



IN THE SERVICE OF THE LORD'S ARMY



National Memory & Peace Documentation Centre

Issue # 5

Written by Theo Hollander

“Palataka”

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 5

When I entered the camp, people were welcoming us by sprinkling water over us and giving us a few drops of water to drink. As I had walked in a complete bare landscape for the last few days, I was amazed by the amount of people in this camp and how it bustled with activity. Thousands of people were performing all kind of activities. On the perimeter of the camp I saw people digging in the gardens. There were young boys, armed to the teeth, standing guard in an elaborate system of trenches. When we entered I saw people carrying bamboo and grass. Others were sweeping their huts and carrying water. I saw one group of very young people running around the camp while they were being drilled by an older commander. I immediately realized that almost everybody was armed and that the average age of the people here was very young. I saw very young mothers carrying their guns in the one hand and their babies in the other, and hardened soldiers who weren't even eleven years old. As we advanced deeper into the camp I saw some huge stone buildings, similar to those that I had only seen before when I was in Gulu town. Not far from a large stone church I saw tanks that were manned by people who looked very different from us. Later I found out that these were Arab soldiers of the Sudanese government, which was our main ally and arms supplier. As we walked deeper into the camp I saw thousands of grass huts, all inhabited by more young and heavily armed people. I was completely amazed by the sheer size of it all.

We were led to a large open space in the

middle of the camp. Once we got there, another high commander was awaiting us. We were all lined up around him and then he started a speech. The commander introduced himself as Raska Lukwiya, a man who would later be indicted by the International Criminal Court, and he welcomed us to this camp, that he called Palataka.

- "This is Palataka, our military base and your new home. The spirit Lakwena is pleased to see that you have joined our holy movement and that you have shown yourself willing to take up arms to overthrow the tyrant who calls himself president of Uganda. You are now part of the Lord's army, that will create a Uganda which will be just and where the Acholi will be supreme; a country which shall be justly ruled by the Ten Commandments. God has chosen us to lead his army and rid the world of all evil, starting in Uganda. You are a soldier of the Army of the Lord now."

I don't remember his exact words, but it was something like that. He lectured us in a way as if we all had joined the LRA voluntarily and that we would want nothing else than receiving the honor of fighting for the LRA, or the "Army of the Lord," as he called it. After his political propaganda speech he told us about the rules in Palataka.

- "The spirit knows you and he knows your deepest thoughts. Those who only think about escaping will suffer the consequences. You are never allowed to leave the camp without specific permission. You are not allowed to take a shit without our commission. Every Friday and every Sunday you are expected to attend mass, unless you are specifically or-

dered to do something else.”

This speech continued for almost twenty minutes. All this time I was barely able to remain conscious. I had just survived the worst march of my life and I only wanted to lie down and rest. Yet, this was not to be. After Raska told us the many rules of Palataka, other commanders came and started to do a selection. Those of us who looked strong were put into the four different brigades that the LRA had previously formed. The weaker ones were selected to become bodyguards of the lower ranking commanders, such as captains or first lieutenants. I was among twenty who were selected to join the support of Stockry brigade, the brigade that I would serve for the rest of my stay in captivity.

After the selection we were given to the artillery commander, who brought us to the parading ground of Stockry brigade. Here we received another lecture from our direct commander, a lieutenant-major this time.

- “Don’t you ever try to escape because the spirit will get you and you will die an awful death. - Obedience is key. If you don’t obey me, you will disobey your own life. - We want you to be active all the time. Everything that you are ordered to do, you have to do it in full spirit. - Never take your own initiative. If I catch you doing something which I didn’t order you to do, you will die.”

My mind started to buzz with all these new rules. There were basically rules for every thing. I knew that, in order to survive, I should better learn these rules quickly, but by the end of his speech I wasn’t able to fo-

cus anymore. During the past four days I only had a few hours of sleep in total, and I was utterly exhausted. The lieutenant kept on talking. I could clearly see that he was happy to have several new recruits that he could boss around. As his monologue continued I tried extremely hard to hold up the appearance that I was listening, but in truth, I was on the verge of collapsing. When I was barely able to remain standing any longer, I finally heard the words I had been waiting for.

- “After one week your military training begins; until that time you will have a week of rest. So now I order you to go to your huts and sleep”.

I had never been so happy to oblige an order from the LRA as this one. We were guided to our huts by a senior soldier. I had a hut which I shared with three others, two senior soldiers and one other fresh recruit. As soon as he showed me which bed was mine, I really collapsed. I think that I was asleep, even before I hit the sack.

Long before the dawn the next day our commander woke us up. He gave us a few minutes to get to the parading ground where we were ordered to march again. My feet were still swollen from the day before and every step I took hurt, but I didn’t complain. I wanted to make an impression on my new commander and I figured that the best way to do this was by being obedient, and to excel in everything I did. Survival in the LRA meant that I had to adapt to their ways and do as they did. As we began marching, the rest of Palataka started to wake up. All around me people came out of their huts.

As for everybody else in the camp, the day started with lining up. The unit commanders would first have a look at everyone to see if he was missing any faces; then they counted, everybody and if there were none missing, we would start the morning march. It wasn't until we were nearly done marching that hundreds of other groups started their morning marches. Obviously, our commander had a thing for waking up early. We marched for several hours and then, we were given different tasks. As we came in with so many new recruits, new huts had to be built. So on that first day many of the new recruits in my section were led to the bush to collect wood and to cut grass for the huts. Others started digging holes on the places where the huts were to be built. At around noon my section commander called me:

- "Kadogo, I want you to collect all garbage around our compound and sweep the floor."

I was given the easiest task and I did my job to the best of my abilities. When I was done I was instructed to assist the others with building the huts. Maybe it was because I was small, but in the first week they never let me to do any of the really hard work. I was ordered to fetch water, clean the compound, fetch some more water, bring the commander some food and clean the compound again.

Palataka was on the foot of a green mountain and to collect water I just had to go downhill where there was a stream, which was only a short walk from the outer pe-

rimeter of the camp. The first couple of times I was led by a senior soldier, but after wards I was allowed to do this on my own. On my daily walks to the stream I got a good overview of Palataka camp. I soon realized that Palataka was divided into two military base camps. On one side of Palataka there was the heavily armed military base of the Sudanese government army, and on the other side was the LRA camp. The two armies mainly lived separate from each other, but in good harmony. We traded with them and the officers especially had a lot of interactions, but junior soldiers were not allowed to interact with them. Yet, for me it was difficult to follow this order. Whenever I went to the stream I met Arabs who were also collecting water. Initially I had little contact with them, as I wasn't allowed to talk to them and didn't speak their language, but I could not keep this up for very long. I soon figured out the meaning of Salaam Aleikum and I learned to reply with Aleikum Salaam.

I think that the LRA camp was the larger of the two camps and I was continually amazed by the amount of people here. I had never seen so many people in such a small location; only market day in Gulu could compare. The LRA numbered at least five thousand soldiers, but it could easily have been double that. I had no way of counting all of them. Also the Arabs had a considerable force.

On my way to the stream each day I also got a good picture of life in Palataka camp and the activities that the people were busy doing. I saw that young soldiers were always busy digging trenches, and others held guard when there was no need to be vigilant. I would pass

the gardens where the women were digging and sowing, while they had their babies tied on their backs. I always wondered what would happen to these babies. They were born here and knew nothing about the other life that was denied them. It made me think about my own childhood, playing football with plastic garbage, telling stories about the fox, the turtle and the hyena, and herding cows with my dad. I remembered the excitement and the fun that I had when I was doing these things and realized that they would never experience any of this. Instead, by the age of ten they would probably become the most dangerous killing machines that walked the face of this earth, completely unaware of the life they could have had.

My first week there passed very slowly. For three days we worked on building huts and the fourth day we were summoned to go the assembly point of Control Atar, which was the main brigade of the LRA. It was prayer day. This was another strict rule within the LRA. Fridays and Sundays were resting days and days of prayer. Anyone who was caught doing any work on these days would be heavily caned. It was obligatory to all to be present at the sermons, and all of us happily obliged. On Friday Joseph Kony himself would come to preach to us, and on Sunday it was another commander. The sermons had many similarities to those that I had witnessed at home, but there were also differences. The similarities involved the normal things for a complete service, including a choir, altar boys, holy water, and even the blood and body of Jesus. The difference was that it was held under the open sky and that

the sermons had a very militarized nature.

At this first prayer service I was seated quite far away from Kony, but I could still hear him clearly. He started praising the Lord like we used to do in our church, but his preaching was different. It was full of military propaganda and his own personal glorification. He claimed that he was the messenger of God, a prophet who is in direct contact with God. He stated that the strength of God was mirrored by the strength of his army and by the prophet leading that army. As I looked around I saw that thousands had gathered around him. We all cheered for Kony, which was very impressive, considering that thousands upon thousands were all cheering together.

Many longed for the Friday prayers, and I also had to admit that the services were quite interesting. Kony could really talk. Not only did he talk long and loud, he also talked in a way that triggered something in me. He got me aroused and excited about our mission. When he told us that we were God's warriors, selected by the Lord himself in all his wisdom, it made me feel proud and worthy. Those moments that we were in prayer, I forgot all about my hardships and I felt as if I had a purpose; as if I mattered. It wasn't long before I started to cheer together with the thousands of others, trying to outdo some of the new recruits who sat close to me.

By the end of the week several new huts were built and I made sure that the compound was clean and free of any garbage at all times. I realized that to survive here, I had to do more than oblige; I had to excel. I quickly learned which rules were flexible and could be bro-

ken, and which were sacred. I would have to look after myself and this meant that I had to break some rules and take my own initiatives.

My first challenge of survival was a chronic lack of food. We had arrived in Palataka with more than two hundred new recruits and the gardens couldn't sustain so many new mouths to feed. This meant that food rations went down drastically and that we were all hungry. In the morning we never ate anything. We woke up, started to march, and then we went about our daily tasks. Only after we finished were we given our first and only food of the day. The food was brought by a senior soldier and the moment it came we all had to sit down and divide in groups of about ten people. We sat down in a circle around the frying pan with some beans and a pot containing watery soup. We all took a small hand of beans, beginning with the most senior soldier then proceeding to the left. We didn't just grab the beans and eat. First we waited until everybody had grabbed something, then we compared hands to see if everybody had the same amount. If somebody had too much he either had to put it back or he would be skipped the next round. When everybody was satisfied over the amount, we were allowed to eat. Then the second round followed in the same manner. The soup was divided in a similar way. We were all given a small slice of bread and again we showed each other how much we had. When everyone was satisfied, we would dip the bread in the soup and eat it. The amount of food that we were given was enough to keep us alive, but not enough to give us strength, so we were all growing

weaker.

However, the biggest challenge to our survival wasn't hunger, but disease, which was, of course, not entirely unrelated to hunger. Our constant state of hunger affected our immune system and we had to be very careful not to fall sick. There were all kind of diseases out here, like malaria and yellow fever, but the most common forms were diarrhea and typhoid, which were especially deadly if one was weakened by a lack of food.

In that first week one of the newly recruits in my section complained about a head and stomachache in the morning. He told the commander, who we called Mzee, that he didn't feel well and asked for permission to stay in his hut. Instead of caring for this boy the Mzee gave him a terrible beating. Half way through the march the boy started puking and he fell down. With another beating he was up and running again, but by now it was clear to everyone that he wasn't pretending. When he fell over again the Mzee ordered a senior soldier to escort him to the sick bay, and this was the last time I saw him. Soon after I learned that there was no sick bay in this LRA camp. Sick bay actually meant that they would walk the afflicted person to a distance far from the camp where they would either kill you or let you die a lonely death. This ensured that the body wouldn't contaminate others.

I knew that the best way to avoid getting sick was by staying healthy and strong and I could only do this by drinking much water and replenishing my daily food rations with other sources of nutrition. Water was no problem. In Palataka there was enough water, especial-

ly for me since it was my task to fetch it. But getting enough food was a real challenge. Our rations just did not provide us the extra strength that was needed to perform rigorous daily activities. So we had to be creative, and I quickly found a way. I could see that the commanders always had enough to eat. On my marches to the water stream I found the spot where they threw away peels of potatoes and cassavas. Although it was forbidden to take these peels, I quickly learned that this was a flexible rule that could be broken to increase my survival chances. It seemed better to collect these peels and run the risk of caning, than to risk getting sick and being sent to the so-called sickbay. I taught myself how to pick the peels while no one was watching and I would hide them in my pocket instead of eating them immediately. I would take them with me to the stream and eat there when I was alone, or I would take them to my hut and eat them in the middle of night when everyone was asleep. In the first few weeks, getting this extra source of nutrition became a personal mission of mine. It helped me a lot, especially in my second and third week in Palataka, when the military training began. In the future I would learn additional ways to get more food.

On the morning of the seventh day in Palataka we were awakened even earlier than usual and told that our military training had begun. Instead of the usual marching, that morning we had to run. For training we ran to the mountain, which was located much further away than it appeared. After this, every morning started with running up and down it countless times. In the LRA nothing was ever easy. We were always pushed far

beyond our limits and that was exactly what happened during the training.

After several hours of running up and down the mountain we would start a long march, only to return to the mountain when the sun was at its peak. In the afternoon we would receive a little training in combat, including what to do if we walked into an ambush, how to advance in the style of the LRA, and how to move when making a tactical retreat. We were told that during battle LRA soldiers only lie down when they are shot dead. LRA soldiers are blessed by God and so there is no need to hide or take cover.

- "If God and the spirit believe in you and you are truly a warrior of God, bullets will just bounce off your body, so there is no need to hide".

Upon completion of the afternoon training we ate two hands full of beans and drank some watery soup. I volunteered to fetch some water so that I could collect some more peels. Afterwards we all went back to the mountain for more evening exercise. This time we were given very heavy clubs to run with, to resemble a gun.

The extra food I managed to get really helped. While everyone else was growing weaker and having more and more difficulty climbing the mountain, I was doing fine. Every day I saw people fainting out of sheer hunger and exhaustion. Whenever someone fainted the commanders would give them a beating and without a chance to recover they would be forced to rejoin the others. If they fainted again they would receive what was called

hot exercise or hot training. This could involve anything, like running up the mountain while carrying a heavy weight, or rotating twenty times around a bottle and then climbing the mountain. Whatever it entailed, it always included the mountain and more caning. If they fainted again after the hot training, they would receive what was called special caning. In this case the commander would cane them on a very specific area of the neck using the cleaning rod of the gun. The person would have to lie down and the commander would step on his head with his gum boots. Then he would cane his neck at least several times, and I promise you that it hurt. In short, it was better not to faint. I was spared all this special attention because I never fainted. I sometimes fell down from exhaustion or simply stumbled over my own legs, for which I received a mild beating, but I never fainted.

After three weeks this training came to an end and we started our first gun training. They showed us two guns and identified one as an AK-47 and the other as an AK-49.

- "Do you see the difference?"

I clearly could. The AK-49 was much bigger and it had some different features. Also the sound was different. The AK-49 had a much bigger bang. They started to explain all the parts. Slowly they took the gun apart and with each new piece they told us its name, which we had to repeat. They named each part and we had to repeat it.

- "Retainer Pin, Hammer Pin, Trigger," and so on.

After taking the gun apart we had to reassemble it again and to name the parts as we did so. Anyone who made a mistake was caned. There was always the caning. It was never as bad as the first time when they wrote my name, but still, they would make sure that it hurt and that a lesson was learned. For the next few days this exercise was repeated, until it became an integral part of our brain.

After several days we had our first and only target practice. They taught us how to hold the gun, how to aim, how to hold our breath when shooting, and finally, how to shoot. We used a big drum for target practice. The drum was a good distance away. They marked a red spot on the drum and we were supposed to hit this target. Each of us received five bullets and we were warned that we would be caned if we missed. Because we were always short on bullets, these would be the only training shots that we ever got. The next time we shot it would be for real. So I did what they had taught me. I aimed, held my breath and when my hand was steady, I shot - miss. A second shot - missed again. In all five shots I never hit the red dot on the drum, but because every single bullet did hit the drum, they deemed it good enough. I received no caning that day. Everyone else also managed to hit the drum. The last day of our training was the first in which none of us received a beating.

The day after our training was finished there was a blessing ceremony in which we were each given our own gun and both the combatant and his gun received a blessing. The ceremony was very similar to the anointing ceremony. They placed the gun in my hands, took some white stuff and drew a big heart on

my chest, followed by a cross on my body, back, lips, palms and feet. During the ceremony we were bare-chested and we clapped and sang a song about Jesus and God.

- "Jesus has saved us...". Clap... clap.....

- "Nothing is impossible to God...". Clap... clap..."

After they drew the heart and the crosses on my body they sprinkled me with holy water while they said some words of blessing. Then it was my gun's turn. It got sprinkled and it also received words of blessing. In the meantime we kept on clapping and singing.

- "Jesus has saved us...nothing is impossible to God..."

We remained bare-chested until the white stuff slowly started to absorb into our bodies. This ceremony was meant to invoke the spirit of protection in us, and somehow it really worked for me. It was during this ceremony that I started to feel a change. I actually felt the power of the spirit running through my veins. They also sprinkled my gun to invoke the spirit in the gun, so that it would not jam or malfunction when I was fighting the enemies.

The gun that I was given was an AK-47, with a bayonet fixed on it and timber at the back so that I could put it against my shoulder. This gun was also called a SMG, Sub-Machine-Gun or a short machine gun. but we

mainly called it Yugoslavia, because the guns came from Yugoslavia, or so we were told. I remember very well what they told me when they gave me the gun.

- "This is your life and this is your death. The moment you hold it, it will protect you very well. The moment you misuse it, it will mean your death. If you ever lose this gun, you have to die. If you protect it, it will protect you".

Afterwards they gave me four full magazines, and in addition two grenades, and the tools for cleaning the gun. We were all told that we had to memorize the number of the gun. The number meant that the gun was ours and that remembering the number created a bond between the soldier and his gun. Till this day, I still remember the nine digit number of my gun, a figure that I will never forget.

When they gave me the gun I liked it so much. I was always holding the gun proudly. Although I didn't fire it, I carried it everywhere and never left it behind. When I went for a long call, I would take it. When I went for a short call, I would also take it. My colleagues did not always do that. They would often just hang it in a tree or put it on top of a hut, but not me. From the day I received my gun till the day I was arrested, my gun was never further than a few meters away from me. Only much later did I ever consider that this gift that I received could eventually cause my death.

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.

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