



IN THE SERVICE OF THE LORD'S ARMY



National Memory & Peace Documentation Centre

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Written by Theo Hollander

“Exorcism of the civilian mind”

Synopsis

BACK COVER:

“At the age of fourteen, I had killed more people than some of the most notorious serial killers that the world has ever known. But that doesn't mean that I am an evil man, or that I am mentally ill. I never killed anyone out of pure cruelty or because of sheer hatred. I killed them because I had to. I had no other choice. It was either them or me. Or at least, this is what I keep on telling myself...”

In the service of the Lord's army tells the story of how the war in northern Uganda changed my life forever. It will show how, at the age of twelve, I was transformed from cheerful child into a cold-blooded killer in the so-called army of the Lord, otherwise known as the Lord's Resistance Army.”

Summary:

“In the service of the Lord's army” is a biography about Norman Okello; a young man from northern Uganda who was abducted by the Lord's Resistance Army at the age of twelve and forced to become one of its harbingers of death. This book will tell a true story of epic proportions, about severe hardships and extreme strength and resilience in events that happened in a strange but real world about fifteen years ago.

The book tells the tale of how one of the most brutal rebel groups in the world changed the life of one individual irreversibly. It will show how a young child was able to cope in this hostile environment and navigate through all the hardships. It shows the constant struggles that Norman had with himself trying to keep his humanity, while it is the very loss of humanity and the will to survive at all cost that makes him human. This book will tell about Norman's life and the extraordinary events in which he was directly involved. From his idyllic early childhood which reveals this part of Africa in its full beauty, to his combat, abduction and punishment missions which can be added to the blackest pages of human history.

Chapter 10

I was growing frustrated with the harsh life in Aru. I was constantly fighting hunger and fatigue, and continually searching for new ways to get enough to eat. I was sick and tired of the constant scratching from lice and threats of diseases. I prayed to get out of this shithole, even if it meant that I had to go back to Uganda and participate in more awful massacres. I was in Aru for about one and a half months when my prayers were answered.

One evening a large truck entered our camp. The moment it stopped at the gate of Control Altar I was selected together with six other boys in my artillery unit to go to the truck and wait for instructions. We had no idea what was about to happen, but we shared a feeling of excitement. At the truck we saw that a group of fourteen other people had already been selected and they also waited for instructions. I recognized most of them and I knew that they were all experienced combatants, just like the six of us. The moment we arrived we were all lined up and a high ranking commander, a colonel, gave us our instructions. It was explained that we were selected to go and pick enough bamboo to fill the entire truck. Because of the potential risk of ambush, we had to be well armed and focused on the bushes surrounding the road as we traveled.

We all felt that there was some deception in this story. Using a truck to collect bamboo was a good idea, but why would some of the most experienced warriors be sent out in the evening to collect bamboo, on a truck that

probably came from our Arab allies? It didn't really make sense. Despite this, in the LRA we never questioned an order, and anyway I was happy that I could escape the boring life in Aru for at least one evening.

Just before we left we each received an extra magazine of bullets and we set off in the truck. We were going in a northern direction, away from a perfectly good bamboo forest that was only a half-day walk southeast from Aru. The road was very bumpy and after we had traveled for several hours I was convinced that the bamboo story was just a cover-up. We remained alert in case of an ambush as instructed, but nothing happened on the journey. In the middle of the night, the truck finally came to a standstill and we were told to get out.

By this time we were very close to Juba and we could see that many people still lived in the area, although, just like northern Uganda, it was in the middle of a warzone. We were sent into a big stone building, where there were many beds lined up and allowed a few hours of sleep. In the morning upon arising we were given some food. It was not as much as that we hoped for, but much more than we were used to eating in Aru. During the breakfast we talked amongst ourselves, each of us wondering what we were doing there. We were in some kind of military barrack, sharing breakfast with Arabs so it was clear that we were not there to collect bamboo. Otherwise the exact reason that we were there was a mystery.

It was clear that this was an Arab barrack, but there were also some commanders of the LRA present as well, including a colonel. After the

breakfast we were given an orientation to our new surroundings. They showed us the way to the showers, to the toilet and other areas to find things we needed. Throughout the entire introduction they never informed us of the purpose of our mission here.

For me, I just assumed that we had merely been shifted to another location and I didn't worry about it. The conditions in this camp were far better than the conditions in Aru. Here we could wash ourselves, there were decent toilets, real beds to sleep in, and most importantly, there was adequate food. After a tour of the facilities they ordered us to sit under a large tree. The LRA colonel came to us and began to explain to us why we were really there.

- "You boys might think that you are tough and dangerous. Do you think that you are a tough soldier?"

He was talking directly to me.

- "Sir, yes Sir"

The commander looked at me and then his gaze went to the rest of the group.

- We will teach you what it is to be a tough soldier. What I see in all of you is that you still have the mind of the civilian and because of that you are all weaker than me."

- This will change soon. In this place we will take the civilian mind away from you and you shall receive the training that will make you elite amongst our ranks. We will start today with the exorcism of your civilian spirit!"

We were taken to the woods surrounding the camp where we were ordered to remove our shirts. We were forced to sing songs while clapping. We were ordered to sing louder

and louder and to clap faster. We could sing any song that we liked the most. Those who wanted a Christian song sang a Christian song, those who wanted to sing a traditional song sang a traditional song, it didn't matter to our leaders. I choose the latter, an Acholi song that is sung when the warrior dance is performed. Others sang their own favorites. We did this for the entire day, and well into the night. Whenever our voices weakened they would slap our face and we would sing much louder again. At night, fires were lit and we continued singing and singing.

Initially, the singing didn't make much sense to me, but after a while I entered a trance. It was as if we were dreaming. We were clapping and singing in the here and now, but our spirits were somewhere else. I felt myself becoming completely enraged as the last remaining bits of my civilian spirit were fighting against a force that was much stronger. I could sense when my civilian spirit was finally driven away and the remaining humanity was squeezed out of my body. Slowly the spirit of the soldier was instilled in its place.

This was their way to force out the civilian mind, and it worked. For three nights in a row, we did this continuously, from eight in the evening to six in the morning. Bare-chested, we clapped and sang and danced our songs. They didn't allow us a single minute of rest or sleep, nor could we show any signs of fatigue. The end of a thick rope was kept in the ashes of the raging fire. Whenever someone yawned or dozed off, the burning end of this rope was pressed against their chest. But most of us never felt any fatigue. We were becoming too angry and aggressive to feel tired, as our spirits were transformed. I was one of

them. In the three nights, I was not even burned once.

By the end of the first night, my spirit was already transformed. I was angry and aggressive, without even knowing why. The others seemed to be angry as well. It was well into the morning before the clapping and singing stopped .

Then we started to march. In this infuriated state of mind we all marched much faster than we were supposed to. Everyone was just marching on their own, not minding the rest of the group. This sloppiness was quickly beaten out of us. The language in which they spoke to us was a mixture between English, Kiswahili and Acholi.

- "Left-right left-right left-right.... STOP....Numa Joka.....left-right left-right left-right."

We each marched with a club to represent our guns. Our real guns were stored in the armoury. During the marching there was a lot of caning. Anyone who joked would be caned seriously. Those who marched out of line with the others would receive caning. If someone didn't lift their legs high enough, they would receive caning. Anyone who was caned, would then have to perform hot exercise, which meant that they had to spin around a bottle and then run while carrying a heavy load. None of us escaped these punishments. For three days non-stop we marched the entire day and clapped and sang the whole night through. By the second day many of us were getting tired, but we were allowed no excuses to

dodge the training. The worse we performed during the marching, the more punishment we received, there was just no escaping it. By the end of the third day we had all received such a severe mental and physical battering that surely the civilian inside of us was killed.

In the weeks that passed the marching continued, and we entered into arms training. We always marched in the morning upon arising and afterwards we ate something. In the warmest hours of the day when the sun was very hot we would march some more, while the commander just sat in the shade of a tree. After the second march we received arms training. It started with the small guns, like AK47 and AK49, also in addition to other weapons such as KPMs, SMGs and the M-4 among others. We learned how to take all the guns apart and reassemble them. We learned how to clean and shoot the guns. I always liked the target practice the most.

This training went on for a very long time, and we learned all that we had to know about almost every light gun in the world. We were constantly tested on how fast we could assemble the AK and we continued to improve. We learned the different sounds of the gun and the range that each gun had. We learned that every type of gun has strong points and weaknesses. Some guns would jam easily, others were not very precise or didn't have a long range, and others were difficult to clean and needed much more attention and care. The simplest and the best gun remained the AK 47 and the AK 49.

At times we were woken up in the middle of the night for a long march, other nights they

allowed us to sleep. We would sometimes be woken up by gunfire nearby and then our instructors would come in and ask us what the type of gun it was that had just been fired. Anyone who didn't know received heavy caning or was forced to do push-ups the whole night through.

During this time the twenty of us in training really got to know each other. Whenever we had spare time we joked together, and bragged that we were now the best soldiers in the entire LRA since we had received this training; and it was probably true. This was elite training, and very few of our colleagues would ever learn more about military affairs that we did in those months with the Arabs.

After gun training for almost a month, we moved another step forwards with artillery training. This was the main reason for which we were sent here. The marching still continued, that never stopped, but instead of gun training in the afternoon, we now received bomb training. It started very simply with the hand grenade. We learned all that we could know about different types of grenades. There is the grenade that is stuck with a little bit of timber. On the timber there is a cap that you can screw off and then a cord that can be pulled. After pulling this cord there is a delay of several seconds to throw it away before it explodes. There was another type of grenade with a pin that is pulled out and a handle that is pressed. The moment it is pressed there is a hissing of air coming out. If the handle is pressed three times the grenade becomes armed, and it must be thrown quickly. Another type of grenade only has to be pressed once, before it is armed and must

be tossed. They showed us another grenade that was designed especially for ambush. The fuse of the grenade was connected to a taut rope that could be placed on a small road. If someone stepped on the rope, the fuse would be activated and it would explode immediately.

They showed us pictures of the insides of hand grenade and what exactly happens once the pin is pulled. Then we learned how to throw the various grenades, and with every type the procedure was a little bit different. We had to see how they rolled and how to make sure that the target was destroyed with just one throw. The training in hand grenades alone took us almost a full week.

After the hand granate week we continued with landmines. There were many different manufacturers and brands. It is like phones. You have Nokia, Samsung, Erickson and Motorola. They are all phones and they all do the same things, but they all look different and they have different features. These landmines, however, could all be categorized into two main types. There were those intended for people, the personnel landmines, and those intended for vehicles. This wasn't a size thing. Some of the really small mines where actually meant to blow up big trucks, while some of the really big ones were just meant for people.

All the mines had two components that were essential to make them dangerous; the mine itself, and the fuse. Without the fuse the landmine was harmless and we could actually dance on it, but the moment the fuse was installed it could not be stepped on without exploding. The top of the mine could be re-

moved, and with most mines there was a hole in the middle. This is where the fuse was put to complete the explosive device.

We also learned the best places to plant them, how to dig a hole in the ground, and how to disguise them so that no one would see them until they said bang. We learned how to arm the landmines and how to disarm them, even when there was somebody already standing on them. It was essential that we knew each type of mine, especially when arming or disarming them, because they all worked a little bit differently. With some landmines there was a white cord that could be put in to disarm them, but first the top had to be lifted. The mines for the vehicles basically worked the same as the other ones. These mines often had a white cord that could be used to disarm them. This training was critical since disarming landmines was very dangerous work.

After landmines we received training for the RPG, Rocket Propelled Grenades. The RPGs are very simple weapons to assemble and to fire. Once again there were two different types, the short range RPG and the long range RPG. Otherwise they both worked the same way. The RPG also had two different types of bombs. There was the anti-tank grenade, which we used for blowing up vehicles and tanks. These were also very good for blowing up buildings. Then there was the anti-personnel grenade. This grenade made a very big explosion with lots of bomb splinters, so that it could kill many people at once. Both grenades were armed in the same way. They had three parts, the booster, the sustainer motor, and the warhead, which is what

we called the bomb of the RPG. It was very easy to arm them. The most difficult aspect about firing the RPG was the strong backfire. The younger soldiers like me had to be especially careful, because the backfire could easily push us over. So we had to make sure that we knew how to sit or stand correctly before firing. Because the RPG was very simple in its use, the training went quickly. It was completed in less than a week.

After this training was over we moved on to all kinds of other weapons. First we got to know everything about the B-10, which was a type of bazooka, only bigger. It required a tripod, so that we could fire it with precision. In the LRA we had only one B-10, which was located in Control Altar. This weapon could easily destroy a helicopter. We were also trained on something we called a 'Silencer'. This was a very short gun that could shoot ten small bombs at a row. This weapon wasn't very precise, as it had no targeting device, but it was very effective if the enemy was packed together. After the first day of training with the Silencer I regretted that we hadn't possessed such weapon during the assault on Palataka.

The next training in mortars turned out to be important because in the year to come I would use the mortar many times. The mortar was a very common weapon in the LRA, as we had many of them. It was also very deadly. For more than two weeks we were trained in the use of mortars, as they were much more complicated than the RPG.

With mortars, there were three different types. These were the 60 mm, the 81mm and the 82mm mortars. The 60 mm mortar was

the most common one and it was portable. With each mortar there were also three main parts; the support, the barrel, and the base plate. We learned how to adjust the barrel and how to aim. We learned to assemble the mortar in a manner of seconds, fire two shorts and then disassemble it, move a couple of hundred meters, and do the whole thing over again. This was very essential because in battle you could never leave a mortar in the same place for too long. Once a mortar is fired it leaves a telltale smoke that the enemy can see and learn your exact position.

After mortar training, we moved on to something called 'fourteen.' Fourteen was a very big artillery piece with an adjustment wheel. This was a medium ranged weapon which meant that it had a range of over several kilometers. This was the type of weapon that was used against us during the assault of Palataka so I experienced first hand how dangerous it was. The Fourteen had four barrels and a wheel to adjust the aim. We were trained in this weapon for almost a week, even though the LRA didn't even possess this type of device. After this training, a few more big artillery pieces followed, but this training was a bit irrelevant because the LRA didn't possess all these big arms. We were a guerilla army and we didn't use those very heavy big guns, because they compromise the mobility. This is what our colonel told us.

Throughout the artillery training, which took several months, we continued our daily marching. We trained for marching with heavier loads all the time. After we were very proficient in marching, we moved on

to running, even for running, there were standard prescribed ways of doing it. Every day between ten in the morning and four in the afternoon, we had to either march or run. We were well fed, so we able to muster the energy to do all the marching and the running, but it was really tough. There were also frequent night exercises. We could never expect a full night's sleep because they could wake us up at any time for more training.

Twice a week we were allowed to take a shower, which was a big improvement when compared to Aru. In the training there were only the few Acholi selected from the various brigades, plus a few commanders. Everyone else who received the training were Arabs. We were also by far the youngest, but that didn't mean that we were weaker than the rest. Among ourselves we established good relations. Whenever we were not training and praying, we would joke around, laughing about things that happened during the training and bragging about who was the best soldier. Although the training was very, very heavy, I did prefer it to the life of hunger that we suffered in Aru.

After the artillery training was over, they started to train us in the ways of the guerilla. These were the last two months of the training. We were trained in how to command and how to ensure the obedience of those we commanded. The next training was in the tactics of war. For this we learned to use the alphabet for communication. Whenever we found ourselves in an ambush and we were surrounded from all sides, than we had to use the O. Within the O formation, all the normal privates would be at the outskirts of the O, defending, while

the artillery and the command center would be in the middle. When we were conducting ambushes ourselves, we would move in a C formation. The C formation was perfect for surrounding enemy barracks. The tips of the C would move around the barrack blocking the escape routes, while the main body would be in the middle of the C and they would start the assault. I realized that this was exactly the way how we had attacked Parongo, leaving only one very dangerous exit route for the enemies in between the tips of the C. We learned that with open wars, we should either use the I, L or V formations. With V the artillery was in the tip of the V, making it almost impossible for the enemy to target, while in the I and the L formation the artillery would be mobile. After all the alphabet strategies, we learned how to recognize the strategies of our enemy and how to respond to each of them. They taught us how best to defend ourselves against mobile units and even against helicopters and fighting jets. With every new lesson, with the exception of very dangerous maneuvers like disarming a landmine, they always explained things to us just twice before we had to do it ourselves. If we failed the test, we would be caned. If we passed the test well we would get additional food rations. This is the way they trained us, using the cassava and the stick.

Although it was impossible to keep exact track of the time, my estimate is that the training lasted about six months. Every Friday and Sunday we had our usual prayer sessions and these days we rarely trained. On all other days we were trained for at least twelve hours on a day. There were very few artillery devices remaining on which we hadn't been trained and we knew all about the guerilla tactics. By then we had developed great confidence that the LRA could not be defeated. We could sustain attacks and we might get temporarily weakened, but by following 'the way of the guerilla' we could never be wiped out. We were now well-trained combatants invigorated with the spirit of a soldier.

The training ended as abruptly as it had started. They had succeeded in their goal to kill the civilian spirit in us. By the time the training was over I had little in common with a normal civilian. I felt aggressive, ready to kill almost anyone and very eager to put my new training to the test. I was ready. Towards the end of the training I began to yearn for some action. I had enough of the training and I got the picture. I was actually looking forward to going back to Aru, because I knew that my new skills would not be wasted fetching water or collecting bamboo.

About National Memory and Peace Documentation Centre (NMPDC)

The National Memory and Peace Documentation Centre (NMPDC), a collaborative initiative of the Refugee Law Project, School of Law Makerere University and the Kitgum District Local Government.

The NMPDC is located in Kitgum district town council in Northern Uganda an area ravaged by over two decades of armed conflict and is struggling to recover in the post-conflict era.

As a country emerging from conflict, Uganda remains highly divided, with a weak sense of national identity, low societal solidarity amongst constituencies, a lack of information and transparency about historical events and little or no accountability for past wrong doing and acknowledgement for suffering. Uganda has a fragile democracy where unaddressed divisions and grievances can easily ignite new conflict. These deficiencies pose significant obstructions to national reconciliation, transitional justice and rule of law in the country; this is what the NMPDC aims to primarily address.

About Refugee Law Project (RLP)

The Refugee Law Project (RLP) seeks to ensure fundamental human rights for all, including; asylum seekers, refugees, and internally displaced persons within Uganda. RLP envision a country that treats all people within its borders with the same standards of respect and social justice.

For comments contact: info@refugeelawproject.org



REFUGEE LAW PROJECT

"A Centre for Justice and Forced Migrants"

School of Law, Makerere University



Plot 5 & 9 Perryman Gardens,

Old kampala,

(opp. Old Kampala Primary School)

P.o.Box 33903

+256 414 343 556

info@refugeelawproject.org

www.refugeelawproject.org

www.accsuganda.org

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Designed by Opiny shaffic with valuable input from Theo Hollander, Abigail Omojola, Dr. Chris Dolan.
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