



# IN THE SERVICE OF THE LORD'S ARMY



## National Memory & Peace Documentation Centre

Issue # 12

Written by Theo Hollander

# “Invoking the Spirit of Vengeance”

## *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 12

After days of marching we returned to Aru and we were a ragged-looking bunch. We had left about sixty people behind, and at least sixty others had sustained injury. Many injured required assistance to march, and some were heavier than others. The ones who were only shot in the hand were supporting those who were shot in the leg. It looked really pathetic. Except for the lieutenant-colonel in command, this military campaign had been a test for all of us. For the new recruits it was their first battle and for those of us from the Juba training, it was the first time that we had commanded artillery units.

Despite our appearance, when we entered Aru we were all greeted as heroes. We were told to go to Control Altar where they quickly assembled hundreds and hundreds of people. We were standing in front of these people when Kony came to give us a speech. First each one of us showed Kony the testicles that we taken from our victims. By now they had become grotesque as the heat had caused the testicles to rot. After Kony had seen the testicles, we were allowed to throw them away.

Kony began speaking about how well we did in battle. He praised us for being victorious against an army of superior numbers and experience. Even the most badly wounded forgot their pains during his speech and all of us felt so proud. Kony announced that from now on, all the new recruits who had participated in the battle would no longer be seen as unholies. They had proven their valour in

battle and they had to be treated as such. At a certain point all the new recruits were taken away. The ones who were badly wounded were taken to the medical centre of Control Altar where their wounds were looked after. The rest were taken to begin their final initiation rite into the LRA. The only ones still left standing in front of the camp were the nineteen survivors from the Juba training.

Now Kony continued his speech, but this time it was directed at us. He told everyone how the Spirit had seen our extraordinary valour in battle and how the Spirit had uncovered the mind of the soldier deep within us. He told the hundreds of people assembled about our elite training and about our courage in battle. Whenever he stopped talking, the crowd started clapping for us. That was the first moment since the battle had begun that I relaxed and got a smile on my face. Until that time I had been very aggressive and not willing to talk to anyone. I felt a strong urge to destroy, even on our march back to Aru. But now with all the applauding for us, I finally showed a sign of humanity again; even pride and a little bit of happiness.

When Kony ended his speech, he told everyone present that we were promoted to the rank of sergeant and we each received a medal. I realized that this was actually the first time since I had joined the LRA that I got any recognition for the countless times that I had put my life in the line. The longer the speech lasted, the happier I became. When the ceremony was over, hundreds upon hundreds of people knew how courageous I had been in battle and I was often recognized by people that I had never seen before. It was a nice

moment, but going forward, life in Aru had changed very little.

The rank of sergeant was the second lowest rank within the LRA and it actually didn't mean all that much. It meant that from now on, whenever an assignment had to be carried out, like fetching water, collecting grass, or tasks like that, I would command others to do it. But this wasn't a big change, because even before I had been given rank I already had commanded others. The new rank also did not mean that I received extra food rations. Hunger continued to be part of our everyday lives. The difference that it did make, however, was that sometimes we were selected for special occasions and ceremonies, because we could march so much better than the rest of soldiers surrounding us.

On one occasion following this event I remember being truly happy. That was the day that an important visitor came to Aruu camp. Rebel leaders arrived from the West Nile Bank Front, a rebel movement that was also in war with the Ugandan government. WNBF rebels fought their war in the West Nile region, which borders the Congo and Sudan. Among these rebels was Juma Oris.

Because of my superior training and marching skills, I was selected for the welcoming parade. Only those commanders or privates who had been in the LRA for a long time were selected for this parade. The parade-commander was a colonel, called Colonel Opuk. He commanded it very well. They selected us depending on our size, and on how well we could march. We were told to make

our guns as shiny as possible and an hour or so before Juma Oris arrived we were given uniforms that were attractive and of good quality.

This day was a special day. It started with the Oris's arrival around noon and then we held the parade for him.. Then there were speeches. After the speeches, the church choir started to sing and to play the boabs, adungko and other traditional instruments. Afterwards we again started to demonstrate our skills in parading and assembling guns. A cow was slaughtered for this special occasion and those who participated in the parade were all allowed to taste the soup from the cow, with the remnants of beef in it. On this day I was completely filled with pride and happiness. I forgot my anger and I became human again.

Of course we were never told the reason for this visit, but I think that Oris was here to discuss a plan to unite. Both our forces were fighting an insurgency against Museveni and his army, so it made sense for us to combine our strength. I think Oris had come to review how the Lord's Resistance Army operated, and for the most part he seemed to like what he saw. He gave a long speech in which he had only one critical comment, which was that he found us to be too young to be soldiers. He mentioned our negative international reputation and that the use of children could harm our standing with other governments. He quickly realised that he had to change topic as this part of the speech did not made him popular with the crowd. Instead he began to describe how the government soldiers were weak and that they were all drunkards; and with these words we all started cheering. He



continued by saying that the government forces were no match for our forces.

That day my heart was filled with emotion. We looked so beautiful in our uniforms. Anyone who had seen us would have just been in awe with admiration. We didn't have to fetch water or do any of the other duties, and we all felt a little bit free. When we were not parading or listening to the speech, we were allowed to just relax.

I think that this day was somewhere in early September, because we were drawing close to Independence Day, which was another day that I clearly remember. Oris's visit came just a week or so before we went back to Uganda for my second major mission there. When the day came to an end we all regretted it a little bit. Upon his departure, we all shot three rounds in the air, as a way to honor him, and then he departed.

The following day we were still very excited about what had happened. By now I felt completely home and at ease in the LRA. I couldn't even think of my other life anymore. For the first time I felt thoroughly appreciated and although my rank as sergeant didn't change my situation that much, it did make me feel important. I had now to opportunity to show my valour over and over and I knew that as a sergeant, I could easily work my way up in the ranks, something that I clearly had in mind. I often dreamed about my future. My image of the future was to have a high rank commanding entire brigades in the final attack of Kampala. I couldn't imagine any other

life than the life in the LRA. I didn't hate or de-test it. It just felt natural. But in the week following the visit of Juma Oris, this feeling came to a dramatic change.

A day came in which there was a mission sent to get food from a village in Sudan. I was not the one in command; there were several people with a higher rank than me. One of them was a major, and there was also a first lieutenant. The team was selected in the morning at around 11, when we were parading before the headquarters of Stockry brigade. The members of Stockry Brigade were all lined up at the gate of Stockry and the selection began for the mission at hand. They chose a large group of us. We received orders that we were to go and collect food. Everybody was to come back with a sack full of food, and the sack should be filled to the height of one's hip. If you didn't collect that amount, you would suffer the consequences. I was selected based on my strength and my capabilities as a fighter. We needed good fighters because taking food from Sudanese villages never happened without a fight. In those days all the villagers in Sudan were armed. So we needed our guns and at least 3 or 4 loaded magazines. We did not carry any artillery with us, because that would only interfere with our ability to carry food back to Aruu.

We started moving that morning, back into the direction of Uganda. After several hours, we passed the first barrack of the Sudanese army and several hours later we passed another one. But we just kept on moving and moving. The village that we intended to plunder was very far away. At that time we travelled only with water and a kind of cassava that was

very bitter. It was shortly after we passed the second barrack of the Sudanese Army that I started to feel sick. I don't know what the illness was, but it came on after I ate some of the cassava. The sickness drained all the power from my body. I drank a lot of water but the more I drank, the worse it became. I was feeling pain in my joints and it was as if all my joints were slowly stiffening and refusing to move. I was moving in the advance party, but at a certain point I lost the power to keep up with their pace. It felt like the energy was pouring out of me.

The commander of the advance party was a lieutenant called Njego. I knew him quite well because he was in the same unit as me, but we were not friends. He had been with the rebels since the late eighties and he was somewhere in his thirties, while I was no older than thirteen. We did not like each other at all. I don't know when this bad relationship started or what the reason was for it, but it was just one of those facts of life and so far I had never really cared about our relation. He used to bully me in my early days with the LRA, but as I grew in rank and prestige we just ignored each other. But this day he was leading the advance party and because of my illness I wasn't able to keep up with them, so he punished me. By now I was used to punishment, and even though I didn't like him I realised that I was slowing everybody down. If I were in his position, I would have also punished the one stalling, but his punishment was really severe.

When he saw that I was fatigued he pushed me to the ground and he ordered me to take off my shirt. He began to hit me with the flat

side of his panga. Normally, you would give someone maybe ten or twenty strokes at the most, but he just kept on caning and caning me. When he had hit me at least thirty times with all his strength someone came up to stop him. This person screamed,

- "NJEGO. WHY ARE YOU HITTING THIS BOY?"

But Njego's only reply was that if he objected, he would get the same treatment. Also others started to object to Njego.

- "Njego, you are killing this sergeant, stop this immediately, or I will report it to the higher commanders."

But Njego was the highest officer nearby, and he threatened to beat up this guy, too. All this time he just kept on beating me to the point that I was nearly dead. Finally the main body caught up with us. Somehow I was still conscious. When the major commanding the battalion saw what was happening he exploded in anger, and this saved my life. While Njego was beating me, the major hit him in his back with the bud of the gun as hard as he could. Njego turned around and the major kicked him in the face and then started to scream.

- "NJEGO, WHAT THE FUCK DO YOU THINK THAT YOU ARE DOING? What the fuck are you doing? Are you killing this sergeant just for your fun? Do you think that we have spent so many of our resources in his training that you can just go out and kill him? Take of your shirt. NOW!!"

The commander grabbed the panga away

from him. The whole blade was bent because Njego had hit me so hard and so many times. Then the major started hitting Njego with the same blade and he gave him at least thirty strokes. When the major was done hitting him, Njego was ordered to stand and while he stood he got one last stroke with the flat side of the machete, right in his face. The commander told him that this would most probably cost him his rank. By this time Njego started to realize that the repercussions of his actions could jeopardize his status, and he tried to plea his way out of it. With great humility he pleaded;

- "Ooh, sorry, I was just beating this boy who couldn't move and I wanted him to move faster. I only wanted to teach him some discipline; I never even wanted to kill him. Please forgive me."

The major replied by saying that he didn't care about his apologies, he had seen what he had seen and he would report it to the highest commanders in the LRA. Afterwards he told Njego that at least for this mission he had lost the privilege to command and that from now on he would always remain in his sight, so that he couldn't beat anyone else to death.

Afterwards the major came up to me to examine my wounds. By now I was bleeding all over my back and I was in terrible pain. He asked me if I could still walk, and somehow I did manage, but my illness combined with my injuries caused me to move very slowly. He told me to go back to the advance party where one of the bigger guys was ordered to help me move. The rest of the trip was a

living hell for me. Every step that I took hurt, but I refused to give up. Not long after the incident we were allowed to rest and even to sleep for several hours.

There was no way I could sleep that night with all the pain. While everyone else slept, I was awake thinking. Something profound was happening in me. Never had I been so extremely angry in my entire life. My thoughts were focused on killing Njego. He was in the same unit as I was which gave me hope. I realized without a single doubt that if I were to kill him in cold blood I would surely be executed. So I had to think of another solution. The only way I knew that I could kill him and get away with it was in battle. I could shoot him in the back when we were engaged in fighting and nobody would ever suspect. Everyone would be too busy fighting and when my gun fires they would just assume that I was shooting at the enemy. This was it. This was my new goal in the LRA and it became my obsession.

When everyone woke up, I had not closed my eyes for a single moment and my body was still hurting, but at least the illness was a little better. For some distance I managed to walk on my own, after which the commander ordered somebody to carry me again. By the evening of the second day we came to our destination. As expected, a terrible fight broke loose in the village we had come to plunder, but was much too wounded to participate. When the fighting ended, someone gave me a sack told me to go into the village and make sure that I plundered something. The village was at the foot of a very large hill and there had been very many people living there. As I walked through the village there were dead bodies

everywhere, but by now I was used to these sights and it didn't affect me anymore.

What did impress me was the abundance of food and animals. I didn't see the village before the fighting started, but it must have been market day, so we really got everything. There were many goats, chickens, ducks and even cows and pigs. Except for the pigs we took all the animals. The pigs we just slaughtered them and left them to rot, because we were not allowed to eat pig. Pigs were considered to be impure animals and eating them would dirty the soul, according to Joseph Kony and the Spirit, but all the other animals were good for eating. We also had groundnuts, simsim, sorghum, millet, maize, cassava and all kinds of other foodstuff. It was more than we could actually carry.

I filled my sack with many things, but while I was plundering the major came up to me and took away my sack. He filled it with some other heavy things and took it to Njego. He told Njego that he had to carry two bags now, his own and mine. For a single moment Njego and I had eye contact and we both understood each other clearly; either he would kill me, or I would kill him. We just had to wait for the right opportunity. When the commander saw the look in Njego's eyes he slapped him in the face and he told him not to even think about it. Afterwards they both left and I was assigned in the advance group. This time I had to walk on my own as everyone else was fully loaded. The two day trip back was again hell, but I made it.

Upon our return to camp both Njego and I

were brought in front of some higher commanders. The major also assembled some eye witnesses to the beating. We retold our stories and they had examined my wounds. Njego was forced to lie down and he received one hundred strokes as a punishment. I was also punished because I hadn't carried anything back from the village, but they only gave me twenty strokes with a thin branch and they made sure that they didn't strike me on my old wounds. It was obvious that they were somewhat sympathetic with me.

For the following week Njego and I completely ignored each other. Any confrontation between us in the middle of Aru would have had bad consequences for either of us. Something changed inside me and in my attitude towards the LRA. I started to wonder whether my life in the LRA meant that I would be continuously beaten whenever a higher ranking commander felt like it. I really started to hate this life in the LRA.

For the first time since I had come to Sudan I started to think a lot about my parents again. Although they had sometimes corrected me when I had done something wrong, they had never beaten me to the point of death, not even close to that. I tried to remember the faces of my siblings, but I noticed that this was difficult. I started even to dream about my parents again. I dreamt that I was digging with my father and herding cows again, although we had lost our cows a long time ago. I had other very funny dreams involving my family as well.

I couldn't share these dreams with anyone. They would have said that I had plans of es-

caping, but this wasn't the case at all. On the contrary, I had only one plan in my mind, and that was killing Njogo. This was my secret.



### **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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# **REFUGEE LAW PROJECT**

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