



*EVERYONE WILL HATE YOU FOR THIS*  
*How I Came to Represent Former Ugandan Child Soldier*  
*Thomas Kwoyelo in His War Crimes Trial*

James D. Pirtle

©2018 James D. Pirtle. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or used in any form or by any means, graphic, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, or information and retrieval systems without written permission of the publisher.

Published by Hellgate Press  
(An imprint of L&R Publishing, LLC)  
PO Box 3531  
Ashland, OR 97520  
email: [sales@hellgatepress.com](mailto:sales@hellgatepress.com)

Editor: Laura Alatorre Parks  
Book design: Michael Campbell  
Cover design: L. Redding  
Cover photo of Thomas Kwoyelo by Edward Echwalu

Cataloging In Publication Data is available  
from the publisher upon request.  
ISBN: 978-1-55571-937-1

# Everyone Will Hate You for This

*How I Came to Represent Former  
Ugandan Child Soldier Thomas Kwoyelo  
in His War Crimes Trial*

JAMES D. PIRTLE



*“I may not be as strong as I think, but I know  
many tricks and I have resolution.”*

ERNEST HEMINGWAY,  
“THE OLD MAN AND THE SEA”

*War has no eyes.*

SWAHILI PROVERB



# CONTENTS

AUTHOR'S NOTE . . . . .	xiii
<i>Prologue</i> . . . . .	I
<i>Biologics (Spring 1998)</i> . . . . .	3
<i>Propeller Pumps (Summer 1998)</i> . . . . .	13
<i>Human Trafficking</i> . . . . .	21
<i>Standing at Attention (November–January 1994)</i> . . . . .	27
<i>Static Discharge (January–March 1995)</i> . . . . .	31
<i>Non-Acoustic (April–July 1995)</i> . . . . .	37
<i>SERE</i> . . . . .	39
<i>Airborne and Airsick</i> . . . . .	75
<i>Earning It (January 1999–December 2001)</i> . . . . .	81
<i>Immutable Facts</i> . . . . .	89
<i>Warsaw's Warrior</i> . . . . .	99
<i>A Million Vodkas and a Wedding</i> . . . . .	107
<i>Spiraling</i> . . . . .	111
<i>Pillars</i> . . . . .	119
<i>Failed Extraction</i> . . . . .	123
<i>Broken Bones</i> . . . . .	127
<i>Christmas in Nevada</i> . . . . .	129
<i>Irish Blessings</i> . . . . .	133
<i>Exploding Pint</i> . . . . .	141
<i>Pirtle v. Scalia</i> . . . . .	147

<i>Finding Prague</i> . . . . .	153
<i>A Girl Named Šárka (Sharka)</i> . . . . .	155
<i>Karlovy Vary</i> . . . . .	159
<i>The World's Arteries</i> . . . . .	163
<i>Metronome</i> . . . . .	197
<i>Networking</i> . . . . .	201
<i>The Bar Exam</i> . . . . .	205
<i>Penmanship</i> . . . . .	207
<i>Headhunting</i> . . . . .	213
<i>The Lawyer</i> . . . . .	215
<i>Guinness</i> . . . . .	219
<i>Black Rock City</i> . . . . .	223
<i>Sling Shot</i> . . . . .	229
<i>Ninth Circuit</i> . . . . .	235
<i>Personal Injury</i> . . . . .	239
<i>Ghost-Riding-the-Whip</i> . . . . .	241
<i>Chop Saws</i> . . . . .	247
<i>Grindstone</i> . . . . .	251
<i>Sine Qua Non</i> . . . . .	253
<i>The Text Message</i> . . . . .	259
<i>Bullet Wounds</i> . . . . .	261
<i>Objections</i> . . . . .	267
<i>Lightning</i> . . . . .	271
<i>Everyone Will Hate You for This</i> . . . . .	273
<i>Nile Specials</i> . . . . .	277



<i>Sick of War</i> . . . . .	279
<i>Historic Opportunity</i> . . . . .	283
<i>Setback at Luzira Prison</i> . . . . .	287
<i>The Source</i> . . . . .	291
<i>The Eyes of Thomas Kwoyelo</i> . . . . .	297
<i>White Savior</i> . . . . .	303
<i>Miscarriage of Justice</i> . . . . .	305
<i>Fraying Edges</i> . . . . .	311
<i>Kony 2012</i> . . . . .	315
<i>Pulling Teeth</i> . . . . .	319
<i>Situational Awareness</i> . . . . .	321
<i>Founding Father</i> . . . . .	323
<i>Grace and Beauty</i> . . . . .	327
<i>The Cycle of Victimization</i> . . . . .	331
<i>War Crimes and Hate Crimes</i> . . . . .	339
<i>African Mud</i> . . . . .	345
<i>Event Horizon</i> . . . . .	349
<i>The Children of War</i> . . . . .	355
<i>The Sea of Cortez</i> . . . . .	357
<i>Epilogue</i> . . . . .	365
<i>Update: October 2018</i> . . . . .	367
ABOUT THE AUTHOR. . . . .	369
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS. . . . .	371



*To all of the child soldiers.  
May you find your way home.*



## A U T H O R ' S   N O T E

All of the events described in this book about my life are true. Some of the witnesses and participants in and to a variety of the stories remember them somewhat differently, but agree I more or less describe them accurately. However, it must be clear to the reader that the stories written about Thomas Kwoyelo prior to his capture by the Uganda People's Defence Force (UPDF) are fiction. I imagined placing myself in his position and how I would behave under his circumstances. I based his background on extensive research on Acholi culture, the Lord's Resistance Army, the UPDF, and their patterns and practices. More importantly, given his timid and gentle disposition, I do not think I wrote anything that is beyond reasonable resemblance to Kwoyelo's actual life. The only anecdotes based on "facts" surround his initial abduction in 1986 and when he was nearly summarily executed when it was discovered he freed villagers during a raid. These are based on my interviews with Kwoyelo and public records. The rest of his background, prior to being shot on the battlefield, is a function of my imagination. Finally, it must be abundantly clear that I do not describe any events for which he faces charges and no inferences should be made that he committed any criminal acts.

I sincerely hope you enjoy this story. It is meant to make you laugh and cry, to recoil and dive in, to throw down and pick right back up. Most importantly, I hope it challenges your assumptions and you will see the world through a broader lens when you reach the end.



# Prologue

NEARLY THIRTY YEARS after his capture, Alobo Kwoyelo still worries she neglected to hug her son the morning of his abduction. Even now, after the war crimes indictments, she grieves she did not walk Thomas to school. What if she kept him home? Now, the innocent child who left her side as a boy faces trial and execution as a man. She would do anything to bring her lost child home. The Mato Oput reconciliation ritual will return life to what it should be, and Thomas will finally be welcomed back to the village.

Lawyers fight for him, including an American.

• • •

On a humid spring morning in 1986, Thomas Kwoyelo leaves his circular thatched roof hut and walks alone from his Acholi village in Pabo, Northern Uganda to the primary school. Frightening stories of the rebellion persist. The violence confuses the thirteen-year-old. Why would any Acholi harm members of his own tribe? Why are government troops as vicious as the rebels? Are we not Christian... gentle and kind?

Lining the horizon, a dusty cloud of earth approaches. A weathered truck rumbles into view filled with armed men. Thomas senses trouble. The sound of heavy bass emanating from the jeep alarms the young boy. The savannah is too barren for him to hide like the well-camouflaged leopard. He runs for a lone acacia tree in the distance. Small and fast, he can climb and hide in the canopy.

Thomas is not a leopard. He cannot outrun the jeep. He wants to scream when his captors take him by the neck, forcing him into the vehicle. He holds silent. Amid the fervor of his abductors, the path home obscures in a copper cloud of African dust.

This is the first of Thomas Kwoyelo's abductions. On this brutal day the boy begins his indoctrination as the newest child soldier in what will become The Lord's Resistance Army.

• • •

Half a world away, in rural Nevada in the western United States, I walk safely to school.

• • •

On July 18, 2011, taking a break from researching case law, I enjoy a magnificent sunset over the Olympic Mountains in Washington.

My phone vibrates.

The text message reads, "Know anything about war crimes?"

"Why? Committed any lately?"

"Sending you something."

• • •

Five weeks later, stuck a mile from the most notorious prison in Africa, red mud erupts as the motorcycles leap forward. I cling to my driver as he drops the accelerator spraying a cerise rooster tail. Tearing up the crimson road toward Luzira Upper Maximum Security Prison, my muddy jacket flaps. I clench my briefcase as we rip through the thick equatorial air. Luzira Prison crowns the hill in the distance overlooking Lake Victoria in Uganda. Behind the numerous checkpoints, impenetrable walls, and countless prisoners, Thomas Kwoyelo awaits.

The accused war criminal is about to become my client.



## C H A P T E R 1

# Biologics

## (Spring 1998)

THE INTERIOR of the old warplane darkens with the low setting sun. Our faces slowly luminesce in neon green sweeps and flashes.

Remaining dark is paramount lest some peeping enemy spy us in the night sky. My station is on the starboard side behind the navigator and next to the #3 engine. When bored, I hypnotize myself by staring at the reverse-rotation effect consuming the propeller spinning mere feet from my face.

This is a simple mission for me with virtually no role to play other than safety of flight, meaning I watch the radar ensuring we do not run into another plane or a mountain, neither of which is likely. I lead our aircrew to a spot over the Pacific with no surface or air contacts within 128 miles (the limit of my radar's reach).

The P-3's belly is loaded with a battery of Extended Echo Range (EER) Sonobuoys, the latest advancement in anti-submarine warfare technology. Sonobuoys track and localize submarines passively or actively. Passive buoys discreetly collect sound. Active buoys emit audible "pings" localizing a target. If we use active buoys, the submarine knows she is in trouble.

In contrast to standard active buoys, EER buoys serve the purpose of open ocean search. These EER buoys emit an astonishing blast of sound underwater traveling hundreds of miles at 4,800 feet per second returning the signal of a target identifying its location. Each buoy is extremely

expensive. We call standard active buoys “Cadillacs” because of their high cost. I am uncertain what name will be assigned to EER buoys. These high-tech bombs will explode indiscriminately in the ocean tonight.

Every Combat Aircrew (CAC) must evidence proficiency with these buoys prior to deployment with Patrol Squadron 46 (VP-46) to Asia in a few months. My aircrew, CAC 11, is no different. Most of our eleven man crew remains intact after our first deployment a year earlier. We are slick and efficient.

My technical title is Non-Acoustic Aviation Warfare Systems Operator Second Class (AW2). That is a fancy way of saying I am an Electronic Warfare Operator (EWO), and my rank is E-5 or Second Class Petty Officer. My position is Sensor Station 3.

I control the radar and various avionics systems on the P-3C Orion surveillance aircraft, a storied platform after decades of anti-submarine warfare and electronic intelligence gathering.

I quickly elevate to the rank of E-5, not because I am a good sailor, but because I am fastidious at my job. In flight, my station dances. No submarine can so much as put an antenna in the air without my detection. I am intuitive. The electromagnetic spectrum is my playground. I anticipate the moves of the targets. I am skilled and ready to ruin anyone on or under the ocean with cross purposes. I locate pirates, arms dealers, human traffickers, driftnet fishermen, ships lost at sea, and, of course, more than a few submarines.

My crew members respect my abilities while bemoaning my disobedience and frequent disregard for the chain of command, convention, and discipline—the pillars of the institution. My ass is in hot water often, though I dodge any serious trouble. My friends and I chuckle when I receive the Good Conduct Medal which reads, “In Recognition of Fidelity, Zeal, and Obedience.” The GCM is a gimme medal if one never gets formally disciplined. Surprisingly, while I suffer several rebukes and reprisals, I never appear before our commanding officer for a serious comeuppance.

With crews deploying, living, eating, and flying together, familial relationships develop. Like most families, CAC 11 enjoys plenty of dysfunction, conflicting personalities, and varying levels of loyalty to one another and the Navy. However, when we conduct operations, we accomplish them with precision.

Tonight's mission concerns the tactical coordinator (TACCO) and the acoustic operators. We achieve qualification if we demonstrate the skills to lay a pattern of buoys and detonate them in such a way we could find an underwater target within hundreds of miles. This acoustic sorcery exists outside my job description. Unless localizing a magnetic anomaly, periscope, or exhaust port (i.e., submarine), my responsibilities primarily involve what happens above the water.

The crew communicates through the Interconnected Communication System (ICS). We wear headphones with a microphone extended in front of our mouths. To activate the speech function, a mechanism in front of every crewmember is triggered by foot. If the device fails, we default to the hand microphone. For some mysterious reason, I use the hand mike when I want to be taken seriously.

After several hours our senior pilot, Lieutenant Jeff Whetman, announces our arrival on station. Lieutenant Whetman is classically tall and handsome, Mormon, a faithful family man (a rare thing in the military), an exceptional pilot, and a mentor. We share little in common; I am an atheist, carouser, drinker, hot head, and an otherwise ne'er-do-well by his standards. However, he takes interest in me and encourages me to pursue my education and become an officer. Perhaps become a pilot and start a family like him. Aside from education, none of this interests me. Regardless, I admire and respect Jeff and appreciate how he authentically blurs the officer/enlisted distinction line. He is a better human than he is an officer. He is an excellent officer.

Pulling up the collar on my bomber jacket, I recline watching the slow neon circular scan on my radar display. Without planes or surface contacts in our mission area, this show falls to the TACCO and the acoustic operators, Petty Officers Grow and Turkovich.

• • •

An ambitious lieutenant commander, our TACCO takes little interest in the enlisted men on the crew unless we perform inadequately. Impersonal and laser focused on his elevation through the officer ranks, he serves as our mission commander, the senior officer on the crew. His career prospects hinge on how we perform during our deployment. We know this because he reminds us. Frequently.

Our top-ranking acoustic operator, Petty Officer John Grow, manages mission orientation under the ocean's surface. His position is Sensor 1. Though on his third enlistment, he and I hold the same rank of E-5. He is senior in light of more time as an E-5. Our shared rank irritates us both. We disagree politically and frequently come close to blows. I do give him credit for protectiveness of the enlisted men on our crew.

Petty Officer Edward Turkovich is my best friend in the Navy. People in our squadron call us "Pirtlevich" because we appear similar and spend most of our time together. Under training by John Grow, Edward serves as Sensor 2. To my dismay, Edward needs only one credit to complete his undergraduate degree. I face three years of full-time college to earn mine. Instead of finishing, Edward enlists in the Navy. "It has something to do with a girl," is all he ever says.

• • •

We descend to 300 feet slowing our airspeed. The TACCO coordinates with Petty Officer Grow and the P-3 deploys the EER buoys in the pre-planned pattern. With the buoys in place, the critical part of the mission begins.

We climb in altitude in preparation for detonations when Petty Officer Grow signals over the ICS, "Commander, I detect biologics within the pattern."

A general term for marine mammals, "biologics" usually signifies whales or dolphins. Considering our location off the coast of Washington, it must be a pod of whales.

Whales swim amongst a cluster of bombs set to explode. My environmentalist sensibilities activate.

VP-46 possesses a rule commanding no EER buoys detonate within thirty miles of biologics. I know this because I read the rules, usually disapproving of them.

From my station, I see none of the crewmembers' faces unless I put my head out into the fuselage. Hearing nothing but systems buzzing, I wait for a response from the TACCO. Finally, "Say again, Sensor 1."

Sensor 1, "Sir, I detect biologics in the pattern."

TACCO, "How can you be sure?"

Sensor 1, "Twelve years as an acoustic operator make me sure, sir."

Silence. Minutes pass. My radar sweeps far more slowly than my mind churns. The officers weigh the merits of abandoning the mission or following through. I deeply fear the latter.

"Crew from TACCO, stand by detonate Buoy 1."

Immediately I depress my foot trigger activating the ICS. "Negative, TACCO. Biologics are in the pattern."

Nobody is supposed to hear from me during this mission unless death is imminent. Now I, a new E-5, countermand our mission commander, an O-4. He outranks me by thirteen pay grades.

Silence follows. My heart pounds. Whatever happens next, I am in trouble. Bring it. I will not stand for exploding a pod of whales.

Ignoring me, "Crew from TACCO, stand by detonate Buoy 1."

Hand mike this time as I lean forward and shout, "Negative, sir! VP-46's safety stand note specifically states we *cannot* detonate EER buoys within thirty miles of biologics. Whales are *in* the pattern!"

The omnipresent buzzing of avionics and propellers drone as the entire crew holds their breath. Insubordinate Pirtle will get crushed. Again.

Thankfully, it is not the TACCO visiting my station for a little conversation. Lieutenant Whetman arrives. He kneels, making eye contact. I remove my headset glaring with hopeful fervor into his eyes.

He evaluates me as a big brother might, places his hand on my shoulder, and kindly inquires, "Do you understand your actions, James?"

Indignant and furious, I respond, “Yes! I am stopping us from killing a pod of fucking whales!”

Wincing at my language, he continues, “I understand this is upsetting. What is more upsetting is your compromising crew integrity. Nothing, *nothing*, is more important than our staying united, no matter the mission. You forget we’re all in this together. We must trust one another. At war, we can’t have dissension. You must tell us when to fire a missile or drop a torpedo. Your officers and senior enlisted men count on you. We all follow orders. You simply must follow those given to you. The TACCO is our senior officer on this crew. He is *our* mission commander. I follow his orders. You follow my orders. You know this. James, I watch your back. I cover for you. I keep the officers and senior enlisted men from coming down on you. This time, I can’t. Please reconsider. Please.”

Watching Lieutenant Whetman walk back to the cockpit, I burn holes in his back with my eyes. His head lowers; I am crushed. I prepared for a tongue lashing from our self-serving TACCO. I endure these often. This betrayal from Whetman devastates me. Jeff is a worthy man. The finest man I know in the Navy. I cannot fathom how he can be on the wrong side of this standoff. Not only am I morally right, the damned rules defend me for once.

Minutes pass. I forgive Jeff. Under the TACCO’s thumb, what happens tonight impacts his career as well. I remain optimistic he can convince the commander to abandon the mission.

Then my faint optimism shatters. “Crew from TACCO, stand by detonate Buoy 1.”

I grab the hand mike and growl through the static, “Negative, TACCO. If you detonate these buoys, I’ll march into the admiral’s office first thing in the morning. We possess rules for a reason, right? You remind me frequently I am on the wrong side of the rules. Now taste the fucking medicine. I will not allow us to detonate on these whales!”

I am beyond the bounds with that comment. I expect to find myself in the brig after this flight.

Silence.

I peer into the passageway. Everyone sits frozen staring at their screens. I stare aft long and hard until Edward finally turns to me. Shaking his head at me he mouths *no* cautioning me to give up this fight. I look forward and see the TACCO uncoupling his safety restraints.

Here we go.

My mission commander marches toward me with purpose. “Don’t you talk to me about rules, Petty Officer Pirtle! You don’t understand the rules! The only rule is executing the mission. Period! Millions of dollars’ worth of buoys are in the water and a mission qualification needs completion. If we don’t do it now, we will be back here again. Do you want that? Do you understand this mission reflects upon all of us and most of all me? Watch your fucking radar and we’ll get this done. By the way, Pirtle, be mindful of your rank. This is the last fuckup of yours I’ll take. Whetman can only do so much for you.”

I remain silent, fuming. Alone. I resolve to carry through and report the incident, but I understand nobody likes a tattletale and the Navy is not historically known for its thoughtfulness regarding the welfare of marine mammals.

Back at his station, “Crew from TACCO, stand by detonate Buoy 1.”

Not sensing what I will announce this time, I grab my mike. Bringing it to my mouth, I depress the thumb activator when Petty Officer Grow interrupts and declares, “Crew from Sensor 1, I no longer detect biologics. I detect no biologics within thirty miles of the pattern.”

Stunned and utterly deflated, my microphone bounces listlessly in a tangled coil as I release it in defeat. John Grow believes he is protecting me by diffusing the whole situation. The whales did not magically teleport out of harm’s way. They sure as hell did not travel thirty miles in ten minutes. I yell, “Fuck! Fucking liar!” to exactly nobody other than my radar. I stare aft in mystified disbelief at the acoustic station; John smiles at me weakly hoping I understand his decision. Edward holds his face in his hands. I turn forward watching the TACCO sit and smirk at me. Bringing his hand mike to his mouth, he looks me in the eye declaring for the final time, “Crew from TACCO, stand by detonate Buoy 1.”

Lowering my head to my console, my eyes well.

“Detonate Buoy 1!” In the peaceful Pacific, Buoy 1 shatters the ocean. Buoys 2–15 follow.

• • •

Upon landing, I gather my gear and walk directly to maintenance control to check tomorrow’s flight schedule. Unsurprisingly, someone radioed ahead informing the schedulers of my renegade behavior. A lengthy “bounce” flight awaits me in the morning. Bouncing comprises taking off and landing over and over for pilots to keep up their qualifications. Some poor enlisted aircrewman must sit in the back as an “observer.” Not my first scheduled “disciplinary” bounce flight and not my last, the indignity fuels my rage.

Hours later, I toss sleeplessly in my apartment outside of Naval Air Station Whidbey Island struggling with what I participated in this night.

The following morning I return to maintenance control to read the Aircraft Discrepancy Log before I preflight the plane selected for my day of bouncing. While I read the log, a pilot from another crew walks directly toward me. We are familiar. We buddied around together in the past. I believe we are friends. He appears stern as he approaches.

He barks, “I heard what happened on your flight.”

“Yeah? Which one?” I respond indignantly returning my gaze to the log.

He grabs my shoulder. “I heard you’re an insubordinate fuck and you don’t understand our purpose here.”

Wow. Harsh. I glare back into his eyes. “Sir?”

“You heard me.” He leans closer, “Now, here is one question.”

He glowers. I simply raise my eyebrows indicating he should get on with it.

“Are you a warrior, Pirtle?”

“Excuse me, sir?”

“You wear the uniform of a warrior. It’s time you start acting like one.”



I wonder at this. A warrior wears a flight suit and plays war games? When it comes down to it, I must guide a missile into a ship. I would tell the TACCO when and where to drop a torpedo on a submarine filled with boys no different than I. If ordered, I will do this. But what truly constitutes a warrior?

Framing up, I face him. "Here is another question, sir."

He leans in, the veins in his neck pulsing.

"What, Petty Officer Pirtle?"

"Is our war with whales, Lieutenant? If we are warriors, we should choose our enemies more wisely, yes?"

I hear him mumble something like "snotty little shit" as he departs. I walk out to preflight my airplane.

In spite of moments like these, many of my superiors request I either reenlist or join an officer training program. Perhaps with some attitude adjustment, I can elevate to the highest ranks.

Crossing the tarmac, I make a decision.

I will leave the United States Navy.

• • •

*Kwoyelo drops his machete and watches as his quarry flees into the bush. Exhaling the thick night air, a rare moment of serenity arrives. God only knows what happened to his sister, Alal. Kwoyelo considers the attractive young Acholi girls the Lord's Resistance Army has apprehended in Northern Uganda. The fewer captured the better.*

*Caught in this moment of weakness, his frothing leader shoves Kwoyelo to his knees. Thomas does not wince. Welcoming death, he quietly confesses his crime. The cold barrel of a .38 caliber revolver drives into his mouth.*

*"Yooh free dem, Lokodo?! Yooh catch dem! All dem! Now I finally keel yooh, Lokodo. Kwoyelo Thomas dead. Long dead! Years dead! Yooh Lokodo! Sold-jah!" Joseph Kony thrusts the gun further into Thomas's mouth, the gunshot slicing his palate.*

*Closing his eyes in hopeful expectation of quiet, Kwoyelo imagines God, his family. In heaven will he find his father? Warm ugali fed to him by his mother will ease the pain in his mouth.*

*God forgives all. God restores.*

*“Final wahneeng! Follow ordahs or loosing head, Lokodo!” Kony growls ominously, ripping the weapon from Kwoyelo’s mouth. Spitting out pieces of bloody teeth, Kwoyelo blinks back tears. Swallowing only blood for days, he wishes somehow he could escape the Lord’s Resistance Army alive.*