



IN THE SERVICE OF THE LORD'S ARMY



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Written by Theo Hollander

"The Kitgum Massacres"

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 14

The march back to Aru Junction went painstakingly slow, and it was one of the most difficult journeys that I had ever taken. It was now somewhere in early November and the Sudanese dry season had begun. By the third day after filling our jerry cans at the river, I had completely run out of the water. This was just before we reached the 'bad place,' an area near the mountains where the rocks were just burning under the hot sun. This was by far the toughest part of the journey. The gumboots I was also wearing turned into ovens as we walked over those rocks. Many people suffered during this part of our march. The heat didn't discriminate between senior soldiers or junior recruits, men or women, young or old. It affected us all.

While we were walking over the baking hot rocks I was on the verge of collapsing. I violently took the water of a few new recruits, taking away their only hope to survive this march. I was reminded of this some years later, when I was in their shoes, not knowing how far I still had to go and terribly afraid of the madmen with their guns. But on that march to Aru I was one of the madmen.

In total it took us seven days of this hellish journey before we finally reached Aru. On the second day the commander had called the headquarters and told them that none of us would survive if they didn't bring us water. Finally on the fifth day a large group came to our rescue with dozens of jerry cans filled with water. By then, out of the 800 people who started the march to Sudan about

100 died from thirst and sheer exhaustion. I didn't know what happened to those boys from whom I took the water, but I wouldn't be surprised if they were among the dead.

When we reached Aruu hundreds of my colleagues came to greet us by sprinkling water over us. We were just relieved to have survived. The moment we entered the camp we were told to line up and to parade. A short ceremony followed in which all the experienced soldiers were honored, but I don't think that any of us cared about it. We just wanted to reach our huts and collapse in peace. Luckily that ceremony didn't take long and we were excused to go and rest. The new recruits had to stay behind while the more elaborate welcoming ceremony for them began. This was an orientation ritual in which the rules and regulations of camp life were explained. Finally the selection began in which all high ranking commanders hoped to get one of the Aboke girls.

As I walked toward my hut I met the commander of my unit, the Mzee, and the overall commander of the Stockree artillery. They were both headed to the selection ceremony. I saluted them as they passed and the Mzee asked me about the mission, and whether I had brought an Aboke girl back for him, but I was almost too exhausted to answer him. For the last few weeks I had been under constant military attack, risking my life almost around the clock. The last few days hadn't been any better, as I had been struggling with malnutrition, exhaustion and most of all thirst. I was in no state of mind to say anything positive about the mission. Instead I said something incredibly dangerous and stupid.

- "The mission went well sir. I have killed many Ugandan soldiers and I brought you the girls, but if you ever send me to Uganda again, I will surely escape."

I had uttered these words out loud without thinking about the implications of such a statement. Even thinking about escaping could cost me a serious beating and now I had said the words out loud, and in front of a captain and a major. The penalty for talking about escape was death and during my two years in the LRA I had seen many people being executed for much lesser offenses. But I was lucky. Instead of giving me a punishment, both commanders started to laugh their asses off. I rarely had the Mzee seen laughing like this and it even put a smile on my face, although there was nothing to laugh about.

- "And where would you go Attiena. You are a holy soldier now. If people find you, you will be killed. Out there you only have enemies. Accept it boy, we are your only family now."

Both commanders continued laughing as they went to the selection ceremony, telling each other how funny I was. It did not occur to them that I could have been serious about escaping. Of course, I wasn't actually inclined to escape. I had been with them for almost two years now and I had built a reputation as a fierce warrior. I wasn't a ruthless killer, like many of the young boys who so quickly climbed the promotion ladder, they knew that. But I was well respected for my conduct in battle and had become a favorite of many commanders. No one would expect

me to want to escape. I was completely used to the life with the rebels, so I even surprised myself with my threat of escaping.

The only time in the past year that I had seriously thought about leaving the LRA was when we passed my village, and even then escape never crossed my mind. I just wanted a short leave to reconnect and have tea and cookies with my parents and to chat a little about my new life. I had had so many opportunities to escape in the past, but I was a soldier and had a duty to dethrone Museveni, before I could even think about leaving the rebels.

Just before I entered my hut I saw Njogo. I immediately felt the urge to shoot him, but I kept my cool even though I hated him so much. Luckily, he had his back turned and I didn't have to look him in the eye. I entered my hut and fell into a deep sleep.

The next day I saw that our unit had received twenty new recruits. This included one of the Aboke girls who was selected to be married to the top commander of the artillery department in the Stockree brigade. The boys and girls that were selected for our unit had to undergo military training, which became my primary responsibility. After a few days rest the training began. Every day I took them for long marches. When the sun was at its peak I made them run over the dusty landscape until they collapsed from exhaustion. I really made them suffer during the training, but I believed that they would thank me later. Once they were confronted by a well-armed enemy with the intent to kill them, they would appreciate the extra stamina that the training built.

This first week of their training was mainly marching, marching and more marching. I seriously caned the ones who couldn't keep up with the others and I gave them hot exercises. It was the same training I had endured almost two years earlier. After the first week I also introduced some gun training, but the main activity was still marching. Because my recruits were selected to become artillery men one day, I introduced the mortar and RPG launcher to them, but for now they were still much too junior to touch these kinds of weapons. All in all the training took four weeks, and by then it was well into December. The recruits were sent on their first military test to attack some Dinka villages and replenish our food stocks. Happily I wasn't selected to join them.

Christmas time was very special within the LRA. The day before Christmas the festivities began with a big ceremony, in which hundreds of soldiers were promoted to a higher rank. Everyone except those who stood guard was invited to watch the celebrations. It was not disclosed ahead of time who would receive a promotion, so I was really anxious for myself. I had fought very well during the last mission and I expected to be promoted for my outstanding service. Being a sergeant was ok, but my life would be much better in the position of second lieutenant. Sergeants could be beaten for no clear reason by any of the ranks that exceeded theirs. But lieutenants were not beaten like this.

The ceremony began with lowest promotions. First there were the ordinary soldiers

who were promoted to corporal or dedication officer. Then existing corporals and the dedication officers were promoted to sergeant, and after there were ordinary soldiers who skipped the first two steps of the ladder and got promoted directly to sergeant. When they were done with this group I became excited for my turn. They started naming the list of sergeants who were being promoted to second-lieutenant, but my name wasn't among them. It completely ruined the rest of my day, even though it was a day of celebration. The next day our Christmas celebrations began.

Christmas was really nice and because of all the fun festivities, I completely forgot about my frustrations of the previous day. It started early in the morning with prayers. Kony stepped up to the stage to celebrate the birth of Jesus. The classic story was told of Mary's journey to Bethlehem where Jesus was born. But the story was also mixed up with all kinds of military propaganda Kony announced that the spirit Lakwena had revealed to him the date that the Ugandan government would fall. The date was to be the 12th of January 1997, just several weeks later. With this revelation everybody clapped and cheered, even me. Even though many previous deadlines had passed, we still believed in the spirit. Every revelation gave us renewed hope. Every time Kony said that Museveni would fall on a certain date, I believed in him. Lakwena's revelation filled me with joy. In about three weeks we would conquer Kampala and then I could finally go home in peace and with honor.

After the Morning Prayer the dances began. Our choir sang traditional Acholi songs and all

the soldiers joined in to perform the dances. It started with the Larakaraka dance, which was a kind of courtship dance and afterwards we performed my favorite, the warrior dance. For several hours we danced and whenever I wasn't dancing I spent time joking with my Juba friends and a new friend, who I had gotten to know during the retreat from Uganda. After the dancing all the senior soldiers got some beans and potatoes. Throughout the month I had been starving due to the ongoing famine in Aru, so this food was really welcome. I had become a valuable asset to the LRA because of my superior training, so they wouldn't allow me to completely starve to death. However, there was rarely enough to take away the hunger. So the Christmas dinner was a great surprise. This was truly a happy day for me.

The juniors got only a small portion of watery soup, while they watched us eating all the good stuff. Many of them were close to starvation, so observing us eating beans and potatoes must have been a real torture for them. Although I noticed that they were looking, I didn't feel any sympathy. We didn't care about the new recruits anymore. Hundreds of them were now being brought in every month. At the same time dozens of them died from starvation, diseases or executions. It was a waste of time to grow attached to any of them, as we never knew who would survive and who would die.

In the days that followed the Christmas celebrations preparations began for yet another big mission. Two days after the Christmas celebrations they started the selection and I was very pleased that I wasn't chosen. I had

completely had it with the missions in Uganda. It was not only the difficult journey that I despised, but also the constant threat of being killed and the horrible suffering we inflicted on the civilians. During the last mission we had been in such heavy fights, that I was not anxious to return. Again, the group that had been selected was given a few days of training in which they were well fed and well rested.

The goal of mission that was under preparation would be similar to the Aboke mission. Punishment! There was only one purpose of this campaign, and that was to teach the people of Kitgum a lesson. During the last few months the civilians had uncovered several of our arms depots and revealed them to the Ugandan army. This was totally unacceptable. The resistance of the Acholi people was getting worse over time even though we were fighting for them. This had to stop.

In the meantime the new recruits had returned from their food-gathering mission and I was supervising them on all kinds of work tasks. Just after Christmas I had taken fifteen new recruits to fetch water. When we came back we were told to gather with others at the Gate of Control Altar. They had assembled several boys and girls on display; some of them experienced soldiers, who all came from Kitgum. Then they explained to us what the people from Kitgum had done. It was stated that Kitgum civilians always betrayed our movements to the Ugandan government and they were always searching to uncover our arms depots.

After a small speech the boys and the girls were told to take off their shirts and then they

were made to suffer for what their people had done to us. All of them received a heavy punishment of one hundred strokes. By the time the beating was over, some of them weren't breathing anymore, while the rest were severely wounded. One of the boys that were almost beaten to death came from the artillery department of Stockree. I knew him quite well and he was made to suffer for the conduct of his people, even though he had been with us in the rebel movement for over a year. This boy had also been selected for the mission, but because of his injuries he couldn't come along on the mission. The Mzee came up to me and he told me that I had to take his place. It made me really angry that I was selected again. Immediately my threat of a month earlier came back to mind, but I kept my anger in check and didn't reveal it to the commander.

After the beating ceremony we were told to stay within the Gated area of Control Altar where we received a nice meal. The next day we each received our supplies, including extra armory plus water and food for the journey. The water wasn't enough to reach Uganda, but we were told that the Arabs would provide us with more on the way. After we had been given supplies, we got a briefing of what would be a very bizarre and contradictory mission.

Three small battalions would invade Kitgum, with each battalion having different objectives. The battalion from Sagnia brigade was instructed to hand out medical supplies in the villages to win the hearts and minds of the people of Kitgum. The Gilba battalion would then visit the same villages and or-

der the people to move out of Kitgum or suffer the consequences. Afterwards Stockree brigade, us, we would come in and kill every civilian that hadn't obeyed to orders of Gilba battalion.

In effect, the mission had two goals that in retrospect seemed to be very contradictory, but at the time, appeared to make perfect sense. The first goal was to win the hearts and the minds of the Kitgum people, so that they wouldn't turn against us anymore. Those who wouldn't go away when we asked them nicely, were probably the same people who gave away valuable information to the enemy, so they had to be executed.

The second goal was to effectively depopulate the entire Kitgum district. We wanted all the civilians to leave Kitgum so that we could have the terrain where we would destroy the armies of Uganda, before we set out to Kampala. Depopulating Kitgum was in effect a measure to protect the civilians from being harmed in the battle; at least that was what we were told. In the meantime we also had to teach them a lesson so they would stop aiding the Ugandan army.

Soon after the briefing we set out on another horrible march. It was the first of January, exactly two years from the time that I had been abducted. January was the hottest period of the year and it meant that this trip would be harder than any I had experienced before. At around nine, we set out with little over 300 combatants. Whenever we went to Uganda we had to carry a lot of ammunition, and therefore the trip went very slowly. As promised, the Arabs provided us with water along

the way but not with food. On the first day out we passed several Arab camps where we refilled our jerry cans. At the last Arab camp we were given some time to sleep. The rest of the journey was very difficult. In the sweltering January heat there was no grass and no water. We had taken only enough food for several days and afterwards we suffered from hunger.

I had very heavy luggage, and I could not move well. I reached the point that I just couldn't move any further. So I sat down. I threw all my gear on the ground and then lay down against a tree. At first I thought that I would just rest for a minute, but after several minutes I came to the conclusion that it was nice to lie here and I couldn't bring myself to stand up anymore. It was my best friend, Joe, from the Aboke mission that walked up to me and encouraged me to move further. He told me that if I didn't move, I would sit there forever.

- "Do you want to sit here forever?"

He persuaded me to continue and finally he even started to beat me, after which I slowly got up and continued my way. He surely saved my life that day, because I would not have continued on my own initiative. I had witnessed many people saying that they would stop to rest for a minute, never to stand up anymore and die on the very spot they choose to rest. Determination and persistence was key to survival in the LRA.

As we continued I was really struggling to keep up with the rest. As I had been selected well after the others, I hadn't received the

benefit of extra food before the mission, and I really felt a lack of energy.

Several hours after Joe had persuaded me to get up I had to sit down again for a few minutes. Joe was now in front of me so I didn't have to count on his words of encouragement, but I didn't really need them. I realized the danger of staying seated, so I was planning to sit down for just a few minutes. But a captain called Langole came along and found me sitting. This man had recently transferred from Sagnia brigade to Stockree brigade and he had become good friends with Njego. This made him a natural enemy of mine. Njego had probably told him stories about me. Yet we had not come to any additional confrontations and most of the time I had just ignored him all his friends. Until now, that was. Langole asked:

- "Attiena, why I are you sitting here like this?"

- "Please sir, I am just resting, but I will continue in a minute."

At this point he became really angry with me. He said,

- "Ok, if the luggage is too heavy for you, we will just take it away."

The moment he said this he took away my armor.

- "And the gun, you can't carry the gun anymore, here I will take it."

At that moment he kicked me on the ground

and he violently took my gun while I tried to hold on to it. From the first moment that I had received my gun I had never allowed anyone else to handle it. They had told us clearly that the gun was our mother that nurtured us and our father that protected us and we should never let go of it, and now I was being stripped from my gun. Afterwards the captain told his bodyguards to strip me off of my cloths as well. I struggled against them, but there was nothing that I could do to prevent this. In the meantime some others were questioning the captain about what he was doing, but he threatened to give them the same treatment if they interfered with his business. He told everybody to continue marching. He didn't want the battalion to witness what he was about to do, so all the soldiers, except for his bodyguards were told to move on.

It took a few minutes for the battalion to pass and in the meantime two bodyguards tied me up with my own shirt. After the group had passed Langole lined me up and he put the barrel of his gun into my mouth. At that moment I really thought that it was the end. In my head I was already saying good-bye to the world. I anxiously tried to look for ways out of this, but all possible escape routes would end the same way, with me being killed. Yet, I refused to be killed like a defenseless chicken. If I would die this way, I would at least take a few people out with me. I had managed to loosen the T-shirt and my arms were almost free. One of the guards stood at a distance of one meter and he held his gun loosely in his hand. My plan was to take his gun and at least take somebody out with me as I was brutally executed. The captain took

the gun out of my mouth and backed up a few steps to attach the bayonet to his gun. That is when I understood his plan. He didn't want to shoot me, he wanted to slowly spear me to death, and then hope that no one would notice.

By now I had already accepted my fate that I would be executed, I just hadn't accepted the terms. I had seen many people be killed by a bayonet before and it was a horrible death. If I were to be killed, it would be by a bullet in a proper gunfight. When he took the steps back I saw my chance. At this time, everything happened like it was played in slow motion. Just as I decided to reach for the bodyguard's gun, I heard a voice shouting;

- "LANGOLE, WHAT ON EARTH DO YOU THINK THAT YOU ARE DOING?"

Once again I was rescued at the last possible moment. The overall commander of the brigade, a colonel named Wall Okot came running towards us, probably because he had heard a report that I was about to be executed. He could march very quickly and his ambitious marching speed was one of the reasons that I was almost executed, but at least he had some sympathy. He was not overly aggressive like the other commanders. He normally talked very slowly and whenever a soldier was lagging behind, he would give them encouragements instead of beatings. The two commanders began quarreling with each other. Wall Okot asked:

- "Why are you sitting this sergeant down?"

The captain explained his story claiming that he was just trying to scare me. At this Okot got became really angry.

- "I know that you are planning to kill this sergeant. So you want to kill all our soldiers one by one; than how are we going to win the war?"

Okot ordered him to give me back my cloths and my gear and then the colonel instructed Langole's bodyguards to put him down and to cane him seriously. Afterwards the colonel ordered Langole to take charge of the advance party, while I was to stay close to Okot. After Langole moved on Okot gave me some water and posho and told me to drink and eat. He explained that my failure to walk was caused by my lack of energy. Both the near-death experienced and the extra food and water gave me renewed energy, and although I was still struggling a bit I managed to keep up with the colonel.

One day after this experience we reached the Atebbe River and here I spotted something that no one else had seen, the footprints of a leopard. I saw that the tracks were still fresh so the leopard had to be close. I immediately told the commander,

- "Sir, there is something here. I think it is a leopard."

He asked me how I knew this and so I showed him the footprints. At that point he ordered three of us to follow the footprints and try to shoot the animal. So as silently as we could we followed the footprints. Everyone was extremely careful, because we all knew how

dangerous these animals could be, especially for young people like us. Several minutes later we saw the leopard sitting high up in a tree. When the leopard noticed that there were humans close by it started to make a lot of noise and it even went down the tree to attack us. We opened fire on the leopard and continued shooting until it was dead. I quickly ran back to the commander to report and he immediately called Kony using his satellite telephone. Leopards were considered to be spiritual animals and if we killed one it was a spiritual affair, which required the consultation of our highest spiritual leader. From Kony we received the instructions that we were allowed to eat the animal, but that the skin had to be brought back to Aru immediately. So we skinned the leopard and then boiled the meat. Because the leopard was very wild, the meat also tasted very wild. It was not all that nice to eat. After the meal, two boys were selected to take the skin back while the rest of us continued on our mission.

After we crossed the Atebbe River, we moved through the place with all the bees and later we reached Padwat reserve. Here we hid some of the weapons that we took with us and we were allowed to rest for a few hours. In the evening we were all summoned, to receive our last instructions. It was at this point that the brigades separated and each of the three battalions left to carry out their missions. This was the starting point of the most horrible mission to date that I had to participate in, and probably one of the worst prolonged massacres that the LRA had ever conducted. Just before we set out, we received some very clear instructions from the man that I now hated even more than I hated Njego.

- "We are God's vengeance to the people of Kitgum who are trying to sabotage our holy war. Let's have no misunderstanding here; we are here to not just to kill, but also to make the people from Kitgum suffer like they have never suffered before. They will be made to understand the consequences of resistance. In Aru they want to hear about the massacre on the radio. They even wanted to hear it in the international news. Do not make a mistake of disobeying the rule and disobeying a command to kill, because if you do, you will be killed next."

These were the last instructions before the horrendous slaughter. It started with a large village. We arrived just in the wake of Gilba battalion and many people in the village were still packing their stuff to move out, just as they had been instructed to. But they were too late. As we surrounded the village we were ordered to arrest all the civilians and place them in the center, regardless of their age or gender. Dozens of them were lined up. We bound their hands with ropes and then the killing started. The people never knew what they had done wrong and they simply didn't understand exactly what was happening to them. Our commander began beating the crap out of those people and the rest of us were told to gather large stones. I will never forget the images from that day. We were ordered to take the rocks and bash in the heads of the civilians. Usually the people didn't die with the first stroke, so we had to hit them over and over again. The whole time their neighbors were just watching it, knowing that they would be next. Even the small toddlers of one and two years old, children who just learned how to

walk and who couldn't possibly had done us any harm, had their heads bashed in, one after the other. While we were doing this some other colleagues killed all the animals that were around. We left none alive in that village; none at all. The last living soul had been a small baby and this life was ended in a type of brutal game of tennis. It was so cruel and so horrible.

After we left this village other villages followed. Several hours after the first massacre we came across a small group of hunters. Again we lined them up and tied them tightly together with ropes. Afterwards Langole shot them with their own bows and arrows. He didn't aim for any vital organs, so that the killing was drawn out into a type of game for him. The hunters were screaming out in pain and the harder they screamed, the more fun Langole appeared to have. At that point I really wanted to take up my gun and shoot the bastard, but I knew that his bodyguards would then kill me. Langole eventually grew bored and he just shot all the hunters in the heart, ending the game. We continued with the three battalions crisscrossing the countryside and the civilians never realized what was happening around them until it was too late for them.

We visited village after village, brutally killing every living thing that we found. I witnessed hundreds of different ways to kill someone. Sometimes we massacred civilians using a brick and branches, other times we would use bayonets and spear them to death. The next day we would wipe out a whole village by decapitating them with axes. When we were done with the killing, we would sometimes

set the village on fire. Then while the huts were still burning, we took babies and young toddlers that were still alive and threw them into the burning huts, where they burned to death. There were even occasions in which we forced the villagers to mutilate, torture and kill each other.

One day Langole instructed a mother to boil her own children and then to eat them. She killed both her boys, but when she couldn't bring herself to eat them, she was beaten to death with a padlock. In another village, two boys were armed with large sticks and they were told to kill each other. We promised the victor that we would let him live. We all watched it as if it was a roaster fight, some of us cheering for the one boy while the rest encouraged the other. Langole waited until one boy had beaten the other to death and afterwards the victor was also slain, using a machete. Langole's justification was as follows:

- "It is the time for killing, not the time for letting people live."

For weeks we continued with this killing spree in village after village. We killed hundreds upon hundreds of villagers and even this wasn't enough to please our commanders. The radios reported the killings and even in Aru they heard it. When the national news, and finally even the BBC started reporting on it, it still wasn't enough.

As the massacres continued I was slowly losing it; I felt I was going completely mad. I had witnessed so many killings in these weeks and each time there was another cruel mur-

der, I felt that something was dying inside of me. We often talked with our victims, taunting them, and they pleaded with us.

- "Brother, please, why are you killing me?"

- "What did I do to you?"

- "Please god, what have I done to deserve this?"

- "Please don't kill my baby, please don't kill my baby?"

- "Boy, if you do this, you will forever burn in hell."

- "In the name of the son and the holy spirit, have mercy on us boy, please have mercy."

- "Mamma, mamma, you killed my mother, please don't kill my father!"

All these sentences kept repeating over and over in my head. I couldn't sleep without hearing these voices, couldn't eat without hearing them, couldn't walk or go for a long or short call without hearing them. I couldn't even kill without the voices of a hundred people resonating through my head, amplifying the one voice of the person that I was about to kill. At night I saw their spirits coming back for me, provoking me, laughing at me and hurting me. I woke up with terrible pains in my chest and in my head, as the spirits in my dream had done some kind of horrible physical damage to my body. I wanted desperately to stop this madness, stop the killings, but there was nothing that I could do. If I refused to kill, I would be the one to die.

While the killing continued, the Ugandan army started a massive military campaign against us, in which they employed all their heavy fighting equipment. Helicopters were constantly flying overhead, so that whenever

er we set a village ablaze, we had to move away from it very quickly. The moment they learned of our position, not only would the gunship start to disturb us, but they would also send tanks, APCs, artillery pieces and other major equipment. Apart from the heavy machinery, several battalions were patrolling through Kitgum trying to catch us. We met these foot soldiers on many occasions, but usually the fights with them were very short. As the soldiers followed our trail they passed village after village where everybody was already dead; including the women, the children, and the elders and the babies. No one was spared. The seasonal heat caused the bodies to decompose very quickly. These sights were very demoralizing and whenever the foot soldiers found us, it didn't take more than a couple of bullets to send them away screaming.

It was somewhere in the second week of the mission that we came under our first heavy attack from the Ugandan army. We came to a village somewhere near the main road that was almost deserted except for some elders who couldn't move too well. After we had killed the elders, we settled down and we started to roast some chickens. It was while we were eating the chicken, at around 2 pm, that we were completely taken by surprise by a UPDF mobile unit that included several tanks. When they started shooting at us, they were still far in the distance, but well within firing range. Their first shell killed several of our soldiers. The moment this shell exploded we all ran through the valley and up the other hill, where we could disappear in the tree line.

I had already covered a few hundred meters when I realized a huge mistake that would warrant Langole's desire to execute me. I had left the mortar behind. The LRA regulations were very clear about leaving artillery pieces behind. Langole had been searching for an excuse to have me executed for already a week and now I presented him with the best of reasons. I realized that there was only one option out of this for me to survive. I had to go back and retrieve the artillery piece.

So while the bombs were falling around me I ran back towards the village. The only thing that was in my mind was to get back at least a piece of the artillery. I risked my life to getting that piece, and my mind was completely empty except for thoughts on how to get the artillery piece back. I had no fear of other emotions. By the time I reached the village, I saw that they hadn't reached my position yet. They had reached the position of others, but not yet mine, so I had one opportunity to grab it and escape. I ran towards the mortar and at that point all the foot soldiers started to open fire. I grabbed the barrel of the 60 mm mortar and started running like crazy, while the bullets were flying all around me. I was the only rebel now in clear target range so many guns were targeted on me. Luckily there was still some distance between them and me and there were huts and other obstacles that prevented them from having a clear shot, so they started chasing me. There was also a tank on the road and the barrel was facing me, but I never knew this. I was only focused on reaching the tree line on the other side of the valley when I heard a very big BOOM!

I found myself down and for a moment every-

thing darkened in front of my eyes. When the light came back seconds later I saw a small crater next to me and I only heard a high-pitched ringing in my ears. The moment I regained consciousness, I got up, took the 60 mm barrel and I started running again. The moment when the UPDF soldiers had seen me getting up they opened fire again, but I was only slightly aware of this. I saw the bullets impacting everything beside me, but it was just like it wasn't real. As I kept running the ringing began to diminish a bit and slowly my senses returned. With that I finally realized of the danger I was in.

By now I was down the valley and just as I started to go up the hill, the LRA opened fire on the soldiers who were chasing me. From the hill my colleagues had seen everything; the retrieval of the mortar, the chase and the tank blast that nearly blew me to pieces. When I reached the hill people immediately came to my assistance and took the barrel from me. They told me that I was shot.

- "No, I haven't been shot, they have missed me."

But they insisted:

- "No, you have been shot, look at you, you are bleeding. Just look at all the blood."

They helped me to remove my shirt and that was when I realized that I had indeed been shot. As they removed the cloths from me I looked at my stomach and I saw a very big hole in my underbelly, and I started to panic. I thought that my stomach was completely shot away. Apart from the wound I

also had some burns on my stomach and my back. While my colleagues were attending to me, I blacked out. Every few hours I woke up and I noticed that they were dragging me on a makeshift stretcher, but I never kept my consciousness for long.

They brought me to a sickbay at a secret location in Kitgum. Doctors and our nurses were there and they took good care of me. I think I lay there for several days. The wound, which at first seemed very bad, was actually not so severe. A grenade splinter had scratched me, leaving a deep cut, but it never entered my body. The burns were also not that bad. After one day I was getting bored and I asked the doctor to release me and to let me go back to my unit. This was not allowed, but after two days in sickbay my unit came back to collect me.

Langole immediately started to give me a hard time. He hit me in the face and shouted at me about leaving the artillery behind. Luckily there was a lieutenant who defended me, arguing that by going back to collect the mortar I had shown extraordinary bravery. Yet it was clear that Langole wasn't satisfied. He clearly wanted to see me punished, or even killed.

Our rivalry had actually started back on the day that we had first set out from Sudan. Langole selected me to become his personal escort, but I had repeatedly refused. In my mind I was too high in rank to be the escort of a captain. I could have been the escort of a colonel, but not of a captain. So throughout our the mission the captain kept requesting me to cook him food, to slaughter a chicken, to bring his chair and other tasks, but I refused

to do these things. This really pissed him off, and he grew more and more irritated. He knew very well that I had the support of the overall commander, so he couldn't just kill me, so instead was always looking for other reasons to have me executed. The fact that I had left the artillery was one such reason, but because of my extreme bravery I now had the support of all my colleagues. They had all seen me retrieve the weapon and even days later, they were still talking about my actions. Word of it quickly reached Wall Okot. This even irritated Langole even more. By becoming a hero I made it even harder for him to execute me.

But Langole found other ways to make things difficult for me. He was the commander of my battalion and that meant that, although we didn't like each other, I still had to follow his commands. If I systematically refused military orders the colonel himself would find out, and I would lose all support from him and I would be executed. So he looked for these opportunities to get rid of me.

Within a few days after I left sickbay he started placing me in dangerous military situations. I was always selected to be the first man in any fight that we encountered. Whenever we were retreating, I would be the very last man to hold off the enemy forces. I was always either in the advance party or in the blocking force, which were the most dangerous positions. Weeks passed like this and I was always in mortal danger. Whenever we met one another he would cane me or quarrel with me for no reason. On one occasion he caned me seriously on my back and my shoulder. He even speared me once with

his bayonet. It was not a deep wound and he didn't intend to kill me, otherwise I would have been dead. He just wanted to scare me and to hurt me.

So I once again started evaluating about my life in the LRA. I slowly realized that this guy would someday become the cause of my death. That is when I started to develop a plan to escape. I even revealed this to certain people, but they just laughed at this news as if it were a joke. I was now their hero, so there was no way that I would escape. They never believed me, but I was dead serious.

In the meantime the killing in Kitgum just continued. Weeks had passed now since we started our relentless killing mission. Kitgum was slowly getting depopulated, but still it wasn't enough for our leaders. Sometimes we walked for days in areas where we had already been where we would only encounter burning villages and dead bodies everywhere. When we passed through these areas we had to cover our mouths and noses because the stench was unbearable. Whenever we saw groups of storks and vultures circling above a village, we knew that we had been there earlier. We could spot these villages from distances up to twenty miles away, by watching the marabous and the vultures.

I wasn't the only one who was haunted by voices of the victims. After several weeks many of us started to intensely dislike the killing of innocent civilians. We just couldn't bear all the pain anymore, even though we were the ones causing the pain. We had become completely traumatized. After so much killing for such an extended time, we all went a little crazy. Any

human being was viewed as someone we might have to kill. Even though deep inside we didn't want to kill that person, it might be a reflexive act. For this reason many fights started occurring between our soldiers, and these fights could turn very deadly in just a few seconds. Sometimes our soldiers just shot off their guns at some bushes, because they had seen people there, while there was nobody, or maybe just some bodies that were already in advanced stages of decomposition.

By February I remembered the prophecy that by now we should have conquered Kampala, as the spirit Lakwena had revealed in all his wisdom. Yet we were still struggling in Kitgum, not even close to destroying our enemy forces and only targeting civilians, the majority of whom had never done us any harm. I felt betrayed. We had been promised that the war would have been over by now, but instead things had only gotten worse.

To make matters even worse for me personally, the overall commander, Wall Okot, became gravely ill. He had a severe case of diarrhea, to the point that he was on the verge of death. He was in such a bad condition that he could no longer even wear trousers. The diarrhea was constant. I saw him on several occasions when we had joint meetings with all the battalions, and each time his illness seemed to have gotten worse. He was my only guarantee that Langole wouldn't execute me. The last time I saw him was after we had been in Kitgum for nearly two months. We had gathered for another joint battalion meeting, that they called RV meeting, the meaning of which I don't know. The

people of Sagnia brigade carried him in on a stretcher. We stayed in the RV for two days and the whole time we saw Okot's condition deteriorating, to the point where he was more dead than alive.

Soon after this meeting, when all the battalions had split up, the Gilba battalion suffered a huge attack. They had called in for reinforcements and as always, Langole selected me as the very first soldier to go. I never got a moment of rest around him. During the RV meeting I had been constantly on guard without relief, so I hadn't slept for more than two days. I was very, very tired. Commander Langole treated me like a new recruit, assigning me the nastiest and the most dangerous of missions. No other soldier suffered the way I did. But there was no way of refusing his orders. If I refused a direct order I would be shot on the spot. Langole was just hoping and waiting for such an opportunity.

In my heart I was not feeling well. I had a very bad feeling about the mission, but there was nothing I could do to avoid it. Just when we passed the RV point we could already hear the battle unfolding. I was leading a group of twenty people, but I was struggling to keep my focus. When arrived at the battleground we saw that Gilba had walked into an ambush of the mobile forces. They were being by all types of artillery, tanks, APCs, foot soldiers and helicopters. The battle started somewhere at around four and continued for hours until nightfall. At that time we finally received heavy reinforcements from Sagnia and Stockree brigades. The helicopter flew away because of the darkness, and our enemies finally started to retreat. By that time dozens of our

soldiers had died, including several boys and girls of the group that I was leading. Luckily, I came out of the battle without a scratch.

It was after this battle that we started to move to the north again. I was afraid that we were on our way back to Sudan. I had the idea that if I followed them into Sudan, I would stay there forever. If I was to escape, this was the time for me to do so. Once again I told some other soldiers who had been complaining about the mission that I wanted to escape. I wanted to find out carefully if there was a chance that they would join me on our escape, increasing our chances. But again they started laughing; thinking that I was joking. But this time I was dead serious. I was tired of all the killing. I felt betrayed by Kony and the Holy Spirit and I knew all too well that if I stayed with the rebels much longer, I would be killed in combat or killed by any commander who took a disliking to me. By now everybody had noticed the way

that Langole treated me, but they were all afraid to piss him off, so nobody made an official complaint about it. If Wall Okot were to die, Langole would be the one to take over, so nobody dared to intervene when he tortured me.

Because of Okot's deteriorating condition and the fact that it was almost impossible to find villages where we hadn't been before, Langole, who was now practically first in command, sounded our retreat to Sudan, almost two months after our mission had started. We set out and after a one and a half's day walk, we were getting close to the river and the border to Sudan. I knew that, once we would cross the river, my chances of escaping would be very slim. I knew that if I wanted to escape, I had to do so while we were in Uganda. Never before did I feel such determination to leave the LRA. My opportunity came when we were nearly at the border.

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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