



IN THE SERVICE OF THE LORD'S ARMY



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Written by Theo Hollander

“My life as a soldier”

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 6

The day after the ceremony was over we were sent on our first military test. We were told that we were soldiers now, and the only way to test our abilities was in active combat. We were being sent to attack five Sudanese villages and come back with lots of food. The moment they announced the mission I was filled with excitement. Something had happened to me during the ceremony; I really felt like a soldier now. And although I had reluctantly killed before, this time I felt eager to do so. I told myself that I would be the first to kill an enemy.

Just minutes after the mission was announced, we set out and walked for several hours. We were slowly descending from our higher altitude, and the landscape was becoming dryer. After numerous hours of walking, we were finally ordered to stop. The commander told us that we had several targets and that our group would be split up so that each group would attack a separate target. There were five Sudanese villages in this area and we would be attacking all of them. My group was under the command of a lieutenant called Njogo. We consisted of a few experienced soldiers and about fifty new recruits; many of us eagerly awaiting our first battle.

Some twenty minutes after we split up we reached the perimeter of the village. The moment I saw the first villagers, the commander and several others in the front of our group started to shoot their guns and for half a minute the villager's guns were firing back at us. I had been ordered to defend

the rear of the group, so when the fighting started I was the furthest away from the gun battle. Immediately I rushed to the front of our group, but by the time I got there the gunfight was already over. The villagers quickly realized that they were dealing with the LRA and knew all too well that we wouldn't be deterred that easily. Just the term LRA, or more precisely, Olum Olum, which was how the Acholi's from Sudan called us, was enough to spread panic through the local communities that were within walking distance of Palataka. Within seconds, the villagers made a run for it, leaving us with months of food supplies. We were ordered to go into the village and take as much foodstuff as we could carry. I grabbed some cassavas, a bag full of sesame seed and some eggs that were still warm from the hen. I don't know if the hen also fled or if someone else took it, but by the time I entered the hut it was already gone. After everything was fully loaded we marched back to Palataka. We completed the mission without sustaining a single injury.

After we came back from the test, my life started to improve a little. I was still under many restrictions and I was still hungry as we received very little of all the food that we looted, but now I could at least move with the senior soldiers and converse and laugh with them. We were all soldiers now. In my first month in Palataka, I had never conversed with anyone. I listened to the commands they gave and only replied with "yes sir," or "yes teacher" – "Laphony" as we used to call our commanders, but I never had a real conversation. New recruits weren't allowed to talk too much. But now, I had the freedom to speak more freely and also to move around more freely; although I

was never allowed to move too far, and always required a clear purpose as to why I was moving to a certain position.

I believe that it was during the ceremony that followed my training that my transformation into a soldier began. It was as if the civilian in me was dying, and in its place a guerrilla was awakened. I could feel that the spirit had invoked something in me. I started to really believe in Kony's Friday prayers and I began to behave like a soldier. I became very aggressive, especially to other new recruits. Occasionally, I witnessed a brutal execution of someone who had tried to escape, and I wasn't as horrified by it as I was when I witnessed my first killing. I started to see it as normal; I even started to believe my commander when he said that they deserved it. I also grew used to all the caning, and as time passed I stopped caring about human lives altogether. I could kill someone in cold blood without giving a thought to the life that I had just terminated. The only life that was still sacred for me was my own.

To give an example of how my behavior had changed, I remember one day, not very long after the ceremony, that we went to collect bamboo to build a hut. We had to walk a long distance to collect this bamboo, as it didn't grow near our camp, and during this walk, there was a colleague who began disturbing me by making fun of my size.

- "Look at this pathetic little soldier. Looking all tough and angry. Hey you there, Kadogo, I bet you are really struggling to carry that big gun of yours aren't you, kiddo".

He thought he could get away with it because he was older and bigger and a little bit more senior than me, but he was wrong. When he harassed me for a second time I punched him to the ground with the butt of my gun and put the barrel against his head. I told him I would shoot him. I even started to remove his clothes and his gun. I would have killed this boy and walked away without even considering the human life at stake. The only reason I didn't was because another colleague intervened. I don't know what came over me and I certainly cannot explain it, but this is what happened to me in the LRA. Before, I would have just ignored the insults, but not anymore.

This is what the spirit did to us. This is how a primary school teacher turns into one of the most brutal commanders. This is how innocent young abductees return to their families one day and execute every single last of them, while smiling. The mind doesn't work in the same way anymore. It was the spirit now that was working in me. The spirit made me become aggressive and ruthless. At a certain point I was just angry all the time, even though I didn't know the reason of my anger.

I think it was for this reason that my commanders started to see potential in me. Increasingly, I was given tasks to command and supervise others. Usually, these were new recruits who just come in and lacked military training, but sometimes it was other soldiers who were more senior than me. I always treated them badly, especially the new recruits. I caned them brutally for minor mistakes and I constantly threatened to kill them. I think that if those people were to see me today, they would still fear and hate me. But at that time,

I didn't care. It felt good giving out orders. I really liked the power that I had over others.

- "Do this, do that.....if you refuse, I kill you".

My section commander observed this change in me and I think that he started to like me a little. Sometimes he would call me over and compliment me on my behavior, explaining that with more effort I could even reach up to his rank one day. We actually started to converse quite often. It was during these conversations that he told me a bit about himself and the history of the LRA in Sudan. He too had been abducted by the LRA, but not as a child. He was one of the people in the LRA that had been abducted when he was already in his early thirties. Because of his older age, we always called him Mzee, a respectful Swahili word for an older person.

Back in the days before he was abducted he had been a history teacher at a primary school somewhere near Anaka. He told me that the Ugandan government officials had constantly harassed him, and that the government had completely marginalized the people of the North, especially the Acholi's. When he was abducted in '91, he was so angry at the Ugandan government that he didn't even mind being in the LRA. He believed that the LRA was fighting a just war. I don't know how he turned from somebody who educated young people into somebody who tortured and killed youngsters, but within four years he had advanced to the position of lieutenant-major and was

among the most ruthless commanders of the LRA. He told me that sometimes he felt sorry for what they did to the young children, but that the end justified the means. In this case the end result would be a just society in which the Acholis would reign supreme.

In addition to giving me advice on military matters, he also taught me about the ideology of the LRA. He told me stories about the early days of the war and how Joseph Kony came to Sudan.

- "You know, this whole war started with the betrayal of Museveni against Tito Okello, the Acholi president of Uganda. Ever since Museveni won the presidency by a coup d'état, he has been out to destroy the Acholis. That is why the UNLA, a rebel movement made up out of former government soldiers and Alice Lakwena's Holy Spirit Movement, started the rebellion against this false government."

I enjoyed listening to these stories, at least as much as he liked telling them to me, so he continued.

- "Do you know the story of Alice Lakwena and her journey to Paraa?"

- "I heard my parents talk about it one day sir, but I remember it only vaguely." I replied.

At this answer, he slapped me in the face really hard, scolding me that I should be ashamed of myself for not knowing the origin of the LRA insurgency now that I was completely embroiled in it.

- "Then let me tell you the story, boy. It was in 1985 that an Acholi woman called Alice Auma,

became possessed with the spirit of an Italian soldier called Lakwena. It was this spirit that ordered Alice to go to Paraa in the National Park to hold a court with the animals and ask who was responsible for all the bloodshed in Uganda. The spirit Lakwena asked the animals if they were responsible for all the bloodshed, but they denied their role into all of it. Instead, all the animals showed their wounds to Alice; wounds which were clearly inflicted by humans. Next the spirit ordered Alice to go to Murchison Falls, where she spoke to the water. The moment the Spirit Lakwena started talking, the waterfall actually stopped flowing. Lakwena asked the waterfall who was responsible for the killing and the bloodshed and the waterfall replied that it was the two legged animals who threw their brothers in the water. Next the spirit Lakwena ordered Alice to go to Mount Kilak, in Opit. She told the mountains that God had sent her to ask the mountain who was responsible for all the theft in the world. The mountain replied by saying that he had gone nowhere and that he hadn't stolen anyone's children. Instead, the mountain blamed the people who came to him asking him to kill and steal from the people."

- "God gave Alice the Spirit Lakwena and bestowed his blessings on her to be victorious in her fight. When Alice was later defeated in Jinja, due to the unfaithfulness of her followers, the Spirit Lakwena passed from Alice to Joseph Kony, and now he is continuing the battle that she started."

My commander told me more about the war that Alice Lakwena fought against the government, including how the UNLA betrayed

the Acholis, and the early beginnings of the LRA. He told me about terrible massacres that the Acholi soldiers had executed in a region called the Luwero Triangle, causing the soldiers to rise against the new government. Although my parents had also told me bits about the history of my country, I understood very little of it from them and from my commander. My commander probably noticed my confused expression because he told me that I didn't need to know about the politics. I was a soldier and I was just expected to execute orders.

Several weeks later the commander called me over again and once more we started to converse. I asked the commander how the LRA came into Sudan and he told me the whole story.

- "You have to know that Palataka is a place which is also inhabited by Acholis, but by the Acholis of Sudan. They are the same tribe and they speak the same language as we do. The only difference is that they live in a different country. In the early days of the Lord's Resistance Army, even before it was called the LRA, Joseph Kony operated only within Uganda. This was before the Acholi civilians started to collaborate with Museveni, betraying Kony. Before Kony entered Sudan, he collaborated with a small Sudanese militia called the Jess Commando. The Jess Commando was made up of a small band of Acholis in Sudan who were at war with the SPLA. The SPLA was the South Sudanese rebel movement consisting mainly of Dinkas, a vicious tribe from the North. For the SPLA, the Jess Commando was not a serious threat. It was more like a nuisance since their real war was against the Ara-

bic government of Sudan. In the late '80s the Jess Commando asked the Sudanese government to help them in their fight against the SPLA and this help was willingly granted. But Jess Commando wasn't a real army. They were more like a civil defense unit and they didn't have the strength to fight the SPLA, which, I once read in the newspaper, was the biggest rebel movement in all of Africa. That is why they invited the LRA to come to Sudan. They saw the LRA as fellow Acholis who could help them in their fight against the SPLA."

The Mzee really knew how to tell a story. I learned more from him.

- "The Jess Commando established the first contacts between the LRA and the Sudanese government. As the Sudanese government was locked in a ferocious war with the SPLA, they gladly invited the LRA into their territory, on the condition that they would help the government defeat the SPLA. The Sudanese government was also happy to assist the LRA in their fight against the Ugandan government, as they were involved in a kind of proxy war against Uganda over their funding the SPLA."

It was not long after Kony established his base in Palataka that relations between the LRA and Jess Commando soured. The leadership of the Jess Commando believed that they had brought an Acholi savior into their territory that would rid them of the SPLA. But it soon turned out that we weren't the redeemers they had hoped for. Because of our gross food shortages, we were forced to plunder the villages that the Jess Comman-

do was protecting. We also started to recruit their children into our army.

Meanwhile the Sudanese government couldn't care less. They had at their disposal a strong force that put considerable pressure on the SPLA. They didn't care what the consequences were for the Southerners who lived in the vicinity of LRA, even though these Southerners were their supporters. They even gave us the mandate and the weapons to completely overwhelm the South of Sudan."

I always enjoyed these stories from my commander. Not only did I like storytelling, but it also allowed me time away from hard labor. However, despite the fact that he had become friendly towards me, outside of our conversations he continued to publicly degrade me so that I was always aware of my inferior position. By the time that I arrived in Palataka, the Jess Commando was no longer a threat. They were the armed civilians that I had encountered during my first military test, and it had already become very clear to me that they had no power whatsoever to resist the LRA.

The LRA, on the other hand, was strengthening. Almost weekly, battalions came back with new recruits and our force was rapidly expanding. To my mind, it wouldn't be much longer before we were strong enough to overthrow the government. This was an idea that excited me because it meant that once we had overthrown the government, I could return home to my parents.

My talks with the commander had given me a greater awareness of the political dimensions of this war and started to get a better under-

standing of our role. We must eliminate the government of Uganda so that we could make life better for our Acholi tribe that had been completely marginalized by the West-Ugandan-led government. I began to feel a sense of duty and responsibility towards my tribe. I started to dream about how proud my parents would be once we had liberated them.

These talks also strengthened the relationship between him and me. Not that he started to be overly kind to me; he was still a very brutal man. Increasingly, however, he gave me tasks that carried greater responsibility. In the first month after training my main tasks were farming, fetching water and collecting wood for building huts, under the command of a sergeant or other low ranking officer. But slowly I was assigned tasks of more importance.

Several weeks after my training, I got my first commanding task. I was to take several new recruits to the bush and make them collect wood for the new huts that we were constructing. It was rare in the LRA that a junior soldier without rank was given a task to lead others. I knew this and I did it proudly. I made sure that my group carried back as much wood as was humanly possible to further impress the commander. This meant that occasionally I had to cane some of the new recruits, but in the end they all obeyed my commands and carried as much wood as I ordered them to do.

Although my commander never really showed his appreciation, a week later I was sent on an even more important assign-

ment. I was to guard the road that goes from Palataka to Uganda. I had to make sure that no one would cross our check point without the main camp knowing who it was. I was sent to this position with another boy, who had been abducted from Sudan and who had served in the LRA longer than me. I was unfamiliar with this boy because he was from another section, but during those weeks we got to know each other a little bit.

The place that we had to guard was about one kilometer away from Palataka. It was our task to monitor those using the road and then to alert others in Palataka about any visitors. Although this task was quite important, it was also very boring as we rarely saw anyone. The only people who ever used the road were the Sudanese soldiers. When they came close we would announce ourselves and then shoot one time in the air to alert the people in Palataka that friendly people were coming. In case of any enemies, we were to shoot our entire magazines and then the commanders would know that we were under attack. But we never saw any enemies. Sometimes an LRA patrol would pass our position to check if we were still there, but this only happened occasionally.

We would remain on guard duty until the commanders sent replacements, and this could take either twelve hours or up to four days. If the patrol would ever catch us sleeping, a heavy caning would follow. What was even worse was that sometimes they completely forgot about us. Then we wouldn't receive any food and water at all, leaving us hungry sometimes for up to 24 hours. Another bad thing about guard duty was that it meant that

I couldn't collect the peels anymore, and that I was slowly growing hungry again. Yet, I did not complain. I knew that it was an honor to guard this important checkpoint and, so I did it to the best of my abilities.

As time passed, both my character and my roles were changing. What always remained the same, however, were the hardships in Palataka. Even though the training was over, we still had to do the compulsory morning marches. Even battle hardened soldiers who had been in the LRA for more than three years had to do the morning marches. I think that our Mzee stayed up all night thinking about new ways in which to exhaust us even more. Before the sunrise, he would wake us up, well before the marching, and he would give us tasks to do. If we didn't do them quickly enough, he would cane us brutally. Then the marching would start. Usually we would start our march much earlier than the other groups did, and afterwards we would receive more tasks to fill the day.

What also continued was the famine. In Sudan, we were always hungry. With more recruits coming in almost weekly, food stocks dwindled even further. My strategy of picking the peels didn't work as much anymore, since I was constantly sent on different assignments and missed the opportunity to get them. And even when I did have the opportunity, I had to be very fast because by this time I wasn't the only one who knew about the peels, so it was always a silent competition to get them. I was starving most of the time. Food was the only thing on my mind every day. Every week, people fell sick from hunger all around me. In the morning they

would complain about severe stomach problems and headaches, and this usually resulted in their death on later in the day. I knew that I had to do something in order to survive, and so I devised a plan.

During the guard missions the boy from Sudan told me about a Sudanese village being located not far from our position. Together we fantasized about all the food that they had. I even started to dream about this village, even though I had never seen it! In my dreams I idealized the village to the extent that it started to look like my own home village that I had been forced to leave behind months earlier. However, it was not the memory of home that caused so much pain; it was purely the lack of food. Apart from killing myself I was prepared to do almost anything for a decent meal.

One morning I woke up and decided to raid this village that the Sudanese boy had told me about. I never considered asking for permission to go to the village because I knew that it wouldn't be granted. Even worse, I might be granted permission, but then I would not be allowed to keep the food. This had happened to me twice before. The first time was after we looted the village during our military test. The second time was when I was sent to hunt for some game. That time I had managed to kill a sizable rat, but I never even got to taste a single bite of the animal. Instead I was just given some of the soup in which they had boiled the animal. No, this time I was determined to keep the food for myself.

This is why I decided to sneak out of the LRA camp, to look for this village on my own. I chose to do this on a Friday, because Friday's

were prayer days when it was the easiest to slip away for a few hours without being noticed. When I snuck out of the camp I came across the guards who were surrounding the camp, but I told them I was being sent out to guard the road again. They did not question me any further and let me go.

The directions that the boy from Sudan had given me were pretty clear. He told me about an old trail that led to the village, but which was now overgrown with bush because it was rarely used since the start of the war. The reason why the village had managed to last untouched for so long was probably because of its extreme isolation from any of the main roads. It took me a while to find the trail, but when I finally found it, it was easy to follow. Sometimes the path would be overgrown and then it would take me some time to find it again, but all in all it wasn't very difficult. After I followed the path for about three hours, I began to hear noises in the distance. I slowed my pace and tread carefully ahead, making sure to move in complete silence. I snuck in the direction where the noises were and after about one minute I came to the end of the bush. I crawled on the ground and from the edge of the bush I finally saw the village that I had been dreaming and fantasizing about.

Although it was completely different from what I had imagined, meaning that it was not my own village, it was a real pleasure for the eye. I was lying at the edge of a large garden where I saw that they had planted some cassava and sorghum. At the other side of the garden was the village. There were about ten houses, so it was a very small village,

but for me that was just perfect. What even made me more excited was that I saw a few women peeling massive piles of groundnuts; clearly they had just finished their harvest. In the middle of the village was the granary and I could only imagine all the good things which would be inside. Apart from the women I saw children playing various games outside and some men and women digging in the gardens. This whole site reminded me of home, and how I used to play with my friends, and how my parents would go out to the garden to get us food.

These memories of home made me sad and this sadness transformed into rage. Not at the LRA who had abducted me and who denied me the type of life that I was seeing in front of my eyes, but at these people that I watched. I despised their happiness and I wanted to take it away from them as mine had been taken from me. But for the moment I couldn't do anything. The men that I saw were all armed with AK 47's and although they were not many, no doubt they could easily overpower and kill me in my attempt to get food. The only option available to me was to go back to the LRA camp and think of another idea. I managed to dig out a few cassava plants at the edge of the garden, and then I went back.

I cursed the whole way back. I felt angry and aggressive. I had just witnessed so much food closer than two hundred meters away from me, and yet it was so far out of reach. I went over everything I had seen and I devised a plan to get all that food. I didn't want to tell my commander about my findings because first of all, he would seriously cane me if he found out that I had missed the mass. Second, he

would never give me any credit for my findings, and I would likely end up eating next to nothing from the loot. Instead I decided to let some others in on the plan and offer to share the food between us. I calculated that it would take four people.

Once I returned, I just went to lie down in my hut. Even though my entire journey had taken about eight hours, nobody even noticed that I had been gone. The next day I was ordered to lead a small group of people to collect some bamboo. Although I was one of the youngest in this group of people, and not the most senior soldier, they all obeyed by orders. I didn't know all of them because they came from different sections, but I decided that this would be the group that I would select. It was actually better that we came from different units, because this meant that our absence was less likely to be noticed. During this task I told three of the most hardworking boys about my plan and asked them for their help. At first I didn't mention that we would do this without official permission, but at the time it didn't seem like anybody cared about that. They seemed very excited about the idea, and when I described all the food they went crazy with desire. We were all starving and I realized that their extreme hunger would persuade them to take extreme risks. On our way back I informed them that they mustn't tell anyone about this because we didn't have permission, and everyone understood why.

We agreed to meet at the water stream the next day after the morning march. It was also only two days after I saw the village, so this would mean that the piles of ground-

nuts would still be there. It was also a Sunday, which was favorable because every Sunday, just like on Friday, we attended mass instead of doing work. The masses were huge affairs on the holy grounds of Control Atar, and thousands would sit together and listen to the preaching, so it would be hard to notice that we were missing. That night I dreamt about the village over and over again.

When I woke up the following morning I started with the daily routine. As usual, we were one of the first units to be up and we started our march very early. Afterwards I was told to clean our compound. I did this very quickly and then excused myself to go to the stream. When I got there two others were already waiting and after a short while the fourth person also came. We all had our jerry cans with us, and decided to hide them until we came back. And then the four of us set off.

We made sure to go around the camp to avoid the soldiers guarding the camp's perimeter, and initially we walked very carefully, to make sure that we wouldn't run into the patrol. Once we were outside the camp I led the rest to the trailhead and we started to follow it, this time with more ease than my journey two days before. Because I knew the way and had organized this whole mission, I was the leader and the others followed my commands very carefully. It took me a bit less time to reach the village than it had previously. When we got close I ordered everybody to remain behind while I went ahead to observe the village. I took the exact same route and when I came up to the edge of the garden I saw an almost identical picture.

The piles of groundnuts were still the same size, a group of women was still peeling them, and the children were still playing their stupid games. Yet there were no men. I looked everywhere but I didn't see a single man. This both comforted and disturbed me at the same time. If the men weren't here, getting the food would be extremely easy. It was just a matter of encircling the women, tying them up and grabbing all the food. Yet I had the concern that we might run into an ambush. To be sure that the men weren't there I circled the village but still I didn't see any of them. Although the fact that the men weren't there disturbed me a little, I wasn't planning to give up. I went back to my colleagues and told them that this whole plan should be executed as silently and quickly as possible. The men might have gone to the bush to hunt and they could be either far away or very close. I gave a briefing and then we all crawled up to the village. On my mark, we started running.

The women noticed us when we were half-way through the garden. Immediately they panicked and while some froze, others started to run. It all happened very fast. When we reached the end of the village I ordered another boy to assist me in herding all the women and children to the center of the village, while the other two went after the ones who had escaped. We started to round up all the women and children, and it was then that I heard a few gunshots. About half a minute later, my two colleagues came back with some of the women and explained that they had shot one woman who was trying to run away. I took the rope that we had taken from Palataka and gave one boy the order

to tie up all the women, while another was to hold them at gun point. I told the third boy to start filling several bags up with the groundnuts while I went searching the huts. The first hut was completely empty, except for a bed and some other items. After a quick glimpse I left it and entered the second hut. Here a big surprise awaited me. This hut was completely filled with dried and smoked meat. The moment I entered the hut, I smelled the very enticing aroma and immediately started to indulge myself. I had to force myself not to take too much, because with the lack of nutrition I had been facing this could be very dangerous. Besides, we were in a great rush to get out of the village, before the men returned. This threat was especially eminent now that my colleague had fired his gun.

I put all the meat in a large bag and quickly left the hut the bag that was now half full. In the meantime, my colleagues had tied all the women and children and they were now eating and filling up the bags at the same time. I ordered them to stop eating and to get ready to go. I think all in all, this whole ordeal took maybe ten to fifteen minutes. Afterwards we loaded all the bags and quickly ran away.

In the rush of excitement I completely forgot about the anger that I had felt so intensely two days before. When we reached the edge of the bush one of the boys put down his sack to eat some more, but I ordered him to continue moving because we had to get as far away from this village as possible very quickly. After we had walked more than an hour, I told everyone that we could take a short rest. We shared a few pieces of meat and I took some raw cassava and groundnuts. I don't think any

food had ever tasted as good.

During the whole attack I was driven by an enormous amount of adrenaline, but now it started to fade away. I realized what I had just accomplished. I had single-handedly commanded a group and carried out a very successful mission to get food. Thanks to me, everything had gone well. The plan had succeeded. I can still feel the pride that I felt that day. We were all excited. The boy who had shot the women bragged about how he had stopped her and how he managed to catch the others, and I boasted what a successful mission it was and that it was all my idea. After a very short break I told them to move on again, and for a while we continued to laugh and joke with each other, in very high spirits.

As we made our way back, I began to worry about our return. How would we get all this stuff into the LRA camp without being noticed? It had taken us about the same time as my first trip, so this meant that it would still be light when we got to Palataka. It would be easier to carry this stuff into Palataka when it was dark, but the longer we waited the greater the chance that they would discover our absence. I decided to speed up our return to Palataka and to hide most of the food somewhere close to the stream, in a place where nobody would be able to find it. This is exactly what we did. I think it was around eight hours after we had left Palataka that morning that we came to the stream and we found a good hiding place in some really thick bush. Afterwards we went to our jerry cans, filled them up and returned to our respective units in Palataka.

When I got close to my hut I noticed that there was a problem. I saw my commander walking around in extreme stress. When I was almost at my hut he saw me and that is when my trouble began. He started yelling at me and he looked at me with the eyes of a devil.

- "Where were you? Do you know I can kill you for missing mass alone? We have sent out a search party to execute you, but now that you came back, maybe I should execute you myself."

My absence had been noticed and I immediately realized that I was in serious trouble. Yet whatever would happen next, I told myself that I wouldn't tell the commander about the village or the food. I took immense pride in what I had done that day and I wouldn't allow my commander to take that away from me, even if he would kill me. Minutes after the commander started yelling at me, he punched me in my stomach and I found myself crawling on the ground. My commander immediately grabbed a stick and started to cane me ferociously.

- "Where did you go? You know that any attempt to escape will cost you your life, don't you boy? You are lucky that the search party hasn't found you yet because they will make you stay in Sudan for all of eternity. Now where did you go?"

The last time I received a beating as severe as this one was on the day that I was abducted. Yet, I didn't tell the commander anything about the village. I told him that I was hungry and that I had been out looking for fruits and animals or anything edible. Initially the

commander didn't believe me and continued beating me. He eventually grew tired of beating me and of my repetitive answers to his questions, and he threw me in the hut. Though the beating was terrible, at least he stopped short of killing me. As a silent act of defiance I took a small piece of meat which I had put in my pockets and slid it in my mouth.

Half an hour later my commander came back. As he entered my hut I could see that he was still furious and I wondered what he would do next. My commander started screaming at me again.

- "I told you the rules very clearly when you came here, didn't I? Didn't I tell you never to undertake anything without asking me for permission? Everybody is hungry, but by disobeying me, you have risked your life?"

For a moment I thought he was going to kill me and I told him that I was deeply sorry. At this point he slapped me in the face with all his might and told me that I wasn't sorry yet, but that soon I would be. Afterwards he sent me on guard duty without any food. This was very late in the afternoon. I could barely walk because of the beating, but he pushed me hard to walk faster and faster with his gun was poking me in the back. He picked someone to accompany me so that I wouldn't try to escape and assured me again that he would kill me if I did anything stupid. For four whole days he forced me to stand guard with an absolute minimum of food and water. There was always somebody who was guarding me, so I had no chance to get to the place where we had concealed the

food. All the people who guarded me were instructed by my commander to beat the shit out of me should I fall asleep. Occasionally at night I would get away with closing my eyes for a little while, but whenever they caught me doing that I would be in trouble.

In the meantime I was growing really angry at the commander. I hated the man. The only thing I did was to look after myself, and now I couldn't even reach the place where I had stashed the food. Luckily I had kept some meat and groundnuts in my pockets so I had at least something to eat. After four days, I came back from guard duty and my commander immediately came to visit me.

- "I hope that in the last few days you had time to consider what happens when you defy me. But if you think that it is over, you are wrong. From now on your task will be to stand guard all the time. From tomorrow onwards, you will have to stand guard for a full week. You will learn what it is to be sorry."

I was so extremely angry. The punishment he gave me was outrageous and I was determined not to undergo this extreme punishment. That day I went to the place where we had stashed our food and I took a smaller bag which I completely filled with groundnuts and dried meat. With this I walked up to the headquarters of my brigade and requested to talk to the brigadier. Initially they wanted to know why and asked me some difficult questions, but after a few minutes I was allowed to see the overall commander of our brigade, Commander Odhiambo, who had the rank of a colonel. I gave him the bag full of food as tribute, and afterwards told him

the full story. I told him about the beatings that I had received and the tasks that my commander had given me. I think my story impressed him a little because after I had finished, he took me with him to my commander. He started to question my commander.

- "Why did you beat this boy?"

My commander answered the question and then they got into a short argument. The colonel ordered my commander to remove his shirt and to lie down.

- "This is what you get for beating the shit out of good soldiers."

The brigadier started to brutally cane my commander. I don't know when I felt more pride; after I had looted all that food, or now when my commander was being punished because he had abused me. Although the caning my commander received was nowhere near as vicious as his attack on me had been, it drew much attention and my commander was publicly humiliated by the colonel. After the colonel stopped beating him, he ordered the commander to be put on guard duty for an entire week, subsisting on a minimum of food and water rations.

- "That will teach you to treat MY soldiers like that".

Sometime that week, I was selected to go on a big mission to Uganda. This was the

first time I had been selected for this type of mission, and I have a feeling it was so that I wouldn't have to face my commander for a while. Before the journey began, we were all guided to the gate, the assembly point of Control Atar where we received a blessing and got our briefing on the mission. It was Joseph Kony himself who addressed us. As always, his lecture was very long and elaborate, but it did lift everyone's spirits.

- "The spirit has decided that we need more recruits for our final stand against the hordes of the corrupt government. It is your mission is to find us more recruits. We order you all to abduct at least five children, three for the movement and two for yourself."

Although the speech went on for at least another hour, this is the only fragment that I can remember from it; abduct five children, three for the movement and two for yourself! I wasn't exactly sure what it meant to abduct two for myself, but I was very happy to leave Sudan and be away from my commander.

This time I took an extra bottle of water with me and we started to cross Sudan to go into Uganda. Again, the march was long and hard, but I had eaten really well the last couple of days and all the training had made me much stronger. So this time I wasn't suffering as much as I did when I first arrived in Sudan. We crossed the river and snuck into Kitgum unnoticed. It was good to be in Uganda again.

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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