



IN THE SERVICE OF THE LORD'S ARMY



National Memory & Peace Documentation Centre

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Written by Theo Hollander

“Escape”

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 15

As we were nearing the river we suddenly walked into a fierce ambush of the UPDF, which took us completely by surprise. Langole was far away from me, which meant that he was in no position to give me the order to advance, as if I was some kind of one man army, capable of destroying an entire UPDF battalion. As the battle unfolded and my colleagues were falling all around me, I knew that my opportunity to escape had arrived. Everyone was completely preoccupied with the action in front of them, so nobody saw me as I slowly crawled backwards, away from the gun battle. When I was far enough, I stood up and ran. The area was covered in a dense forest, and although I could still hear the gunfight, it didn't take me long to be completely out of sight. Close to the trail there was a dry riverbed and because it was dangerous to follow the trail, I went downhill to follow the riverbank. I knew that both Gilba and Sagnia battalions were near and that by now they would have been called in to come to our aid, so any minute that I was out in the open, presented a real threat to me. I had to find a place where I could hide for some time, waiting for them to pass.

After about twenty minutes I found the perfect hiding place. It was a little cave in between the roots of the trees that grew on top of the river bank. The cave was covered with long yellow grass and it was one of the few places which hadn't been destroyed in a wild fire. It was somehow miraculous that I had seen the cave, as it was completely covered by grass and was about 2 meters above the riverbed. I climbed up the river bank

and over the roots and branches of the trees. I reached the cave and carefully uncovered the grass crawled in. The cave was too shallow for a grown man, but for me it was just perfect. I carried two landmines with me, a mortar, several grenades, my gun and my knife. I put the landmines and the mortars into the back of the cave and I made some space for myself. Then I covered the cave opening with the yellow grass as carefully and precisely as I could. Then I waited.

From the distance I could hear the gun battle. It lasted maybe for several hours before it finally died out. All this time I just lay there, not minding all the insects and trying to stay awake. I wondered who had won the battle and for the first time in more than two years, I actually hoped it was the UPDF. Not that I suddenly favoured them. I still hated them as much as I had done a day earlier, but at least they wouldn't be looking for me. More hours passed. I considered leaving my hiding place to check whether everything was clear, but then I remembered that I had made this mistake once before and that had caused my life to turn into a living hell.

After a long while I started to hear voices, and they were voices that I knew all too well. It was two boys from my unit, who I had led into battle on several occasions. From my position I could hear what they were saying and it was very clear that they were searching for me. Suddenly I also heard voices from up ahead. There were more soldiers directly above me, maybe even standing on my cave. One of the boys said that he had found another footprint and they were slowly walking in the direction of the cave. As they came closer I could even

see them through the grass. Luckily the cave was very dark, so they couldn't see me, but my tracks led them right towards the cave.

As the two boys followed my tracks they suddenly saw the cave and I was listening to what they were saying. One boy told the other that the cave would be a nice place to hide in and then they came even closer. In the meantime I took a grenade and as silently as I could I set my gun on sharp. Luckily they hadn't heard it. By now they were just standing a meter away from me, both of them looking at some footprints and afterwards looking at the cave. Suddenly I heard an all too familiar voice from up above. It was Langole!!

- "Have you found him yet?"

I was inside the cave, listening and nearly dying of fear. I was positive that these were the last moments in my life, I was so sure now that they would find me. I held my gun and the grenade in front of me and I was ready to say good-bye to the world in one last spectacular move that would take out the two boys with me and maybe others. I only hoped for the opportunity to take out Langole first. It was inconceivable that I could make it out there alive. Suddenly the boy who stood closest to me replied:

- "No, we haven't found him. He must be further ahead of us."

- "Then go damnit," Langole replied.

The boys took one last look at the cave, and continued on their way.

As the boys left I could finally breathe again. I wondered what it was that persuaded them from not entering the cave. Maybe they just hadn't thought that I was there or maybe they feared for their own lives. Perhaps they had fully realised that I was there but they just felt sympathy because of the way that the commander treated me. I will never know the answer, but at least I was alive.

By the time the soldiers left it was around noon and I stayed in the cave the entire day and night. While I was lying there my stomach was aching from hunger. It was somewhere near the end of February when the spirit Lakwena had determined that it was a time for repenting which meant that every soldier, even the highest commanders must fast. So for days I hadn't eaten anything. My hunger was extraordinary.

Early in the morning of the following day I slowly crept out of my cave. I left the mortar and the landmines behind, but I took my gun and the hand grenades. I laid in the sun for a while, because I was quite cold and I needed the vitamin D. After half an hour I started to move on. I was in the middle of the bush, but still way too close to the LRA trail, so I decided to move away from that trail as far as possible. I climbed to top of the hill on the far side of the riverbed where I could clearly see the mountains of Sudan. It was those bloody mountains that had almost killed me already several times, but seeing them now caused me to smile. I knew that I never had to pass them again. I felt freedom for the first time and with it I felt extreme joy and relief. I was free. No longer did I have to put my life in the balance because someone ordered me to do

so. No longer did I have to kill anyone, because someone else told me to do so. At that moment, I never felt so free in my entire life. But all too well, I knew that I was in more imminent danger than I had ever been before. Even though Langole had sounded the retreat to Sudan, he would go out of his way to find me so that he could torture me to death himself.

I was in hostile territory which was completely infested with people who meant me a lot of harm. If the LRA found me I would be killed; If the Ugandan army found me I would be killed. Even civilians would do anything in their power to kill me. Despite my sense of freedom, I also felt extremely lonely. I was on my own now and there was nobody to cover my back. I had to proceed with great care.

As I stood there on top of the hill I saw the vultures and the marabous circling in a distance, and I decided to go in that direction. If I was to survive all my enemies, I needed to get some food. The village I entered was completely ravaged and everyone was dead. There was no smell of decomposition, so I knew that this was a fresh massacre. It would be important to move quickly. Massacres always attracted the attention of the UPDF, and the LRA might also return any at any time. It was one of those rare occasions in which my colleagues had left some animals alive, so I caught a few chickens and I all took them to an empty hut. Within the hut I made a small fire that didn't smoke. Making a smokeless fire was a unique guerrilla trick that I had learned in Juba. I slaughtered the chickens and

plucked the feathers. I was getting very excited about the nice meal that I was preparing.

While I was roasting the first two chickens I suddenly heard the sound of a hundred gumboots coming into my direction. I completely panicked. By now the soldiers were in the village so it was too late to run away. I immediately threw some sand over the chickens and the fire to take away the scent, but it was already too late. They had found me.

- "Attiena, Attiena mortar, I immediately want you to leave the hut. You are under arrest for attempted escape. Come out immediately with your hands up."

There was a large crack in the mud wall of the hut through it I saw that several of my former colleagues were approaching the door. It was Stockree battalion that had found me and I was again in mortal danger. I knew very well that if I would go out as they told me, they would execute me in the most brutal way. So when the soldiers approached the hut I put my gun through the crack and I was ready to blast everybody away. It was the last man in our row, an older man called Otim who spotted the barrel. He screamed for everyone to take cover and at that moment all the soldiers ran away.

Again it was like everything happened in slow-motion. In my head I heard two voices that were contradicting each other. One told me to stay in the hut and fight, while the other told me to run and never stop running. As the group started to run away it appeared that those few seconds lasted for several minutes. Even in the split second it seemed that the

two voices had already been debating for minutes. I decided that there was only one way to survive. I had to go!

As the soldiers ran away they had their backs turned against the opening of the hut. As they flew for cover, I ran from the hut. I was completely surrounded from all sides by my former colleagues who were just standing meters away from me. Everything happened so extremely fast and yet, it appeared to take hours. I was in the middle of a circle of people who started shooting at me, but their bullets missed, and instead endangered the lives of the other rebels. I heard somebody scream to stop firing, and to catch me alive. In the commotion I ran straight through a group of three rebels and they tried to catch me but I was too fast for them. As I passed them I had broken out of the circle and at that moment everybody started to fire at me. I ran as I had never run before, but still it seemed to be in slow-motion. Bullets were hitting all around me and they even ripped my sleeves and my shirt. I could feel the blast waves of the bullets that whistled millimetres over my head, but somehow none of them appeared to hit me. I just kept on running, ten times faster than was humanly possible, and I never looked behind. Yet, I was sure they followed me. I knew how badly Langole wanted me dead, especially now that I had escaped his little kingdom, so he would not give up easily. Against all the odds in the world I had escaped from the ambush and I just kept on running and running and running.

I kept this up for three to four hours. From the time the sun was at its peak until it had gone down to the horizon I ran. I finally came

to appreciate the benefit of all the training sessions in which we had to run in the heat of the day. It had prepared me for exactly this moment. After I had run at full speed for half an hour, I adjusted my speed but still kept on moving, using the energy from the boost of adrenaline that was rushing through my body. Sometimes I thought I heard my former colleagues approaching again and then I got a new burst of energy, but after many hours, I finally collapsed. My body just gave in. My mind wanted to continue, but my body just couldn't take another step. I hadn't taken a single bite of my chicken and by running all day I depleted all my energy. With my last bit of strength I hauled my body into some dense bushes and I just sank in. I instantly fell asleep.

I woke up in the middle of night, not knowing where I was or if my colleagues were still following me. I felt terrible weak and even though I wanted to move, I noticed that I had no strength to do so. I stayed where I was until it got morning. In early light I saw that I was lying close to some banana trees. The bananas were not yet ripe, but I ate them anyway to restore some energy. Nearby there was a little stream where I drank some water.

I had no clue where I was, only that I had been in the area before. The last two months we had been in almost every corner of Kitgum district and this district was very large. I was in the middle of the bush so I just chose to move in a random direction, away from where I had come from. Several hours later I came to a small village, in which everybody was long dead. The stench of decomposing bodies made me sick. I quickly searched the village for food, but I couldn't find anything.

Soon the voice in my head told me to get out of there and so I moved on. The village was connected to a road but I didn't dare to take it because the UPDF were always patrolling.

So I just returned to the bush. Two days and nights passed in which I never saw a single soul. It appeared that I was walking in very large circles. I was completely lost. My hunger had only grown worse. The bananas had helped a little, but their effect had been short. I needed something for a real energy boost. I have no idea where I was when I finally found my opportunity to fill my stomach, but I think it was close to Limu. As I was walking I spotted a very large beehive. I knew that if I could get to the honey, it would provide me with all the energy I needed. I was only a small child when I was abducted, and nobody had ever taught me how to harvest honey from a beehive, but I knew very well that the honey was in there and I was just determined to get it. I took off my jacket and T-shirt and I bound the T-shirt around my head, and then pulled on the jacket again. From my previous experiences in Limu I learned that the bees only stung those areas that were not covered by clothes, so I tried to cover every inch of my body with clothing.

I took my AK-47 and pointed it at the beehive. I was still contemplating whether to shoot the hive from a distance, or to open it by hand using my gun as a precaution, but I realised that shooting my gun might attract some unwanted attention to my position. I slowly approach the hive with my gun pointed at it. At a distance of twenty meters all was fine. There were some bees buzzing around me, but none of them stung me. At ten me-

tres away from the hive I was still untouched. It was when I was almost there, within three meters that they all came out to attack me.

Thousands upon thousands of those bees suddenly swarmed out, each of them intent to harm me. They started to sting all the uncovered areas, like around my eyes and on my hands, but soon they even found all the cracks in my clothing. As thousands upon thousands of them charged me I ran away as quickly as I could, but it didn't do me any good. The bees were faster than I was. After I had ran for several meters I threw away my gun and I started to undress while they kept on stinging me. After I had moved for maybe half a kilometer the bees finally gave up. By that time I had been stung at least a hundred times, especially on the areas surrounding my eyes and my hands, but also all over my body. It was so extremely painful. All of the areas began to swell, including the area around my eyes. As a result the world grew dark around me. I could only see when I lifted the swelling around my eyes with my swollen hands, but touching the swellings really hurt.

So I just stayed on the spot where the bees had left me, unable to stand, sit or lie down because of the extreme pain. I stayed there for hours. Night was falling and somehow I managed to fall asleep. When I woke up very early in morning, the swelling was gone and instead of burning all over I was shivering from the cold. As I lie there the first light started to appear on the eastern sky and at this point I collected all my cloths again. My gun was still lying very close to the hive, but there was no way on earth that I would continue without taking it. From previous experiences in Limu

I knew that bees were less active at night, so when I was close to the hive, I just ran towards my gun and continued on my way.

It was getting light all around me and by now I was almost starving to death. With every step that I took I felt how the energy was draining from my body. I needed to eat something very soon, or I would collapse and never stand up again. Half way through the morning I came to another village. It was completely deserted and there were only two bodies of elderly people lying around, which was a clear sign that they village had been abandoned before the rebels attacked. In this village I found some chickens again. I didn't have the energy to catch them, so I just shot them with my gun. I knew that the sound would attract the attention of anyone in a range of five kilometers, so I quickly took the two chickens and just ate them raw. Of course it wasn't tasty to eat raw chickens, but at that time the meal tasted as if it came straight from heaven. Within minutes I had devoured all the edible parts of the first chicken and I brought the second and the third with me to eat later. I then went back to hide in the bush where I slept until it was dark again.

From the village there was a small road which ran in one direction. I knew this small road, not even big enough for a car, would eventually come out at a main road and although I was still terrible afraid of the UPDF patrolling the roads, I knew that I had to take my chances. For nearly a week my resistance to follow roads had only caused me to walk in circles. The longer I kept on walking like this the greater were the chances that eventu-

ally I would run into the LRA again, so I had to change my strategy. When it was completely dark I started to follow with village road. After about an hour, the road led me to a bigger road which went in an east-west direction, if I read the stars properly. This was another skill they taught us in Juba.

Some memories were unfolding which I had long forgotten; memories of my early school years, long before my life had turned into hell. I remembered very well that my teacher had explained the geography of Uganda. He taught us that north of Uganda we could find Sudan, the biggest country of Africa. In the west there was Zaire, in the east Kenya, and in the south there was Tanzania. I also remembered the history lessons in which it was told that from all these countries, Kenya had always been the most stable and peaceful. So when I came to the road, in my head, I had two options. Either I would go to Kenya or to Zaire. I decided to go towards Kenya, and I hoped that once I got there, some Kenyan would be good enough to take me home to my parents.

I started moving in the eastern direction and the entire night I kept on walking. The moment it started to become light, I hid again. It was clear that on the main road, the UPDF was in charge. During the daylight hours, I saw many civilians moving over the road, but at night it was all quiet again. For two nights I moved like this. Every time when I came close to a village, I would move around it through the bushes. All this time I felt so lonely.

I had eaten the chickens and I started to feel hungry again. This is when I completely lost hope. It seemed that I had escaped only to en-

ter a world that was even more miserable. It was a world in which there was only me, and everybody else was my enemy. I feared every sound that I heard and every movement that I saw. I had to be sharp 24 - 7. There was nobody to cover for me and or protect me. I had barely slept in the last few weeks and even the moments that I did sleep, I was haunted by nightmares. Each time I closed my eyes, all the innocent faces and voices would come back to me, haunting me, torturing me. As the days passed I was growing completely desperate. This life was even worse than what I had endured in the LRA. I just wanted to go home, but this seemed to be the one place that I couldn't reach. I reached a point that I didn't care anymore. I decided that if this was my life, then it was better to die. So with this thought I began to move on the road in clear daylight.

After half an hour of walking in the daylight I came across several civilians. The moment they saw me they wanted to run away but I told them that if they would run, I would shoot them. I told them to turn around and so they did. I told them my story. I told them that I had escaped and that I wanted them to bring me to the UPDF barracks, where I would surrender. The men argued that they understood me very well, since they had children themselves that were abducted, and they wanted to help me, but first I had to give up my gun. There was no way that I would agree to give my gun to the civilians. I was sure that they would shoot me as soon as I handed over my gun. So I told them very clearly that if they asked me again to give up my gun, I would shoot them.

- "NOW, LEAD ME THE WAY TO THE BARRACKS DAMN IT!"

I pushed the men and reluctantly they went ahead. I told them very clearly not even to attempt to run, or I would kill every single last one of them. After we had walked for an hour or so I saw a large settlement appearing on the horizon. There was a hill and on top of the hill was a barrack. Surrounding the barrack was a settlement that had clearly grown enormously in the last few months. From a distance I could see that only the houses in the middle of the settlement were proper huts, the rest were just shacks. It finally occurred to me where the civilians had fled to. This is where many of the survivors of our massacres had fled to. I realized that every individual in the camp must have lost relatives because of actions that I was directly involved in. I knew I shouldn't expect a warm welcome.

As I entered the village I still had my gun pointed at the two men who led me there. All the villagers were looking at me, their eyes filled with pure hatred. Just as the Mzee, my former commander had told me earlier, they all wanted me dead. I ordered one of the men to go up the hill and warn the army, but the moment I excused him he ran away in fear, without going to barracks. In the meantime the soldiers that were up there were playing cards and they had no clue what was unfolding below. . The civilians were arming themselves with machetes, axes, shovels and all the other farming tools that they could get their hands on and slowly, they started to approach me. Since I had just entered the village, I hadn't been completely surrounded yet, so I knew that I stood a chance. As they came closer I

set an imaginary perimeter and I decided to shoot anyone who entered this line.

The whole situation was extremely volatile and it could completely get out of control at any moment. I knew that I didn't have enough bullets to kill all the civilians before the first could reach me, but at least I would take as many with me as possible. Suddenly the whole situation broke loose as the civilians ran towards me. I cocked my gun and the moment I aimed to shoot the first man, I heard a lot of gunfire from up on the hill. The civilians who had been running towards me

immediately dove on the ground to take cover. For a short moment you could see the sheer panic on everyone's face, as people thought that they were under attack. Yet it was the army who had fired the guns, not my former colleagues. Right away soldiers appeared among the crowd. Before they surrounded and disarmed me, they started to beat up the civilians, and they ordered them to return to their shacks. Reluctantly, the civilians obeyed the orders. It took several minutes and the whole time I just stood there, completely perplexed at the fact that the UPDF had just saved my life, instead of ending it.

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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