



IN THE SERVICE OF THE LORD'S ARMY



National Memory & Peace Documentation Centre

Issue # 9

Written by Theo Hollander

"The Deserts of Sudan"

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 eighteen 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 darkest pages of human history.

Chapter 9

I had a very restless sleep that morning. I was haunted by terrible nightmares and every half hour I woke up bathed in sweat. Whenever I closed my eyes, even when I was still awake, the horrible images of the previous two days would come back to me.

I was awakened around noon, to an atmosphere of defeat and despair. Most of my colleagues were completely silent and no sounds of laughter were heard. We had lost Palutaka and it was clear that we would not try to recapture it. This meant that we had to look for a new home. We all knew that the next few months would be very tough. It would be only a few days before all the provisions that we had taken from Palutaka would run out and then what would we eat? Although we were always hungry in Palutaka, at least we had our gardens there and we grew all kind of crops. The crops weren't fully enough to feed the whole army, but they came quite far. Now we had nothing. For the next few months we would be forced to rely solely on the goodwill of the Arabs to feed us, and on plundering, hunting and gathering.

We also knew that it wouldn't be long before our enemies would start to pursue us, so it was critical that we find a place that would give us a strategic advantage in case of attack. Our military moral hadn't died out completely. We were severely weakened, but far from defeated. Although hundreds of our finest soldiers had been either wounded or killed in the attack on Palutaka, thousands had survived, and these survivors were bit-

ter, angry and vengeful. Our commanders had already promised that we would strike back and we were all anxious for our fine day of vengeance.

I saw that the first groups had already started to march off in a northwestern direction, and the rest of us soon joined them. Throughout our march we reconnected with many scattered groups of LRA fighters and our numbers grew. I was actually amazed by the numbers of survivors. The main group continued to walk further away from Palutaka, while dozens of scouting groups were sent in different directions to find a new location for our camp. Two days after the defeat of Palutaka we were ordered to march south again and on the end of the third day we reached the ideal spot, a place called Kit One. Kit One was also in a green hilly area, actually not all that far away from Palutaka. We eventually set up camp there on a hill, which proved to be very difficult for building grass huts, but which gave us a very strategic defensive position.

We arrived at Kit One late in the evening, at around eleven. Although there was a bit of moonlight, it was too dark to start collecting grass and to make up camp, so instead we slept under the open sky again. I had another restless night. This time I was not only haunted by all the images of war, but also by countless insects. I changed positions several times, but it appeared that the insects were everywhere.

The next morning I was awakened by our Mzee, the commander of the artillery unit, who told me that he had a special mission for me. I think this was his strategy of getting back on me. Whenever he was ordered

to select someone for a dangerous mission, he always picked me. First, when I was sent with the battle group to assist the Arabs, and now again. Our unit consisted of at least fifty guys and he could have chosen any of them, but it was always me. I was wondering what kind of suicidal thing I had to do now.

The Mzee took me to the assembly point of Control Altar brigade. On the way he told me that I was selected because of my excellent performance in combat and because of my courageousness, but I was sure that his personal vendetta with me also played a role in my selection. When we got to the location, there was a group of about three hundred of the best-trained guerillas who were commanded by a major. The major explained that we had a dangerous mission in front of us that would lead us through the heartland of our enemies. He told us that in the last few hours of the battle, hundreds of soldiers had carried our armories out of Palutaka. Most of the weaponry would stay in Kit-One in case of another attack, but we also needed to stash some weapons and armor in Uganda. He stated that there would be a day that we would strike back at our enemies, and then we needed our weapon supply to be close by.

To deliver all the weaponry, we had to slip through hostile territory unnoticed. It was essential that our weapons wouldn't fall into enemy hands, so we had to avoid any enemy contact. We were given enough water and food supplies as well as all the weaponry that we could carry, and then we set off. I was carrying hundreds of bullets that were packed into two bullet belts, five bomb fus-

es that were tied together with ropes, and of course, my own AK 47s. The strongest soldiers had to carry one full tin of bullets all by themselves, and these tins were extremely heavy. The top commanders didn't carry anything. Because of all the weight that we were carrying and because we were marching through hostile territory, our movement was really slow. The trip to Uganda was the hardest so far, but this time there was no rush. Our commander gave us enough time to rest and we had enough provisions to take our time.

After a couple of days we reached the river that separates Sudan from Uganda. Crossing the river itself took almost half a day as we couldn't transfer all our ammunition across the river at once; instead we had to go back and forth many times. Drained by exhaustion I nearly lost my grip on the rope at one point, but a colleague managed to help me. This was the only serious trouble that I ran into during the entire mission. After crossing the river we walked for only several more miles until we finally found some good places to hide our ammunition. The first spot we selected was a very high termite hill. We needed to protect the weapons before they were stashed. The bullets were put into a jerry can and the bigger weapons were wrapped in a plastic cover, so that everything would remain waterproof. My colleagues who had carried shovels were selected to dig the hill out. After they were done and the weapons were stashed, we set several landmines around the termite hill so that nobody but ourselves could gain access to the weapons. Afterwards we selected two additional places to hide the remaining weaponry. All of the locations were in the Padwad game reserve. We chose this location because

there would be no people to interfere with the weapons or accidentally step on the landmine and thus reveal the hiding place.

After all this was over, we safely returned to Sudan without meeting a single Ugandan civilian. We hadn't hidden the weapons far from the river separating Uganda from Sudan so going back didn't take us long, and without the heavy burdens we made good time.

When we were well into Sudan, we received a message that Kit One was under attack and that we were needed quickly to aid with its defense. We quickened our pace, but it was already too late. Kit One was more than two day's march from where we were, and even by running, we wouldn't reach it within a day. Hours after the first message, we got a revised message telling us not to go to Kit One, as it was completely overrun by the SPLA, our Sudanese enemies.

We continued marching and after a couple of days we came very close to Kit One. We didn't dare to go straight into the camp, since we suspected that a whole division of enemy forces occupied it. Instead, we went around it. Once we past Kit One it didn't take us very long to find the trail that the army of thousands of LRA had left behind in their retreat. So we just followed this trail. As usual, the advance party was in the lead scanning for enemy activity, while the blocking force made sure that the enemy couldn't attack us from the back. It took us about five to six hours after passing Kit One before we reached the second camp, a place conveniently called Kit Two.

Kit Two was nothing more than a place in the bush. When we arrived I saw thousands of people trying to dig trenches so that we could defend ourselves, but there was little effort was being taken to actually construct a military camp. No huts had been built and even the headquarters was nothing more than a small depression in the ground. It looked as if we were preparing for another attack. Sure enough, this attack came only one day after we arrived in Kit Two. Like with the first attack on Palutaka, it started in the morning with a very heavy bombardment. The trenches were not dug as deep as the ones in Palutaka and quite a number of people died in the initial bombardment. Afterwards the ground forces came with thousands of combatants and there was no way that we could hold them for long with our poor defenses. Throughout the battle I was again at the frontline where the most killing was done and the most suffering was witnessed. When the first wave of attack came we managed to hold our enemies off, but with every subsequent wave it became more difficult.

One of the problems was that we weren't allowed to sit or to lie down. In the LRA, we had to face our enemy standing and bare-chested, and it was this military tradition that cost us many lives that day. Again, the majority of casualties were the more experienced fighters as they were sent to the most dangerous spots. The trenches weren't deep enough and when we stood half our bodies were in clear sight, which made it easy for our enemies to injure us. We managed to hold them up for maybe one or two hours, but by this time we had suffered hundreds of casualties. A grenade exploded very close to my position and I saw

that several of my colleagues were blasted away. On my other side a boy was hit in the lungs by a bullet.

When the third assault came I saw the commander making a run for it, and I immediately followed. Once again I was one of the first to follow the commander in his retreat and I had the bullet fire of thousands of my colleagues for protection. Those who stopped firing last had a real problem of escaping without being hit in the back. Again in retreat I saw the bodies that had been torn apart from the initial bombardment.

It seemed that we left a couple of hundred dead behind us, and this time there was no one to blame for our defeat, but our own poor defenses. We realized then that the enemy forces were too many and we were constantly outnumbered and outgunned. So we had to find another way to defeat them.

As we sounded the retreat we began to march with incredible speed. Again, the mothers and children had a head start of several hours, but it only took us half a day to catch up with them. When night fell, we continued to march and by first light the next day we were still on the move. By now I could see that the landscape had changed. On our previous march from Uganda to Sudan we had seen a green landscape turn into a semi-desert and then back into a green landscape again. We had passed the fertile volcanic mountains near Magwi and stretched woodlands. When we descended the hilly area we came to an area covered with thick bush, which is where Kit Two had been, in a landscape which actually remind-

ed me very much of Uganda.

After we left Kit Two we gradually came to a landscape dominated by tall yellowish grassland. The further we marched, the dryer it got. After we had walked for almost twenty-four hours, we passed some very large barracks of our Sudanese allies. Here we finally got the order to rest a little bit while our commanders went to negotiate with the Arabs. I don't know what they were talking about, but to our relief we soon saw that the Arabs started to unload some of their food provisions for us. Of course it wasn't much. The Arabs told us that it should be enough to last for more than two weeks, but after only two days all the food was gone. However, the little they gave us was better than nothing, and the minimum of food in our stomachs gave us the strength to march on.

We got the order to move on again after we had been given some time to rest and to cook. This time we could follow the main road. We were now in land occupied by the Sudanese government and there we had nothing to worry about. We passed four barracks of the Sudanese army and kept on walking, following the road. After a march of several days we finally came to the place that would be the LRAs new home for many years to come, Aru Junction. Aru was located in between Nimule at the border of Uganda and Juba, the largest town in Southern Sudan. The landscape in Aru was very dry and inhospitable. The only plants that grew there were dry grasses, thorny bushes, and trees that could go without water for months on end. When we were given the order to set up camp in this desolate place, we all knew that our lives would become even

more difficult.

We arrived in Aru early in the morning, when we were given the order to start building up camp. Hundreds of us were instructed to collect bundles of tall grass, while others were ordered to dig trenches or to fetch water from a river that was supposed to be somewhere nearby. Many were sent to collect bamboo from a bamboo forest that we had passed on the way, maybe half a day's march from there.

On the second day after our arrival the first huts were constructed and within a very short time this dry and desolate place was transformed into a military camp. The activity was intense. I was instructed to lead several new recruits to hack down some of the trees that grew in the area so that the new command centers could be constructed. As I was hacking into a tree I saw long rows of people coming back with jerry cans, a clear sign that there was indeed water somewhere near this dry place. All around us we saw the activity as thousands of people were constructing a camp all the same time. It was quite a stunning sight. Hundreds of people were digging trenches for the camp's defence. In other areas people were digging the land, and planting all kinds of seeds that would feed us one day. At least a thousand people were cutting the long and dry grass from which we made our grass huts, and hundreds of huts were already under construction. As soon as we delivered the timber, people were immediately instructed to start the construction of the new headquarters of the various brigades, starting with Control Altar.

Kony's hut was already built. Surrounding it the huts of all his wives were under construction. I was ordered to go to my commander for further instructions. Close to where Stockree headquarter would be built, I found the place where our artillery unit would be stationed. I immediately found the Mzee. He instructed me to help some of my unit members with the construction of the huts, so that for the first time in many days, we wouldn't have to sleep under the open sky.

The next morning we started our first parade in many days and afterwards the construction continued. I was selected to cut more timber, this time for the construction of Stockree headquarter. The entire morning I was doing just this and in the afternoon we continued the construction of our huts. By now the last provision of the food, given to us by the Arabs, was gone. The next night, all of us went to bed with no food in my stomach whatsoever.

The next day early in the morning, the commander started parading us again, but it was clear that morale was very low. Everyone was hungry. Ever since the start of the exodus from Palutaka, food had been a serious problem. Thanks to our Arab allies we had been fed during our march, but they wouldn't continue to supply us. It was not their problem that we were hungry. The Arabs had also given us guns and we had to use these guns to supply ourselves with food. Again we worked the entire day on the construction of our new camp and at night we went to bed again without eating anything. By now I was getting really hungry.

When we woke up the next morning, we were forced to parade again, and afterwards we were sent out to cut some tall grass for the construction of even more huts. Throughout this activity there was actually only one thing that was on our minds - food. Hunger made everything difficult. To cut the grass we had to walk a small distance, because we had used all grass in the immediate area around the camp. While we walked I picked some grass and put it in my mouth. I thought, if cows and goats can eat it, so can I. I didn't like the taste of it, but at least it filled my stomach.

Very close to this place I noticed a tree with very large leaves that was heavy with fruit. It didn't grow in Uganda or in Palutaka so I had never seen it before. I wasn't the only one to see the tree, but since no one recognized this type of tree, people were concerned about eating the strange yellowish fruit. I picked one of the fruits and I started to eat it. It tasted very bitter.

As I picked a second fruit, two boys came up to me and told me to immediately stop eating. For a moment I was scared that they were warning me that it was poisonous, but then I saw that they just wanted all the fruits for themselves. They grabbed the fruit that I was about to put in my mouth and ate it themselves. When I tried to reach for my gun I got a terrible blow in my face. I knew these boys very well and so I also knew better than to resist. They had been in the LRA for a long time, in the same unit as me, and our commander respected them. The tallest of the two, which we called Aguam was trained in artillery and he knew how to set landmines

and mortars. The other, Arob was never sent for the artillery training, but he was a very good soldier. Both of them came from Kitgum region.

I didn't like either of the two. Both had given me a hard time in the first few weeks when I was in Palutaka. They were always bullying me and sometimes they even stole my food. Arob was especially cruel. The moment they had seen me eating the fruit from the tree, they presumed that the fruit was safe to eat. They kicked me away from the tree to have it entirely to themselves. I was extremely angry at them but I couldn't do anything. I sat just a few meters away from them watching. After only two minutes they sent me back to do my task of cutting the grass and threatened to report me for disobedience.

I walked away and when I was about twenty meters from the tree I started to cut the grass. However, I soon started to feel a strange sensation in my stomach. At first I thought that the pain was caused by hunger, but I quickly realized that it was more serious. I had only eaten one fruit, but within ten minutes a terrible pain went through my stomach and then I started to throw up. The world was spinning around my head and little white bubbles of foam started to come out of my mouth. It felt like my stomach was actually on fire, burning me from the inside out. At the same time my vision started to blur a little, and I saw everything double.

In the meantime Aguam and Arob had continued to eat the strange fruit. It wasn't long before they began to feel the same pains that I did. I hadn't yet realized that my former bul-

lies had just saved my life. When I looked in their direction I saw them squealing on the ground. From where I was, I could see that their mouths were covered with the same white foam that was coming out of my mouth. One of them said something to me and he tried to get up to come towards me, but he immediately fell down from the pain in his stomach. In the meantime my own pain was getting much worse. As I was squealing on the ground some of my colleagues lifted me up and carried me back to my division. I remember very little after this.

When I woke up the next morning the pain in my stomach had diminished and I was feeling a lot better. I was given some soup to eat with a little bit of bread, and this helped immensely. As I finished the bread my commander told me that Arob and Aguam had died. The poisonous fruit had caused them a horrible and painful death. They had survived for several hours in terrible agony after the poisoning began, but there was nothing that could have been done for them. They had simply eaten way too much of the killer fruit.

I stayed in the hut for another two days, recovering. I was still not feeling well and I had a fever. During those two days I received some soup to drink and a handful of bread to eat, which helped me to get back on my feet. By the third day I came out of the hut with enough strength to work again.

I was surprised to see that the barren desolate grassland had turned into a fully functioning camp. The majority of huts had been constructed and entire gardens were begin-

ning to be cultivated. Although Aru was a very dry place, water was being collected from a nearby river. It was used both to quench our thirst and to sprinkle the gardens. The surrounding nature of Aru was hostile to a group as large as the LRA, but somehow Kony seemed to have made it work.

Although the camp appeared to be functioning on the surface, Aru still wasn't a good place for us. It was extremely dry and only few things grew there. Furthermore, the area was sparsely populated which meant that there were only few settlements around for us to plunder. Within only a few weeks all the plundering that was possible was done. Sometimes our groups would revisit a settlement that had already been robbed, but that was like plucking the feathers from a featherless chicken. When our commanders told us that there was no food, there really wasn't any food - nothing. Often days went by without eating, and then when we finally were able to eat something, it was only a handful. This meant that we had to actively seek other ways to get any kind of nutrition. We would try eating anything that looked slightly edible in the area. Some of these things were poisonous, like the yellowish fruit that I had tried, others just made us sick. Some things had no added nutritional value and other things were utterly disgusting, but at least they filled our stomachs. In the search of food many kids died eating poisonous fruits. People started to eat grass, but we soon realized that the grass had no nutritious value and that eventually it made us sick. We ate the leaves of a tree that in Acholi is called Ugali. The leaves of this tree were a little bit sour, but they did fill our stomachs. Other things we tried were roots and

tubers that grew underground. There was one thing that looked a little bit like potato, although it was extremely bitter. , We never tasted its bitterness, since the severe hunger we felt made everything taste ok. Whenever somebody discovered something new that was edible, they tried to keep it a secret as long as possible. But the secrets never remained secret for long. It didn't take long for everybody to know all the edible things that could be found in the area surrounding Aru.

Yet somehow the commanders always appeared to have enough to eat. Every evening they threw away the peels of the potatoes. One day when I saw them doing it, my hunger drove me to run towards it the moment the commander had turned his back. By the time he started to walk away I had already put a few handfuls in my mouth. When the commander turned around and saw me I got a terrible punishment, because it was still forbidden to eat the peels the commanders threw away. In full view of many others who also wanted to go for the peels he lay me down and brought the cleaning device that was used to clean the inside of our gun barrels. He hit my neck with it, over and over. In total I got twenty strokes, and for what? My only crime was trying to save myself from starvation. For the next few days I could barely move my head without feeling an excruciating pain. It was really horrible, but it had been worth it. At least I had some food again in my stomach.

Once in a while a battle group would return with plundered food and then we would be eating again for a couple of days, but afterwards we had to depend on our own

resourcefulness. Although the famine was horrible, most of us usually had just enough food to prevent starvation. Many still died of hunger and diseases related to malnutrition, but the vast majority survived on the bare minimum of food that we got. Unfortunately, hunger wasn't the only problem in Aru.

Aru was an extremely dry place. Getting water there was like getting water in the desert. Only a few days after I recovered from my food poisoning I was ordered to fetch some water from the river. I set out with a group of around fifteen people, because we were warned that there might be Sudanese villagers there who were always armed and who would try to fight us over the only water source in the area. So to get water we had to travel in groups of at least ten people and we each had to carry our weapons, in addition to a twenty-liter jerry can. Initially, I thought that the river would be very close by, but after we walked for over an hour, we still hadn't reached any source of water. When we finally did reach the river, I was in shock. It was nothing more than a dried up river bed, covered with some green grass and some mud. It appeared that there had not been a river there for a very long time. We climbed down the riverbank looking for Sudanese civilians, but we didn't see any of them. To get the water from the riverbed we actually had to dig holes in the mud. At a depth of about 30 centimeters, muddy water would appear. We used the palms of our hands to catch this water and put it in a jerry can that had been cut in half. Then we had to wait a few seconds for the hole to fill up again. Once the split jerry can was full we transferred the water into a jerry can that was still in one piece. We put our t-shirts over the top of the

intact jerry can in order to filter the water, but the result was still a little bit muddy. All this meant that collecting the water was a painstakingly slow process. Since this was the only water source for an army of thousands, not to mention all the civilian settlements in the area, it was very important to scout for other armed civilians while we slowly filled our jerry cans. .

The first time we went out to collect water it took us maybe six hours all in all to go back and forth from Aru, but overtime it only took us even longer. Not only did we have to fight with armed civilians on many occasions, fights we always won, but the places where we could find water became further and further from the camp. As thousands of people collected water every day from the same spot, these areas would dry out very quickly. If you were able to collect water at a certain spot on the one day, the next day you had to collect it ten meters further downstream. This meant that after half a year, the fresh water source had moved several kilometers further away from the camp than its initial point. Eventually, this nearly doubled the time it took us to collect the water.

The lack of water meant that we could only use it to drink and to water our crops. There was rarely any water for bathing and as a result we were always dusty and dirty. Once in a while were we allowed to use the water to bathe, because even though we lacked water our leaders still wanted us to be clean. Even then it was difficult to completely clean ourselves using the dirty water. It didn't take long before the first combatants had lice and soon everyone was affected. After several

weeks we all felt extremely dirty, but this simply became our reality. Because we had just enough water to avoid dying of thirst, there was rarely enough to plunge ourselves into it. Everybody was always scratching at the lice, but only a good bath could solve the problem; scratching didn't help a single bit.

Only when we were actually ordered to collect the water, did we have the opportunity to drink as much as we could at the river, but even then we had to be careful not to be spotted by a higher commander. Because of the lack of water and food, all kinds of diseases began to affect us. It started with diarrhoea. As so many of us tried to eat poisonous food, diarrhea was one of the most common diseases among our ranks. Already in the first few weeks I saw a few people who died from it, and it only grew worse over time. I remember one boy from my unit who died in the first week, just after I had barely recovered myself. He told me in the morning that he had a terrible headache and that he was suffering from diarrhea. This was the same day that I was first sent out to fetch the water. By the time that I came back, I saw a few elder boys carry his body out of the camp. Only six or seven hours had passed since I had talked to him, and yet his pains had already become lethal. His dead body was immediately taken out of the camp and thrown away to rot.

This boy was lucky enough to die in his hut, because the disease went so fast. Normally, when a person became very sick they were separated from the camp. When it was noticed that a person was mortally ill, they had to walk out of the camp with the last energy that was still in them. They would be walked out for a

long distance of at least 8 to 10 kilometres. When it was clear that, the patient couldn't return on his or her own strength due to the state of the illness, this person was left there to die a lonely death.

Apart from diarrhea there were many other diseases affecting us, some of which were lethal and others that were just a nuisance. A common disease that could be very dangerous in our state of malnutrition was the fever. I saw it happen several times that people got fever around me, and it was usually a fifty-fifty chance whether or not they would survive. There were other diseases such as skin infections, as well as all kinds of coughing diseases and swelling diseases. I didn't know all the names of the diseases, but what I did know was that it was of crucial importance to remain healthy. This meant whenever I saw a sick person, I would stay away from him or her. I always tried to drink as much water as I possibly could. Even with food, I had to be very resourceful to at least try to eat enough so that I would preserve some energy.

But all these precautions didn't always prevent me from getting sick. There was one day, maybe a month or so after I had arrived in Aru, that I woke up with a swollen leg. I had no idea how it got like this. I checked for signs of a wound or bite-mark but there were none. There was no explanation for the swelling. When I tried to walk, I fell to the ground again. The pain was really bad and I was completely immobilized, which was a dangerous condition in the LRA. What worried me the most was the slight fever that came with the leg infection. The fever wasn't all that bad, but I knew my odds. When my

commander examined my leg he sent me to the medical ward of Control Altar, where I was given some medicine. I stayed there for a couple of days to recover. I never told them about the fever, as I was really afraid that they would march me off as well. I was very lucky that after a few days the swelling went down by itself and also that the fever never affected me much. Perhaps it was because of the medicine and the food I received there that I was able to strengthen up again. Whatever it was, those few days really helped.

Aru became the camp where I would spend the remainder of my time in the LRA. The camp was set up in the same way as Palutaka, with the main difference that we didn't have an Arab camp that was neighboring ours. In the middle of the camp was the headquarters of Control Altar, and surrounding it were the sub-camps of the four different divisions. Stockree was located north of Control Altar. Within a few weeks, thousands of huts had been constructed and it looked as we had been there forever. It took only a few weeks before we established a daily routine that, apart from our worsened hunger, bad hygiene and chronic thirst, was not much different from our routine in Palutaka.

Our days always started with the usual morning march. Our commander hadn't lost his taste for early mornings, and we would get up long before the other units arose at around sunrise. After the marches we received the tasks for the rest of the day. One of the usual tasks was going to fetch water, which, due to the chronic thirst, was the most favored task, despite the danger that the armed civilians posed. Other assignments included collect-

ing grass or bamboo for the building of new huts, or to dig in the fields. Training new recruits and standing on guard were additional tasks assigned to us, although this was a bit boring because we never had any encounters with our enemies in Aru.

Another aspect that hadn't changed was the prayer sessions on every Friday and Sunday. The LRA was a deeply religious movement skipping the prayers was only allowed when there was a very good reason. I actually never wanted to skip them. The prayers always filled me with energy and motivation. After the prayer sessions, I always wanted to go back to Uganda to deliver our people from the tyranny of Museveni.

Aru was always full of life. Among the boys there were also thousands of girls and young women, many of whom had children at very early ages. It is a mistake however, to think that the women were only there for getting pregnant and delivering babies. Many of them were also warriors who had to fight just like we did. We regarded the young women and girls as we would our sisters. We never fancied them as potential girlfriends. We were not allowed to talk to them without a good reason. We only talked to them when the husband sent us to call them, or if we were given an order to give to them. Then we would go to talk to them, but only on the matter of our order. If anyone was found conversing with a lady without a proper reason, they could be killed in front of a firing squad. It was very strict that we could only talk to women when we were told to talk to them, or if we had something to say to them that was in accordance with our duty.

We were certainly not allowed to date any women, also under penalty of execution. Being with the ladies was only allowed if one was actually married. But this threat of execution was never necessary, because we never got erections. The special Shea oil that was smeared on us prevented erections. It was only when a person got married that the leaders would perform a special ritual that would allow him to become erect again. In my case, I didn't have any feelings for the ladies; at least not sexual feelings. Although I regarded the ladies as my sisters, I never conversed with them, and I never even fancied a single one of them. So although there were many women in the camp, the entire time that I was in the LRA, I don't remember a single moment that I had an erection.

My relation with the other boys was different. With them I was allowed to talk and on many occasions we sat together just to converse and laugh. Although life was harsh in Aru, we were always joking and laughing with each other. Yet, this didn't mean that I befriended anyone or that I trusted anyone. I never shared my secrets with any of the other boys. When I had found a new thing to eat or a new place where the commanders would throw away their peels, I would never share this with anyone. These were the things that I kept to myself.

Another thing that I anxiously kept to myself was any stories about my former home and family. None of us really thought about our previous lives anymore, and even when we did, we would keep it to ourselves out of the fear of repercussions. If there would ever be a chance for escape, nobody was allowed to know who my family was or where they lived,

because when they knew, my whole village would be destroyed just to get back at me. However, at that point, escape was far from my mind. So the conversations were always about past or future battles, and the people that we had killed. These were the kind of conversations that were also encouraged and stimulated by our commanders.

Ever since I had been abducted, the LRA continued to be very active in raising new recruits. With one year of service I was actually more senior than many of my fellow combatants. In Aru, battalions of the LRA would go out on almost a weekly basis, and they always came back with many new recruits. I didn't hate the new recruits, but I always imagined how they would suffer, and I wondered whether they could even survive it all. The thing that I did hate about the new recruits was just the fact that they meant of couple of hundreds of new mouths to feed. I was now a more senior soldier than I was when I first entered Palutaka, and my role as the one who was bullied shifted to a new role of the bully. Whenever I got the chance, I would try to steal food from them. The younger ones had an especially difficult time. We would push them around and always let them perform the heaviest duties. For example, if we went to fetch water, we ordered them to do the digging while we would stand on guard. If we collected bamboo, they would carry the heaviest bundles. The new recruits suffered greatly, and many of them never made it passed their first few weeks in camp. The ones that survived grew

up to become strong soldiers.

The weather conditions in Aru, continued to be very dry. Yet this wasn't to say that it never rained at all. In the first one and a half months that we were in Aru it was during the dry season and it drizzled only one time. The moment that it started to drizzle we all tried to collect as much water as possible. The frustrating thing about Aru was that we very often saw heavy rain clouds in a distance, over the mountains, but they always remained there, raining on places that we couldn't reach. The rainclouds could usually be seen hanging over the mountains of Magwi and Palutaka, a very frustrating reminder of our former home, and the inglorious battle that had ended our life of relative luxury. In in the rainy season it drizzled more often, yet we never got any showers.

These conditions in Aru camp in these early days after arriving were very difficult, but I survived. Life was an everyday struggle, especially to get enough food, but I somehow managed. Whenever I got too hungry I would just steal the food from some new recruit, but I also found some fruits that grew underground that kept me alive. The heavy duties that I had to perform everyday, like carrying twenty litres of water for over a distance of 12 kilometres, only made me stronger. It was after I was in Aru for maybe one and a half or two months that a completely new chapter began in my story as a combatant for the LRA, one that made me a commander.

About the National Memory and Peace Documentation Centre (NMPDC)

The National Memory and Peace Documentation Center (NMPDC) is a memory and conflict documentation initiative of the Refugee Law Project and the Kitgum District Local Government.

The NMPDC collects, organizes, preserves and communicates memories of conflict-related events and experiences to inform ongoing transitional justice processes in Uganda and to give effect to the right of Ugandan citizens to unbiased and holistic information about their own past.

The overall objective of the NMPDC is to become a central information collection and information dissemination hub for matters related to conflict and transitional justice in Uganda.

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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This publication was sponsored by the Democratic Governance Facility (DGF) and the Department for International Development (DFID) of the UK government.

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