



# IN THE SERVICE OF THE LORD'S ARMY



## National Memory & Peace Documentation Centre

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## "The Girls of Aboke"

### *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 13

I continued to recover for days after our return to Aru. They applied some kind of cream on my wounds and as a result they healed very quickly. Within four days I could move again with ease and after six days I didn't feel any more pain. I don't know if it was my young age, if it was the cream or if it was just me, but I always seemed to recover from injuries very quickly, no matter how serious they were. Njego and I were still in the same unit. The commanders realized that something had to be done to separate us for a while, so that we could both cool off. But in my mind I had only one think left to do in my life and that was to execute this son of a whore. Several weeks of cooling off wouldn't help a single bit to take this desire away.

By now it was September in the year 1996 and the LRA was stronger than ever. The LRA had continued abducting people and had been reinforced with a constant flow of new armoury from the Sudanese government. We now had a formidable force, much stronger than the army that had been defeated at Palataka. Our leaders felt that they needed to demonstrate this renewed power to the Ugandan government. The day that was planned for this show of strength was to be the 9th of October, Uganda's independence day.

A selection began for yet another mission to Uganda. At first it seemed like an ordinary mission, but there were clues that indicated the commanders were very excited about this mission. The first thing I noticed that set this mission apart from many others was

that only the very best soldiers were chosen from all the different brigades. From my unit Njego was still under punishment so they selected me instead of him. Once the selection was over we had to report at Control Altar where we got our briefing. Again it was Kony who gave us a speech. He told us that our new mission would let the Ugandan army know that they were no match for us, and that we could do anything we wanted in northern Uganda. More than half a year had passed since our defeat at Palataka and we had fully recovered. Kony explained the goals of the mission. He stated that the people of northern Uganda were breaking our laws and that this had to stop. We had to show them an example that they would never forget. Kony believed that the laws of the Ugandan government didn't apply to the citizens of northern Uganda so they had no reason to follow them. The only laws that were sacred were our own and we had to make sure that the people of Northern Uganda understood them very well. They would learn that breaking our laws was a crime and criminals had to be dealt with. So in addition to being an army, we were also a police force.

However, this was not the main objective of the mission; it was clear that teaching some people about our laws would not invoke this high level of enthusiasm from our commanders. The main objective of our mission would put the LRA in the spotlight of many international news agencies for the first time. It was explained that in Lira District there were two prestigious schools, called the Aboke Girl's School and the Aboke Boy's School. Our main objective was to target the Aboke Girl's School. This was the most likely reason that caused the

excitement among the commanders. Within a short time they would have many new females to choose as their wives. We were told that the preparation for this mission would take three days, which was very unusual.

We spent the time on the sacred grounds near the gate of Control Altar. The preparation included weapons training, resting, and eating. . We had a lot of target practice in that time. They also gave us training on the one B-10 that the LRA possessed. We learned how to use it to shoot down airplanes and helicopters. Of course, there was little that they could add to my previous training with the B-10, but for the vast majority this type of elite artillery training was new and they watched it with great interest. The most exciting part of the preparation for most of us was the eating. Every night we each received a very large roasted sweet potato, and we were allowed to eat it entirely by ourselves. It was mainly because of this extra nourishment that the three days went by in a flash. In the morning of the fourth day we set out.

As always when we set out for Uganda, everyone was overloaded with extra ammunition. I was carrying a heavy load of several fuses, one bullet belt, my AK47 and the barrel of the 60 mm mortar. Most of this stuff would be buried soon after arriving in Uganda, and after several hours of marching we already looked forward to this. The march through Sudan went without any major incidents. . It was in the middle of September and this was in the rainy season. It was a fine season for marching since it wasn't too hot. Still, it took us at least four or five days to reach the Uganda border.

When we arrived in the area that was occupied by the SPLA we stopped moving in the daylight, and continued marching only during the night. Close to Owini Kibul we had to cross the main road, which we did moving with '99 speed,' because of the danger of being in the open. The same night, very early in the morning we passed Pajok where we had fought that horrible battle against the white mercenaries. Over half a year had passed since that battle and now it was little more than a vague memory. The trauma that I still carried with me from the final battle in Palatoka overwhelmed all my other memories of battle. Not far from Pajok we took cover for the daylight and at night we moved on again. When we reached Uganda we continued our march deep into the Padwad reserve where we hid the extra armor we had been carrying. Although nobody said so out loud, it was apparent that this was a relief to everyone. We could now focus on the mission at hand.

We had several weeks to reach Aboke, so we could take our time. By now it was around the 20th of September and our mission at the Aboke Girl's school would happen on the 9th of October, Uganda's Independence Day. In-between these two dates we had a lot of distance to cover and many laws to teach.

In Uganda we moved during the daylight hours again. We never walked in a straight line. Instead we zigzagged cross-country, so that it appeared we had no clear destination. Whenever we came across civilians, we would tell them about our laws. Those who we found that didn't break any of the laws were sometimes left alive. We just told them orally what the laws were and then we let them go.



But those who we determined to break our laws were in deep trouble.

Some of our laws concerned animals that were not supposed to be kept or eaten. These included dogs, pigs, and sheep. Whenever we saw any of those animals we would kill them, and if we found their owners we would deal with them to. Sometimes we would just beat them severely, but in most cases we just killed them. The people who were savagely beaten must still hate us, but what they didn't realize is that they were extremely lucky that their lives were spared.

For most of us it didn't matter whether we killed someone or if we would beat them up. Beating and killing had become routine. Some of my colleagues actually preferred to shooting people instead of beating them up, as it involved less physical effort. Other colleagues were just cruel and they preferred to kill for the fun of it. These few liked all the killing, especially when the process went very slow and there was a lot of torturing and bullying involved.

The majority of us didn't enjoy the killing, but we also didn't hate it. I was usually indifferent when I saw someone being executed. Depending on my mood I didn't like the killing and could sometimes feel sorry for a victim when he was killed in an extremely brutal way. Most of the time, I simply didn't care. It was only when I was in a battle rage that I was ever eager to do the killing myself. That was not to say that I would refuse to kill if I was given the strict order to do so. When ordered, I would kill

without remorse or second thoughts. Luckily I was never given those orders during this mission. There were always enough crazy fuck-ups in our group who would gladly line up to do this nasty work.

When we were in Uganda for several days we carried out the first small massacre. We came across several people cultivating their fields on a Friday. This constituted their first crime, working on Fridays. That was enough for us to execute them. What made it even worst for them was that they had come to the fields on bicycles. Bicycles were absolutely forbidden because they allowed the civilians to report our whereabouts much faster to the Ugandan army.

When I think back about it, I can still see how those people were lined up and executed, one after another. Some were begging for mercy, while others just met their fate in silence without any objection whatsoever. Whenever I saw this I found it to be incredibly intriguing. How could people who knew that they were about to be executed meet their fate without any distress? They didn't show any signs of extreme anger or even fear. It seemed like their minds were dead already and they only waited for their bodies to follow.

Every time when we met civilians we would teach them our laws. We didn't actually kill all that many people during this mission, but the deaths of those we killed were especially horrific. In the first massacre the people were simply shot, but as the days passed our methods also became crueler. We devised punishments that were in the line with the crime that he or she had committed. If we found some-

body on a bicycle, we would hack off his legs and cut off his buttocks. If we found a local leader, we would cut out his tongue that he used to report, his hands that he used for writing, and his ears that he used for listening. If we found that somebody had been talking to the army, we would cut off the lips so that they could never speak again. In this manner we set very clear examples as to what our laws contained.

We were a relatively small group in the region, compared to the Ugandan army and the SPLA. But because of our very effective strategy of fear and terror, we were able to control almost the entire north of Uganda and a large chunk of Southern Sudan with an army of just several thousands of fighters. We didn't need a police force to enforce our laws. One brutal murder was often enough to broadcast the message; the rumor mill, popularly known as Radio Kabi, would do the rest of the work. Within one week, the story of a gruesome murder could travel from Pader all the way to Atiak and back. With every kilometer the story travelled, the details of the murder would get worse. In this way each of our murders had their intended effect. It was not about the person that was killed, it was about setting an example so that the rest of the country knew that we meant business when we told them that we have laws.

So our killings were not personal, but on rare occasions there was a personal element to the massacres. Sometimes killings were motivated out of revenge, and the examples we intended to teach were not for the people outside of the LRA, but more for the people

within it. We had such a mission when we moved into Gulu District, around the first of October, one week before Independence Day.

Near the trading center of Awach, some thirty kilometers north of Gulu we were told that we had to carry out another assignment. A few months earlier one of our more experienced soldiers, a boy called Okello, had managed to escape. This crime alone carried the death penalty, but to make things worse, Okello had also taken several guns and loads of ammunition belts with him when he escaped. Losing a human asset was one thing in the LRA, but losing weapons and armor was yet another. Okello had been in the LRA for several years and he had made the fatal mistake of letting people know where he came from and who his family was.

The boy came from a protected village called Awach. They referred to these villages as protected because there was a small army barracks located nearby. But these barracks never had more than 50 soldiers, and often, the soldiers were based in the middle of the camp, rather than around it, which in real sense meant that it were the civilians who were protecting the soldiers rather than the other way around. We expected the soldiers to flee without a fight the moment that we attacked them. The escapee had been the protégé of our commander who was now very angry at him. Our mission was to enter Awach, find the boy and his family, make him disclose where the weapons were, and then kill the boy and his entire family, and families in Uganda are very large.

As we approached Awach it was already get-

ting dark. We shot one RPG into the army base and this was enough to immobilize the whole barrack. It seemed that very few soldiers were actually present, we saw only two who ran away. We managed to catch one of them, because he fell down while he tried to escape and we quickly executed him. The other kept on running straight through the bush, and we were unable get a clear shot at him. Because it was getting dark we soon lost him as he ran away in the direction of Patiko Ajulu. We knew that we had only a few hours before he would come back with massive reinforcements, so we had to be long gone by then.

The advance and blocking force had already surrounded Awach so that no-one could escape. The main body entered Awach and all the civilians were just silent. Some of them tried to hide, but there was nowhere to hide. Some tried to escape through the bush and were shot. The ones who remained were arrested. We kicked in all the doors of the huts, and we arrested all the civilians and brought them to the middle of the village, where they were all tied up. Then the questioning and the caning started. Our commander beat up people randomly asking everyone where Okello was. In the meantime we searched all the huts to see if Okello was there hiding from us. But we didn't find anyone hiding. Everyone was in the middle, where the questioning and the caning were taking place. It didn't take long before a woman confessed after we threatened to kill her child. She told us that Okello had been here, but that he was taken away to Gulu to the rehabilitation center. Then she pointed out his family. Okello's mother glared at her

in hatred, but we had given this lady no option. If she hadn't told us what we wanted to hear, we would have killed her boy. When Okello's family was revealed our commander walked up to them and caned his mother and father with a very thick stick. Our commander went completely mad on them. All of his rage against Okello was directed at this family. He beat them until there were no signs of life, and then he ordered some soldiers to spear them with bayonets. Every one of us was ordered to watch, so that we would learn never to escape. Any of us who contemplated escaping, but still loved our families, learned a valuable lesson this day.

After the family was executed we got the order to plunder Awach. When we finished, we had to patrol the village to make sure that the UPDF reinforcements didn't catch us by surprise. From the outer edges of Awach I saw that the rest of the civilians were beaten when the commander was done with Okello's family. He took mercy on no one, not even the children that we were going to abduct. During this whole time the reinforcements never came. . By nightfall all the civilians were beaten half to death and we got the order to move out.. Only the soldiers with bayonets on their guns were ordered to stay. Although I didn't witness or hear it, I believe that all the civilians in Awach were killed that day. There was no other reason to keep the bayonets behind. When we crossed the valley and looked back we saw that entire village was ablaze. I don't think anybody or anything in Awach could have survived that fire.

Although we never found Okello, he would surely feel the consequences of his escape.

Because of his actions, his family was now dead. Because he had taken guns with him, the entire population of his village was massacred and the village was set ablaze. It certainly set a clear example to the rest of us. The lives of your family and your village will be endangered if you try to escape. After the Awach massacre we stayed in the vicinity of Gulu town for another week. Sometimes we even entered to the town, which was the stronghold of the UPDF. We never stayed in town for long, because we didn't want to get into a fight with the entire fourth army, but we did demonstrate to them that we had the ability to penetrate the town. First we attacked the prestigious boy's school called Samuel Baker, where we abducted little over twenty boys. The school was located on the outskirts of Gulu town and the attack lasted only fifteen minutes. We were gone well before the Ugandan army could ever respond. We conducted these hit-and-run campaigns for almost a week. By the time we were near Aboke, our numbers had increased with two hundred fresh recruits.

Out of necessity we trained the new recruits while we were on the move. When we were cooking and stretching our legs, they had to march. If they didn't march properly we would cane them. When we got the order to move out, we did and with the next break their training continued. They never got any rest. We taught them how to disassemble the parts of a gun and how to reassemble them. To the recruits nearest to me, I introduced artillery training. We had the 60mm mortar, the landmine, RPG, and the KPM. Although it wasn't professional artillery training, at least they were taught the basics.

During that week we came very near to my home village. We passed my former school, which was completely deserted because of the rumors that we were around. I could even see some of the huts of my distant relatives. We walked over the land that I used to cultivate with my dad and we passed the little pool near the papyrus where I swam and played with my friend. The hut where I was born was less than one kilometer away from this place. The soil where we walked was drenched with memories of my youth.

I felt a deep pain in my chest. Although I was completely indoctrinated to life in the bush with the LRA, I was getting tired of all the killing and the suffering. I just longed to be back with my parents, especially now that I was only a couple of minutes' walk away from their hut. I wondered if they were home. I knew that the chances of them being home were slim, as the rumors of our presence had probably reached this place long before our arrival. But I still felt a strong urge to check. I wasn't thinking of escaping. I just wanted to go home and say hello to my mum and dad, and drink a cup of tea with them before returning to my group. But I knew very well that I couldn't risk it. A visit like that would put my family in serious danger, so I quickly put this idea out of my head. Our point commander Agira came up to me while we walked along. He knew that I was born somewhere in this area, although he didn't know exactly which village. He asked me if I wanted to show him my village, and I felt some panic. Luckily another soldier approached us at that same moment to report rumors of UPDF soldiers in the area. This took Agira's focus away from me and my family. We continued moving and the further we went,

the more the memories faded away.

We kept traveling south, in the direction of the parish of Lalogi near Aboke. To obscure our destinations we never moved in a straight line. Despite this it appeared that this entire region had heard of our arrival in the area. We occasionally ran into some civilians, but the places we passed through were mostly deserted.

On the eight of October we reached the parish of Lalogi, and from here we started moving indirectly towards the village of Aboke. Throughout the day we moved deeper into the bush so that our presence would be unnoticed. At dark, we set up our camp in what is now known as Oyam District. We were hidden deep in the bush so the next morning, nobody was aware that we were in the area. We used this fact to our advantage. In a surprise tactic we entered a small trading center where they had lots of chickens and goats. The people there fled in all directions when they saw us. We killed whoever we could catch, but we were too hungry to bother chasing the rest. Most of us were more interested in boiling the chicken and the goat, even though the fleeing villagers were probably on their way to get the army. The moment that we conquered this trading center we started boiling water and slaughtering animals. So our meal for Independence Day was boiled chicken and roasted goat.

This was an advantage about being in Uganda. I didn't like all the killing and the suffering of the people, but what I did like was all the extra food, which we never enjoyed in

this abundance in Sudan.. Although we didn't rush our meal, there was a sense that we had to keep moving to stay ahead of the army.

After the feast, we continued south. Our doctor, a lieutenant named Michael, went ahead of the advance party on a bicycle. He probably had some other business to attend to, because the commander who trusted the doctor completely, fully expected him to return. I heard our head commander, Agira tell him that they would meet up a little later; and so they did. Not even an hour after we had left the trading center we found the doctor again, lying dead on the ground, shot down by arrows.

This is how we realized that we had walked into an ambush of a Local Defense Unit (LDU). They usually used bow and arrow to achieve silent kills of our scouts, and these were the weapons that they handled best. The LDU's included mainly farmers and young boys who had been given guns from the government to fight us. Their mandate was to protect the civilians in the surrounding area, but in my mind they did exactly the opposite. They were rarely strong enough to defeat us and the only thing they did was to anger us.

This was how the suffering in the north had started. In the late eighties, the LRA was very good to the citizens of Northern Uganda. But when these citizens turned against the LRA in the early nineties, it caused the LRA to react harshly. Once the civilians start to kill rebels, the rebels had to teach them a valuable lesson that it is not wise to attack a rebel. It was the same thing with the killing of our doctor.



The moment when we saw the doctor, we took up defensive positions against the ambush. The LDU militia opened fire at us. Some of them had guns, while others just had their bow and arrow. The militia had strong numbers, but it wasn't organized or trained the way our army was. Some of their boys with guns didn't even know how to reload them. It didn't take us very long to win the battle, maybe twenty to thirty minutes. We killed all of the LDU's. On our side, only three received minor injuries, all flesh wounds, nothing really serious. One boy was hit in the buttocks, a girl which was hit in the leg and another boy was hit in the shoulder. And then of course there was the doctor.

We took away all their weapons and we were surprised to find out that they were well equipped. Some of the weapons were given to the fresh recruits. I saw that some of the Samuel Baker boys were now armed.

Suddenly, a plane flew over and started to shoot at us with its machine gun. The LDU had called in the army and it was clear that they intended to fight us with heavy equipment. The B-10 was the only weapon we had that could use to defend ourselves from an air attack, but actually hitting an airplane with a B-10 was almost impossible. So the best strategy was to hide in the bush, where the fighter plane had no way of finding us from up above. We stopped the plundering and scattered into the bush. In small groups we moved out in a south-eastern direction. In this manner it didn't take us long to lose the airplane.

Without our doctor we couldn't take care of

the wounded. They had to be taken to our sickbay near Gulu, where we had another doctor who could attend to them. When the wounded were marched off, we continued our way south. It was around noon and our commander was still red hot over the death of our doctor. It was clear that he wanted more revenge. Eventually we entered Lira district, an area inhabited by the Lango tribe., who are related to the Acholi. We speak almost the same language, but because of the war, they really hated us. The LRA had always run into trouble when they were in Langoland. In fact the people from the LDU militia had been Lango's. So our commander was determined to teach these civilians a lesson. We would give them an Independence Day that they would never forget.

It started with one civilian who appeared to be following us, but may have been completely oblivious to our presence. . The commander thought that this man had to be intelligence, so we ambushed him and began questioning him. The man repeatedly claimed that he was only a farmer, but his words had no effect on his fate. He was brutally beaten by Ojet Bugem, who was the second in command during this mission. We left the man behind half dead, probably so that the blocking force would kill him.

We continued marching straight into a large swampy area that was completely covered with papyrus. This was difficult terrain for marching, and for this reason the enemy would never suspect us come from this direction. Sometimes we would sink so deep in the muck that the water came to our chest. As a result everything was soaking wet and cold.

We entered the papyrus swamp at dusk and by the time we cleared it, it was already dark. As the night was falling over us we heard the beginnings of the celebrations. Independence Day is one of the most important public holidays and feast days in Uganda and everybody around was celebrating. In Langoland this holiday bore special significance, because Uganda's independence was achieved by one of their leaders, Apolo Milton Obote. Everywhere we saw bonfires and heard the cheering and songs of joy. These people didn't realize that we were closing in on them and that their joyful evening would end up in terror. We slaughtered a lot of people on the roadside that night, and brutally ended the festivities. Commander Ojet actually cut out the heart of one civilian and placed it in the mouth of this dead man.

Around midnight we stopped our massacres. By now it had started to drizzle and dark clouds were covering the sky, making it impossible to see very far. I could see only as far as the colleague walking in front of me, but that was it. Many of us were equipped with flashlights, but we were not allowed to turn them on until we reached Aboke, for reasons of secrecy. We kept on moving until around three in the morning when we finally entered the village of Aboke. At this time everyone was in a deep sleep. Except for some barking dogs, there were no noises whatsoever. Before we entered the village Aboke our roles for the mission were assigned. I was selected to be a standby, which meant that I would take part in the attack. Only the most experienced soldiers were selected for this assignment. At least fifty percent of those who had set out from Sudan were as-

signed roles in this mission. The rest stayed behind to guard the new recruits.

Aboke was a small village near Lira town, with two of the most prestigious schools in Northern Uganda, one for girls and the other for boys. . It was the girls that we were after, St. Mary's High School. We approached the school and saw that the only thing keeping us out was a weak wire fence. It took us only a few seconds to get in. Some of our soldiers quickly stormed the church and the seminar, while others went straight for the girls. I ran into the schoolyard, but I was selected with two others to guard the main entry gate, opposite from the one we entered.

From where I stood I couldn't see too much of the raid on Aboke, but I could hear it very well. Within seconds the tranquility of the school turned into total chaos as hundreds of my colleagues tried to get into the heavily enforced buildings. The entry doors to the buildings were made of steel and the windows were protected with iron bars, so it was very difficult to get in. I heard my colleagues screaming that they would blow up the building if the girls wouldn't open the door. Then I saw that the threats were effective. . A girl in the first building opened the door and all the girls, most of them younger than I was, were forced to march out. Soon afterwards, our soldiers blasted a gaping hole in another of the buildings, and the girls inside were also forced out. These girls were clearly from a higher class and they all appeared to be older than I was. In the meantime I watched some of my colleagues pour petrol over the only vehicle around and set it ablaze. It was very chaotic and quite frightening for the girls.

Throughout the raid which took several hours I just remained guarding the gate. When all the girls were bound with ropes and cloths, my colleagues marched them out of the schoolyard. This entire procession had to pass me at the gate. The girls all wore dark blue clothes and they all had decent shoes. I was somewhat jealous of their nice clothes. They looked so beautiful in that cloth, like they were going out dancing. Yet their faces revealed that they weren't going for fun. They wore expressions of complete terror. Many of the girls were crying. As they passed me I tried to count them, but when more than hundred had passed me I lost count. When we all cleared the gate we quickly marched as far away from Aboke as we could. It was still dark.

At dawn, we came to a river that we had to cross and there was a lot of objection from the girls. The river was deep enough that the water came up to my chest. Although the girls didn't like it, they were all forced to cross the river and they became very dirty and completely soaked. Because it was still very early in the morning, there was no heat yet from the sun, and we were all cold. The girls were clearly shivering, but it was difficult to tell if that was their fear or the chill.

We soon came to a village, which we attacked. There was a man there who warned us that if we kept girls the entire army would be on our back. This man was immediately executed. We found some more children in the village, and we abducted them before moving out. We kept on moving until well into the morning when we reached a second village. This village was deserted just min-

utes before we arrived, so we had a couple of minutes rest. When we set out again a friend from the Juba training took over my position in support and I was reassigned to the blocking force. . First the advance party, moved out, then the main body, that now had over 400 people with all the fresh abductees, and finally the blocking force.

The blocking force had about fifty warriors and it was led by the major who had been responsible for my abduction, major Ojara. While Ojara stayed in the middle, I was in command of the rear of our entire battalion, so out of the 300 experienced soldiers, I was the last in the group. Because of the Aboke girls and all the other new abductees, we couldn't move very fast, so my position was a very important one. The Ugandan army could easily catch up with us so we expected an attack any moment. An hour after we passed the village we came to a big rock from which we could see the entire area. Usually we used these places for navigation and scouting, but this time we were in an urgent haste to get as much distance between us and St. Mary's High School as humanly possible, so we we didn't stop at the rock to survey the situation.

We came into a small valley and then up another hill. At the top of this hill I looked back to check whether we were being trailed. This is when I saw them for the first time. On the other side of the hill were three people who were clearly following us. One of them was a white sister who was wearing nuns cloth, one was a well-dressed black man, and the last was a black women who looked like a local villager. The white lady and the man were waving at me and they were even shouting things, but because of the distance I couldn't

hear what it was. The moment I saw this I sent for a dedication officer, the lowest officer in rank, and I told him to run up to the commander of the blocking force to report this. In the meantime I gathered some boys to check out our visitors. While the visitors walked down the hill there was a brief moment when they were out of our view. We used this moment to line up, and I sent out some boys to see if these three had been followed by the army.. When they came into sight again we had an ambush prepared. Suddenly they were staring in the barrels of our guns.

We stared at each other face-to-face. It was clear that they feared us, but there was also a very strange determination within these people, like they were ready to die. The nun immediately started to talk. She introduced herself as Sister Rachelle and she requested to talk to our commander. I wasn't sure what to do. I could kill her immediately or I could take her to the commander. Both these things might anger the hot-headed Agira, so I was very relieved when my senior commander of the blocking force appeared. He took over the discussions from me and he allowed the party to be taken to commander Agira.

I was selected to take them to Agira. I walked in front and the three followed me until we came to the main body. The moment the Aboke girls saw the nun, they started crying, as if they had the feeling that their salvation had come. Somehow I admired the white lady and her two followers. I had gotten used to people who fled away when they saw us, and rarely had I seen such a brave but stupid

determination. She was very much aware of the risk she was taking in following us, but she had clearly shown us that she wasn't afraid to die. I saw the surprise on the faces of my colleagues. They were all wondering what these three people were thinking. The white lady especially attracted a lot of attention.

As soon as we were in front of the commander the lady started to talk, but the commander made it very clear that he would be the one asking the questions. He asked if she spoke Acholi and she confirmed that she understood Langi, which was very much related to Acholi. The commander questioned where they had been when we attacked the school.

- "I had been in Lira with Sister Alba who was sick," she replied. "When I came back I saw what had happened and I decided to follow you, to ask you if I can have my girls back."

From her bag she pulled hundreds of thousands of shillings and put them into the hands of the commander, but he wasn't interested in the money. She offered medicine or anything else that they could provide in exchange for the girls. I don't know what it was with this commander. He was one of the most brutal commanders within the LRA. I had seen his brutal beating of the Okello family in Awach. This man was vicious, ruthless and very dangerous. He could have killed her with just one blink of his eye and normally he would surely have done so. But instead he began to smile and then he said to the women;

- "Don't you worry, you will get you girls back".



The moment I heard this I was completely taken by surprise. I had expected that any moment I would be given the order to shoot this nun who introduced herself as Sister Rachelle, but instead the commander told the lady that the Aboke girls would be returned to her.

After the commander had made this strange promise he gave the order to move on again and to line up the girls on the top of the hill. There they would talk further. I was ordered to stay in the main group and help to guard the girls. As we walked the commander talked to the nun as if he had known her all his life. He talked about that battles that he had fought and the things that the LRA had achieved. Agira also called Kony through the satellite phone.

We kept on climbing the hill and when we were on the top we were told to line up the Aboke girls. Agira's second wife, a girl who was barely fifteen years old, unrolled a plastic sheet on which the nun and the other visitors were told to sit. The sister started negotiating again. Again she told the commander that she would give the commander anything and everything he wanted, from medicine to money. But the commander was very clear; he declined everything and told her that she shouldn't worry so much, and that she would get the girls.

Just then we heard the distant noise of a helicopter approaching. Immediately the commander started screaming orders. Everybody should take cover so that the helicopter didn't spot us. The sister was forced to take off her white cap and also the black man who was escorting her had to take off

his white shirt. It was too late. The helicopter had already spotted us. As the helicopter disappeared over the horizon, we were told to pack our gear and to start moving. We knew that the Ugandan army was now aware of our position so we had to clear out of there as soon as possible. We had to push the girls to walk faster. After ten minutes the helicopter came back looking for us. We tried to disappear under the bushes, but because there were so extremely many of us, it was difficult to hide. We just continued marching. Several hours after the helicopter had first spotted us, we crossed the railroad that had been out of use now for more than a decade and which was slowly disappearing under the tall grass. Once across the tracks we walked into the first ambush.

It was the advance party that walked in the ambush so the main body was able to go around it. Along with several dozen experienced soldiers I was selected to reinforce the advance party. When we came to the frontline it was complete chaos. The UPDF had been there waiting for us and they had set up good defensive positions. This wasn't going to be an easy battle. Furthermore, the helicopter was still circling above us and it was equipped with a heavy machine gun. When we arrived, the advance party, which consisted of about sixty warriors, was under heavy fire. We came just in time to prevent the UPDF from destroying them. We immediately set up defensive positions and I took command of the left wing. A fierce battle unfolded in which neither side could advance.

Within minutes the blocking force came to our aid and provided another fifty experienced soldiers to our forces. We finally man-

aged to eliminate the enemy. We also tried to shoot down the helicopter with the B-10, but we didn't manage to hit it. The blast was enough however to make the helicopter retreat. After we had defeated the enemy it didn't take long to catch up with the main group again.

When we found them the sister was still negotiating with commander Agira. We came just in time to see the selection of the girls. A small group was selected to stay among the rebels, while a much larger group was set apart. Even from a distance we could clearly see that the sister was upset. When we came closer we heard that Agira had given her back one hundred and nine girls, while we kept thirty of the strongest and the most beautiful. For not a single moment did I consider this offer to be unfair. From my perspective, we could have willingly and easily killed this nun and taken all the girls, so giving back so many of them seemed to me to be an extremely generous gift. Yet it was clear that the sister didn't accept this offer. As she was talking to the girls I could see her eyes were in tears.

She begged Agira to take her and let the girls go. She even went on her knees and held her rosary in her hand. At this point Agira was nearly at his breaking point. He became extremely wild and he started to scream at the old nun.

- "Do you know me.... ANSWER ME.... DO YOU KNOW ME!!! I will kill you if I hear just one other word from you. You don't know me. I can kill you any second from now if I want to. Either you stop begging now, or I take all the girls."

Sister Rachelle was clearly startled by Agira's sudden outburst of anger. While he walked away, she offered him her apologies. She got the message. Either she would back down, or the commander would carry out his threat. The sister had no choice but to accept. The commander told her to note the names of the girls left behind. One of the girls had to assist the sister in writing down the names, because her hands were shaking uncontrollably.

When they were done with this, Agira ordered the nun to join him in prayer. We all knelt down as the commander praised the Lord and the Holy Spirit, who had taken hold of our leader Joseph Kony. After the prayer sister Rachelle showed Agira a list with thirty names and she was forced to call all the names and have the girls come forward. One of the 30 girls hid amongst the larger group. The sister realized Agira's anger at this so she asked some of the girls to collect the missing girl.

By this time it was late in the day and it was getting dark. The commander gave the sister a flashlight and she told her to go. The sister ordered all the girls to say thank you to the commander. Agira asked the girls if he had mistreated them, or if he had mistreated the sister, and both times the girls replied no. He told them not to run away the next time he visited their school. As the sister was departing with the one hundred and nine girls, the commander gave her another abducted girl who was barely 10 years old. She had been abducted from the last village and maybe have been the child of the local village lady who had come with the nun. Sister Rachelle took the child and afterwards she left with one hundred and ten children.

We proceeded for another few hours until we came to a deserted village. Here we set up camp for the night. The thirty Aboke girls were forced into one hut while all the other abductees were separated into the other huts. Each hut a few guards inside the rest of us soldiers had to sleep under the open sky. At first light we packed our gear to move out.

I was ordered to be in the blocking force again and I watched the advance party and the very large main body as they set out. Because there were so many abductees in the main body Agira decided to reinforce it with troops from the blocking force. Because of this, the blocking force was left with only about ten people. Leading us was a captain called Ojara, who was not the same Ojara who had abducted me. I was the second in command. After the main body was long gone we followed their trail. We marched for maybe one and a half hours when we walked into a terrible ambush. Somehow neither the advance party nor the main body had noticed the ambush. For some reason the UPDF hadn't opened fire on these groups; instead they reserved it all for the ten of us. It was captain Ojara who saw them first, a lot of soldiers lined up about a hundred meters away from us, on the top of yet another hill. At first we thought that it was people from the main body, so we walked up to them without even expecting an attack. Then it began.

Our enemies held the high ground and they were lined up in great numbers, so when they started firing we really stood no chance. Although it was forbidden in the LRA, we all squat down and hid behind some trees.

Captain Ojara ordered one of his escorts to run with the walkie-talkie to get within talking distance of the main body and to request reinforcements. Luckily the main body had already heard the shooting and they immediately dispatched a battle group to support us. This group was under the command of Opiro Anaka. When they came to reinforce us they were bare-chested and ready for battle. We removed our shirts as well and lined up to fight. Captain Ojara, who was also in the artillery department, loaded the mortar and began firing back at our enemies. A serious gun battle ensued. As we advanced up the hill captain Ojara was shot in the belly. When I saw this I brought him back to safety as my colleagues continued to fight. Ojara's injury was very severe. He must have been hit by some kind of bomb and an entire part of his belly was removed, and all his intestines were out. I tried to get him back to a safe distance, but he died on the way. Minutes later Ojet Bugem, now in command of this entire battalion, had his thirty reinforcements in position to help us. Ojet fired his mortar and I fired the mortar of captain Ojara.

In the meantime two helicopters came to reinforce our enemies. One of the helicopters was a gunship and it caused us serious trouble. The other didn't engage us; it was just there to scare us. In the first few minutes the gunship did a lot of damage to us. Finally, some of my friends from the Juba training fired the B-10 at the helicopter and it immediately left the battlefield. We were still greatly outnumbered by the UPDF soldiers and the battle continued fiercely for hours. . By three in the afternoon, we managed to scatter our enemies a bit. But they kept on fighting us, shooting at us with

mortars from all the different directions.

That day our enemies had suffered very high losses, but so had we, particularly in the blocking force. From the ten people who started in the force that morning, I was the only one who emerged unwounded. Three others in the group were severely wounded and the rest were shot dead. Throughout the fight we continually received reinforcements and many of them also got shot. Somehow, I managed to survive.

I deeply regretted the loss of my colleagues, especially captain Ojara. He was the nicest commander in the LRA. He truly cared for his soldiers and he always wanted us to survive the battle. When we first walked into the ambush, he allowed us to take cover and wait for reinforcements, instead of just sending us into our deaths like so many other commanders would have done. This battle was the heaviest that I had fought in Uganda and one of the heaviest of all the fights while I was in the LRA. We lost more than fifty people that day, and once again I was angry. I always experienced such rage from these battles. This time I blamed the Aboke girls for all our trouble. On several occasions I openly cursed them. This was a sentiment that was echoed by many of my colleagues. Why were they so fucking special! Hadn't we all been innocent children when we were abducted? Where was the Ugandan army then? Where was all the fucking media attention when we were stolen from our parents? Where were the fucking white people coming to rescue us? It was as if nobody gave a shit about us, only about those damned girls from Aboke. I fumed that we

had lost almost fifty of our best fighters and commanders, men such as Ojara, just to abduct some girls who would mean nothing but trouble to us.

After the battle we moved out back into Lalogi parish in Gulu district where we settled in the middle of the bush. At night one of the Aboke girls tried to escape. A guard had seen somebody slipping away in the distance and we were immediately awakened and told to pursue the girl. Not far from our position we found a hut which was inhabited by a large family and we ordered them to come out. The commander questioned them about the girl. The family claimed that they hadn't seen the girl nor had they seen anybody. While the commander continued to question the family some soldiers searched the house and quickly the girl was found. The reaction of the commander was frightening. He was so extremely angry. He beat the girl and also the family until they were all unconscious and nearly dead. For the rest of the night we stayed near the hut. Around nine in the morning we began to move out again. Just before we left our commander beat the girl and the family some more, and we left them there to be killed by the blocking force.

We then returned to our sickbay near Gulu town, under Atwa Hill. The sickbay was located in the thick bush at the foot of the hill. Ironically, on the top of this hill were the barracks of the UPDF. The only thing separating our sickbay from the barracks was a thick line of trees. But they never knew about our sickbay and this was the last place where they would ever look for it. It was only much later that they found out about it. The only problem



was that we had to remain silent in this area, and this was difficult for the badly wounded.

We stayed in the sickbay for several hours while we waited for all lightly wounded to get treated. Afterwards we went to a village called Ogul, where we stayed for almost a week. Ogul was a friendly place for us where we never mistreated any of the civilians. This is why we had their full support. They always made sure that we had enough to eat, we even paid them for our food, and in return they didn't disclose anything to the Ugandan army. In Ogul the training of the all the new abductees continued. We trained them in parading, in handling the AK 47, and other things they would need to know about life in the LRA. Some of the new recruits, for example the boys from Samuel Baker, were already given a gun and all the initiating rituals were performed. Agira had all the authority to bless the new soldiers and he did so readily, because we badly needed to replenish our forces. Some of the recruits who had received a bit more training were given power over the other recruits. In this way they could improve their own position within the LRA, and we had some new guards for the other abductees.

By the time we left Ogul, every abductee had been anointed and everybody's name was written. It was one of the guidelines that all the newly abducted people had to be anointed within four days and they could only be anointed after their name was written. All of this happened within the first days after arriving in Ogul. Hundreds of recruits were seriously beaten and afterwards commander Agira anointed all of them with

Shea oil. All the new abductees were told that they belonged to us now and that they would all become fierce warriors.

From Ogul we set out for Kitgum where we were supposed to have a gathering with all our other battalions operating in Uganda at that time. Just before we crossed Atwa River, there was a big meeting of the commanders of several of the battalions. I think that three or four battalions were present, and they all had abductees. From here they started selecting people to go back to Sudan, while others were selected to stay in Uganda. Many of the new soldiers that we abducted at the beginning of the mission who had already received their training and received their guns were selected to stay in Uganda. The newest recruits were selected to go to Sudan. In all around five hundred abductees from the different battalions were sent to Sudan. To escort them, there was another full battalion, selected from all the experienced soldiers of the different battalions. I was among them.

In our return to Sudan we were constantly disturbed by helicopters. The helicopters knew that the Aboke girls were among the hundreds of abducted and they were trying to scatter us and separate the girls. But they couldn't do this, because the abductees were surrounded by experienced soldiers at all times. The entire day we kept on moving and the helicopter continued firing at us. It was so terrible. Many of the new recruits were actually hit by the shooting. It was as if they didn't care about the new recruits, they only held their fire where the Aboke girls were located.. They didn't care about the rest of us. After a while I was selected with a second

lieutenant and another sergeant to take out the helicopter. We assembled the B-10 and when the helicopter came into view, my colleague, the second lieutenant, stood in the open without moving. Although we all had our army uniforms on, the helicopter didn't see us until it was too late for them. The second lieutenant shot at the helicopter and we managed to shoot the helicopter down. We saw the helicopter burning and going down slowly. When it passed behind a hill and we didn't see it anymore. That was the last that we saw of the helicopter. Without this distraction we continued to move the whole night through and for two more days, until we were near the river that separates Uganda from Sudan.

That morning we came to the area of the last big settlements in Uganda. This was our only chance to gather enough food for all the new recruits to survive the journey, so we attacked some very large settlements. Once we had gathered as much food and jerry cans as we could find, we crossed into Sudan. It took us several hours to reach the river and here another disaster awaited us.

We were in the rainy season and there had been some very strong rainstorms. Many of these storms happened further upriver so the river was extremely wild. There was one flooded area in the river and dozens were carried away by it. We had tied the rope over the water and about one hundred of our experienced soldiers crossed successfully before they forced the abductees to do the same. At one point there were too many people on the rope and it sagged and everybody went under the water. I saw of five of

these new recruits dragged away by the water and I think that they all drowned. I was one of the last to cross the river.

All the jerry cans had been filled at the river so we were ready to start the long march towards Aruu. We were still wary of an attack by the SPLA, who had surely been warned by the UPDF, but what happened next was unexpected. Just a few kilometers from the river, the UPDF had also crossed into Sudan and prepared one last great attack. We walked straight into their ambush. Once more a heavy fight followed. The UPDF was trying their very best to rescue the Aboke girls. Never before had I seen them so determined. With one full battalion they came after us with the sole purpose of rescuing the girls, but they had underestimated our resilience. We also had an entire battalion of determined soldiers. The battle lasted for several hours, but at the end, we again managed to win it. As in the last battle, we suffered very heavy losses but not as bad as the UPDF.

Throughout this battle I fought side-by-side with the second lieutenant with whom I had shot the helicopter. He and I were very similar and we had become good friends. Like me, he was a courageous warrior who fought like he was willing to die. Both of us were fearless and this fearlessness really scared our enemies. I do not remember how many enemies I shot during this battle, but again they were many and again, not even a splinter hit me. It almost seemed as if I was invincible.

After the battle had raged for several hours the UPDF finally sounded their retreat and they were forced to leave the Aboke girls behind.

Among the newly abducted the Aboke girls were now the most hated recruits of them all, but also the most protected. All the action that was taken by the outside world to release the girls only made their life within the LRA worse..

### ***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**

*"A Centre for Justice and Forced Migrants"*

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