

COMRADE FANA

“Women fight for their fatherland’s heritage” be it land or otherwise goes the Eritrean saying:

Zager, Eritrea

By: Bruno May 17, 2021



JELEHANTI 1982

Comrade Fana was born in Weki, lived happily married to Gebrezghi with her family in Zager and Jelhanti when David, Goliath, Andropov and internal collaborators fought together in Africa to crush the right of the people of Eritrea to self-determination and independence - Eritrea that heroic country the winners of World War II categorized in the African continent as the “ex-enemy land” which was left to be protected by the British army in 1941.

It must be always remembered that Comrade Fana and her age group lived in a typical Eritrean community influenced by these phenomenal contemporary history of colonialism, neo-colonialism, proxy influences of the superpowers and prevailing wind of resistance that followed and engulfed all of her community, including her, her husband and their children, both in their youth and adult life. Her contemporaries, be it those who were living in urban or rural part of the country, resisted the continued military onslaughts of extermination by protecting and camouflaging themselves seamlessly amidst the population of the Northern and Southern Red Sea area of the country. It was in this area that the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Forces (EPLF) stayed, in a survival mode, after overcoming continues, strong and multi pronged military campaigns from 1970 to 1975. Comrade Fana from Weki and her villagers were not only there in the tumultuous war period but were the parts and parcels of this whole experience themselves. Her husband Gebrezghi from the village of Zager, from the same locality, had also the same experience.



ZAGER 1977

Ninety five percent of the population who lived in this area of land depended on agriculture, fisheries and livestock herding for their livelihood. The family is the prevailing production unit, be it in nomadic, semi-nomadic or settled villages which were spread all over and predominantly in never ending constant migratory movement from place to place for grazing and scouting of water sources to their livestock and for a living.

Mother is the epicenter of the family, clan, village and community in all aspects of the societal activities. It is not an exaggeration to state that mothers in Eritrea are the true platforms and heritage of the socioeconomic, cultural and political makeup of the country - be it post, during or after the armed struggle for the independence of the country. "Women fight for their fatherland's heritage" be it land or otherwise is an old saying uniquely passed from generation to generation through Eritrean oral history. Long years of the protracted armed and political struggle which was predominantly played out in the rural part of Eritrea amply testify to this truth.

Mothers were the true epicenter, be it in open or in clandestine formations, of the men and women freedom fighters of Eritrea in this area. Many were given the popular name of "Comrade" by the freedom fighters to show their love and affectionate bond to them.

Comrade Fana was one and indeed a very typical example of those beloved mothers. Memories of all those mothers that kept the lifeline and existence of many fighters in the dry lands, watershed areas and villages scattered on the highland plateau of the country are yet to be recorded properly.



ZAGER 1977

The area stretching from Karneshim and Saharti on the Rift Valley plateaus which sharply fall into Adishuma (Mot-at) and Gulf of Zula of the coastal lowlands not only did they became the bedrock of the coffee plantations and modern farming estates, which date back to the different settlements of the Italian occupation, but it also became the main arena where the revolutionary struggle of Eritrea gathered momentum, blossomed and grew fast in a span of about ten years.

From a few poorly armed guerrilla fighters, the area has witnessed the liberation forces growing into a hardened battle tested infantry, mechanized and conventional army of more than six brigades. Comrade Fana and all the mothers of that area nurtured this phenomenal growth with unique dedication and love which they shared freely with all the freedom fighters. We cannot discuss the Eritrean People's Liberation Forces' (changed into a Front in 1977) organization by some generalizations without making a proper survey and assessment of what took shape during this period. One code labeled "against counter revolutionaries" was

a military campaign by the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) and the other one was code named “feed the bullet to the person who said no”, a military campaign of 15,000 troops by the Imperial Ethiopian Armed Forces and 5,000 Israeli trained local police commandos. It must be always remembered that small armed propaganda units of EPLF did survive these continued enemy onslaughts by protecting and camouflaging themselves amidst the population of Northern and Southern Red Sea area.

Away from home and in a very challenging environment, the so called “counter insurgency” forces of the Imperial Army of Ethiopia swelled from 15,000 men in 1973 to Ethiopian Revolutionary Army of 250,000 men in 1983. 35 fighters and 3 bombers of Imperial Air Force of Ethiopia in 1973 swelled into 112 jet fighters and 30 helicopter fighters of Revolutionary Air Force of Ethiopia in 1983. The booming population of Ethiopia besides becoming an ever-ready pool of cheap labor for the super powers has also forced the poor for undesirable positions to serve in wars dictated by elite rulers or face starvation. Tanks, heavy artilleries and missiles reached figures of thousands.

It was landmark period of the armed struggle which waged a punitive long and protracted war against this growth too. Away from home and in a very challenging environment thousands of Eritreans from different walk of life: farmers, workers, nomads, fishermen, school children, university students and graduates, lawyers, scientists, agronomists, pharmacists, bankers, administrators, skilled operators, technicians, mechanics, health workers, artists, musicians, soldiers, police, police commandos, pilots, navy, municipal workers, lawyers etc. mention it people from all ages, creed, race and religious denominations flocked to join and set up agriculture, schools, communications, transport, logistics, health, finance, workshops, public administrations in these areas and truly the trusted lifeline and supporters of all these challenging activities were the people who lived in these areas.



AZIEN 1978

Comrade Fana was in the middle of all these activities and always part of the hustle and bustle entailed with it throughout those years.



ZAGER 1977

Comrade Fana ululated with joy when the platoon leader by Abe Saleh of EPLF's Battalion 2 and an ex-Imperial Ethiopia Navy officer downed the T-28 in front of her eyes in 1976. It was a day of jubilation when the history of the routine visits by the T-28 to strive Zager came to an end. Zager was one important EPLF's command post for the Northern Front of Asmara from 1975-1979. Most of the EPLF commanders and information units had stayed in her humble home during those difficult years. They were all hosted, always treated with love and respect by Comrade Fana. Language was never a barrier to her. Journalist from all parts of the world visited Zager to find out the secrets of Comrade Fana and all the people in her surroundings – an embryo of black dignity with a long proud history.

It was a common sight to see in this period an agronomist sharing experiences with local farmers on how best to increase the yield of chicken, potatoes and other crops where Comrade Fana and other mothers played a central role. Foot doctors roving villages to save lives. Engineers building access roads, milling plants etc.



GERSILLE 1975

Comrade Fana was in the middle of all these activities and always part of the hustle and bustle entailed with it throughout those years. The mothers of that area compared the two liberation movements with their own two eyes and always worked day and night to get them together in one body where they belonged. Their slogan was “we need two eyes to see properly”. They considered the two fronts as their two eyes. Comrade Fana always spoke with fond memories of Saleh Tetew, Abraha Andebrahan and others who were killed in this civil war that happened in their village in 1974.



ADI TECLEZAN

More than 4 ton of powdered cereals was baked into Ingera as a daily ration and was delivered every day by Comrade Fana and her chain of motherhood community to feed the freedom fighters stretching from Adigombolo - Tsolot - Durfo – Quazien – Embaderho – Medrizen – Adi Merawi – Adi Yakob – Tsezega all the ways to Himberti who were facing the military huge onslaught lead by USSR, Cuban, Yemeni and Ethiopian army. It culminated in an operation of three months military campaign from the Red Sea, Eastern Lowlands,

borders of Eritrea, Asmara North and South which was aimed to crush, surround and mop-up EPLF and ELF from the face of this earth in 1979. As a result the pace of change that this brought in-terms of firepower and vulnerability of the population in the increased areas of the EPLF and ELF defenses was obviously needing much effort and flexibility to sustain.

It would be difficult task to attempt and asses Comrade Fana and the other lovely mothers' contribution and role but it sufficient to say now i.e., in retrospect, that they fought against all the obstacles that prevailed in the Strategic Withdrawal situations and always ready to face the heat from the crucible of the ugly war that unfolded fast in front of their eyes. May they all rest in peace, Eritrea shall celebrate its 30 year of independence because of Comrade Fana and all the lovely mothers who paid dear with blood, sweat and tears to defeat the rule of the tyrants where hundreds of thousands of innocent Eritreans were brutally massacred.

The story of Eritrea, Comrade Fana, Zager, Weki, Hirgigo, Hazemo, Weki Diba, Sawa, Kerbkebet, She'eb, Asmara, Simanugus, Tsada Kiristian, Elabered, Keren, Mogoraib, Shebah, Agordet, Massawa, Afabet and many more is a history of the very proud Africans who fought alone against the mighty. Comrade Fatna Mofokot, Comrade Zeyneb, Comrade Hiewt, Comrade Zewdi, Comrade Hiwet (Aden) and all the heroic mothers all over the land and those who supported them from outside the country are the footprints of Eritrea's history without whom victory was an impossible task. They were truly, the command and communication post of the Eritrean revolution and thirty percent of the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Army were women and Comrade Fana was one of them.



ZAGER 1978
