

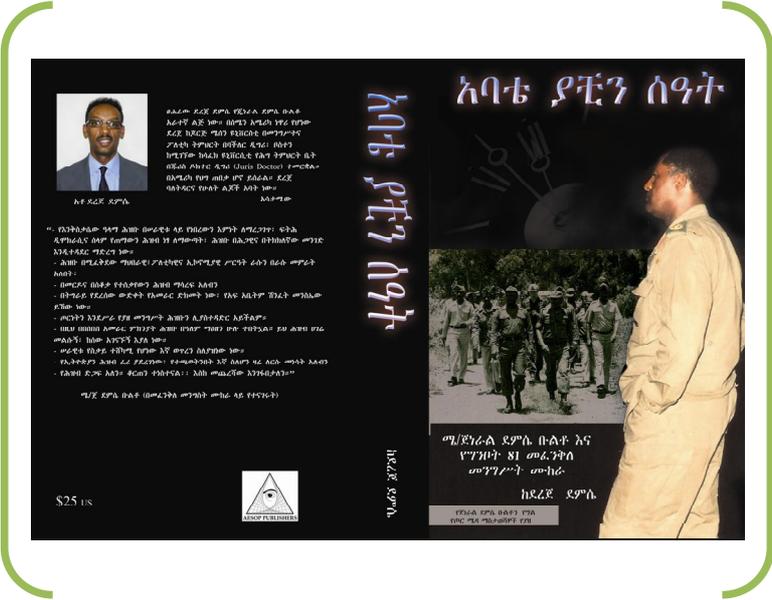
"Abate Yachin Se'at": Major General Demissie Bulto and the *coup d'état* of May 1989. A new Book by Derege Demissie

In “*Abate Yachin Se'at*,” author Derege Demissie narrates the story of his late father, Major General Demissie Bulto. Derege’s story is about the private and public life of his father as well as a number of other high-ranking officers whose life run in tandem with the rise and fall of the post-WWII Ethiopian military history.

Derege’s book follows the arc of his father’s life and career from this period of Ethiopian history until his fateful death in 1989, by which time General Demissie had reached the pinnacle of his career as a Major general in command of the largest single military unit in Ethiopia. But Derege’s book is more than a son’s narrative of a beloved father’s public life. Throughout the book an intimate portrait of the private life of a father and a husband is threaded expertly on the large canvass of great historical moments that have shaped the attempt to establish and maintain a modern African nation-state. The promising ascent and catastrophic demise of the Ethiopian military under the otherwise inept leadership of the revolutionary Derg regime closely trace the triumphs and failures of the many campaigns of the country’s military, in all of which General Demissie participated.

General Demissie’s career began more or less with the very first attempt by the late Emperor Haileselassie to transform the Ethiopian military into a modern, thoroughly westernized fighting force. Demissie joined the emperor’s own *Kibur Zebegna* (literally meaning “honor guards”) as an officer candidate of the third intake. It was a novel experiment in Ethiopia’s storied martial history, and Demissie’s time as a cadet was perhaps the most formative years of his life. After a giddy, joy-filled three years as an officer candidate, Demissie and his fellow cadets were hastily shipped to the USS Radford, a United States Navy destroyer, and were unceremoniously commissioned as first lieutenants en route to the Korean peninsula. It was the Korean War, and the Ethiopian emperor, eager to impress western powers, had volunteered four successive reconnaissance battalions to be attached to the U.S. 7th Infantry Division as part of United Nations forces. The Korean War was to be the first of innumerable campaigns in which Demissie participated in his military service of more than three decades.

The story Derege narrates, is at once a story of personal courage and conviction as well as the moral dilemma inherent in war. Fade up with the dictatorial ruler who continually ignored their informed and professional counsel to institute crucial policy changes to end the war in the North



and the government's refusal to seek political solution to the internal problems the country faces, three high-ranking officers decided to design a daring plot to overthrow the government. These officers were: Maj. Gen. Merid Negussie, the Chief of Staff, Maj. Gen. Fanta Belay, the Minister of Industry and former Commander of the Air force, and Maj. Gen. Demissie Bulto, the Commander of the more than 200, 000 strong Second Revolutionary Army (SRA) . They convinced many others to join them and attempted the May 89 *coup d'état* against the dictator Mengistu Halemariam.

When the attempt organized at the capital city failed in the first day of the coup, Gen. Demissie continued the effort in Asmara, then Ethiopia's second largest city. For three days, Gen. Demissie continued his call for the end of dictatorship and for the formation of a representative government. The EPLF agreed to a 15-day cease-fire and preparations were underway to send troops to the Capital to crush the Palace Guard that was protecting the dictator. It was a daring plan, but one with increasingly diminishing chance of success. Yet, Gen. Demissie chose to fight to the end instead of boarding one the many planes under his control at the Asmara Air force base and saving his life. At that critical hour, Derege intimately examines the intense challenges his father faced and the personal courage he displayed.

The bloody massacre of the ablest generals and imprisonment of hundreds of officers, during the coup and its after math, became one of the major factors that contributed to the demise of the Ethiopian armed forces. Decapitated off its highly professional and brave leaders and officers, the Ethiopian army was now unable to withstand the continued push of the rebel forces. Engulfed with multifaceted contradictions, and ever alienated from deeply dissatisfied populace, it took mere two years after the May 1989 aborted coup for Col Mengistu's regime to finally succumb to the coordinated assault of both the EPLF and TPLF. The collapse of the regime was to be followed by another era of tyranny under the dictatorial and ethnocentric TPLF/EPRDF that continues to date.

Many writers have written about General Demissie Bulto in most flattering words extolling his farsighted and brilliant military mind and the decisive leadership he provided. In "The Ethiopian Revolution," a newly published work of scholarship in English and focused on the modern military history of Ethiopia, Dr. Gebru Tareke, characterized General Demissie's leadership during the war against Somalia as follows: "...The operation was directed by Brig General Demissie Bulto, Commander of the First Revolutionary Army and an officer with a well merited reputation for strategic vision, integrity, discipline, and decisiveness. These qualities had earned him the admiration and dedication of his staff and troops, who in turn fought with high motivation and determination. Demisse allowed his field commanders sufficient freedom of action while demanding full accountability. This calibrated responses to a complicated situation proved to be extremely effective. ”.

General MacArthur, the American general who led the defeat of the Japanese in the pacific front during WW II and under whose command General Demissie served in Korea while still a Lieutenant of the then Royal guard of Ethiopia, once said "**old soldiers never die, they just fade away.**" In his book, Derege has brought back to life the legacy of General Demissie and the heroic officers who served Ethiopia with him in vivid detail. It is a testimonial about Ethiopian

patriotism, heroism, and professionalism of a generation from whose life the current generation and posterity should draw strength and inspiration.

Like all good works of literature, the book has a quality of keeping one in suspense. It narrates the intricacies of the plot from many angles based on eyewitness accounts, interviews with key individuals who were involved in the coup attempt, and seventeen years of research from various published and unpublished sources, including information obtained from the United States Department of State through the Freedom of Information Act.

The book also contains a daily diary of Gen. Demissie Bulto taken during two of the most successful campaigns waged against the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) in then Northern Ethiopia. *Zemecha Bahire Negash* and *Key Bahir Zemecha* were often singled out for the sophistication of their planning and operation. Gen. Demissie, who was temporarily transferred from his position as head of the First Army in Harar, was assigned as a head of The Armed Forces Coordinating Committee that planned and executed the two campaigns. The daily notes the General took provide rich details of the coordination, planning, and execution of the campaign against EPLF forces that were entrenched in the town of Barentu and the mountains of Nakfa. Gen. Demissie's notes give rare insight into how the ground forces, the Airborne, the Navy, and the Air force collaborated in these campaigns as well as the many logistical and structural challenges they faced.

Derege Demissie, the author, is an attorney at law and a partner at the law firm of Demissie & Church. He graduated from George Mason University in Political Science in 1994, earned his Juris Doctor Degree from Suffolk University Law School in Boston. He is the fourth child of the late General Demissie Bulto. Married and with a son and daughter, Derege currently lives in Boston, MA.

Neamin Zeleke, Publisher

“ABATE YACHIN SE'AT” IS AVAILABLE ON-LINE and Washington DC Ethiopian stores. To purchase a copy on-line, go to: www.demissiebulto.com