

II

Toward The West

August 2011, Delta Flight Honolulu–Seattle: I am on the last leg of the longest trip I have ever had so far – a two-week marathon trip that took me around the globe: Seattle–Amsterdam–Bangkok–Sydney–Hawaii–Seattle. The highlights of this trip undoubtedly were Bangkok and Hawaii, the two places I visited for the first time and I happened to have time to spend an extended weekend. Bangkok was fun, I saw all the touristy locations on a motorcycle taxi. I felt I was the attraction for the locals – from elementary school children wanting to take a picture with me to university students asking me to interview for their research projects! My meeting in Hawaii was planned for Friday but got moved to Tuesday. So, with a long weekend in between, my wife flew in to spend quality time with me which was incredible! It was great to visit what I think is the most beautiful city in the world – Sydney – for the fourth time. Staying at the glamorous Park Hyatt that is tucked underneath the Sydney Harbour Bridge with an incredible view of the Opera House made my visit all the more special. To compensate for all of these, I got to spend time with Qantas Airlines and Hawaiian Airlines which in my opinion were very demanding airlines to do business with.

9. *Keep Moving - Teharek*

A loud whistle caught everyone's attention. We were told to gather outside of one of the buildings and stand in two lines. When one of the fighters told us where we were headed, he did it in two different languages: in Tigrinya, my mother tongue, and another unfamiliar language. Overwhelmed by the situation, I did not pay attention and ended up knowing nothing about where we were heading.

But there was one thing I noticed which was different from the day before. We were accompanied by many fighters, heavily armed and with military bags strapped on their shoulders. At the end of the line, many camels were kneeling and screaming without end, lodging a roaring protest. They were being loaded with wheat, sugar, and utensils that were meant for our journey ahead. I could tell that the camels didn't like what was happening. Neither did I.

Just when I thought our journey had ended in Agordat, the line of loaded camels gave me a bad feeling that a long journey was ahead of us. I was not desperate, but I won't deny I was somewhat anxious. My teenage brain started to resent what I was about to experience and had started looking for a way out. Escaping, however, was not an option – I would just have to stick it out. So, bravely, I convinced myself to act strong, face what may come next, and not feel inferior to anyone in the group.

The line of camels started moving and we made our way west of Agordat. Approximately 100 young men, women, and a few kids like me, accompanied by camels and many fighters formed a long winding line that slowly but surely negotiated the terrain. I was walking just ahead of the camels that brought up the rear of our convoy. There were a few camels in the front as well, leading the pack.

As we walked, I could see the long line of people ahead of us making their way across the valleys, mountains, riverbeds, and flat terrain. With the sun setting, so close to the horizon, and the incredibly red skies, this was a spectacular view that would be engraved in my mind for the rest of my life.

After hours of walking, the line started to disintegrate. The energetic young men were way ahead of the weak people who could not keep up the pace. So, the fighters had to stop the fast-walking men, asking them to wait for the weak to catch up.

The transition from the beautiful sunset scenery to the frightening dark of the night was almost instant. The darkness set in and it was time to walk slower and closer to each other. It was a scary experience to walk at night with no flashlight or sense of direction. Your only focus was that the person ahead of you remained linked to you. There were some frightening moments when we had to cross bushes at night, tightly grasping each other's hands. The occasional slip of the hand from the person ahead gave me the instant, terrifying feeling of getting lost and finding myself being the lead.

It was late night when we finally stopped walking. We were told to line up about 2 meters from each other and form a circle in open

flat terrain. That was the position we would sleep in on the ground. I had nothing to sleep on, not even a single sheet to cover my face. Most of the people were prepared and had a sheet to cover their bodies or the traditional local bed sheet called *Netsela*. But before I could contemplate asking someone to share a sheet, I fell asleep. I was exhausted.

Hours later, I was awoken by an ear-splitting noise that sounded like someone was involved in a life or death struggle. For a moment, I didn't know where I was and couldn't figure out what was going on. It was dark, and all I could see on the blurry horizon were small hills surrounded by the silhouettes of evenly spread trees. The screaming continued with various intensities and then I recognized the noise. I realized that I was still in the middle of my adventurous trip and that the camels being loaded with our supplies were the source of the noise.

It was time to line up again. There was no water or food, it was time to start walking again in the darkness of the morning. The fighter who was in charge of the contingent would walk along the line and repeatedly call out, "*Teharek! Teharek!*," meaning "move on" in Arabic. After a while, I started to hate the word "*Teharek!*" for it meant no time to rest and no time to eat.

After hours of walking, the sun was well up in the sky and it started to get hot. The shadow that had loyally followed me since dawn was getting shorter and shorter, indicating that the sun was almost above my head.

Around afternoon, we finally reached a small village on a dirt road. We were ordered to stop there and prepare our food. The wheat flour and cooking utensils were unloaded from the camels. I can't remember who was doing what, but before I knew it, the team had cooked food and it was time to eat. The food was plain traditional flatbread called *kicha* made from flour and water. That was it. There was no tea or sauce. Those who had money bought tea or other necessities from the small shops in the tiny village.

We rested for a few hours and then a Fiat N3 truck appeared on the road. It was fully loaded with supplies and heading west. They decided to load the women, kids, and the weakest among us on the truck that was heading to our destination.

Fortunately, I was eligible to board the truck. As people started climbing the truck to sit on top of the load, I decided to quickly run back to the makeshift kitchen where the food had been prepared to fetch some more *kicha* before I hopped on to the truck. There was not much bread left there. While I was trying to collect the leftover crumbs, a man approached me and warned me that the truck would depart soon.

I ran back to the truck as quickly as I could, but the truck started moving and was gone in no time. All I could see was the thick black smoke from the exhaust pipe and the yellowish plume of dust kicked up by the truck tires in the distance. Shocked, I didn't know what to make of this unfortunate moment.

For a minute, I hoped that the girl that gave me the tangerines and took care of me in Agordat would notice and somehow stop the truck. But I was out of luck. The truck and its thick red dust trail slowly disappeared into the sunset.

I was left behind with *kicha* crumbs in my hands, as the only kid in a group of strong and tough men. My friend Yonas, the girls, and other men who were considered weak were allowed to board the trucks. They were lucky.

The men were ordered to line up. By now, I knew exactly what was required from me when it came to following orders. It was the beginning of my transformation from a young boy with a lot of personal freedom to a brainwashed and disciplined young fighter. A few of our guards had gone with the truck. The majority of them, however, had stayed with us. We were told that since we were now the strongest men of the group, we would break a record by being the first to walk nonstop to Kerkebet, the final destination. Kerkebet was a camp that was approximately 100 miles away from Agordat and was a major military training center for ELF fighters. At that

moment, however, no one knew where Kerkebet was or how far we would have to walk.

The young men were very enthusiastic and excited about the challenge. Many of them believed, “If these fighters carrying their weapons and ammunition can walk nonstop to Kerkebet, what is our excuse?” I did not object, feeling like a real man for a moment. The line was instructed to move and the men started to walk taking big steps at a time. I don’t recall any of the men being concerned about me being so young. This was going to be looked at as a personal challenge, not a group challenge.

We walked for hours without talking. The sunset was beautiful. The landscape of Barka was flat, with occasional mountains. In the distance across the horizon, the tall *Arkobkobay* (Doom Palm) trees formed an impressive silhouette against the orange sky. I was doing very well. My legs were moving at a rhythmic pace that allowed me to hum my favorite songs in sync. That was a good distraction. As the hours slipped by and darkness set in, the temperature began to cool, making it ideal for walking long distances.

After a long walk, the line started to disintegrate, and a clear distinction could be made between the weak and strong men. The sun disappeared, leaving just a full moon and stars to illuminate the fields of Barka. The moon was so bright that the entire line of people who walked in front of me was visible to me. When it was clear that a group of young men were too far behind, the leader ordered us to park ourselves and wait for the group to catch up. I was hoping that he would let us sleep for a while and then continue. But to my dismay, he called out “*Teharek! Teharek!*” very soon and everyone got up again.

We hadn’t walked for even half an hour before the weak men were far behind once more. Again, we had to wait for them. As soon as they caught up, “*Teharek*” was heard again. This would happen a few more times. Eventually, the slower group started to complain that they were not getting a chance to rest for even a minute since every time they caught up with us, the leader would order us to

continue. Although I was not part of the slow group, I, too, started to hate this leader who would order “*Tebarek*” time and time again.

The leader, Mr. *Tebarek*, as some jokingly nicknamed him, was a skinny but stiff guy in his forties, hailing from the lowlands where the majority of the Muslim population was settled. He had a very dark face with three large scars on each of his bony cheeks that ran vertically from just below his eyes down to his chin – a typical Beni-Amer tribe member. He had oversized eyes, of which the sclera, the white part of his eyes, gave way to a brown iris with tiny blood vessels that streamed down from the center to disappear below the eyelids, making him look tough and uncompromising. He wore oversized khaki shorts, white protective sleeves, and old-fashioned military gaiters called *gambale* around his ankles. His attire was covered with an oversized green military jacket that the Ethiopian soldiers typically wore. His thick dark-green military waist belt carried two large leather holsters symmetrically separated as to be supported by the outer sides of his buttocks, one holster containing bullets and the other recognizably shaped just like the three curved magazines it contained, separated by his bedsheet that was perfectly folded into a small brick-shaped square positioned in the middle of his lower back supporting the half-filled military backpack he carried of which the color perfectly matched that of his khaki shorts.

On the front of his belt, two grenades, one on each side, were affixed to the same green military belt, leaving no space around his waist. He carried his AK-47 mostly on his right shoulder with the barrel pointing at a downward angle with the curved magazine slightly resting on one of the holsters. His AK-47 was dark purple and smaller than the one Mulugheta Wodi-Batsi had allowed me to carry when I had first met the fighters in Emba Derho. Later, I learned the fighters called this type of gun “Kalashin-Checky” since it was made in Czechoslovakia. Although its shape resembles that of an AK-47, it is not an AK-47 – it is known formally as Sampol vz. 58.

The leader barely spoke Tigrinya, a language spoken in the highlands where I come from, and he showed no sympathy at all for the weaker people. Although we were very tired, he gave us no moment to catch our breath. His job was to get us in Kerkebet as soon as possible. It is mind-boggling how the man who carried so much military gear, primarily on his waist, was able to travel so long and drive the pace.

The rhythmic pace that had allowed me to hum my favorite songs earlier had long been disrupted, my mouth was parched and gritty, and my legs started to tremble with exhaustion whenever we stopped to wait for the slow team. As we walked by the small villages and nomads, now and then we were terrorized by encounters with the cattle of Barka. In the dark, the cattle tend to stick together at whatever cost. Afraid of wild animals, when they sense anything that moves at night, the cattle panic and wildly start running. If one of them runs in the wrong direction, they all follow, and they could easily have overrun us. This was a very dangerous and terrorizing experience for me since there was no warning to the stampede.

The moon and the stars started to fade eventually and darkness began being replaced by light. Albeit my exhaustion, I still was able to appreciate and be impressed by the process of transformation from darkness to light that seemed to take place within just half an hour. It looked like everything on earth became a different color during the transition from darkness to light, before settling on its natural color. The smell of the morning hours in Barka (low land region) was very distinctive because of the combination of dust, cattle, and camels.

At one point, our leader asked us to take a break and he disappeared for a while. Fifteen minutes later, he came back and took two men with him. When they returned, they were carrying skim/buttermilk and water. The water was in a leather container made from goatskin. The buttermilk was in a large wooden dish. The men, recognizing that I was the youngest, told me to drink first from the wooden dish. I didn't know what I was getting. I tasted for the