



IN THE SERVICE OF THE LORD'S ARMY



National Memory & Peace Documentation Centre

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Written by Theo Hollander

“Death March”

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 4

Although I had suffered a lot during the two months that I was with the LRA in Uganda, it was nothing compared to what was about to unfold. I was slowly getting used to the hardships that accompanied being in the LRA, like the killings and the marching, but none of these hardships had prepared for my first march to Sudan. This march was something else. For four days we walked almost non-stop. Only on a few occasions did we stop to rest, but never longer than half an hour. On the second day I got blisters on my feet and on the fourth day my feet even started to swell up. But there were no excuses. If you stopped, you would be killed. The thing that made it even worse was that we completely ran out of water and food. My mouth was dry to the extent that I couldn't even swallow anymore, and my stomach ached from the hunger. All around me I saw people collapsing and dying. They just fell down, unable to move, unable even to cry for help. I knew that I was also close to my end. I really couldn't bear this much longer.

The march started in Uganda, somewhere on the border of Kitgum and Gulu district, close to Achwa River. For the last couple of months, the LRA had been abducting and looting in Uganda. As a result, our troops had swelled to more than 300 people, most of which were new recruits. Like me, the other recruits were constantly being trained while we were on the move. We were taught how to march, how to run, how and where to take cover, and how to kill. In the last two months, I had seen many killings, but so far I was never forced to participate

in murder. However, I had no illusions that I would maintain my innocence for much longer. Few returnees will publicly acknowledge their complacency in murder, but for those who stay in the LRA for some time, becoming a murderer is a fate difficult to avoid. For me, this day came on the first day of our march towards Sudan. We had just crossed the Achwa River that separates Gulu district from Kitgum when my commander called me and the other recruits to witness 'something important'. We were taken to a large open area in the bush where we all had to line up. As we stood there, two soldiers appeared out of the bush while they dragged another soldier behind them. The third soldier was tied up and he had this terrified look in his eyes. He was a tall, dark boy with long dreadlocks. I estimate that he was around eighteen years old. I knew who he was. Not that I knew him personally, but I had seen him before and I knew he was a senior soldier who had been with the LRA for a couple of years. He was even given a low rank, like corporal or sergeant or something. As I looked into his eyes I came to realize what he apparently already knew. Today would be his last day in the LRA.

I still remember the exact words when the commander told us that we had to execute him.

- "This is the living example. This is the example of what will happen to you when you try to escape. I want all of you to be part of his death so that you will never forget this lesson."

Apparently, this boy had tried to escape and was obviously caught in the action. Now we had to kill him. We were given several clubs, stones and sticks. I was one of the few given



an AK with a bayonet attached to it. We had to line up so that everybody would have a turn to hurt him. A few fanatics made sure that they were first in line, which in retrospect wasn't such a bad choice. By the time it was my turn, the soldier was severely injured by the fanatics who had been first in line, but he wasn't dead. Although severely injured, he was still alive and doing reasonably well, considering the circumstances. When it was my turn I looked him in the eye and he looked back at me, revealing the terror in his eyes. From all sides I was being watched. The commander had high hopes for me, and he was curious what I was capable of. I took a deep breath and then plunged my bayonet into his body. I felt it glide into his chest and I still remember the gurgling sound he made, a sound that I am anxiously trying to forget. After me, there were many more recruits. All of us had to participate. The fact that we were with many relieved me a bit from the feeling that I was responsible for his death, but I had no illusions about what I just did. I had killed an unarmed man tied in ropes at point-blank range. I didn't do it out of my free will, but I had done it. I also could have stabbed him in the arm and leave, but instead I stabbed him in the chest, plunging my bayonet into his lungs. From this point onwards I knew that I had lost my innocence and that I was no longer a child. I was a murderer and I had learned my lesson: whatever you do in the LRA, don't you ever try to escape!

Just minutes after the last recruit stabbed the already dead body, we started moving again. Hour after hour we moved. My feet started to hurt and I was trying to delete the image of the dying corporal, but to no avail.

All day long we walked through Kitgum district and when day turned to night, we continued walking. It was late at night on the first day that we finally got our first rest after the killing incident. I tried to sleep but my dreams were haunted by the corporal's eyes. It felt like he was taking his revenge in my dreams. No matter how desperately I tried, I could not lose the image of his last living moments. Although I was completely exhausted, the dream caused me to wake up again. I was too terrified to sleep. Long before sunrise we started moving again and although my feet hurt, it was actually a relief to be on the move again. Idleness really is the worst thing for a traumatized mind. All day long we walked and I saw very few villages on the way. The ones we did see were abandoned. The civilians living there were either killed by the advance party or they had fled. By now we were in a group with over 300 combatants and recruits. While the LRA is a master in concealment, even they couldn't completely conceal a group this large. So wherever we went, rumors of our movement preceded us.

In the last few hours of daylight on the second day I didn't see any signs of human beings or human civilization anymore. It was as if we walked in a completely deserted landscape. In the dusk of the second day we got to a river. I was told that this river marked the border of Uganda and Sudan, and I wondered if I would ever see Uganda again. We started crossing the river. One soldier swam across with a rope tied around his waist, which he tied to a tree at the other side of the river. This was our alternative bridge. The first to go were a few senior soldiers of another LRA group who were waiting for us at the other side of the river. Af-



terwards, it was our turn. I was somewhere in the middle of the group of new recruits, which meant that there were at least hundred recruits in front of me and an equal number behind me.

When it was my turn to cross the river, I put the rope under my armpit and started dragging my body across. Although the water ran fast, I had no problem crossing the river. When I was at the other side, I looked back for a last glimpse at Uganda. But they didn't give me much time to look.

- "You there, I want you to walk over to that group immediately, and stop staring back at Uganda, or I will teach you the meaning of pain.!

Always these threats! Never was anything said in a nice way. He could have just told me to join the group. I wondered why every sentence in the LRA had to end with words such as pain, kill, suffer, etcetera. I walked over to the other group and when we had enough people we marched on under the guard of a group of senior soldiers, until we came to what they called the operation venue, a kind of field headquarters, where we were allowed some rest as we waited for the others to cross the river.

It was after the river passing that things really started to get tough. Sudan is considerably drier than Uganda. At that time, it was a land that was completely deserted. Decades of war had led to an exodus of civilians towards Uganda, Kenya and Ethiopia. The lack of human civilization meant that there was no opportunity to plunder any settlements or raid any livestock. At the river we filled our bottles with water and were told that this was the last water

we could get before reaching our destiny, so we had to use it sparingly. Also our food rations were declining drastically, as we would not find any opportunity to replenish our stocks. We started our march again. We had been walking for most of the night and much of the morning when I noticed that the landscape had changed. The luscious green bush had given way to yellow grass. There was still enough vegetation, but it was the dry and thorny kind. I started to wonder how the plants managed to find water, because I didn't see any. Sudan was also much warmer. Even in the early morning sun, I already felt a pressing heat, which only continued to increase for the rest of the day.

Even before the sun reached its peak, the first victims started to fall. One boy was walking right in front of me. He was both older and taller than me. I noticed that at a certain point his pace slowed down while his head started hanging and he couldn't manage to walk in a straight line anymore, as though he were completely drunk. When I got very close to this person I heard him whisper Miya Pii, Miya Pii, which means give me water in Acholi. At that moment I was still doing fine and I still had some water to spare, so out of compassion I filled my bottle top with a few drops of water and I gave it to him. I think it helped him a little, because after this he managed to walk a little bit faster. Yet after not even half an hour he started to slow his pace again. Actually, we all started to slow our pace, even the senior soldiers. I told him that he should take a minute of rest, but I think at that point he was already half way into the spirit world and he couldn't listen to me anymore. I forgot how long he managed to keep up but at a certain



point I just saw him falling over. As he tripped he fell with his head against a rock, while all his luggage was still tied on his back. He hadn't even used his hands to break the fall. He was five meters in front of me the moment he collapsed. I wanted to stop to help him, but a senior soldier was behind me and we were told it was not our duty to look after the others. So instead of giving him some water, I passed him and never even looked back. Whether he lived or died, I don't know, but I never saw this person again.

It was not long after this when I also poured the very last drop of water out of my bottle. This is when I learned what thirst really is. You must know that thirst spares no one. It doesn't discriminate. Thirst doesn't care if you are a woman or a man, a new recruit or an experienced soldier, a commander or a private. In the afternoon of the third day, everybody was thirsty and everybody suffered. Victims were picked at random. I also started to feel the consequences. My lips, mouth and throat completely dried up. At a certain point I tried to swallow, but I had even stopped producing saliva. The second person that I saw collapsing was a very experienced soldier collapse. At one point we walked past a rocky mountain and the rocks were even warmer than the sun in which they had been baking all day. It was as if we walked into an oven. In this place, it was especially the more experienced soldiers who suffered, as their footwear was not made to deal with this heat. The soldiers were the only ones wearing those rubber gumboots and they really started to boil, which made walking increasingly difficult. In contrast, I was wearing tire shoes, shoes made out of

rubbers car tires, and although my feet were covered with blisters, I was still ok. The soldier collapsed several hours after the boy that walked in front of me.

When the senior soldiers collapse, things become very dangerous, especially for us new recruits, as the soldiers start waving their guns around and threatening others that they will kill them if they do not give water. That was the same with this man. He walked over to a new recruit, walking maybe ten meters in front of me and shoved his gun into the mouth of the terrified recruit, demanding water, which the recruit of course didn't have. He would have killed the kid if other soldiers hadn't intervened. The other soldiers started asking water from everybody and then they finally found some water of a new recruit who had so bravely managed to spare a little for himself. This was divided among the soldiers, but to no avail. At a certain point the soldier just collapsed. He fell on the ground, unable to move any further. At that point the other senior soldiers lifted him up and he was dragged on. I quickly learned that it was only the new recruits who were left dead when they collapsed.

The next day I saw four other people collapse from the thirst and the increasing hunger as well. On the fourth day we completely ran out of food as well, which was less of a pity than you would expect, because most of our mouths were so dry that we couldn't swallow the food anyway. At a one point, I saw a girl lying on the ground. Her luggage was lying beside her and a soldier was caning her with a thin but flexible stick. She was lucky. Out there you were lucky if you got a beating. A



beating meant the difference between life and death, as a good beating would help you up on your feet again. The ones that did not receive a beating were the ones that were really in trouble, as they were left at the mercy of the blocking force, who could either kill them or leave them to die a lonely death. I was actually doing pretty well the fourth day. In the morning, I had found some mud in a remnant of a puddle where there had been a flowing river once. With two hands I had grabbed the mud and started sucking all fluids out of it. I didn't care that insects laid their eggs there, I only cared for the moisture, and it helped. Different people had different techniques to cope with the thirst. I saw others drinking their own urine, but for me the mud was enough to give me the strength to last.

In the afternoon of the fourth day, the land

started to become greener again and there was more shade to hide under. We were slowly climbing to a higher altitude and in front of us we saw some green mountains, which meant that there would be water soon. This gave me the strength to continue, strength that I desperately needed, as I was really nearing my end. My feet started to swell and although the mud had helped me, my mouth was still dry and my stomach ached with hunger. If we didn't reach our destination soon I would surely collapse, just as all the others that I had seen falling on this horrendous trip. But once more I was lucky. It was when I almost was about to give up, that I finally saw hope appearing on the horizon. The relief that I felt when I saw the camp appearing on the horizon was the largest that I had experienced in LRA captivity so far. I would not give up now that redemption was so close.



About National Memory and Peace Documentation Centre (NMPDC)

The National Memory and Peace Documentation Centre (NMPDC), a collaborative initiative of the Refugee Law Project, Faculty 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



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