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Front cover: Pilots of 1st Fighter Intercept Squadron IFAF posing in front of an F-86F. Standing from left: Bezabih Petros, Alemayehu Gondere, Taweke Assefa, Ashagre Mekonnen, Neguisse Zergaw, Habtewold Gebrewold, Asemare Getahun, and Techane Mesfin (CO 1st Squadron). Kneeling from left: unidentified and Goitom Asfeha. (EtAF via S.N.)

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Note: In order to simplify the use of this book, all names, locations and geographic designations are as provided in *The Times World Atlas*, or other traditionally accepted major sources of reference, as of the time of described events.

Abbreviations

AAA	Anti-aircraft artillery	IAP	International airport
AA-2 Atoll	ASCC code for R-3S or R-13, Soviet air-to-air missile	IDF	Israeli Defence Force
AB	Air base	IEA	Imperial Ethiopian Aviation
AdA	Armée de l’Air (French Air Force)	IEAF	Imperial Ethiopian Air Force
AK	Automat Kalashnikova; general designation for a class of Russian or former Eastern Bloc manufactured 7.62mm assault rifles	IEAA	Imperial Ethiopian Army Aviation
An	Antonov (the design bureau led by Oleg Antonov)	IFF	Identification friend or foe
APC	Armoured personnel carrier	IFV	Infantry fighting vehicle
ASCC	Air Standardisation Co-ordinating Committee (US, British, Australian and New Zealand committee for standardisation of designations of foreign aircraft)	IR	Infra-red, electromagnetic radiation heat sensor
Brig Gen	Brigadier General (military commissioned officer rank)	II	Ilyushin (the design bureau led by Sergey Vladimirovich Ilyushin, also known as OKB-39)
CAP	Combat air patrol	IIAF	Imperial Iranian Air Force
Capt	Captain (military commissioned officer rank)	IRIAF	Islamic Republic of Iran Air Force
CAS	Close air support	KGB	Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti (Committee for State Security. Soviet National Security Agency, 1954–1991)
CAdS	Corpo Aeronautico della Somalia (Somali Aeronautical Corps)	KIA	Killed in action
CBU	Cluster bomb unit	km	Kilometre
CCS	Ciidanka Cirka Soomaliaayad (Somali Air Force)	Lt	Lieutenant (military commissioned officer rank)
C-in-C	Commander-in-Chief	Lt Col	Lieutenant Colonel (military commissioned officer rank)
CO	Commanding Officer	1st Lt	First Lieutenant (military commissioned officer rank)
COIN	Counterinsurgency	2nd Lt	Second Lieutenant (lowest military commissioned officer rank)
Col	Colonel (military commissioned officer rank)	MAAG	Military Aid and Assistance Group
Col Gen	Colonel General (top military commissioned officer rank)	Maj	Major (military commissioned officer rank)
CPSU	Communist Party of the Soviet Union	Maj Gen	Major General (military commissioned officer rank)
DAAFAR	Defesa Anti-Aérea y Fuerza Aérea Revolucionaria (Cuban Air Defence Force & Air Force; often shortened to ‘FAR’ in every-day conversation)	MANPAD(S)	Man-portable air defence system(s) – light surface-to-air missile system that can be carried and deployed in combat by a single soldier
DoD	Department of Defence (USA)	MBT	Main Battle Tank
EAL	Ethiopian Airlines	Mi	Mil (Soviet/Russian helicopter designer and manufacturer)
EE	English Electric	MIA	Missing in action
ELA	Eritrean Liberation Army	MiG	Mikoyan i Gurevich (the design bureau led by Artyom Ivanovich Mikoyan and Mikhail Iosifovich Gurevich, also known as OKB-155 or MMZ ‘Zenit’)
ELF	Eritrean Liberation Front	MoD	Ministry of Defence
ELINT	Electronic intelligence	MRL	Multiple rocket launcher
EPLF	Eritrean People’s Liberation Forces	NCO	Non-commissioned officer
EPRDF	Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front	OAU	Organisation of African Unity
EtAF	Ethiopian Air Force	PDRYAF	People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen Air Force (air force of former South Yemen)
Flt Off	Flight Officer (military commissioned officer rank)	PLO	Palestinian Liberation Organisation
Flt Lt	Flight Lieutenant (military commissioned officer rank, equal to Captain)	PMAC	Provisional Military Administrative Committee (120-member committee of Ethiopian officers, better known as the ‘Derg’ or ‘Dergue’)
FS	Fighter squadron	PoW	Prisoner of War
GCI	Ground controlled interception	R-3S	Soviet-made air-to-air missile (see AA-2)
Gen	General (military commissioned officer rank)	RA	Regia Aeronautica (Royal Italian Air Force)
GP	General-purpose (bomb)	RAF	Royal Air Force
HE	High explosive	RHAW	Radar homing and warning system
HQ	Headquarters	RWR	Radar Warning Receiver
IAI	Israeli Aircraft Industries (since 2006 Israeli Aerospace Industries)	SA-2 Guideline	ASCC code for S-75 Dvina, Soviet SAM system
		SA-3 Goa	ASCC code for S-125 Neva, Soviet SAM

	system	UN	United Nations
SA-7 Grail	ASCC code for 9K32 Strela-2, Soviet MANPAD	UNHCR	UN High Commissioner for Refugees
SA-13	ASCC code for Strela-10, Soviet SAM system	UNRWA	United Nations Relief and Works Agency
SAAB	Svenska Aeroplan Aktiebolaget (Swedish aircraft manufacturer)	USAAF	United States Army Air Force (until 1947)
SAC	Somali Aeronautical Corps	USAF	United States Air Force (since 1947)
SALF	Somali-Abo Liberation Front	US\$	United States Dollar
SAM	Surface-to-air missile	USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
SMSC	Supreme Military Strategic Committee	V-TA	Komandovaniye voyenno-transportnoy aviatsii (Soviet Military Transport Aviation)
SNA	Somali National Army	V-VS	Voyenno-Vozdushnye Sily (Soviet Air Force)
SNDF	Somali National Defence Force	WIA	Wounded in action
Sqn	Squadron	WSLF	Western Somali Liberation Front
Sqn Ldr	Squadron Leader (military commissioned officer rank, equal to major)	WWI	First World War
		WWII	Second World War

CHAPTER 1

GEOPOLITICAL PRELUDE

In the late 1970s, as the Cold War between the US-led North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and communist states of Central and Eastern Europe grouped within the Soviet dominated Warsaw Pact was heading for its next high point, rumours about an intensive conventional war between Ethiopia and Somalia began spreading through the circles of various military intelligence agencies and academics around the world. The word was that Somalia (usually described as a Soviet ‘client state’ until that time) had invaded Ethiopia (formerly a major US ally in Africa) in order to realise its national aim of annexation of the area called ‘Ogaden’. The two nations then swapped their alliances to the superpowers in the middle of the resulting war, with Ethiopia joining the Soviet bloc and Somalia turning West. Both sides intensively deployed Soviet-built fighter-bombers of Mikoyan i Gurevich (MiG) design. Cuban advisers became involved on the Ethiopian side, followed by the Soviets and even ‘Israeli mercenaries’ that flew for the Ethiopian Air Force (EtAF). A ‘Soviet General’ then launched a daring heliborne operation to outflank and rout the Somalis and force them out of Ogaden, thus successfully concluding the war in Ethiopia’s favour.

For years after the end of this conflict very little factual information was available. Although a number of publications related to labyrinthine political and diplomatic intrigues that surround all aspects of its history were released, none offered any closer insights into specifics of combat operations. Contrary to earlier reports, it appeared that this conflict did not bring any new, interesting or relevant experiences, and especially that – with exception of one operation – air power did not play any kind of important role. Indeed, in a classic misjudgement about this war, a conclusion emerged that US-built Northrop F-5 Tiger IIs, which were known to have been delivered to Ethiopia in the mid-1970s, and Soviet-built MiG-21s, known to have been operated by Somalia around the same time – two of most-prolific fighter-bomber types in service with more than 70 different air forces around the world – have never engaged in air combat, and that thus it is only possible to ‘guess’ about the outcome of any clashes between them.

It was only in the early 2000s – and thanks to the ever wider availability of the internet – that additional, more authoritative information began to appear. Gradually, a picture emerged according

to which the Somali invasion of Ogaden ignited a major war that initially brought the Somalis close to attaining their strategic goal but eventually turned into a battle of attrition that Somalia could not sustain. Indeed, with extensive support from Cuba and the Soviet Union, the Ethiopians not only averted catastrophe but also turned the tables on the aggressor. Even more time lapsed before it transpired that in opinion of many Ethiopians, their country was saved by its small, but well-equipped, organised, and trained air force, and a small number of Northrop F-5E Tiger II fighter-bombers almost in the same manner the RAF saved the United Kingdom during the Battle of Britain, in 1940.

A result of years of often troublesome research, put together with help and information from very different sources, this book is probably the first to cover in great depth the emergence of the Ethiopian and Somali air forces, and the air war over Ogaden against the backdrop of ground warfare. Unfortunately, it is still likely to contain some errors and omissions. Sadly, official Ethiopian archives remain well outside the reach of most researchers and practically all Somali documentation was destroyed in the course of wars that savaged this country over the last 30 years.¹ Except for a handful of rarely available books in Amharic language, there is also next to no authoritative literature about the armed forces of either nation, while the few articles published in specialised magazines over the years mainly emphasised the work of foreign instructors in the 1950s and 1960s. Even with the help of several participants from both sides, some details prefer to remain unknown: memories fade with years, no matter how many have their recollections and images firmly blazed into their minds.

Geography

Situated at the north-eastern corner of Africa, close to the Arabian Peninsula and on the coast of the Indian Ocean, the Gulf of Aden

¹ The only researcher ever granted official permission to work in the official Ethiopian archives so far was Gebru Tareke, author of the essay ‘The Ethiopia–Somalia War’, published in 2000 in *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*. Tareke’s work mainly covers ground warfare, but is considered the most complete, objective and balanced narrative by all of participants interviewed by the author.

and the Red Sea, the Horn of Africa contains ports and airfields that connect routes of intercontinental significance and strategic importance.

Stretching from Sudan in the north and west, southwards to Kenya and to Djibouti in the east, Ethiopia is the biggest country in this area. More than half of Ethiopian territory is covered by the Ethiopian Plateau, diagonally split in a north-eastern to south-eastern direction by the Great Rift Valley and with an average elevation of about 1,680m above the sea level. The plateau is cut by many rivers and deep valleys, ranging from the Dallow Depression, 100m below sea level to the South Mountains of the central highlands that rise up to 4,000m. Southern Ethiopia is bisected by the 40–60km wide Rift Valley. The road network remains underdeveloped and in many areas of Ogaden is actually non-existent, significantly impeding vehicular movement during rainy seasons. The principal rainy season occurs between mid-June and September, followed by a dry season that may be interrupted in February or March by a short rainy season.

Although largely homogenous in regards of religion, the population of Ethiopia is deeply divided along ethnic, regional, and political lines, and for centuries the country has faced an uphill struggle to keep all of these united. The Amhara, who founded the original nation, and the related Tigreans, both of which are highland peoples of partly Semitic origin, constitute around 30% of the total population. They primarily occupy the north-western Ethiopian highlands and the area north of Addis Ababa. Central and south-western Ethiopia is largely populated by the Oromo, a pastoral and agricultural people that constitute up to 40% of the population. Western Ethiopia is predominantly populated by the Shankella, that constitute about 6% of the population, while the east and south-east is predominantly populated by the Somali. Out of around 70 languages spoken in Ethiopia, most belong to the Semitic and Cushitic branches of Afro-Asiatic family. Amharic, the official language, is spoken by more than half of the population, but English and Arabic are also widely spoken.

The country is divided into nine regions that have a significant degree of autonomy and are composed around specific ethnic groups: Tigray, Amhara, Afar, Oromia, Somalia, Benishangul-Gumuz, Gambela, Harari, and Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' which comprise about 41 different ethnic groups. Addis Ababa is the largest city in Ethiopia, but only about 15–20% of the population can be classified as urban.

About 40% of Ethiopians are Christians, primarily followers of the Ethiopian Orthodox Union church, an autonomous Christian sect headed by a patriarch and closely related to the Coptic church of Egypt (which was the state church of Ethiopia until 1974). All the southern and eastern regions have Muslim majorities, who represent about 45% of the country's population. The south also contains considerable numbers of animists. The majority of members of the sect known as Beta Israel or Falashas, who practiced a type of Judaism that probably dates back to contact with early Arabian Jews, were airlifted to Israel in 1991.

The economy is heavily dependent on earnings from the agricultural sector, with the raising of livestock being the most characteristic form of economic activity, followed by farming coffee, cotton, sugar, fruit and vegetables. Much of the trading is conducted by barter in local markets, especially because periodic droughts have greatly reduced agricultural output and repeatedly forced the country to import basic foodstuffs.

Somalia covers most of the coastline of the Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Aden, stretching over 3,025km (1,880 miles) from

Djibouti in the north, to Kenya in the south, and is bordered by Ethiopia in the west. The terrain in this country is dominated by dry savannah plains characterised by lava rocks and sand that pose formidable obstacles to wheeled vehicles in several areas. A series of mountain ranges, with average elevations between about 900 and 2,000 metres (about 3,000 and 7,000ft), dominate the northern part of the country, while a sandy coastal plain borders the Gulf of Aden in the north and a wide coastal plain with many sand dunes borders on the Indian Ocean in the south. The country's two major rivers, the Jubba (or Genale) and the Shabele (or Shebelle), are found on the southern plateau and there are very few natural harbours. Like that of Ethiopia, the climate of Somalia ranges from tropical to subtropical and from arid to semiarid. But, the monsoon wind brings a dry season from September to December and a rainy season from March to May.

While nominally divided into 18 regions and 84 districts, Somalia is one of very few African states where virtually all citizens share a history, language, culture and religion. The vast majority of the population consists of Somali, a Cushitic people, some 70% of which are nomadic or semi-nomadic pastoralists. The remainder, including Arabs, Bantu-speaking people in the southern part of the country, some Indians, Italians and Pakistanis, are either crop farmers or inhabitants of the few urban centres. Islam is the state religion and most of the people are Sunni Muslims. The official language is Somali, but Arabic, English and Italian are also spoken.

Between the Ethiopian Plain and Somalian Plateau lies the area of Ogaden. Some 200,000 square kilometres (125,000 square miles) in size, this barren and bleak region is drained by the Shabele and Juba rivers, but otherwise predominated by a semi-desert of sandstone and limestone, with some coarse grass and a few stunted thorn and acacia trees. Flat-topped hills and arid plains slope southward from the Harar Plateau (elevation 2,000m, or around 6,000ft), where aromatic flora, producing frankincense and myrrh, are indigenous. As of the mid-1970s, it was inhabited almost exclusively by some 500,000 ethnic Somalis, mainly nomadic herdsmen of the Ogaden clan, which gave the territory its name. While mineral resources are relatively diverse and include deposits of petroleum, copper, manganese and uranium, they have not been exploited. Instead, the economy in this part of Ethiopia since the 16th century has been dominated by Somali nomadic pastoralists that graze their herds on the plains. The climate is generally hot and dry throughout most of the year.

Ethiopian Heritage

Ogaden has long been a site of contention: first between Christian Abyssinia and the Muslim emirs, then between Ethiopia and European colonial states, and finally between Ethiopia and the Somali nation.

Ethiopia is a country situated in one of the oldest – if not *the* oldest – area of human habitation. Archaeological research has shown that modern Homo sapiens probably evolved there. The original form of the modern-day name of this country was first used by ancient Greeks to refer to the peoples living south of ancient Egypt; modern usage has transferred this name further south, to the land of people known until the early 20th century as 'Abyssinia'.

In the 1st century AD, the Axumite Empire developed in the area. Relatively isolated due to the inaccessibility of the high central plateau, rich with gold, iron and salt deposits, it eventually became one of the five largest empires of the world in its time. It was in the year AD 330 that it experienced the introduction of Christianity through Greek clergy. Through the following two centuries, the

Axumite Empire benefited from a major transformation of the maritime trading system that linked the Roman Empire and India. This increased the significance of the Red Sea as a maritime trading route that made Axum's main port, Adulis, a major trading centre. At its height, the Axumite Empire controlled the area covering the entire modern-day Ethiopia, Eritrea, northern Sudan, southern Egypt, Djibouti, Yemen and southern Arabia.

Axum remained strong until the rise of Islam, in the 7th century. Because the Axumites had sheltered Muhammad's first followers, the Muslims never attempted to conquer the country as they spread across Africa. While Axumite naval power gradually declined through that period, in AD 702 its pirates were able to invade the Hejaz and occupy Jeddah. In retaliation, the Muslims took the Dahlak Archipelago from Axum and began spreading along the coast of the Red Sea, forcing Axum into isolation from the rest of the world.

In medieval times, three chief provinces came into being: Tigray in the north, Amhara in the centre and Shewa in the south. The seat of the government was usually in Amhara, but at times there were two or even three kings reigning at the same time. It was only in 1528 that Ethiopia again made contact with the outside world. Invaded by a Muslim army from the nearby Sultanate of Adal, the Negus ('King') Lebna Dengle Dawit II requested help from Portugal. As Muslim forces came close to extinguishing the ancient realm of Ethiopia and converting all of its subjects to Islam, the Portuguese expedition led by Cristóvão da Gama arrived in 1541 and saved the nation. However, they were subsequently obliged to make their way out of Ethiopia and the area that is now in Somalia.

Many historians trace the origins of hostility between Ethiopia and Somalia to this war, but the conflict of 1528–1541 also resulted in bitter religious conflicts with the Jesuits and inner struggles between different Ethiopian rulers and the country remained relatively isolated for the following 300 years. It was not before 1855, when Lij Kassa proclaimed himself 'Negus Negusti' ('King of Kings') under the name of Tewodros II and launched a campaign to unite the nation under his rule, that modernisation and the opening up of Ethiopia began. Although a ruthless ruler, Tewodros was determined to protect the country from the Europeans who were scrambling to get colonies in Africa at that time. When Queen Victoria failed to answer his letter, in 1867, he took it as an insult and imprisoned several British residents, including the consul. The British deployed an army of 12,000 from Mumbai to Ethiopia and defeated Tewodros during the battle at Magdala (better known as Amba Mariam), prompting him to commit suicide.

Effects of the Suez Canal

The end of Tewodros' rule resulted in an internal power struggle, won by Kassa, who was crowned Emperor Yohannes IV and rose to power at the time the area of the Red Sea became strategically important due to the opening of the Suez Canal. As Western colonial nations began political battles for the control over the shores, the British occupied Yemen, the French took Obock, Asars and Issa, while the Ethiopians had the ambition to conquer the source of the Nile and had invaded Sudan. In 1870, the Italians appeared on the scene, buying the port of Asseb from the local sultan. In 1888, the Italians exploited Yohannes IV's preoccupation with defending Ethiopia from an invasion of dervishes from Sudan and deployed 20,000 troops in the country. Not interested in fighting the newcomers, the Emperor solved all the disputes – more or less – through negotiations, and granted permission for some 5,000 troops to remain stationed in a part of the Ethiopian Tigray Province, which

over time became known as 'Eritrea'.

Meanwhile, on 9 March 1889, Yohannes IV had defeated the Dervish invasion, but a stray bullet hit him and his army withdrew. The Emperor died during the night and his body fell into the hands of the enemy. As soon as this news reached Sahle Maryam of Shewa, he proclaimed himself Emperor Menelik II of Ethiopia. Only two months later, Menelik II signed a treaty with Rome, granting Eritrea to Italy in exchange for supply of 30,000 rifles, ammunition and several cannons. The Italians scrambled to declare this treaty as granting them a protectorate over all of Ethiopia. Menelik's protests were completely ignored and this caused another war. The following conflict between Ethiopia and Italy culminated in a humiliating Italian defeat during the battle of Adwa. On 1 March 1896, a provisional peace treaty was concluded in Addis Ababa in which Rome recognised the absolute independence of Ethiopia, which thus became the first internationally recognised independent African state.²

Following this success, the Ethiopians invested heavily in development of modern infrastructure, including the construction of Addis Ababa–Djibouti railroad, post and telephone services.³ The Emperor began appointing ministers, a bank was founded and the first hotel, hospitals and schools opened in the capital.

Menelik died in December 1913 and was succeeded by his grandson, who proved unpopular due to ties to Muslims; he ruled only for three years. In 1916, he was deposed by the Christian nobility who made Menelik's daughter Zauditu, an Empress, with her cousin Ras Tafari Mekonnen (son of a hero of the Battle of Adwa) a regent and successor to the throne. After the death of Empress Zauditu, in 1930, Mekonnen founded his own army and established himself in power after a civil war against different opponents, resulting in his crowning as Emperor Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia.

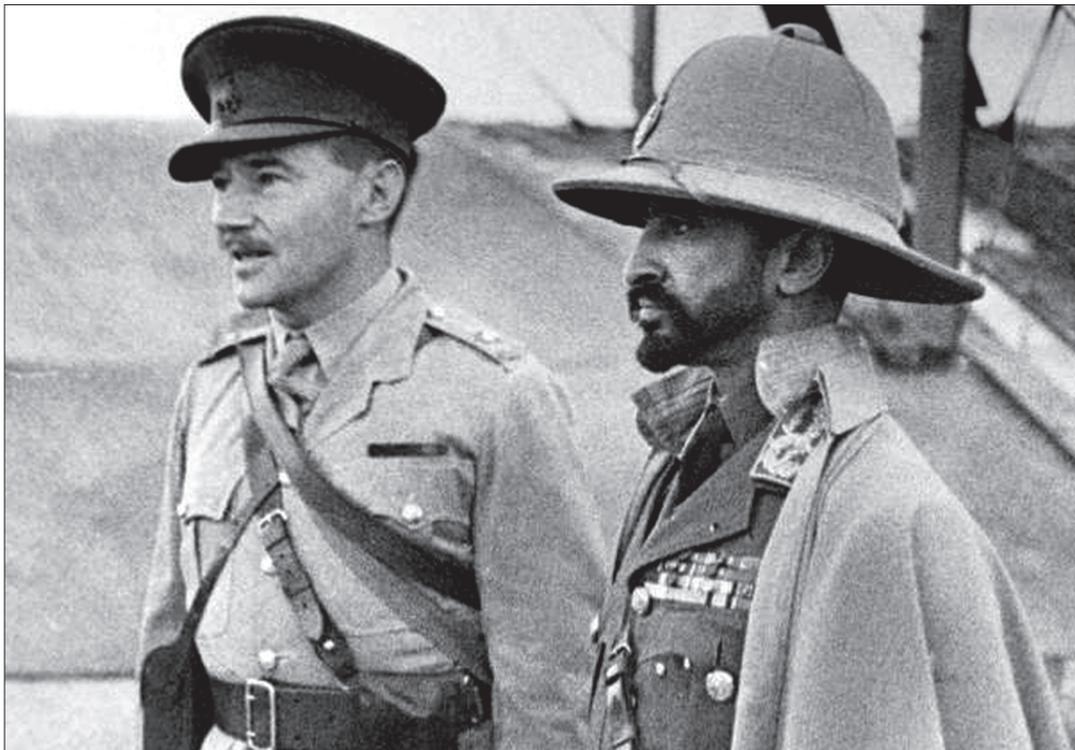
Italian Revenge

Aiming to expand its colonial possessions, Italy invaded Ethiopia with troops deployed in Eritrea and Italian Somaliland in 1935. The initial advance was slow, but Adwa – the site of the Italian defeat in 1896 – fell on 6 October and the commander of the Italian forces, Gen Emilio De Bono, subsequently launched a major campaign into Tigray, characterised by deployment of air power, tanks and chemical weapons. Although many landlords offered no resistance (some even sided with conquerors) the Italian invasion was no 'walk-over'. Indeed, De Bono's troops were halted by December and he was replaced by Gen Pietro Badoglio.

In an attempt to exploit the apparent Italian weakness, Selassie ordered a counter offensive, only to have his forces battered by the full might of heavy and chemical weapons. Putting to the test the tactics of Gen Giulio Douhet, the invaders then launched a bitter campaign of air attacks and artillery bombardments, hitting not only the Ethiopian Army's positions but also civilian settlements. The town of Harar was fire-bombed on 29 March 1936, and two days later Italy won a decisive battle at Maychew. Addis Ababa fell on 5 May and Rome then officially annexed all of Ethiopia, together with Eritrea and Somaliland, declaring them elements of the Italian East Africa.

2 Addis Ababa was established as the Ethiopian capital in 1886, in Intoto Valley, in the course of Menelik IV's attempts to re-unite the country, see Marcus, *A History of Ethiopia*, pp. 104–116.

3 Ibid. The concession for a railway was issued to a French company in 1894; construction of the stretch from Djibouti to Dire Dawa, a town some 45km from Harar, was completed on 31 December 1902.



Emperor Selassie with some of the British Army officers during the campaign that led to liberation of Ethiopia from Italian rule in 1941. (Mark Lepko Collection)



Somalis are proud of their military heritage, much of which dates from their defence against the Portuguese in the 16th century and revolts against British and Italian colonial rule (motivated by the Mahadist uprising in Sudan), in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This Italian illustration from the 1910s shows the cavalry of so-called 'Marehan Conquerors' that rose against the British in 1914. (Mark Lepko Collection)

The Italians did a lot to improve the local infrastructure, constructing roads and bridges and expanding most of the larger cities. However, they brutally crushed repeated revolts of intellectuals, provoking armed resistance. The start of the end of their rule came in the summer 1940, when Rome launched an offensive against

British-held Sudan, followed by another into British Somaliland, which saw a successful capture of Berbera. However, heavy terrain and supply problems, as well as the uprising in Ethiopia, prevented their victory and Italian forces eventually found themselves facing a three-prong British and Commonwealth counteroffensive.

Although forced into exile, Emperor Selassie never stopped requesting help from Great Britain and elsewhere. His pleads to the League of Nations went unanswered, but the situation changed fundamentally once Italy and the United Kingdom found themselves on opposing sides during WWII. Following a series of defeats to Commonwealth forces (primarily South Africans), the last major Italian units in Ethiopia capitulated and Emperor Selassie returned to Addis Ababa on 5 May 1941.

Drawing lessons from this war, as well as from the Royal Air Force's (RAF) involvement in crushing of a rebellion in Tigray Province in September 1943, the Ethiopian ruler subsequently took care to bring his country into the United Nations as a founding member, greatly expand diplomatic relations and establish a new military, including an air force. Furthermore, he established a dependable tax base to support a dependable military that could help him in case of a new invasion from abroad, as well as problems at home. Although many of the nobles and several provinces battled related reforms and laws, over time, Selassie managed to make peace with the many ethnic, religious and economic factions through appeasement and compromise. This resulted in his country enjoying an unprecedented period of relatively uninterrupted stability and progress. Strengthened with tax-income and foreign aid, for most of the time between the 1940s and 1970s, the Ethiopian ruler was able to spend about 40% of the nation's annual budget on defence and internal security.

Vibrant Somalia

Somalia never existed, as such, prior to its independence in 1960. In ancient times, this area was designated the Punt by Egyptians and the inhabitants referred to as 'Black Berbers'. The Ethiopian Kingdom of Aksum controlled most of the Punt between the 1st and 7th centuries AD, while Arab tribes set up trading posts along the

coastline of the Gulf of Aden. The Somali people – mostly Islamised Yemeni refugees – began to migrate into this region in the 13th century. During the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries the Portuguese launched several expeditions into the area, but faced stiff resistance while attempting to establish a presence and eventually withdrew when local warriors were reinforced by the Ottoman Empire, which subsequently established itself in control of northern sultanates. The southern ones accepted the sovereignty of the Sultan of Zanzibar. During the 18th and the early 19th centuries, the Gobroon Dynasty established itself in power in some parts of East Africa, reaching its apex shortly before the region gained strategic importance due to the construction of the Suez Canal. The French bought the port of Obock and surrounding area in 1862, which became known as the ‘French Territory of the Afars and the Issas’, paving the way for creation of present-day Djibouti. Through the mid-1870s, Egypt occupied some of the towns along the Somali coast. When Egyptian troops withdrew due to the Mahdi Revolt in Sudan, the British, mainly concerned with keeping open the route to India, occupied the territory instead. In 1887, Great Britain proclaimed a British Protectorate in what became known as British Somaliland and in 1905, after the British put down several armed revolts by local Dervishes, the area was placed under the administration of the Colonial Office.

Meanwhile in early 1869, Italians began settling in some of the ports of northern Somalia, and by the early 20th century their influence spread through agreements with local Somali chieftains, Great Britain, Zanzibar and Ethiopia. Taking advantage of the Treaty of London, from 1915 the Italians then spread their control

inland from Asseb (nowadays in Eritrea) and in 1936 merged all the territories of Somaliland, Eritrea and Ethiopia into the colonial state of Italian East Africa. It was from there that Italian troops invaded British Somaliland in 1940 and expelled the British. However, just a year later the British took their protectorate back and then continued with the successful liberation of Ethiopia.

The Italian Peace Treaty of 1947 forced Rome to give up all of its possessions in Africa and the Allies took over responsibility for the Horn of Africa. However, because the USA, Great Britain, France and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) failed to reach an agreement, the matter was referred to the General Assembly of the UN in 1948. This promised to give Italian Somaliland independence following a period of ten years as a UN trust territory, merging the former British Protectorate of Somaliland with formerly Italian-ruled parts of Somalia in the process. With Rome accepting the UN terms, on 1 April 1950 the British military government was replaced by a provisional Italian administration and the territory named Somalia. In accordance with the UN Trusteeship Council, the former British Somaliland gained independence on 26 June 1960, and was then united with the former Italian-Somaliland, for combined independence on 1 July 1960. The new Somalia was founded as a parliamentary republic, with Aden Abdullah Osman Daar becoming the first president. However, it did not include predominantly Somali-populated parts of Kenya, nor Affairs and Issas (Djibouti).⁴

4 France released Affairs and Issas into independence as Djibouti in 1977, but the population decided not to merge their country with Somalia.

CHAPTER 2

MILITARY BACKGROUNDS

Origins of the Imperial Ethiopian Air Force

The history of military flying in Ethiopia can be traced back to November 1922, when (then Ras) Tafari Mekonnen witnessed a show of the RAF in Aden. Having never seen an airplane before, he was captivated by this demonstration and spontaneously asked to have a closer look at one of the biplanes and to take a flight. The result of this experience was his decision to develop the Imperial Ethiopian Aviation (IEA).⁵ Further impressed by the exploits of Hubert Fauntleroy Julian, the first African American to obtain a pilot's licence in the USA, Mekonnen visited Europe to negotiate the purchase of some French and German aircraft two years later. These were used to form the nucleus of an air force, based on the race course at Bishoftu, near Addis Ababa, and officially organised into the IEA on 18 August 1929. That was the day when Frenchman Andre Maillet, a former fighter pilot of the Armée de l'Air (AdA, French Air Force) during the First World War (WWI), delivered the first Potez 25A2 biplane to Ethiopia. An additional five French, one Italian and one British built biplanes, were all acquired by November 1930.

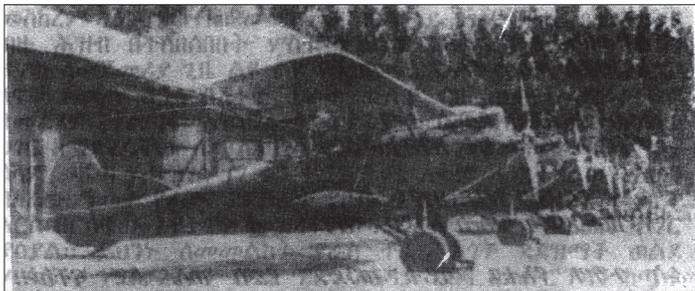
Aiming to set up a flying school, another French pilot, Gaston Videt, arrived in Addis Ababa in April 1930. His first students included Mishka Babitcheff (the son of a White Russian and Ethiopian mother), Asfaw Ali, Seyoum Kebed, Bahru Kaba,

Demissie Haileyesus, Demke Tekle-Wold, and Mulu-Embet Imru, the first female student pilot in Africa. Two other cadets, Bahru Kabba and Tesfamichael Haile, were sent to France to study flying at Saint Cyr. Asfaw Ali and Mishka Babitscheff graduated first, receiving their pilot certificates from Emperor Haile Selassie I himself, on 13 October 1930. By then, Maillet was succeeded by another Frenchman, Paul Corriger, who served as commander and chief flight instructor of the IEA until the Italian invasion in 1935, when Mishka Babitcheff replaced him.

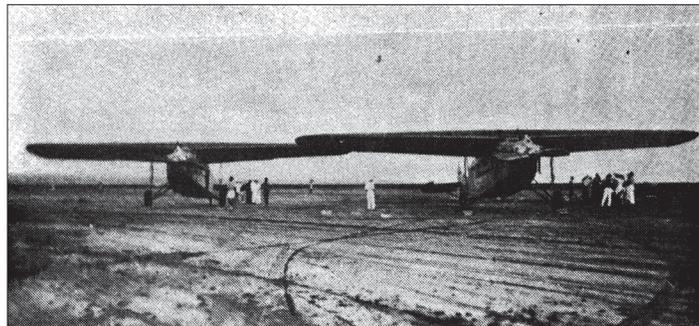
Meanwhile, new aircraft were purchased in 1934 and 1935, including two Beech B.17 Staggerwings, two Fokkers (one F.VIIa/3m and an F.XVIII) and a single Meindl AVII; the latter became the first aircraft ever assembled in Ethiopia. However, there were still only two qualified Ethiopian pilots, including Mishka Babitcheff and Asfaw Ali. Like the rest of the Ethiopian military, the IEA was still underdeveloped and lacked the ability to defend the country when, on the morning of 3 October 1935, Italy invaded Ethiopia with troops deployed from Italian Somaliland.

Only very few reliable records about IEA operations during the war with Italy are available. It is certain that the Ethiopians had no combat aircraft or combat-trained pilots at the time and stood little chance against the might of Regia Aeronautica (RA, Royal Italian Air Force). Known to have been operational as of 1935 were three Potez 25s, one Junkers W.33, one Breda Ba.15, a de Havilland Tiger Moth D.H.60C, one Beechcraft 17, and a Fiat AS.1. Within days of the

5 Forsgren, SAFO No. 20, p. 23.



Row of six Potez biplanes as seen at Bishoftu in 1930. (EtAF)



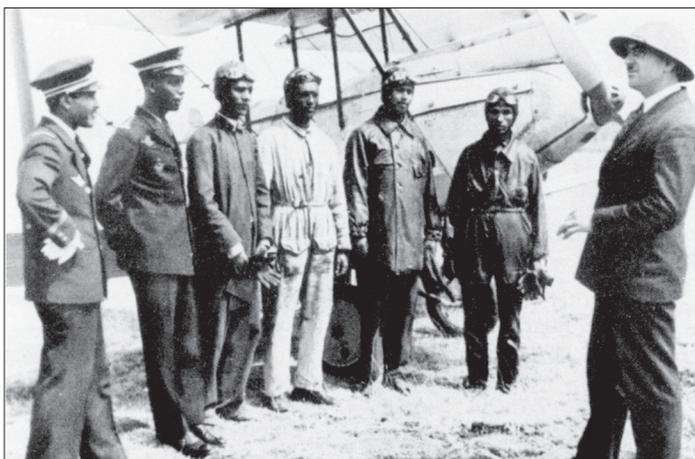
The two Fokkers acquired by the IEA in 1934 and 1935. (via S. N.)



Mishka Babitcheff (sitting in cockpit) was one of first Ethiopians to obtain a pilot's licence in 1930. (EtAF)



On their delivery, all early Ethiopian aircraft were painted different civilian colours. Only the French-made Potez biplanes were painted green. This was the third of six Potez 25 A2s operated by the IEA. The plane was nicknamed 'Nesre Mekonnen' (Prince Mekonnen in Amharic), and wore national markings on top wing surfaces (usually in form of a rectangle in green, yellow and red), as well as the Lion of Judah (symbol of Imperial Ethiopia) under the cockpit. (EtAF)



French instructor Paul Corriger with a group of six Ethiopian cadets and a D.H.60 biplane in 1935. (Photo by Richard Pankhurst)

Italian attack, only one Potez 25A and three other aircraft remained operational. Although capable of carrying machine-guns, they were never armed and only used as light transports.

Nevertheless, shortly before and early during the war, several African Americans were recruited or volunteered to go to Ethiopia to serve as professionals in various fields. The most influential of them was Colonel (Col) Julian, assigned the Commander-in-Chief (C-in-C) of the IEA in October 1935. Julian took over as commander of the Flying School and became responsible for the tuition of Mulu-Emebet after she completed her high school education at Lycée Gebremariam, the French School in Addis Ababa. However, the Italian invasion prevented her further training and she never soloed.

Another US pilot active in Ethiopia at that time was John

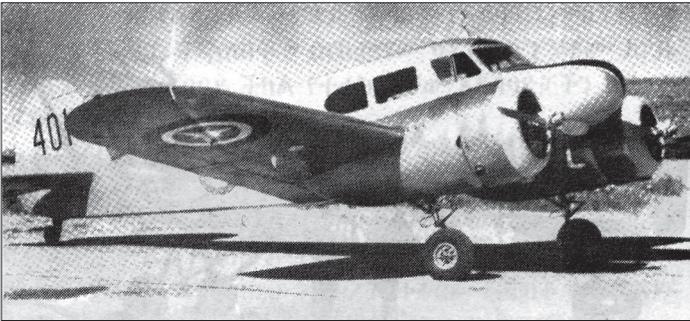
Robinson, better known as the 'Black' or 'Brown Condor', who earned his wings at the Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute, Alabama, in 1920. Invited to Ethiopia by Emperor Selassie, Robinson arrived in late May 1935 and soon became involved in fighting, flying the few operational aircraft, transporting troops, ammunition and supplies, as well as the Emperor, from one site to the other. At some point in time, Julian and Robinson had a public fist-fight, and the former was asked to leave the country. Although frequently confronted by RA fighters and ground fire, and having his aircraft riddled by bullets a number of times, Robinson was wounded only once.

The third US pilot that appeared in Ethiopia during that war was John H. Spencer, who acted as official military adviser. He is known to have flown some transport and reconnaissance missions with one of the Potez 25s, together with the British Military Attaché, Major (Maj) Holt, as well as with Babitscheff.

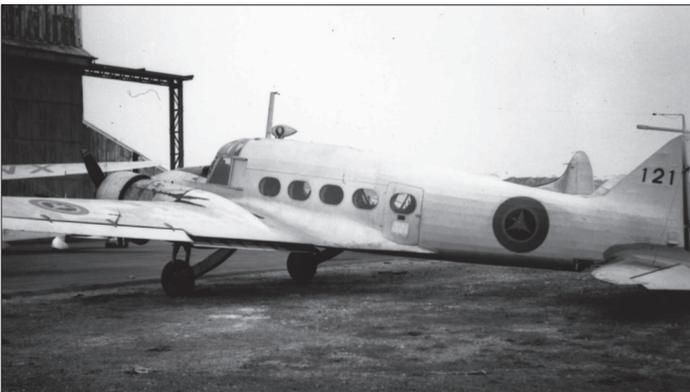
Initially, the IEA's main operation zone was in the Dessa area, where the Ethiopian Army Field Headquarters (HQ) was also positioned. Dessa included a small airfield that was several times attacked by the RA, and in one instance even the Emperor had to man an anti-aircraft gun. Eventually, all the efforts of the Ethiopian military and US volunteer pilots were in vain and the Italians won the war.

Re-Establishment of Imperial Ethiopian Air Force

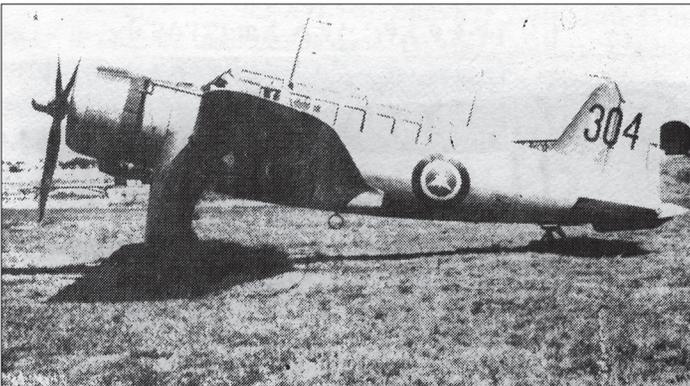
Efforts to establish the Imperial Ethiopian Air Force (IEAF) were launched in 1944, when John Robinson returned to Ethiopia, now as a full colonel of the US Army Air Force (USAAF) and together with a team of African-American aviators and technicians. Within weeks he had recruited 30 cadets from schools in Addis Ababa and



One of two Cessna AT-17 Bobcat advanced trainers, donated to Ethiopia by the USA in August 1944. (EtAF)



This was one of two little-known Avro Ansons operated by the IEAF as training aircraft and light bombers during the late 1940s. Both saw only short service in Ethiopia and were returned in 1949. (Albert Grandolini Collection)



One of the first batch of 16 SAAB B.17s delivered to Ethiopia in late 1967. The type was originally designed by the AB Svenska Järnvägsverkstäderna ('Swedish Railway Workshops Company) as a dive-bomber in the 1930s and remained in service with the IEAF until 1977. (EtAF)

Dire Dawa, and acquired two Avro Anson twin-engined training aircraft from Great Britain to form the core of the future air force. Washington then donated two Cessna trainers on 3 August of the same year, and a flying school was established at Harar Meda, with Robinson in command, together with an Egyptian pilot, Capt Sadik. Two de Havilland D.H.60 Tiger Moths, followed by various other light aircraft, were acquired in 1945, and by the next year, the Flying School had 75 students.⁶

However, because neither the USA nor the UK showed interest in seriously expanding the IEAF, and because of quarrels between

⁶ Notable is that Swedish (Forsgren, SAFO No. 20) and Ethiopian sources differ over the base of the IEAF's Flying School: the Swedish state Harar Meda near Addis Ababa, while the Ethiopians insist this was actually stationed at Dire Dawa, a town of around 70,000 where a major army base and supply depot were subsequently established too.



While the newly-established IEAF was re-equipped with aircraft of Swedish origin, the Ethiopian Army obtained CKD AH IVb light tanks from Czechoslovakia, armed with two Skoda 7,92mm machine guns. Ordered in June 1948 and delivered by ship to Djibouti and then by rail to Addis Ababa in 1950, these vehicles with a crew of two remained in service until the early 1980s. At least a company of them saw combat service during the Ogaden War. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

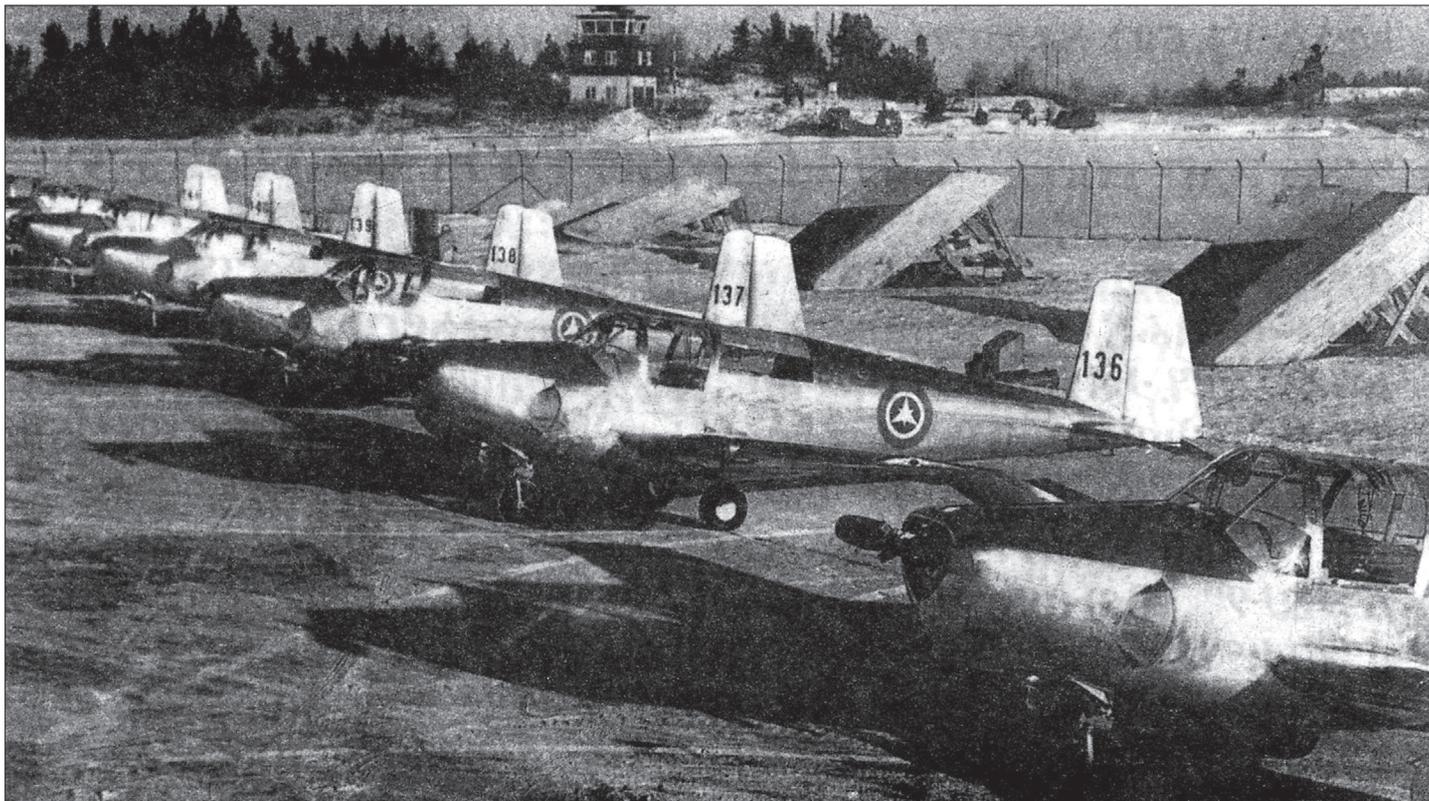


Except for US-made aircraft, Ethiopia also acquired 15 M8 Greyhound 6x6 light armored cars armed with 37mm cannons and two machine guns in 1955, 15 in 1956 and 15 of the M20 variant in 1959. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

Robinson and one of Swedes that worked with the air force, Count Carl-Gustav von Rosen, the American was asked to leave in early 1946. Signalling the start of the 'Swedish period' in the history of the Ethiopian Air Force, Selassie then appointed von Rosen as a new chief of the Flying School and the C-in-C of the fledgling IEAF.⁷

Planning to establish a force of three squadrons (including one bomber, one fighter and one combined reconnaissance/bomber unit) and a flight school, von Rosen was soon reinforced by a group of 19 Swedish instructors that arrived in Addis Ababa on 19 January 1946 and helped to organise the Cadet School. These units were

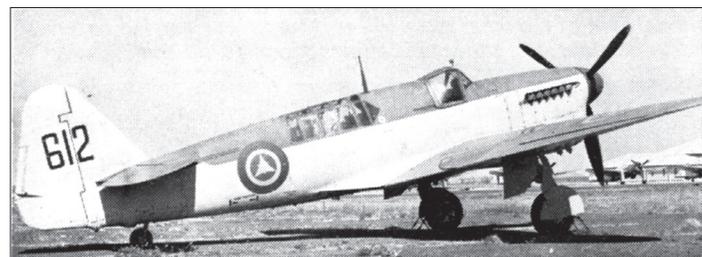
⁷ Author's notes, based on various publications specialised in aeronautical affairs. Von Rosen later became prominent for his actions in Biafra in 1968. He returned to Ethiopia in 1977, this time pioneering the use of MFI-15 aircraft for air drops of food supplies during a catastrophic famine. He was killed in an attack by Somali guerrillas.



Pre-delivery photograph of seven SAAB 91 Safirs, which served as primary trainers until 1973. No less than 48 were purchased by Ethiopia during the 1950s. (EtAF)

to be equipped primarily with Swedish aircraft, including Svenska Aeroplan Aktiebolaget (SAAB) 91 Safir training aircraft, SAAB B.17 fighter-bombers and FFVS J.22 fighters.⁸ Furthermore, he recognised that the existing Lidetta airport outside the capital was insufficient for planned future operations. Therefore, a decision was taken to construct a new air base at the race course in Bishoftu, situated near the former Italian experimental agricultural station and a railway station on the Addis Ababa to Djibouti railway. Working together, Ethiopian cadets and their Swedish instructors constructed the new airfield on time for the arrival of the first six SAAB 91 Safir training aircraft on 24 December 1946. Nearly a year later, on 10 November 1947, Swedish pilots also delivered the first 16 SAAB B.17 fighter-bombers to Bishoftu, and subsequently the Flying School moved there. The new air base was officially inaugurated on 20 May 1947, although this ceremony was formally repeated for Emperor Selassie on 13 November of the same year, when the flight school was officially inaugurated. This event also marked the graduation ceremony of the first generation of Ethiopian pilots, technicians and radio operators, as well as the official introduction to the service of the recently delivered aircraft obtained from Sweden, and the naming of the air base as ‘Harar Meda’ (‘Harar Field’). Curiously, Harar Meda soon became colloquially known as ‘Debre Zeit’, after a nearby town constructed around the time to house the families of IEAF personnel.⁹

Except for contracting Swedes to help establish the air force during the 1950s and 1960s, the Ethiopians also recruited British, Norwegians, French, Indians and Israelis to help organise, train



One of the Fairey Firefly FR.Mk 1s operated by the attack squadron of the IEAF in the 1950s and early 1960s. (EtAF)

and advise a small navy. Israeli advisers conducted special infantry training and provided advisers for the Frontier Guard (responsible for monitoring the border to Somaliland) and the Commando Police. West Germany provided equipment for police field units, while India helped with the training of the Imperial Bodyguard and the establishment of the faculty of the Military Academy at Harar.¹⁰ Ethiopian officers attended military schools in the USA, UK and Yugoslavia, while a volunteer battalion of the Ethiopian Army, consisting of the Imperial Bodyguards, and better known as the ‘Kagnev Battalion’, was deployed in Korea together with UN forces, where they fought with distinction.

Safirs and Fireflies

Relations with Sweden remained crucial for the development of the IEAF in the 1950s. Not only did the air force remain under command of a Swedish officer, but it continued purchasing Swedish aircraft, partially because of a high attrition rate. This resulted in Ethiopia eventually acquiring a total of 48 Safirs (between them 9 Lycoming-powered SAAB 91Bs) and 46 SAAB B.17A light bombers (a few of which were locally modified to the Sk.17A training variant, and one of which was assembled in Ethiopia from spare parts).¹¹

⁸ Forsgren, SAFO No. 20, p. 23.

⁹ *Local History in Ethiopia*, released by the Nordic Africa Institute website, accessed June 2009; Forsgren cites that as of 13 Nov. 1947, the IEAF consisted of sixteen B. 17 As, five Safirs, four Tiger Moths, two Cessna UC-78s, and one Avro XIX.

¹⁰ Dupuy et al., p. 207.

¹¹ Forsgren, SAFO No. 20, p. 24.