

# Brothers in Arms

## Part I

By Abdul Ahmed III

Oct 29, 2011

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This is the story of few good men of the Somali National Army (SNA) and their ordeals in the summer of 1977 in the Somali town of Godey (part of the Somali region, in Ethiopia). Men in this story were from all over the cities of the Somali Democratic Republic; they were professional soldiers, military leaders, and strategists. They were selected for their military training to liberate a Somali town.

Many of Somalia's elite officers would cross paths many times; this is the story of the elite officers who were involved in the Southern Command or Somalia's Southern Army-primarily the 60-division and its supporting stations-who liberated Godey, implemented a successful war plan and, assured the success of Somalia's Grand National Strategy in 1977 war with Ethiopia.

The story began the first quarter of 1977 under the command of General Mohamed Ali Samatar and it was at this juncture that all chief commandants of the Somali Army were asked to work on a national war plan. The commandant (abaanduule in Somali) of the 60<sup>th</sup> Division of Somali Army, Colonel Abdullahi Ahmed Irro was ordered among others to carry out the planning,



Somali Army

organizing, and implementing Southern Somali Armies preparedness plans and contingencies. This meant a continual coordination with the Central Command headquarters. This would then lead to plan refinements, organizing the 60<sup>th</sup> Division, and several non-division Armies and military stations scattered around southern Somalia.

It was a difficult task for the Central Command of the Somali National Army, division Commanders (Abaanduleyaal), and

division heads. Apart from the 60<sup>th</sup> division, there was no other infantry division for southern Somalia. Many months to come, many of Somalia's elite officers were assigned to provide contingency plans for a grand national strategy.

Like many in other divisions, Col. Irro was to be responsible for organizing as well as mobilizing various brigades of the Somali Army. He was in charge of planning and organizing all the 6 Brigades that were destined for Godey as well as for Nagele and Sidamo.

The Somali government had also appointed Col. Irro's s longtime friend and classmate, Col. Ahmed Terzo, to lead the first phase of what would be a full-scale Somali assault on the disputed Ogaden Region. This was the pivotal assault for the national strategy. This was "*The Godey Front*"

The central command under the leadership of Lt. General M. A. Samatar tasked Col Irro of the 60-Division in Baidoa, Somalia to provide wide-ranging technical and logistical support as part of the southern commands contingency plans. Lt. General Samatar, a genius and proven military strategist had in mind a national plan to carry out a quick and decisive one-time assault using 3 to 4 battalions of regular Somali Army with support from irregulars. He trusted the implementation of the grand strategy to some his best officers.



Lt. Gen. Mohamed Ali Samatar the decision of choosing the right battlefield commanders. The two colonels, Irro and Terzo like Lt. Gen. Samatar, graduated from the same academy, "Frunze Military Academy"-a highly prestigious USSR military academy that trained the highest qualifying officers of the Warsaw Pact Armies and their allies. It was not the kind of military college one gets sent to but one that an officer must qualify for to be admitted.

The two colonels were the youth of Mogadishu and longtime friends. They also spent many years of military training together, first in 1961 in Cairo, Egypt. Later, they were sent to Moscow, USSR. Both Col. Abdullahi Irro and Col Terso are of the few highly trained Somali Officers who graduated from Frunze Military Academy (Военная академия им М. В. Фрунзе). The few military cadres that managed to finish strenuous training were awarded the highest military doctoral degrees known as кандидат наук. Other Somali officers who graduated from

Frunze but with shorter training include Lt. Gen. Samantar, Col AbdullahiYussuf, and Gen Aidid.

After consulting with his chosen military commanders, Lt. Gen. Samantar succeeded appointing Major Salad Awar, a brave warrior who hailed from Las Anod region, to be deputy commander of the Godey campaign.

The Chief Commandant of 60<sup>th</sup> Division established a command center in the strategic town of Hudur for ease of mobility. After consulting with the campaign leader and in coordination with the central command in Mogadishu, he assembled a full brigade of 4 battalions; complete with armored battalion and commando unit under the leadership of Captain Abdirizak Omar Hagi Jama (aka Saif), a well-respected commander of the Somali Commando units.



In Early July, Col Terzo, Maj. Awar, and all their troops crossed Somali border headed for Godey. They met little or no resistance. On July10, Col. Terso communicated with Col. Irro and informed him that they were approximately 20 Km outside of Godey and had established a command base. Indeed, the

Somali troops were by this time well settled in the area. They were busy gathering direct tactical intelligence of the 5th Brigade of the 4th Division of the Ethiopian Army. The following day the two colonels met in an emergency meeting at the border; they spent most of the day together and spoke about war contingencies.

On Tuesday July 12, 1977 at 3 am, Somali Forces launched surprise attacks from three fronts, thereafter successfully capturing a number of reconnaissance soldiers who were manning the frontline. However, Ethiopia Air force, the entire 5th Brigade and its commando unit 18 a unit that have ruthlessly ruled over Godey and Addid Ababa crashed the Somali assault. Within a few hours, the campaign leader Col. Ahmed Terzo was killed.

Major Awar who was the deputy commander was wounded; Capt. Abdirizak Saif was badly wounded but stubbornly continued to fight. Major Awar, with unparalleled bravery led his troops for a few more hours while wounded; he eventually died from wounds. The Somali



Lt. Col. Mengistu Haile Miriam

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### **Brothers-in-Arms**

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battalions were no match for the Ethiopian 5<sup>th</sup> brigade with its superb air support power.

Many brave young Somali soldiers and the leaders of the campaign were killed on July 12, 1977. It was a sad day for the Somali National Army and a very sad day for friends and family members of those who perished.

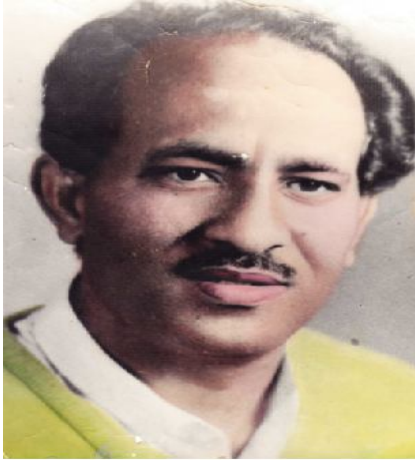
Back at home in Hudur Col. Irro lost direct communication with the field commanders, but was receiving some real-time intelligence reports; he immediately called for regrouping and as required of him communicated his findings with the Commander of Somalia Army and the Minister of Defense in Mogadishu.

They discussed the situation and some intelligence reports indicating a bad blow in Godey as well as the overall Somali Army Plans. General Samatar knew that this meant more than Godey. He would not allow Ethiopian Victory. In a matter of few hours he sent a written official message to Col. Irro ordering him to regroup the remaining members of the Somali Brigade and lead the campaign.

Upon assembling a superb team within a matter of hours , Col. Irro, the deputy head and Chief Commandant of the 60th division, headed to Godey from his base in Hudur. The Central Command also appointed Abdulkadir Koosaar of Hargeisa to be deputy. Again this was the genius Gen. Samatar at play. He selected Koosaar to serve as deputy in part because Koosaar was also trained in Frunze.

The Somali National Army and the Somali Government had put their faith in a plan based on quick capture and blow of Godey, with corollaries that would position the Ethiopian Army in the entire middle regions of Ogaden in a disadvantaged position. This plan was now in jeopardy! Could the Somali Army succeed in Godey and would that create cascading victories all along the middle regions of the Ogaden? Gen. Samatar knew the plan was sound but Somalia was disadvantaged by some logistics. He however had a great faith in his men and was confident they could deliver.

Aiding Col. Irro and Major Kosaar were several battalions, among the Leaders Godey Battalions included Capt Handule of Hargeisa, Capt Askar of Burao, Capt. Omar of Qardho and Capt. Shukri Bedel of the Somali region in Ethiopia and off course Capt. Isse Geledi of Kismayo (Head of the Irregulars). Many of these have become legends in the Somali Army and some have even become involved in politics in the years that followed.



Gen. Abdullah Ahmed (Irro)

Upon arriving at the outskirts of Godey Front, the Commander Col. Irro and his Deputy Maj. Koosaar begun tactical implementation using the forces they brought with them to defend new lines of defense, stop the Ethiopian offensive, and recover of what was left of the previous brigade.

The new forces were now dealing with defeated, dispersed troops, and high casualties. They established impregnable routes to Hudur and Baidoa and quickly attempted to ship wounded officers and soldiers. They also quickly re-assembled the remaining troops of the initial campaign. After initial review, Col. Irro requested some additional support officers; the Central Command acknowledged the severity of the situation and dispatched additional troops and officers including Maj. Yussuf Dhagjar of Borama, Capt. Sherrif Abaas Shengani of Benadir and Major Kaarshe of Galkaio as support officers.

Most of these officers had worked together in the past, or had known each other in some capacity. However the fog of war requires entirely a different level of functioning, mental agility and strength that is deeper than being physical and emotional. The Somali officers relied on each other and delivered for each other. They trusted their government leaders and believed in their cause.

The re-grouping was done while the fighting was going on; Ethiopia had two hypotheses of a Somali led Ogaden War. One hypothesis was based on Godey being the first front. Now Ethiopia could witness and verify of what they had speculated. Indeed the Somali War strategy was based on what was called the 5-Centers ( 5 Kulmis). The largest among these were the Godey Center and the JigJiga Center.

Upon regrouping amidst heavy bombardments and assault from the Ethiopian Air Force, The Somali officers laid out a detailed plan to disallow Ethiopia's air supremacy, to employ armored vehicles and dismantle the entire 5th Brigade and its augmentations from Addis Ababa. They also planned and successfully isolated Godey, depriving Ethiopia any chance to re-enforce the 5-th brigade. Also, this plan not only endangered Godey's fall into Somali hands but nearly guaranteed the defeat of the entire 4<sup>th</sup> Army of Ethiopia. Again, Gen. Samatar's strategy could have worked based on this plan – and it sure did!

On July 25<sup>th</sup> in just 12-days of unstoppable, sophisticated and strong-minded battle plan, Somali officers from Hargeisa, Mudug, Benadir and Kismayu captured the entire Godey Zone. The Imperial Castle of Haille Salase, 12- Ethiopian officers, wounded a member of the Ruling Dergue Junta and killed the most senior military expert that Ethiopia ever had Von Karlos (A Swedish –Ethiopian expert, and advisor of Haille Salase and later the Megistu’s Dergue Junta ).

The lives of these officers have changed forever since their brave liberation of Godey in 1977. All of these soldiers and officers have become legends of Somalia’s military history, some have continued their military service, many others have pursued more earthly goals but all of them remained close friends and brothers in arms.

Col. Irro was briefly arrested by Somali government in 1978 on suspicion of involvement in the 1978 coup; he since became a general and a military professor at several Somali Military Institutes. Maj. Kosaar continued to serve actively for a while, he became a well-respected colonel. At a later stage Col Kosaar left Somalia and organized the military wing of the SNM Political Party. Maj. Kosaar was subsequently assassinated in early 80s. Capt. Handule died of a gun wound in the last days of the war in Godey by Ethiopian snipers; Maj. Dhagjar was killed in Hargeisa in 1977; Capt. Bedel became a respected war hero and colonel of the Somali Army based in 26<sup>th</sup> division. He was killed in 1988. Capt. Isse Geledi retired in late 1980s; Capt. Abdirizak Saif joined the SSDF in 1979; Capt. Asker continued to serve the Somali Army and later became the minister of defense of Somaliland; Capt. Omar of Qardho died in the last days of the war while at the front in Godey. Capt. Sherrif Abbas of Benadir became a respected officer and served in the Somali Central Command till the late 1980s. After some 33 years, there is a constant and continual chatter among those who are still alive, they indeed remained Brothers-in-Arms. .

Ethiopia’s defeat in Godey on July 25<sup>th</sup> enabled many Somalia brigades to capture several other cities between Godey and JigJiga. Indeed the victory was a cascading victory and overwhelming for all the armies of the fourth and second Armies of Ethiopia. This was the Grand Strategy that Gen. Samantar wanted for Somalia and these were the officers that delivered it.

The subsequent parts of this series of stories are human and the military story of *Brothers In Arms*, Officers and Soldiers whose lives has changed forever. The deep bond that these officers built and the paths their lives took since 1977.

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*Abdul Ahmed III contributes to THOAPI and other research institutions in Arizona, Washington DC., and Virginia.*