-15/05/82 E.C., 1.

<sup>26</sup> MOND Archives, Intelligence 022-24, Yä Soasä Wotädäräwi Märäja Amätawi Riport (Annual Report of the TRA's Military Intelligence), 1982 E.C., 53-57.

<sup>27</sup> MOND Archives, Operations 262, Yä Soasä Zämächa Riport (Report of TRA's Operations), 10-17/07/82 E.C., 1-3; Operations 262 Bä Soasä Genbar Yätädärägä Wegya Acher Zägäba (A Brief Record of the Engagement on the TRA Front), 16-30/07/82 E.C., 1-2.

<sup>28</sup> MOND Archives, Operations 418, Yä Soasä Tor Asäläläw Läwt (A Change in the Positioning of TRA's Force), ND, 1-6.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 6-7.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> MOND Archives, Operations 262, Yä Soasä Zämächa Riport (TRA's Operations Riport), 13-19/09/82 E.C., 1.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 2-4.

<sup>36</sup> MOND Archives, Operations 493, Bä 102 gnaw Ayär Wäläd Keflä Tor Lay Yädäräsä Gudat (Damage Inflicted on the 102<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division), 15/09/ 82 E.C., 1-6.

<sup>37</sup> MOND Archives, Operations 262, Yä Soasä Zämächa Riport ..., 13-19/09/82 E.C., 4-5.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 4-5.

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<sup>39</sup> Anonymous, “Zämächa Nābälbal: Kā Karra Mesheg Eskä Märagna,” (operations Flame: From Karra Mesheg to Märagna), *Ethiop*, Vol. 2, No., 17, 1993 E.C., 23-24.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> MOND Archives, Operations 262, Yä Soasä Zämächa Riport ..., 13-19/09/82 E.C., 5-6.

<sup>42</sup> Anonymous, “Zämächa Nābälbal ..., 23-24.

<sup>43</sup> MOND Archives, Intelligence 022-24, Yä Soasä Wotadärawi ... , 70.

<sup>44</sup> Tsägga Mogäs, “Kā Woldya Eskä Midda: Kā Mängaga Yätäfäläqäqäw Yä Särawitu Del,” (From Woldya to Midda: the Victory Snatched from the Jaws of the Army), *Tobyä*, Vol. 3, No., 7, 1987 E.C., 32.

<sup>45</sup> MOND Archives, Administration 2521, Zämächa Nābälbal 02 (Operation Flame II), 1982 E.C., 1-3.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 4-5.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 4-6.

<sup>48</sup> MOND Archives, Intelligence 022-24, Yä Soasä Wotadärawi ..., 71 – 75.

<sup>49</sup> Anonymous, “Zämächa Nābälbal ..., pp. 24-25; MOND Archives, Operations 262, Yä Soasä Zämächa Riport (TRA’s Operations Report), 4-5/10/82 E.C., 3-4.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.* ; Intelligence 022-24, 71-72.

<sup>52</sup> MOND Archives, Operations 513-514, Major General Kenfä Gäbrél Denqu to Operations Main Department, 05/12/82 E.C.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Dawit, 109.

<sup>55</sup> MOND Archives, Operations 532, Tämäsgän Chala to 3<sup>rd</sup> Division Commander, 08/09/83 E.C.

<sup>56</sup> Bahru Zewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia 1855-1991*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford: James Currey, 2001), 267-268.

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