



IN THE SERVICE OF THE LORD'S ARMY



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Written by Theo Hollander

“Still Trapped in the War”

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 17

By the age of fourteen, I had killed more people than many of the most notorious serial killers 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 me or them. Or at least, so I was told.

In the rehabilitation center of World Vision almost every day we had group sessions and individual counseling sessions. These sessions all revolved around just one message: It was not your fault; you are innocent. Whatever I had done wasn't my fault because they had forced me to do it. Whatever had happened in the bush had happened against my own free will, and therefore I couldn't be held accountable. They had abused me. They had brainwashed me and turned me into an errand boy for the grim reaper, a harbinger of death, the ultimate killing machine, free of remorse and sorrow. Whatever I had done, I held no responsibility. It was my commanders who were to blame; they had forced me to do all those horrible things.

The first day the counselor told me that I was innocent and that it was the commanders who were to blame, I couldn't help but to think back about those days when I was a commander myself. Even though my rank was very low, it was still a rank. I had ordered others to do unspeakable things and I had also threatened to kill them if they refused. So if I wasn't responsible as a juvenile commander, then who was? The ones who had

commanded me? Most of them were also abducted at young ages and turned into killing machines. And what had age got to do with it anyway? My unit commander, the Mzee, he had been quite old when they abducted him, but still he was as ruthless as I had been, even though he had been a school teacher before that time.

Every day, the counselors told me that I had no other choice. Yet, I clearly remembered several people who had been given orders to kill and who had refused to do so. Even though none of these people are alive today to tell about their bravery or foolishness, depending from which perspective you choose to look at it, they had made a clear choice. It was a choice that I could have made as well, if it was not for my lack of courage, my will to live, and the fact that I had valued my own life above that of dozens of others.

Yet, I do not pity my choices. If I had refused to kill, this story would not have been written. It might have been another man's story, a story of someone who might have been alive today, only because I had refused to kill him. That storyteller might have recalled a brave young boy who had refused to shoot him. But that would have been the end of it. Afterwards they would have told you that young boy had been shot dead and no one would have remembered me. I am happy that my story was written. I hold no regrets over the choices that I have made, I only pity that my options were so limited. The counselors at World Vision were definitely right about one thing, it was either them or me. The LRA was a kill or be killed society, and I had chosen to live.

The time in the World Vision center past very slowly. I hated that they always treated me like a child, preaching about God, his forgivingness and my innocence. Just a few months earlier people had preached to me how it was right to kill in the name of God, and now all of a sudden it was a crime. For sure, I had always hated to kill those innocent civilians who hadn't done anything to harm me, but killing in a battlefield was a whole other story. The vast majority of those who I had killed had died during battle, and I wasn't convinced about the immorality of this. Our enemies had shot at me, and I had shot back. Yes, I had killed women and children during combat missions, for example when we attacked the SPLA camp, but letting those people live was a military liability.

Yet, the councilors insisted that killing was a bad thing, no matter what the circumstances. They told me that I had no free will, no choice whatsoever. Everything had been done against my will and I was just a poor little boy that needed attention. Every day they kept on patronizing me, treating me like some kind of victim and I was getting sick of it. I was a soldier, a very good soldier, and yet they couldn't stop treating me like a child.

They tried to keep us constantly occupied, so that we wouldn't have any time to reflect, but it wasn't working. At night the dreams would always come back to me. During the daytime we had all kinds of activities, starting with prayer, breakfast, and then all kinds of stupid games and then those counseling sessions. We had to do theatre plays in which we simulated what had happened in

the LRA and how we should behave in civilian society. It was supposed to make us ready for being a civilian again, but I wasn't impressed. I just wanted to go back to school and to get on with my life. Mostly I wanted to be reunited with my parents. So far there was still no sign of them; at least, no one ever told me about them. Several times I had asked people if I could leave the compound, but the guards always refused. I had to stay here, for my own good, or so I was told. I felt like a prisoner once again.

Several days after I had arrived at World Vision, I couldn't take it anymore and I decided to escape. The escape itself couldn't have been easier. I just walked through the gate while the guard had fallen asleep in the afternoon sun. The rehabilitation center was in the middle of town, to protect the escapees from the wrath of the LRA. It was now the raining season, but this day was very beautiful and for miles around I saw only blue skies.

As I was walking through the center of Gulu I felt completely free. So far I hadn't made a plan. I could walk to my village, but I knew it was a very long walk through LRA territory, so I decided to do something else. I only had two dreams, and since one of them was not yet in reach, I decided to satisfy the other.

After I had walked around for several kilometers, I came across a school. From outside I heard all the children repeating after the teacher; English. This was the class that I wanted to follow. I wanted to be able to talk English, so that I could talk with all the white folks in their big land cruisers. I entered the school and when I came to the classroom

where they taught English, I knocked on the door. For a moment the class went quite, and the teacher, a lady, told me to enter. At that moment a strange fear came over me. What if the class wouldn't accept me? What if the teacher wouldn't want to teach me? I knocked on the door again. Again the class fell silent and now I heard the footsteps of the teacher coming closer. When she opened the door, I could clearly see that she was in shock. I was still wearing the uniform that the old commander had given me and at that time and I still had a wild look in my eyes. She immediately looked around, expecting to see hundreds of others, but there was only me. With a shivering voice she asked me:

- "Please sir, how can I help you?"

I liked how she called me sir.

- "I want to sit in on your class, madam."

She refused and told me that the class was already full, but I clearly saw that some school benches weren't occupied. That is when I got angry and I told her very clearly that I wanted to follow her class, or otherwise I would stab her to death. This woman was completely terrified, but she let me in. Then she continued her class.

- "Hi friend, how are you doing today?"

The class repeated:

- "Hi friend, how are you doing today?"

She read the next sentence, which was written on the black board, and the class repeated again. This went on for several minutes. Yet it was clear that the class didn't have the same flow anymore. The teacher was sweating and she was falling over her own words and the students' replies were only in whispers. It was clear that everybody was afraid of me and that I was an unwanted guest. Behind me I started to hear the whispers.

- "He is a rebel. He can cut us into pieces if he wants to."

Another boy replied:

- "Yeah, but he is unarmed and alone, what can he possibly do against all of us?"

At that point I turned around and looked the boy in the eye. I felt an urge to hurt this boy. He was trying to set up the class against me. In the LRA I would have killed him without even thinking about it. Yet, I wasn't in the LRA anymore. As I was looking this boy in the eye, he fell quite, whispering a very soft "sorry"...

The teacher immediately tried to avert this situation and she called me.

- "This is for the new boy, please, repeat after me and then translate the following sentence: I am going to the church today, where are you going to?"

At that point I had had it. First of all I hated to be singled out. I was sure that the teacher was trying to make me look like a fool if I couldn't pronounce or translate her sentence right. Furthermore, the teacher and the stu-

dents were all sweating out of fear. It was very clear that I was an unwanted guest. I had entered the classroom to be educated, not to be feared. At that moment I stood up and I left the classroom. I never repeated the sentences for the teacher.

By the time I reached the edge of the school compound, the police and World Vision were already alerted. Several minutes later, a white vehicle came to pick me up. It was the people from World Vision, returning me back to my prison.

Once I was back at the center I immediately had to talk to a counselor. She asked me why I had entered the school and I told her about my wish to go back to school again. She explained to me that I wasn't yet ready for that, but that soon they would send me to school and reunite me with my parents. So I had to wait. Several weeks later I got a sudden visitor. From the first moment they told me about my visitor I was extremely excited. I fully expected that the special visitor would be either my mum or my dad; so when I saw Hervé Cheuzeville, I was slightly disappointed. Yet, I was really happy that I finally had someone to talk to outside of World Vision, someone who might help me finding my parents. Hervé gave me a firm handshake, and he said that he wanted to know all about my last few weeks. Hervé told me that he had come to visit me in Pajimo, but that I had already been transported to Gulu. Except for the fact that I had sold the clothes he had been giving me earlier, I told him everything. I told him about the incident at the school, which actually made him laugh. I told him about World Vision and how I hated

the way they treated me as a small child, but Hervé told me that I should be patient. He explained that these people really had the best intention for me, but that they could only help me if I opened up to them.

I really liked Hervé. He was always so kind to me, but never in a patronizing way. He was patient and always when he visited me, he brought me a little something. When he saw that I was still wearing the military uniform, he took me to the market and bought me some new clothes. He never asked what had happened to the other set. We spent most of the day at World Vision and in Gulu market, talking about all kinds of things.

We were still using a translator, as my English wasn't good enough for us to talk alone, so this made me even more eager to go back to school. I asked Hervé about my parents, whether there was any news, but again he told me to be patient and to rely on World Vision, because they would surely do everything in their power to find my parents. When he brought me back to World Vision at the end of the day I felt good. It had been a truly wonderful day. Hervé always made me feel appreciated. He neither feared nor patronized me. I had the feeling that he was becoming a good friend, even though he was at least twice my age.

Weeks passed. My life at World Vision was becoming routine. The counseling sessions still continued, but they became less frequent. I noticed that I was slowly starting to change. I didn't despise the civilian counselors as much as I did in the beginning, and slowly I began to see that they only tried to help me. The more I

accepted what they did, the less patronizing it felt. Above all, during my little adventure at the school I had indeed come to realize that I wasn't ready yet for the world outside the gates.

Inside World Vision, I could say whatever I wanted to. I told the counselor several times that I would cut her to pieces, but they always reacted very patiently. In the first few days, they had just let me talk and threat, but afterwards they started to ask me all kinds of stupid questions. At first I really hated those questions.

- "Norman, can you tell me why you want to cut me into pieces? So, what do you hope to achieve by killing me?"

Whenever they asked me this, I walked away. But later it made me realize that my threats were just empty. I actually didn't want to cut those people into pieces. What I wanted to achieve? I wanted them to leave me alone. But I was coming to understand that the world didn't work that way. They taught me that in the case of a conflict, I had the resolve the dispute with words, not violence. They told me that threats would not improve my life outside these gates. Instead, people would be scared of me and I would be alone. They asked me repeatedly what I wanted to achieve, and after a while I realized that the only thing I wanted was to be accepted by people and to live a normal life again.

Even the theatrical plays started to make sense. We simulated what would happen if we told someone that we would slit his or her throats. Afterwards we did the same

scene over, but instead of making threats, we made conversations. I started to see how conversations were better than violence and threats. Slowly I was calming down. The rebel inside of me was dozing, slowly falling asleep, while the civilian slowly woke up. I learned the advantages of small talk once more. As I was lightening up, I gained new friends and sometimes they allowed me outside of the gates. At first, there was always someone who guided me, but after several weeks of excellent behavior, I could even walk outside all by myself.

However, World Vision could not cure the dreams. Every night I was haunted by the most terrible nightmares. Often, I was awakened in the middle of night by my new friends, who had heard my screams. When they woke me up, I immediately started to thrash around, and it always took several people to calm me down. On several occasions I woke up and I found myself at the other side of the compound. I had a tendency to sleepwalk while I was having my terrible dreams. Every night I was afraid to fall asleep, but eventually, I always did and the dreams came to haunt me. As a result, I developed a chronic sleeping disorder, which meant that I slept very little at night, and that I could fall asleep very quickly during the daytime hours.

I had been in World Vision for nearly three months, when I finally received the long awaited news. My parents had been found and that afternoon they would come to visit me. As I heard this news, my world began to shake. This was the one thing that I had been looking forward to ever since I had left the rebels, which was now almost 6 months ago.

How many times had I asked about my parents? Always I was told that they were still looking for them, and now suddenly they were found and I would see them soon.

Instead of joy, a terrible fear grew inside of me. I had been in World Vision long enough to know what could happen. In the past few months I had seen so many of my friends who had gone to see their parents return hours, sometimes even minutes later, rejected and utterly bitter. It was my worst fear that my parents wouldn't recognize me anymore, or worse, that they wouldn't want me back because of the things that I had done.

Before the visit I received some instructions. They told me that my parents would only visit for one hour and that I could not go with them afterwards. They were very clear about this. They told me that it was better for all of us if we would take things slowly. After I had been given some time to wash myself and put on my best cloths, I was told to follow one of the counselors, who took me to another building, five minutes from the rehabilitation center. These were maybe the longest minutes of my life. When we entered the other room I was told to sit in a white chamber, with one of the head counselors of World Vision. Minutes later my parents walked in. Almost two and a half years had past since I had last seen them.

They looked sad and much older, but apart from that they were exactly how I had remembered them. The moment they entered the room, tears started flowing across my face. I wanted to run over, but something held me back. When I saw the look in my

parents' faces, it was like they were completely indifferent. As they looked at me, the sadness on their faces increased. Francis, the head counselor, walked over to my parents at the other side of the room and he pointed to me, asking me if I was their son.

- "Sorry sir, but we have never seen this boy, this is not our son."

From all the shocks and disappointments in my life, this might have been the biggest that I ever faced. After years of imprisonment I stood just three meters from my parents. All this time I had missed them intensely, and now they rejected me. They didn't even recognize me as their son anymore. My mum and dad looked at me again, but there was no sign recognition. I fell on my knees and started crying.

- "But it is me. How can you not recognize me while you are standing just here? For the last two and a half years I have wanted nothing more than to see you again and now you reject me?"

For a moment it was completely silent, but then my dad mumbled:

- "Norman... is that you?"

- "Yes papa, it is me."

At that point my mum and dad ran towards me and the three of us embraced. For a long time we couldn't say anything. My parents also started to cry, and at that moment, none of us were able to even speak. My mum was the first to break the silence.

- "Norman, we heard you had been killed. We thought you were dead. Sorry that we didn't recognize you immediately. You look so different now"

I wasn't able to speak. I just held on to my mum and dad. I was crying so hard. After about fifteen minutes my father asked me some questions about what had happened to me. I wasn't sure how to answer but Francis intervened by saying that they should allow me time to find a way to talk about it. Instead, my dad told me about their lives after I was abducted. Whenever he forgot the smallest detail, my mum would jump in to tell the rest of the story. Just days after my abduction, they decided to move to Gulu, and leave everything behind. They now lived somewhere near the edge of Gulu town together with my siblings, who were all doing well. Even though it was dangerous to do so, my parents still walked to our land every day to cultivate it, because it remained our only source of food. They left before the sun was up and returned only after it had sunk beneath the horizon, always walking through the thick vegetation to avoid encounters with the LRA. The long day was hard and the trip was dangerous, but it was the only way to keep the family fed, and to pay the rent of land they lived on.

My dad told me that he used to spy on the rebels who were walking through his lands, in the hope of seeing me. He would also watch the rebels from the bush, putting himself in great personal danger, just for the chance to find me. He continued this spying until the day that he had heard that I had died.

When I asked how they heard that I had died, my mum started to speak of Francis, the boy whom I had been abducted with. All this time, I had been under the impression that he had died, the night that they were writing his name. Apparently, he also had assumed that I had not survived the beating. He managed to return months after our abduction, and he informed people that I had been beaten to death and that they had dumped my body some place that he did not know. As we had been abducted together, everybody had believed him. Initially my parents didn't want to believe it, but after a long while they had just accepted the sad news. Therefore they were very surprised and almost angry when a World Vision representative came to them with the news that their son was found.

I asked my mum about Francis, and she told me that he had joined the UPDF after he returned, and he was still fighting for them. I had many more questions but before we even realized it, the hour was over. There was still so much left to be said, yet, Francis, the head counselor, was very strict. He told my parents that they were allowed to visit me again in three days, and this time slightly longer than an hour. We gave each other a really long hug, and afterwards they had to go.

After this, my life in World Vision became easier. My family visited me regularly. Sometimes it would be only my mum or dad, and other times they came together or with a younger sibling. We always talked about lots of things, about the schooling of my younger siblings, about the family, our new home. I slowly started to unveil my life in the LRA, although I kept my deepest secrets hidden. There are certain

things that happened, which remained private, but as much as possible I was very open. My parents were often in shock when they learned about the hardships, but they never rejected me for it, nor did they ever cast any blame on me. Because of the visits of my parents, I always had something to look forward to. Because of this, time seemed to be passing much quicker. Also, Victor had been released from the hospital, and he had come to World Vision. We quickly became best friends. As the months passed, I was getting better at the conversation games; I stopped threatening people and using violence to solve my problems. After six months had passed, I was told that the time had come for me to leave World Vision. I could finally move back home with my parents and to go back to school.

This is when things started to get difficult again. The real world wasn't very friendly to former rebels. The neighborhood was very hostile to me, and because of that, I resorted back to my old patterns of aggression, which only made things worse for me. It was like a vicious circle which was accelerated by my own actions.

My parents lived on the edge of Gulu town. Once I moved in with them, it didn't take long for the whole neighborhood to know that I had been a rebel. Whenever I left the hut of my parents to fetch water or to do other tasks, people would point at me and I could hear them whispering about me.

- "There is that rebel again. Did you hear that he is responsible for the slaughter in Kitgum?"

I have no idea how people knew these things, but somehow radio Kabi, the Acholi rumor system, worked in mysterious ways. My nightmares grew worse again, and every night I woke up screaming so loud, that the whole neighborhood heard me. Because of my screams and other behaviors, the neighborhood became aware of me and my past.

They started pointing at me and discriminating against me. I reacted to this in the way I had learned in the LRA, by becoming aggressive and by threatening people. Within a matter of days I forgot everything that I had learned in the six months I spent at World Vision.

Because of my violent interactions with people, it didn't take long before I developed a bad reputation and people started fearing me. For example, when I played with the children of my neighbors, I often lined them all up and started parading them and caning anybody who was parading out of line. Soon, none of the children of the neighborhood wanted to play with me anymore. These actions petrified my neighbors, and made them all think that I wasn't any better than the rebels in the bush. I threatened people in the most horrible ways when they discriminated against me. Somehow, the threats worked in the short term and people had a tendency to shut up if I told them that I would eat their children if they wouldn't stop stigmatizing me, but in the long run things only got worse.

Even my parents and siblings started to fear me. In the beginning, when they went to the land they left me in control of my younger siblings. When they came back at night, we

would have a conversation about my difficulties of the day. But soon my parents started taking my siblings with them, because they were too afraid to leave them with me. They would rather risk running into the rebels with my siblings, then to leave them with a rebel like me. Initially, I slept together with my siblings in one hut, while my parents occupied another. But after only several days home, all my siblings moved in with my parents, and I was left alone in the hut. They told me it was because it would be more comfortable for me, but I knew the real reason all too well.

When my parents came home after a long day of work, they had to listen to the complaints of my neighbors regarding my behavior, leaving little time to have a meaningful conversation with me. Our conversations were reduced to verbal fights. One night my father came up and hit me in the face, telling me to never cane my neighbors' children again. I reacted by kicking my dad threatening to slit his throat in his sleep, if he ever talked like that to me again. Minutes later I offered my apologies, but by then the damage was done. I became alienated from my parents and the whole neighborhood hated me.

Sometimes I had these mood swings when all of a sudden I wanted to kill or destroy things, and I always did so. I would kick things into pieces, especially things that people had been working on for a long time. I would kill all kinds of our neighbor's pets, including chicken and ducks that the people kept for special celebration days, like Christmas and Independence Day. The consequence of my

actions was that I became completely isolated. I couldn't get anything at the shops anymore, because those folks were afraid of me. I didn't have intense conversations with my parents anymore, because they were afraid of me. I didn't play with the children in my neighborhood, because I scared them. The more I was alone and discriminated against, the worse my aggression got, and the more I became isolated.

At school, things didn't go much better. Most of the time, I was behaving quite decent, and I tried to remember the behavior lessons that I had learned in World Vision. They had taught me that I would make mistakes, but they never told me that for every bad thing I did I had to do more than a hundred good deeds to make up for it. For me this didn't work. Already in the first week, my fellow students started to gossip about me and after several days I lost my cool. I got into a fight with a fellow schoolmate whom I hit very hard. Just seconds after the fight erupted, a teacher came and he pulled me away from the other boy. The teacher told me that I was grounded and that I was not allowed to enter school for one week. When I returned after that week, nobody had forgotten about the fight. The other students stopped bullying me, but no-one talked to me either. I tried to behave at my very best, but all my good actions couldn't make up for the mistake I had made a week earlier. After the fight, I didn't get into a fight with anybody anymore and I also stopped threatening the other students. But their behavior towards me didn't change with my changed attitude. After I developed ringworm infection, because of the infectious nature of the disease, I wasn't allowed to go to school anymore. I

think that everybody was relieved about this. I felt depressed, lonely and miserable. Once more, my life had turned into a living hell. I knew that it was my own behavior that was to blame for my isolation, but I was simply incapable to take all the World Vision lessons to heart in the face of severe stigmatization.

Once again, it was Hervé Cheuzeville who came to my rescue. He had come to visit me at World Vision, but found that I had been sent home several weeks earlier. He came on a Sunday, just as I returned from church with my parents and my siblings. He arrived with a translator from World Vision, named Kaunda Kenneth. When Hervé showed up, I was very excited and eager to talk to him. I knew that he wasn't afraid of me and he would hear my stories without judging me, or calling me a rebel. Hervé took me aside and I told him everything; from my experiences upon coming back home to my ringworm infection. Afterwards, Hervé went to my parents and he had a long conversation with them.

This was at a time when the rebel activity around Gulu was really bad. Just a few days before, the rebels had even penetrated Gulu town, near Lachor hospital. Living on the outer edge of Gulu, I was extremely afraid for re-abduction. When Hervé heard all the stories and saw where I lived, he took me to the clinic and he bought a medication for scabies. Then he took me to the Acholi Inn Hotel where he applied the medication. He booked us a room for the night, because by then the rebel activities within town were serious and he didn't want me to live so close to the edge of town. We talked for a long

time and he stressed that he could do very little for me at that point, and that I definitely had to stop threatening and bullying people.

The next morning he bought me a nice school uniform and some sandals. He had to go back to Kampala so he brought me back home. In the days that followed I remained in my hut as much as possible. I didn't feel like facing the people outside anymore. Within my little space, I had a lot of time to think about the things Hervé had said and I promised myself that I wouldn't threaten people anymore, especially not my parents and siblings. Several days later my ringworm was almost gone, and armed with my new sandals, uniforms and books I went back to school.

From this time onwards, I tried to as much as possible to behave. To avoid fights and other conflicts, I simply isolated myself from everyone. During the breaks I just sat down somewhere and I tried to study, far away from the other pupils. During the lessons, I tried to actively participate, but I had a very hard time concentrating. Images from the war kept on coming back to me. Because of my chronic sleeping disorder during the night, I often fell asleep in the middle of a class. Then the teacher would wake me up and tell me to focus, but with my sleepiness and the images of the war coming back, I simple couldn't. Normally, when a student falls asleep in class, everybody would laugh at him, but none of the other students would dare to do that with me. When I returned home from school, I would go directly to my hut where I would shut myself in for the rest of day.

Although I wasn't causing any trouble any-

more, things were not going well for me. I felt completely alone. The terrible images of the war were increasingly tormenting me. I still had many anger attacks, but instead of destroying things, I tried to walk or run it out. Whenever I felt an attack, I started walking or running far distances. I would walk to the centre of Gulu, past World Vision, towards Lachor Hospital and back. Sometimes I still destroyed things, but I always tried to do this as far away from home as possible.

The only ones who still talked to me were my parents, and even though they were sympathetic and understanding, there was always this fear. Once I had a long conversation with my mother about my nightmares, the images of the war and my behavior, and afterwards we started crying together and my mum repeated over and over that she wanted her son back. When I told her that I was here, she replied that I wasn't the same son anymore that she had lost so long ago.

She was right. I wasn't the same boy anymore. I had changed drastically and the son she remembered had indeed died a long time ago. They had brainwashed me and they had taught me the way of the gun and the laws of the bush. I wished so much that I could resurrect the son that she remembered, but my living conditions in the LRA had forced me to become a different person. Had I not changed, I would not have survived. This was the sad truth. Her words, although they were meant to comfort me, deeply hurt me instead. It was the first time that someone else told me that part of me had died, and this realization hit me deep.

In many ways, I was still trapped in the war, which continued both in my head and in the physical world. I could not shake the images of all the horrible things I had seen. On top of that, we heard stories about the war every day. Radio Kabi broadcasted new rumors of the war every single day. There were schools that were plundered, camps that came under attack, and new massacres in Kitgum. However, the most terrifying rumors were that the LRA was planning to capture Gulu town. Several times, the rebels had penetrated Gulu. One time they even came all the way up to the police barracks, which were in the heart of town, in an area know as Pece, the same area where my parents had settled.

Because I lived close to the edge of Gulu town, I started night commuting with thousands of other kids from the surrounding area. Every night, we would pack our stuff and head into the city centre of Gulu, as far away from the edge of town as possible, just to escape the threat of re-abduction. We slept on the streets and on the verandas, no matter what the weather conditions were. In the daytime, I went to school, but as the rumors of rebel activity outside of Gulu grew, the lessons became increasingly tense. Whenever Radio Kabi was on the air, people looked at me. For some, I was the closest they had been to a real rebel. After I had been behaving for several weeks, some classmates asked me about my time with the rebels, but I never replied to them. I was not sure if they were reaching out to me, or if they were trying to make a fool out of me.

Several months passed and it was time for our third term holiday. I received my report card

and the only thing it said was pull up, try harder, and weak. I was doing my best, but my traumas kept me from performing well. The first day of the holiday, I had another visit from Hervé Cheuzeville and he asked me if I wanted to spend the holiday with him in Kampala. By this time I was completely depressed, and this offer really cheered me up. I ran to my parents to tell them the news and they were also happy about the offer. The rebel activity was really high at this time and they told me that I should go, as they wanted me to be safe. Again, I suspected that their real joy was that, for three weeks, they would be free from the fear that I instilled in them and my siblings.

Hervé left that same day. I was to take the bus the next day together with Kaunda Kenneth, also a former child soldier. I had never been in Kampala before, so I was really excited to go. When we came to the bus park the next day, a guy named Richard was waiting for us. This man worked for the World Food Program and he was instructed by Hervé to make sure that we would be on the morning bus. He bought us two tickets, and we entered the bus. By the time the bus left Gulu, our excitement had grown, even though we knew that we would pass through the heartland of LRA territory. The atmosphere on the bus was very tense. There was a chance that an RPG could hit us, so the bus drove at a staggering speed that was terrifying in itself.

It took us maybe less than an hour before we came to the bridge across the Nile, near Karuma. Once we passed it, everybody relaxed; everybody but me. We were out of LRA territory now and this meant that we

were safe, but I couldn't help remembering the last time I was here. I recalled the charge over the bridge two years earlier as clear as if it was the day before. This was a time that we felt invincible and all of us had the idea that we would march on straight to Kampala.

As we passed the bridge with its stunning view across the Nile, all the images came back to me. There were images of soldiers running for their lives, and the two civilians who were so-called informers, that were shot through their heads. Yet, somehow I felt a strange kind of pride. Back then we all thought that we would go to Kampala and we were all extremely disappointed when we were told to go back. Now, however I was on my way to Kampala, and from this point onwards, nothing could stop us. It was Kaunda who took my focus away from the memories. Once we had passed the bridge, everybody started talking in relief, including Kaunda and I. We bragging about what we had heard of Kampala and both of us tried to outdo the other, although neither of us had been in a city bigger than Gulu.

When we finally entered Kampala almost nine hours later, we entered a world that we had never imagined and which was completely new to us. We were amazed by the sheer size of the city, but even more so by all these people. Everywhere we looked we saw hundreds and hundreds of people. It all resembled a big anthill, where thousands of ants were running in every direction. It did not make any sense whatsoever. The traffic was completely chaotic. Never in my life had I seen so many vehicles. When we got to the bus park and finally left the bus, two boys came walking over

and told us that Hervé had sent them to pick us up. We walked with them to the 'old taxi park,' where we would take a minibus to his home. While we were walking to the old bus park, we chatted a bit with the boys. Kaunda did most of the talking, because his English was so much better than mine.

In the meantime we just looked around in amazement. Until then, the highest building that I had ever seen in my life was just two stories high, but here there were buildings with even more than fifteen stories. I didn't even know that men could build such things. Everywhere on the streets, people were selling things. It didn't seem like I was still in the same country. It was also like nobody cared about the war in the North. People were laughing and making fun. We passed several vendors, who were selling newspapers and the headlines were about the war in the North, but it didn't seem to matter to these people.

When we arrived at the old taxi park I was really perplexed. Just minutes before, when we had entered Kampala, I had told myself that never in my life I had seen so many cars, but what I saw now was really overwhelming. Below me it looked like there were at least a thousand cars all on one big taxi park. This was pure chaos. Constantly, taxis were getting in and out, but to me, it didn't make any sense whatsoever. All the minivans looked exactly the same, white with blue stripes, but somehow our two guides knew exactly which van to take. As we got in, the two boys paid the fees and we moved on. It took us many minutes to clear the bus park, but when we had finally left it behind, the

trip went really fast.

Kampala was built around many hills, and on almost every hill there was some kind of religious building. Large mosques and cathedrals were dominating the view. After about a twenty-minute drive we came to a very posh neighborhood, and this is where we got out of the vehicle. With our two guides we walked past several villas, until we stopped at a gate. The two boys knocked at the gate and a watchman opened it. Several seconds later Hervé came walking towards us and he greeted us with open arms.

When we entered Hervé's home, dinner was already being served. It was like they had made it especially for us; what we were served was a typical Acholi meal. Rice, beans and a sauce made of peanuts. Hervé asked us about our journey and both Kaunda and I recounted all the things we had seen, especially the large buildings and the unbelievable crowdedness of Kampala. Since we were so excited about Kampala, Hervé asked our two guides, who were the children of the housekeeper, to give us a tour through the city the next day.

We spent three weeks in Kampala. These were among the happiest days I had encountered. Very often we went into Kampala with the two boys and I was always amazed by everything. One day we went to the catacombs of the Bugandan kings. They were buried in their old palaces, which were the biggest huts that I had ever seen in my life, and according to our guide, the biggest in the world. Everything they showed us was impressive, but after the first week the overcrowding of Kampala was getting to be too much for me. I was happier

staying at Hervé's place.

It was there that I first met a woman named Els de Temmerman. One day Hervé returned home with two visitors, Els de Temmerman, who was a journalist from Nairobi and her husband Johan van Hecke, who worked in South Africa on democracy and other issues. Hervé told Els about me and my past as a child soldier. That day I had a conversation with Els and she wanted to know everything about my past. Initially, I was a little bit afraid and I didn't trust her, but because I was under Hervé's care and with her promises that she would pay my education till university, I started to tell her a brief version of my story. I told her about my abduction, Sudan and even some of the missions in Uganda, including the abduction of the Aboke girls. But I never told her any of the details or the fact that I was a commander. Later, Els would write the book *Aboke Girls*, in which I played a large role, but this was all later.

Before I knew it, my weeks in Kampala were over and we had to get back to the north again. On our last evening Hervé had a long conversation with Kaunda and I. He told us about a school in Masindi. This school was made for Sudanese students, many of whom had also been former child soldiers for the SPLA, our former enemy. Hervé told us that this was a very good school that was especially equipped to deal with former child soldiers. In this school, people would not whisper about us, nor would they be afraid. When we heard that the school was for Sudanese, we were both a bit shocked and Kaunda told Hervé that he didn't want to go to this school. Yet, I had fewer reservations.

My home situation was miserable. Although I was trying to be good, I was making my parents' lives difficult and I didn't want that. Above all, in Gulu, I would still be trapped in the middle of the war. Every night I would have to go night commuting and I would always run the risk of getting abducted again. Masindi on the other hand was just outside of the LRA territory, on the safe side of the Nile. After Hervé described the school, I decided to give it a shot. Hervé promised that he would come to visit once in a while and if I really didn't like it, he could always bring me back to Gulu. Once he said that, I made the decision not to return to Gulu just yet.

The following day we set out to the North again. This time, Hervé drove us himself. During the ride back, my feelings were very mixed. On the one hand I was glad to leave Kampala. Even though I had a wonderful time, the city was too big for me and in a place like this I would never be completely at ease. I was a country boy and I felt most at ease in the middle of nature. Yet, on the other hand I realized that a whole new future lay ahead of me and this made me very anxious. Hervé had convinced me that this future was best for me and earlier on, he had talked about it with my parents and they had also agreed. I realized that I had made the right choice by accepting to go to this school. Yet, I would be all alone at this school, with no friends or family and mostly Sudanese people. While we were driving the atmosphere was relaxed and the three of us were actually making jokes and having a lot of fun, but all this time I had an anxious feeling of uncertainty.

We left Kampala at dusk and we reached my

new home in the middle of the night. The school was called the Blessed Damian School and it was led by head teacher Sister Asiimwe Sophia. Sister Sophia was already waiting for me at the gate. Hervé walked with me and the nun to the main building and for a while he and Sister Sophia talked about all kinds of things, but mainly about me. Hervé told her about my past, my mood swings and my attacks of aggressiveness. At first, I didn't want that Hervé told her all these things because I was a little bit ashamed of them, but from her reactions I saw that she understood my situation and that she had dealt with it before. After a while the sister came to me and she called me young mister. She told me that I had made a good decision by coming here and that she would take very good care of me. Similarly to Hervé, she talked to me without any sense of fear, even though she knew what I was capable of. She talked

to me with respect; respect for my past and respect for what I had gone through, but not in a patronizing way. She told me about the school and that I would soon have hundreds of new friends. Although I still felt very anxious about all this, she made me feel relaxed. We talked for a while and afterwards she showed me my new home and the bed I would be sleeping in for the next few years. After the tour, I walked back to the car with Hervé and I thanked him for all the good things he had done for me. His compassion touched me deeply. Afterwards he and Kaunda got back into the car and they drove off. Once he was out of sight, I turned back to the sister. She must have read my mind when she told me that I was very lucky to have a man like that taking care of me. We talked for a few more minutes and afterwards she guided me back to my bed. This was the beginning of a whole new chapter in my life.

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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