

TALES OF THE WARFRONT

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Scripture quotations are made from New King James Version (NKJV) unless otherwise stated. Those marked (KJV) are from King James Version.

PRINCE MUSAU,

P.O. Box 42496 00100 Nairobi, Kenya E.A.

Cell: +254 708 721 360

Email: musaudmm@gmail.com

Facebook: Prince Musau

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INTRODUCTION

Our Kenyan soldiers put their lives on the line in order to keep our borders safe. The war against the Alshabaab opened a whole new chapter in the life of a KDF officer as the dynamics of the career changed all of a sudden. A soldier goes through a lot from the moment they are enlisted into the defense forces to the day they hang up their boots. In most cases, members of the public don't understand the sacrifices that our soldiers have to make in order to achieve this.

This book helps the reader understand what it takes to be a soldier. I take you through my life in the military in detail to help you appreciate the efforts our troops make in the warfront so that we can enjoy the peace and stability we have as a country.

The views expressed in this book are personal and do not in any way translate to be the military position on the issues discussed. Lastly, this book is not in any way intended to paint the military in a bad way. I remain eternally grateful for the years I spent in the military and continue to support their actions and visions for making Kenya a peaceful and secure nation.

Enjoy the read

APPRECIATION

I would like to appreciate my parents Jeremiah Muli Makau and Esther Mutheu Mwaka who have made immense sacrifices to see me through school and life up to this point. You are a true definition of the love a parent ought to show their child.

This book would never have been had the military not offered me the chance to join them. I want to appreciate them for seeing potential in me and giving me a platform to excel in a career I only watched in movies previously.

Special thanks to Jason Gatheri. Since the first day we met, you have always been a good friend. You have given me a deeper definition of friendship and over time transitioned from just a mere friend to become family.

Simeon Ngula, you have been a good man you have supported this cause since the publication of my first book till now. I have seen you do the same to so many people on your own volition. May God continue blessing you to be a blessing to other people.

Lastly I would like to appreciate my good friend Faith Kangai. We have been friends for over thirteen years now. I have had my flaws, many of them but you have never called quits on our friendship even when deeply provoked to do so. I know I can be a handful, I know I can push one to the limits and thank you for being patient with me. Thank you for being a true friend. God gave Mark the best the universe could offer.

JOINING THE MILITARY

“Now that you have been expelled from school until your exams, why don’t you go out and try out the KDF recruitment tomorrow?” My father asked me, seemingly in deep thought. “But dad, I still have a chance to go back and sit for my exams. The idea of repeating form four was so that I can make the university cut which I missed by few points. If I choose to go to the military, I will probably never have a chance to step into the university,” I replied. I had sat for the KCSE exams in the bungled 2007 examinations and ended up missing the university cut by a few points. Dissatisfied, I had elected to repeat my form four examinations in order to make the cut. This dream had been cut short by a suspension following a riot that we had staged in school after the administration had decided to deny us a chance to watch a Champions league final match between Manchester United and Chelsea, a game I knew we, Manchester United, were going to win. I have always wondered why the school administration had to do that anyway as this game was being played at 10pm, way after the normal school timetable. I had paid the ultimate price for my love for Manchester United.

“Son, remember you are the first born son here and we also have your sisters and brothers in school. Trying the military recruitment would be a wise decision as it will ease the burden on us. Besides, you can as well pursue your education once in the military. Look at this air force officer who is a pilot from our locality. He is the first pilot to ever come from this region and he got this chance by joining the military,” my father

responded. This got me thinking. I could actually pursue my education while still serving in the military and earning? Not a bad idea. “What of my age? I am barely eighteen years of age dad, don’t you think I am too young for this?” I asked. “Their qualification age is eighteen years old and you attained that last month so I think you are good to go,” he replied.

“What of my height? I hear the forces only recruits tall guys. Besides, I am not so fast in running so definitely I won’t make it. There are also allegations that these exercises are only used to endorse candidates who have already been recruited,” I prodded further. “Just go and try your luck. If this is the will of God, he will see you through,” My father replied. “Okay then, let’s see what happens tomorrow,” I replied. With my doubts cleared, I was ready to give this a try.

On the material day, we were divided into 3 groups depending on the arm one wanted to join, army, air force and navy. I figured out that I was better off in the airforce group as it had fewer applicants due to the grades needed which I had surpassed. We were made to run probably the longest distance I had ever done in my life. As I scaled the distance, the situation back at home rang in my mind. The fact that this was also my best chance at advancing my education also gave me the motivation to press harder. By the time we were getting to the finish line, I had outsmarted everyone else in that race. My villagers still remember this run to date.

The intrigues ensuing saw me switch from the airforce back to the army but I was happy that at the end of the day I had succeeded in getting enlisted into the military. My journey in

the world of arms was slated to start on 1st September 2008 as indicated in the calling letter. We approached this day with a lot of caution. I was not allowed to stay out late in to the night or operate machinery lest I got injured before the reporting date. My dad couldn't trust me with my ID card as he thought I was too careless to keep such a document while geared for such an important phase of my life. When I insisted on having my ID and the calling letter, he made copies of the same and gave them to me.

“This is the first time you are going out of our sight to be on your own in an institution you will be expected to make your own decisions which may have effects on other people. You know how we have tried hard to bring you up in a Christian way. You have been a truant child and it is a miracle that you were able to finish your secondary education. That aside, the Lord has shown you great mercy to be enrolled in the armed forces at such a young age,” were my father's words on the day before we embarked on the journey to Eldoret. “I pray that you will never forget where you have come from. Remember your humble background and never forget that the main reason you are getting into the military is to further your education so be vigilant to grab every opportunity that comes your way. Your success will be our happiness,” he concluded. This was good advice from a father to his first born son but all this while, my mind was miles away, wandering in the streets of Eldoret.

The journey itself was something I was really looking forward to due to a number of reasons. This would be the second time I would be finding myself in Nairobi after the first time where I

had run away from home after being expelled. The city had fascinated me and the thought of being back again excited my heart. Secondly, I had researched and found that Eldoret is a 8 hour journey from Nairobi. This would be a memorable experience. Growing up, my siblings and I didn't have the luxury of family vacations and travels due to our humble backgrounds. Nevertheless, we were grateful that our parents were able to see us through school and meet the other basic necessities. The journey lived upto my expectations; it remains one of the few trips I can narrate the experience bit by bit but that is a story for another day.

As I waved my father goodbye at the Retruits Training School gate, tears swelled up in my eyes. This would be the first time I was being separated from my family for a very long time. The previous times had been during my secondary education but they were shorter as there were visiting days, mid-term breaks and all that. Here I was being left alone in uncharted waters with zero communication. The first thing you lose your rights over immediately you step into the college is a mobile phone. You only gain access to this towards the end of the recruitment and if your lot has been a troublesome one, on the passing-out (graduation day).

The making of a soldier is not a walk in the park. The process starts with removing the civilian mindset and indoctrinating you with the military way of life. I came to learn the hard way hear that you don't question orders. Getting this to sink in my mind cost me big time. It is a catastrophe in the warfront for any commander to have a soldier who questions orders. I had been used to the liberal way of life where we could discuss

anything before execution. The more I questioned orders, the more I found myself in trouble.

“Cousin, these people will kill you if you continue disobeying whatever they tell you. Just follow their orders to be on the safe side,” my cousin told me one day after witnessing me go through a rigorous one hour exercise. “Some of their orders are senseless and ridiculous. I wish I knew this is what I was to go through; I would never have come here. I think I will have to devise a way and run away from this place,” I responded. “Are you kidding me? With the level of security in this place, how do you even bring your mind to start thinking of an escape?” my cousin asked. She was right. We were closely guarded round the clock. “I just don’t know how but I will figure out a way,” I responded. “The earlier you accept the situation we are in the better for you. I am equally not happy with what we are going through but I have resigned to fate. Besides, you are a man, what you will tell people out there if you succeeded in running away and left me here?” she continued. “Will I sit here and be killed just because I am a man?” I asked her. “No one wants to kill you. It is you who is not following instructions. Do the right thing and these people will stop chasing you around,” she responded.

One day, it was announced that one recruit had run away. The rest of us had to be brought back to the camp for the officers to embark on a search for the escapee. “Wow, I am glad it is not you,” my cousin who had been looking for me in the accommodation are told me when she finally got hold of me. “My time is yet to come,” I replied. “You still harbor those thoughts of escaping? You need to realize this is not a

secondary school but a military training college. Think of the people that turned up for the recruitment. God saw you through the process and you want to repay him by running away?" she asked. "Let's see how life turns out here," I responded, still not yet convinced.

Meanwhile, it took the military guys less than three hours to bring back the escapee. The precision with which they had done this and the punishment that the escapee was subjected to extinguished the silly thoughts that had lingered in my mind for a while. I came to realize that there was no escape route in this journey. "I have realized that there is no choice in this. Let's do this," I told my cousin the next time we met. "Nice one, I am glad you grew some brains," she responded. "So all this time I didn't have brains?" I asked myself as I walked away. Anyway, that chapter of planning an escape was closed.

Meanwhile, training was progressing on very well. Within no time we had learned the basics in handling a rifle; its stripping, assembly and also drills with it. We were now headed to the range where we would each get a chance to fire our first shots in the world of arms. The weapon class had been one of the most thrilling one. This was the only class that we looked forward to as it gave each one of us a chance to learn a new weapon as the days progressed. The first range firing exercise is always a memorable one. This is akin to the first solo flight a trainee pilot does. Being that we weren't practically competent in the holding of a rifle when firing, the backward kicks landed on our cheeks mercilessly. Despite our swollen faces, we were a happy lot as we marched back to the camp from the range area. We were divided into three divisions and our division had

been the first one to do the practical and this gave us bragging rights over the other divisions. As far as we were concerned, they were still civilians as they had not yet fired their inaugural shots. Mark you calling one a civilian here is the worst insult you can hurl. This can easily result to a fist fight in a bid to prove the opposite.

The worst bit of this training happens to be the physical training. Every recruit dreads those sessions, regardless of whether you had been hitting the gym prior to joining the military. It is at this point that one realizes the gym workout is just a child's exercise. Anybody who remembers my session on the physical training ground probably ridicules me about it. I was a weakling here. The first day on the physical training ground remains etched in my mind; I almost vomited my intestines out on this day. I hadn't imagined that people would be so brutal but in real sense, I later came to learn that this was just a teaser. There was more pain along the way.

Generally, the hardest bit in military training happens to be the first three months and this is primarily due to the physical training that lasts almost this duration. The reality of the saying 'Train hard fight easy' is made manifest here. The route matches here are no joke; the climax of one of them is always the 25km log route match. On this one, I practically cursed everyone around; I have since retracted the same as I realized that it was the long that was making me mad anyway.

With the logs behind us, the next moment of truth was the 42km route match. The stories we had heard about this one gave us sleepless nights. We had heard all manner of advices

on how to conquer this one. We had also been told that people lose their lives in this one if they failed to take heed of instructions. I was barely 18 years old and there was no way I was going to lose my life over something thousands of people had done and come out alive. For the first time, I threw the truancy in me to the dogs. This was a matter of life and death and there was no way I was going to be casual with it.

The 42km route match involves a circuit over the same distance, carrying a 20kg bag and your rifle. A the rifle weighs around 9kg. This is usually the climax of the rigorous physical training. Everything one does from day one on the physical training ground is geared towards preparing them for this day. It is like a rite of passage; you can't become a soldier as long as you fail to do this. The word failure doesn't exist in the military dictionary across the world so this leaves one with no choice.

The much anticipated day finally came. The dryness of the taps and the frisking of our bags to ensure that we hadn't hidden water bottles in them signified the intensity of this exercise. We had been told of recruits who had died during or immediately after this exercise after taking water before the body had cooled down. To ensure safety, the administration ensured that the taps were dry and that there was no water bottle around. Still, as is the case with the human race, people devised a way to hide the water bottles.

The route match would start at 6am after all the check had been done. I had been advised that the secret here was keeping a moderate speed constant and this worked wonders with me. I

found myself not struggling with the first 30km. after this, the weight of this exercise started weighing me down. I found myself dropping from the leading group. “This is more intense than I thought but I have to make it to the finishing line,” I said to myself. The joy of making it to the finishing line unassisted kept me going. I had to earn some bragging rights. I was an underdog here and upto this point, I had pulled a fast one on the instructors who thought they would have a field day with me as I had been a weakling throughout the training.

By the time we were hitting 40km, I was back to the leading group. The last 2km here is the most painful one. One feels as if they are not moving. This is the stretch that took us the longest time to finish compared to the rest. At the finish line, tears of joy rolled down our cheeks. We had said goodbye to the heartless physical trainers; the enemies of any recruit in a military training school across the world. After checking out that everyone was in good condition and that all weapons were back, we were released to go back to the camp.

Unfortunately, one of us chose to disobey the instruction given and gulped down water he had hidden in a water bottle back in the camp. He immediately collapsed, prompting those around him to raise the alarm. The paramedics arrived at the scene within no time and tried resuscitating him as they rushed him to the hospital. He was pronounced dead on arrival at the hospital.

The news of his passing hit us really hard. It was very unfortunate that we had to lose such a good soul at the tail end of the rigorous phase. A very somber mood engulfed the entire

college. The commandant read the mood during the morning parade the following day and called off the training sessions slated for that morning. The painful reality was that as recruits we never got a chance to attend the burial as the regulations never allowed us. This is probably one man I would wish to meet in heaven and ask him a few questions; I hope he made it to eternity.

My other headache during the first three months had been marching drills. This is the other lesson that I dreaded most. Part of the reason behind this is that I have two left feet and hands. My left turn is the actual right turn. This meant that I would always find myself moving in the opposite direction at the instance of every drill command, giving me over to the instructors for some punishment. With time though, I learned how to march and this was a source of great relief. Still, drill is no joke; every officer will tell you that drill is not their thing, unless they are naturally gifted in that areas.

Nevertheless, this first phase was coming to an end. The weapon classes that I had thoroughly enjoyed were also coming to an end and this was the only sad bit. The instructors would tell us that we were half soldiers at that point but this had to be confirmed in the next phase which was a one month manouvre training. This would be done at the military training area in Baringo, another wonderful opportunity to travel around Kenya, something I had missed while growing up. I kept longing for this day and on the material day, I ensured that I was one of the first people to get ready; I had packed my bags long ago in readiness for this day. I kept wondering why

my colleagues were delaying the onset of this adventure for this naïve village boy.

I made sure I sat on one of the window seats in the bus I boarded. There was no way I was going to miss the beautiful scenery. As we progressed with the journey, I realized that my expectation were actually lower. I have always wondered why some place can be so beautiful and evergreen yet where I come from rainfall is actually a miracle but who is Thee Prince to question God? Am still doing a research on why my tribe had to migrate from a gold-rich region only to come and settle in one of the driest parts of this country. This should be recognized as another wonder of the world. Back to the journey I came to realize that there are other dry parts in this country as we snaked into our destination.

For travellers, this place is home to Lake Baringo and Lake Bogoria. The bird lovers would have quite a good day here. The hot springs of Lake Bogoria are therapeutic not to mention the nyamachoma of this area. The place also produces some of the best and unadulterated honey sold in the country. The locals here also churn out some of the best charcoal in the country although the world is now moving on to green energy. The negative review for this place is the venomous snakes. If one finds their way around them, they could thoroughly enjoy their stay here. On our part, we were not here for adventure though but on serious business.

Part of the instructions here were not to leave our bags, more so the sleeping bags in the camp as we went out for our daily training as a snake would easily coil itself in. There are no

lights allowed in a defence camp and this meant that one would not get the chance to inspect their sleeping bags if they left them behind as we always reported back to the camp past last light. The liberal mind in me couldn't agree to this instruction. I figured out that these people just wanted to tire us for no reason by having us carry our sleeping bags during training. As such I always left mine behind whenever we went out for training as long as we were not breaking the camp.

One day, on setting back, I proceeded to set up my sleeping point as usual after having dinner: dinner here is taken from a standing position though. Unbeknown to me, a snake had slithered into my sleeping bag and coiled itself in. I proceeded to get into the sleeping bag ready to take a breather from the hectic day we had had during the day. That's when the snake started coiling itself over my body in a bid to find its way out as its abode had found its rightful owner. I thank God that I hadn't removed my boots as the first instinct the viper would have had was to bite me. I tried applying the drills we had been taught if one found themselves in such a situation; remaining as calm and immobile as possible in a bid not to offend the intruder. This was probably the longest time of my life as the snake coiled itself over my body and out of the sleeping bag.

Immediately it was out, I jumped out of the sleeping bag in fright. My screams woke up everyone in the camp. I was too terrified to even explain the ordeal that I had just gone through. This was one of the few times that lights were turned on in the defense training camp, courtesy of yours truly. After inspecting the sleeping bag to ensure that my intruder had not left its mate behind, I had no choice than to slide back in. The

only other option there was would have been staying awake the entire night but this would mean that I would be too tired for the day's activities the following day. From that day up to my last day in the military, I never left my sleeping bag behind in ops areas. I learned my lessons the hard way.

Life at these training grounds is not a joke. The reality of eating dry foods during operations hits hard. Most people in the civilian world love the army biscuits, corned beef, canned pineapples and all that but if you ask any officer, dry ration is the last thing they would wish to have in ops areas. Part of the reason behind this is that the body will need a lot of water after taking the dry rats, a commodity with scarce availability in these areas. One of the trainings a soldier must grasp is water management. One must learn to take considerable amounts of the same in the morning before setting out from the camp. That way, the body will be able to cope with the quantity of water one on them.

Every single day that, I longed for the range firing where we would have a chance to fire the bigger weapons that we couldn't fire back at the college due to their dynamics. Every single soldier longs for this day. Everyone wants to hear the sound of the mortar, and all other weapons and probably be the one to fire. I was lucky to be one of the persons selected to do the firing. The selection was made by one of the few officers who had had personal differences with me since day one. To him it was some sort of punishment but to me, this was a chance I had been longing for. This remains one of my best days in the military for my entire tour of duty.

One day during our field training, one of the female recruits had used perfume. We had been warned against this immediately we landed in this area but humanity is known to rebel against orders. On this day, the perfume irritated the bees and they decided to rain havoc on us. The female recruit had one of her worst day in this life to date. The bees descended on her mercilessly and even though we tried our best to help, they were seemingly having a field day. By the time she was being airlifted for medical assistance, one of the strength of the Kenya Defense Forces to date is its response to the health needs of its officers; we could only pray that the worst didn't happen.

We had had a bad experience with the death of one of us after the final route match and we didn't want to experience the same again. Besides that, Wambo (not her real name) was a beautiful soul and a darling to many; one of the people who could never offend you in anyway. At times we would wonder if she would have mercy on the enemy in real wartime as she had such a good heart. And her complexion.... Oh she was farer than the daughters of Solomon. The only thing that saved her was that she was a born-again Christian and that there are boundaries people don't cross while in training, if one values their job. Our hearts were grateful seeing her return to training in good health a few days later. I would bet that she never uses perfumes till now; they almost cost her life.

Meanwhile, after a month, our days here had come to an end and we were breaking camp. As usual, yours truly had to seat at a vantage point to marvel at the blessing God has afforded the people of this side of the country. I wished I would make

the trip to this place again in my civilian world or after training to sample the nyamachoma here, a sundowner at Lake Baringo as with the beautiful view of the Flamingoes and a treat at the hot springs of Lake Bogoria. Contrary to the beliefs people have about this place, it has some of the best adventure activities one can possibly engage in. The journey back to Eldoret passes through very beautiful sceneries which leave me thinking why our artistes shoot their videos in Nairobi, or even fly out of the country to do the same.

The completion of the first four months of training is every officer's joy. That phase is touted as the most difficult and here most of the instructors are seen to be merciless and inhuman. What recruits come to learn later is that the instructors were just doing their job as if they would have smiled or danced with us during this phase, we would never have become whoever we became.

As a detox, this period is followed by a month long games competition where we got to take part in all our favorite sporting activities. This period offered us a chance to mend the relationship with our instructors in preparation for the drill competition which sets in motion the parade rehearsals. We could finally afford a smile and forgot the pains we had gone through. By now I think I had lost about a third of my weight. The only flip side of this is that I was now missing my family so badly. This was the 5th month since I had left home. With zero means of communication, all I could do was to pray for God to grant them life and good health till the training ended.

“Hey man, am missing my girl so much,” I remember saying this to one of my fellow recruits who had become a good friend. “I know the feeling too well. How long had you been together before you were enlisted?” he asked. “Two years. We met in school and have been together since then,” I responded. “Well, I wish you well and pray that you will find her when we finally graduate. I am lucky since I was not dating at the time of recruitment so I have lesser worries,” he responded. I fully understood him, the only worry he had was his family. Joining the army comes with its own costs and the first cost on my end was my girl. I didn’t have time to say goodbyes to her by the time I was leaving for Eldoret and for all those months, she thought I had ghosted her. She sadly changed her numbers and we have never met to date.

As the games ended, the truth moment that we had been waiting for came; the results from the verification of our documents. To those that think that they can join the military with fake certificates, that is a huge miscalculation. As we were handing over our documents for verification 4 months earlier, the instructors had made a passionate call to the recruits saying,” If you know any of your certificates is fake, please don’t hand it over. You have already gotten the job, you have no reason whatsoever to hand in a forged certificate.” As usual, a few couldn’t heed the call and it was a pity seen them being bundled onto a police van to go face charges of forgery of academic certificates. We could only pray that the authorities would be lenient on them. The pain of losing their jobs was enough punishment or so we thought.

The same fate would befall anyone who was found to have had a past criminal record prior to enlistment. The same were also asked to declare this at enlistment but had chosen to hide the same. Luckily for this lot, there were no charges preferred against them. Their punishment was dismissal from the service. The last test was the pregnancy test for the female recruits and the HIV test for all of us. If you knew that you hadn't messed up during training, there was no cause for worry. Those found to be positive for either the virus or pregnancy were shown the door too. The understanding was that they had messed up while in training against the rules as everyone is tested for the same before joining. This was the shameful lot to go. Losing your job due to lusts and passions is not an easy thing to explain to a parent or guardian. We hadn't imagined the military would be so frugal and keen to detail as it turned out to be. We learned that the forces do their best to churn out the best soldiers for the tasks ahead of them at graduation.

With all that behind us, they had been left with the recruits who made the cut to become soldiers. The next thing was to prepare us for the passing out parade and this is preceded by the drill competitions. These drill competitions determine where every platoon will be positioned on the day of the pass-out parade. Ordinarily, the president inspects the first three or four lanes due to time. You wouldn't wish the president not to pass in front of you after all the training, right? Now that gives birth to the gusto and madness in the drill competitions. Ideally, no instructor would wish to be on the last lane so that meant each one had to push. This applied to the recruits as

well so one can imagine the pressure on any one deemed to be pulling the others back ward.

My two left feet and hands didn't help the situation. The pressure exerted on me was too much. The rest of my platoon members were doing well save for me. This earned me the name 'mabaki ya platoon' due to my slowness in grasping the marching drills. We had one of the best drill sergeants and we knew we would make the cut for the first three rows. Luckily there was no way I could be replaced unless I was completely incapacitated so this guaranteed me a spot within the sight of the president. The only thing they could do here was to make sure I improved and thankfully, they were gracious enough.

The drill competitions were a huge fun. This is where everyone puts their best foot forward. This is the first time the college is opened up to the locals to come and witness this. On this day, I prayed hard that I don't forget which one was my right hand, lest I ended up saluting with my left thus costing my beloved platoon vital points. Luckily, God revamped my memory greatly on this day. After doing our thing, we rested on the stands as the judges continued adjudicating the other platoons. "Kumbe unaweza shika maneno, Kongoi," our platoon sergeant said to me. His greatest worry had been my two left feet. Thankfully, I didn't let the entire team down.

Later that day, everyone at the parade grounds was dead silent as we followed the results of the competition. Normally, here they announce every position starting from the last. As the list continued going up, our hopes for making the presidential cut remained alive. Finally, we were called out, position 7! You

should have seen us jumping in joy. The impossible had happened. We had not only made the presidential cut but also secured our spot on the coveted first row. This is every recruit's dream as it gives one a good view of the dais and one can follow the happenings on the graduation day with ease. The only small problem with this is that it didn't leave any margin of error. You had to be at your best and there was no room to play around. This was a challenge I was prepared to take anyway. My colleagues had carried me up to this point and now it was my turn to return the favor by not letting them down.

By now, the passing-out parade was in sight. We were just two months away from our day. The preparations for the passing-out parade were in top gear. None of us had envisioned that this day would finally come. As our measurements for the number one dress which we would pass out were being taken, tears of joy flowed freely. The pain we had endured was fast coming to an end. Within no time, we had dispensed with the service commanders' rehearsals. The only rehearsal left was the Chief of General Staff, now called chief of defense forces, to come and give us the green light. This normally happens a week or two to the scheduled graduation date.

When he eventually came, he was satisfied with our training and all that we had achieved and learned but he had some bad news; the graduation date had been postponed by around 3 weeks. Our hearts sank. "What will we be doing all these three weeks" was the question in every recruit's mind. The instructors could read the disappointment written all over our face but then again just like us, there was very little they could

do. The boss had spoken and it is a taboo in the military to question orders.

With the date now definite, we were given invitation cards to send to our parents and loved ones. How I wished I had the chance to send one to my girl back then but then her address was unknown to me. At the back of my mind, I knew my clan would turn out in throngs; they had to witness the passing out of two of their own, my cousin and I. This was unprecedented; never before had lady luck smiled at one family twice. By this time, we had gotten back our phones and with the conversation with our folks, we knew they would really show up. No one wanted to miss this. As a way of cutting down on the number, they decided to have everyone foot their own transport costs. Still, the numbers were high.

On the material day, Moi barracks was a beehive of activities. I could only imagine the security checks our folks went through to get to the dais. All this while, everyone tried to steal some glances at the dais to see whether they could spot their loved ones, an effort in futility going by the scores of people who had thronged the place. As we headed back to the accommodation area to dress up after drawing our arms, the crowd at the parade square roared in chants of joy.

I have not had any other day in my life that can come close to the feeling on that day. Though for long in comparison I have always likened this to the day of the second coming of Christ. We had gone through hard times, we had toiled. The training itself had cost us our blood. There had been tears and cries of pain as the training progressed. There had been times where

we had felt like giving up; I have candidly explained the thoughts of escaping that I had toyed with for a long time. Now the moment of glory came.

As we marched into the parade ground, tears of joy flowed freely down our cheeks. We remembered our struggles no more. My mind came to the realization that there is nothing impossible to a willing heart. From the first row that we were in, I was able to see the president and the other dignitaries present quite well. Our placement on the first row also accorded us the glory of the president passing in front of us as he inspected the parade.

A more glorious moment would present itself; the president stopped directly in front of me. My heart skipped a bit as I waited to hear what he had to say. "Officer, how old are you?" was the question that came from his mouth. "18 years old Sir," I responded, not tilting my head to look at him as that would amount to a grave parade mistake. "Congratulations, you have a bright future ahead," he responded. "Thank you sir," was all I could mutter. He continued with his inspection as I stood there relishing my fifteen seconds of fame. To date, everyone who saw this wants to know the details of my brief conversation with the most powerful man in the country at the time. For the awards ceremony, I was glad that my good friend scooped the best recruit award; she has followed this with many firsts in the military to date and she remains one of the few ladies who have managed to achieve a lot in this front over the years; Congratulations Faith, am sure your family is proud of the woman you have become and the successes you have achieved over time.

The glorious moment came when we took the oath. From that moment onwards, referring to us as recruits was almost a criminal offence. We had attained what we left home in search of. As we did our two rounds of honor past the presidential dais, I could only marvel at how tides change. The crowds continued with their chants of joy throughout this. I could imagine how proud my parents were at the time. The parade was eventually dismissed as we marched off to life as career officers. At this point the only thing holding us from running to our parents was returning the arms we had. No matter the situation, arms come first.

After this, I literally ran and hugged my parents and sister in tears of joy. It is very sad that I lost all photos of this glorious moment of my life; probably the best life has accorded me to date. At that point everyone wanted to know how the training was like. If one is tempted to give in to these questions, one might end up giving a day's lecture. The good thing, we all learned to steer clear of these questions and dodge them without necessarily offending the person asking the same. It is always said that if one wants the finer details of what happens during training, let them join the military. Some things are better understood (when)if experienced firsthand anyway.

The misconception with every parent is that they go home with their son or daughter immediately after the graduation much to their disappointment when they come to learn that they will have to leave them behind for a day or two as they clear with the college. The first time my dad said goodbye 7 months back, a wave of sadness gripped my heart as I didn't know what lay ahead of me. This time round, it was different as I

was certain that in less than three days or so, I would be reunited with them at home as I had already achieved all I had come to pursue in Eldoret. This time, it was a case of goodbyes of joy; to see each other soon

The next bit was getting to know where each one of us had been posted. There are those that had expressed interests in joining the special forces. Others had specialised trades that made them fit only in particular units then there were those of us that had zero qualifications apart from our form four certificates. As we waited for the units to be announced, everyone hoped that they wouldn't land in the fighting units. Going by the stories we had heard, we all hoped to join the support units which would offer us a chance to further our education.

One of the reasons I had joined the military is after my dad had convinced me that I could actually further my education here. I had missed the university entry grades by a whisker. My name remained inked on the academic honors board of the village school I had attended, not a mean feat going by the fact that we held a bunsen burner for the first time during the science practicals. Here I was, and the only thing that stood between me and furthering my education was the unit I would be posted to going by what we had been told at training. I would later come to find that this was not true as all training opportunities are floated to the entire force for the qualified officers to apply. When I found out that I had been posted to 10 Engineer Battalion, my heart sank. I thought my dreams had been shattered. The only good thing about this was that it offered me a chance to get to know a part of the country that I had

never stepped into. This unit is based in Nanyuki, a town I had never thought I would ever step into, let alone live there. The fact that it was near Mount Kenya grew my interest in this town the more. This was the only thing that had kept us back at the college so we were free to go home afterwards for a 14 day leave.

The journey from Eldoret remains etched in our memories. This was akin to the exodus of the children of Israel from the chains of the Egyptians. Figuratively I shed tears bidding the college that had transformed me for the past seven months goodbye. We had hated this place so much mainly due the pain it had inflicted on us. Getting to Eldoret town, we insisted on traveling in the same bus with no civilians. We had to catch up and have some banter one last time before we parted ways in Nairobi as we knew this would mean that we may never see each other for a long time. The bus operators obliged. This was the first time I was traveling alone since birth. It was also the first time for most of us and as such we opted to travel by night so that we would get to Nairobi in the morning, for fear of getting lost. This would also give us an opportunity to make a few strolls around the city as we familiarised ourselves with it. Of importance would be knowing where one would be boarding a bus to where they had been posted to immediately after our short leave had ended. We also needed to know a few streets so as not to get lost in the city,

Getting to the city, we had to find a place to whirl away time before dawn. We had arrived at around 4am and bus companies didnt have waiting lounges for their clients. “Lets find a hotel or club near a cooperative bank as we will need to withdraw

some money in the morning,” I said to my colleagues. My suggestion made sense. We all needed to do some shopping for clothes as whatever we had carried to Eldoret didn't fit us any longer. One of us directed us to a restaurant around Kenya Cinema from where we could easily access cooperative bank house. These were the first two buildings in Nairobi that I became conversant with.

At the cooperative bank, we caused a commotion but not in a bad way. I think the bank hadn't anticipated such a huge group to walk in at once. We were around 1000. From where I stood, I could see the customer service manager in communication with the back end staff. Within no time, a squadron of police officers arrived and attempted to commandeer us to a corner so that we could explain ourselves. We just burst into laughter. At this point, the officers remembered that the president has presided over a passing out parade in Eldoret and hence figured out we were that team. The customer service manager was left with an egg on her face as she tried to apologise to us although we didn't take offence in the same.

From here. We started splitting into smaller groups as we both had different interests to pursue. After strolling in the CBD for close to 6 hours, we decided it was time to say goodbyes to each other as we all headed back to our homes. From our postings, we knew that there are those of us whose paths would cross regularly while the others who we would never meet again in life. That's how military life is anyway. That's the reality of military life

As I retraced my footsteps back home, I was happy with all that I had been able to achieve. The only bit I was uncertain about was the issue of advancing my studies, as that was the main motivation in joining the military anyway. I figured out that we would need to have a tete-a-tete with my dad on this as I headed to Nanyuki after the short leave. At home, everyone was overjoyed, completing the military training is not a mean feat. The 14 days lapsed so fast that within no time, I was having my last meal with the family before I headed out to start my life as an army officer based in Nanyuki.

EARLY MILITARY LIFE

“Son, we are happy that you completed the training well and that God has kept you in good health up to this point. As you go to Nanyuki, know that the government expects you to adhere to the oath that you took. We also have great hopes for you as a family, being the first-born son and my first child to get formal employment. I kindly request you not ever to forget where you have come from,” my father told me. “I will take heed to that. Now that I have been posted to Nanyuki and there is no university there, how am I going to further my studies?” I asked. “The most important thing is that you now have a job. However, I am certain that God will open doors for you to be posted to Nairobi so that you can pursue your studies. Being posted to Nanyuki doesn't mean that your life will end there,” my father responded. “If there is anything within your means that you can do to make sure I come back to Nairobi, please do,” I answered. “I will help where I can, but the first thing to do is to report; the other things will follow later,” My father told me.

“Do you know where to board the buses to Nanyuki from?” he asked. Clearly, he wasn't taking chances with his son. “Yes, when we were coming home, we surveyed the town well enough,” I responded. “That's okay. In that case, then I won't have to accompany you to Nairobi. I will link you up with one of our family friends in Nanyuki. He will pick you up when you get there and guide you from that point,” My father responded. “That's not even necessary. I am sure I will be able to link up with the other soldiers who have been posted to Nanyuki. We agreed to travel as a group,” I replied. “I have no

problem with that. I am just making these other plans just in case you need help while in Nanyuki. Whether you travel with your colleagues or not, make sure you visit this family friend. It is always good for you to have someone you can count on when in foreign lands,” My father responded.

Traveling to Nanyuki for the first time was huge fun. As expected, I had to occupy the co-driver's seat; there was no way I would miss the view this seat offered. Getting to Nanyuki, I fell in love with this town at first sight. Nanyuki is one of this country's favorite tourist destinations but with a disclaimer; if you have money. Going to Nanyuki on a budget will make you hate the place forever, but with deep pockets, not the size of a government tenderer, you will thoroughly enjoy this place. The scenic views of Mount Kenya were just breathtaking. The bush camps hidden deep into the forest offered great therapy to the body, mind, and soul. “This was not a bad posting after all,” I told myself. A flip side of this town is its CBD, which is infested with twilight girls trying to eke a living out of the unholy trade that was probably recorded for the first time in the incidence of Tamar and Judah.

A story is told of how the railway line ended in Nanyuki and not its destination, Moyale. It is said that the lead engineer lost the masterplan map of the railway line in one of the twilight girls' houses in Majengo, a slum within the town. There being no other copy, the engineers constructing the railway line had no other option but to abort the mission. How true that is has remained a bone of contention to date, but the story tells you how dangerous this town is if one is driven by lust. Away from the town, Nanyuki offers all the adventure and serenity one

would wish to have in this life. That said, I found my way to the gate of the unit I had been posted to with ease due to the help of the family friend who I had found waiting for me. The place is seriously cold... We were glad that the military had envisioned this and kitted us with enough bedding; otherwise, the weather here is a recipe for pneumonia. Mosquitoes can't even survive here. Having been brought up in the dry lands of Makueni, I knew that adapting to this weather would be a huge challenge.

The first two weeks here were gobbled up by an induction course and also familiarising ourselves with the area and the operations and formation of this unit and core. "As your seniors have told you, this unit offers combat support to the infantrymen in times of war. We are tasked with conducting mine warfare and also neutralizing the same from the enemy side. As a result, it is mandatory for anyone posted here to go through the Combat engineering course as that is our primary role. You will be trained as a group. After this, you are free to pursue any other career as the opportunities present themselves," the commandant said in his inaugural address to us.

The thought of being trained in mine warfare and handling IEDs and explosives greatly fascinated me. Who would have ever thought that this village boy from the dusty plains of Makueni would ever get such a chance? The fact that the training itself was to take part in Isiolo interested me the more. The reality of the phrase 'join the army and travel the world was being fulfilled here. I couldn't wait to find myself aboard one of the military trucks headed to Isiolo. This was turning

out to be more fun than I thought, although it hadn't occurred to me yet that my career in the world of arms had actually taken off. I was the youngest officer in our cohort. The fact that I was young gave me room to make a few mistakes here and there.

Going down to Isiolo, the area was a stark contrast to the environment in Nanyuki. The place was dry and extremely hot. In addition, wild animals roamed the place freely, and this meant one couldn't take an evening stroll whenever they felt like it. Any movement here had to be in a group, primarily due to the wild animals. If possible, one of the officers had to be armed. This was the first time I was getting to see an elephant and the other wild animals from a close distance. So serious is the elephant and wildlife menace here that we had to have people on guard as the others slept, lest, we be attacked or be caught unawares. For speed enthusiasts, the Moyale Isiolo road offers you a chance to test how fast you can go. The only prayer you have to make is that no wild animal crosses the road while at a dangerous speed.

One day as we were having an evening stroll, I was way ahead of the other colleagues. I was having a discussion with one of us on a private matter. We had sighted a herd of elephants on the other side of the road. We figured out that they posed no danger to us as they were just grazing. Our colleagues were shouting unto us to alert us of imminent danger. I brushed their calls off as I thought that they were jealously trying to distract me from the conversation I was having with this beautiful lady officer in tow. Unbeknownst to us, there was an elephant on our side that was menacingly charging toward us. We were

lucky enough that there was a culvert nearby where we ran and hid, but there was a small problem; inside the culvert was a snake that threatened to chase us out of our hideout. This shows you how risky this place is due to the wildlife.

Back to class, I found myself getting distracted by two things. I had been allocated to sit next to this lady officer, and this made me utilize class time for the wrong reasons. The second reason was that this was the first time I had owned a phone that had access to the internet. With the advent of Facebook, I found myself spending most of my time on the internet while in class. My seatmate also had the same problem; we were birds of the same feather, forced to flock together by default. The effect of this is that we missed a lot taught in the course's first phase. This phase entailed learning about charges (what people refer to as explosives out there) and how to prepare them. Unbeknownst to us, there was a practical to be carried out after the completion of this unit.

The date for the practicals came. They were to be done at the Wamba training area. This was the only journey in the military that I was uneasy about, primarily because I knew that I hadn't grasped anything and that everyone had to pass the practicals unassisted. Along the way, my lady friend and I tried as much as possible to read the piecemeal notes we had, which were not helping in any way. This was a case of the wise brides and the others. Everyone was busy with their notes trying to polish up on the procedures of the practical, but here we were, with nothing to do. How I wished I had taken heed to the lectures in class. I figured out that I would steal some glances at what the other trainee officers were doing to see if it could help.

After preparing what one had learned in class, the moment of truth came, detonating or firing whatever it was we had prepared. All our charges had been arranged in a systematic order and were detonated systematically so as to identify the owners of the ones that had not gone off. My heart sank when my charge didn't go off. All the others went off well apart from mine and the lady officer's. The procedure here is usually to wait for 15 minutes and pray that your charge goes off; if that doesn't happen, one has to carry his/her charge to the disposal site for it to be detonated manually. Those fifteen minutes were probably the longest in my life. By the 10th minute, my charge was remaining, and the lady officer was off the hook.

After the fifteen minutes lapsed, the next thing to do was to wait for another 30 minutes to see if the charge would go off. This was another torturous episode for me. Everyone else was starting to take offense on Friday that I was keeping them here. People were starting to imagine where they would be if we had dispensed this without any hiccups. As a rule, there was no way anyone was going to leave this place until my charge went off, whether they liked it or not. My prayer at this point was for this charge to go off. Thirty minutes later, the decision was made that I have to go physically carry the same to the disposal area to be detonated manually.

This is one of the riskiest acts in the world of arms and explosives. The charge may be going through slow combustion and explode as you carry it, killing you instantly. Another scenario is carrying it with shaky hands, thereby igniting it manually, losing your life in the midst. This is one of the times no one follows you to guide you. No one will want to risk their

lives due to your negligence as the classes are very thorough, and one is not expected to miss the procedure. One of the few times one is left alone and with his God. As I carried this little object that threatened to end my life at 18 years, I tried to be as steady as possible. Everyone watched from the periphery with bated breath, my friends saying short prayers for me. Getting to the disposal area, I placed the same down gently not to ignite it at the end. After this, one is supposed to walk back to safety slowly and in a composed manner, but there was no time for this. To date, I believe I hold the 100m record for the sprint I made here, only that it was not recorded and approved by the world athletics board.

This incident shaped my military life a great deal and also the person I am today. I have never operated my phone while in a class sitting ever since. This resulted in me being at the top of my class at the end of the training. I ensured that I was the first to get it right in the event of a practical as I knew luck doesn't smile on a man twice. The instructors were happy with me at the end of the day as the incident had turned out for my own good. Even though I would later take a different career route from this one to date, my expertise here remains top-notch as this incident made sure that I did all within me to grasp everything taught in class.

While here, my father spotted a good investment opportunity in Nairobi, which he thought wise for me to consider. Plots at syokimau were going for between 150,000 to 300,000 at the time. He figured out that these prices were bound to skyrocket with the developments that were going on here. The same plots retail in upwards of 6 million shillings right now. Not a bad

idea, or so I thought. The only way to fund such an investment was through a bank loan that sailed through smoothly.

As this was going on, my family and friends on the other end were trying to figure out a genuine land-selling company. With the con games that are the second name of the real estate business in Kenya, we had to take time to make sure that I didn't lose money in the process of investing. Losing over 200,000 thousand shillings at the time was quite a huge sum of money, enough to send one into depression.

After a thorough search and checks with the lands ministry, a seller was found, and the price agreed to 230,000 shillings. We engaged a family lawyer to draft the sale agreement, scrutinize the other sale documents, and give us the green light, which he did. My loan application had matured by this time, and the money had hit my accounts. I had tried to remain as sober as possible so as not to squander this money and then come to regret it later. To aid in this, I flushed my ATM card down the toilet and deactivated my mobile banking services until after I had completed this purchase.

On the day I was to travel to Nairobi to make this purchase, I withdrew 300,000 shillings from the bank in Isiolo town. Everyone seemed like an armed robber to get out of the bank. I had come from a humble background and had never imagined I could ever carry the amount of money I had in my pockets, let alone imagine it being mine. I took a motorbike straight to the stage; I figured out controlling a Boda guy was easy because I could easily break his neck if he tried deviating from the known route.

Getting to the stage, the person seated next to the driver had to alight and go look for another seat at the back; I paid his fare for that. I also couldn't risk having someone sit between the driver and me, so I also paid for that seat. I had heard of how carjacking is done, and there was no way I was going to let a stranger occupy that seat. On reaching hizi maeneo za KU, there was a huge traffic snarl-up. We were barely moving.

I badly wanted to get to the offices of the seller before dusk, but the traffic betrayed me. We finally snaked into the city at around 8.30 pm. This was my first time in the city at night.....with 300,000 shillings in my pockets. In Isiolo, people had looked like armed robbers, and here everyone looked like a battle-hardened and seasoned criminal, the reincarnate of Matheri, Wacucu, and Wanugu.

Alighting at Tea room made everything worse; we all know the traffic of people around this place. I really tried calming down as I walked to Ambassador where I hopped into a taxi to my sister's place. I made sure I chose a weak guy who I could easily overpower in the event of mischief and checked the boot to ensure he was alone. When I got to my sister's and explained to them the happenings of the day, they all burst into laughter. "Ushamba utaacha kijana," was all she could say at last. Wasn't that being mean anyway?

Meanwhile, the following day I woke up very early for the task ahead. The company had to take me to the site so that I could view the plot I was buying. My father and other family members had done all this, but I also needed to view the same before the completion of the sale. The company sends its representative to take me to the site. "What good can possibly

come out of this place? Is this not akin to a waste of money and time?" I asked the company representative. He looked shocked. The plots were being bought at a very high rate at the time. "Sir, this is the best investment decision you can make at this time. This place will be hugely developed in a year, and the prices won't be the same. We can sell this plot to someone else if you are not interested. We only reserved it at your father's request," the sales representative told me. After long persuasion and a call to my dad, I agreed to buy the plot, and we proceeded to the company offices.

"Who is this?" a man who seemed to be the boss asked the representative who had accompanied me to the site. "This is the client we have been waiting for since yesterday, sir," the representative responded. "Isn't this a schoolboy?" the boss asked. "Mister, have some respect. You can't be disrespecting me, yet this is a business transaction we are making," I said as I walked out of the offices. "This is a KDF officer, and he has the money," I overheard the company representative telling her boss. She would later rush and catch up with me at the elevator. "I am sorry for what has happened at the office. My boss mistook you for those boys who come to trouble us for no reason," the lady said. "Whatever the case, his approach is very wrong and unprofessional," I replied. "That's why I am apologizing for what has happened. Please let us go back and close this deal. There is no point in traveling this far only to abort the mission," she said. She had a point. We went back to the offices.

"Sir, I am sorry for the unfortunate incident," the boss said. "I don't need the apology, Let's complete the sale, and I get away from here," I said. "Please calm down. As a result of what

happened, I will give you a 30,000 shillings discount," the boss told me. This now caught my attention and calmed my nerves. Thirty thousand shillings was a huge sum of money that I could utilize in other meaningful ventures. We closed the deal, signed the documents, and made the payments that needed to be done. "You are the first teenager to see making such a sound decision. As I left his offices, you have a very bright future ahead, and I wish you well in life," the boss told me.

The journey back to Isiolo to compete in my course was a more relaxed one. Events already overtook all the fears I had had. I was glad that I had been able to make a wise investment decision. As I continued with my course, I knew that every moment was worth it. I had something tangible to show for the same. The course was soon drawing to a close, and within no time, we would be on our way back to my beloved Nanyuki.

"You have acquired invaluable skills in the handling of explosives. Many criminals out there would wish to have the skills and knowledge you have gained. With this being impossible, their only choice is to try and lure experts in the forces to their end. Always remember the oath you took during your passing-out parade. The allure of money should never tempt you into betraying this beautiful nation, whether you are in active service or not," the commandant said in his address to us during the graduation ceremony from the college. "The certificate we have issued you is proof that you can handle all that appertains to the handling of explosives and combat warfare, now go out there and serve this nation diligently. Always remember that as a combat engineer, your patriotism should never be questioned, whether in active service or after you have left the service," he concluded. He was right. I could

only imagine the damage that would be caused if this information landed in the wrong hands. We were glad that the government had chosen to entrust us with such a duty.

The journey back to Nanyuki is one that I had longed for. This was a town I had fallen in love with at first sight. Save for the wild animal menace, Isiolo treated us fairly well; we couldn't complain much. We had been able to attend and take part in the Lewa Conservancy Marathon, which attracts thousands of people from all walks of life every year. The marathon is a whole experience, probably one of the best memories I took from Isiolo. That said, Nanyuki was always a vibe, a town I always look forward to.

There are a few things I credit Nanyuki town for, and one of them is laying a strong Christian foundation in me that has always guided me in life. Although there are times that I have found myself deviating from this, the authenticity of the same has never been in question. To many, the church is a place you go whenever you feel like it and at whatever time you wish, but the case is different for me. Pastor Paul Mwaniki inculcated a culture in us of the need and place of God in our lives wherever we would be. Services here didn't get late just because people were late for service. When going on missions, one would be left behind if they arrived at the meeting point past the stipulated time.

One day we were going for a schools and colleges mission at St Francis Girls High School in Doldol. While on the way, the Suzuki truck we were traveling in was overturned after the driver had miscalculated the speed while negotiating a corner.

Luckily for us, no one was injured, and the vehicle was still mechanically sound. The logical thing for people to do in such a case was to abort the mission, but that was not the case for us. We brought the vehicle back to its upright position and continued with the journey. Such dedication and urgency for the gospel have continued to shape the man I am becoming today by the grace of God. The bonds with the guys we used to do this with have remained to date, though we went our separate ways to wherever our careers sent us. We ended up being separated by our career choices and paths.

That aside, I continued with my life in Nanyuki without much a do. The routine was getting on my nerves with time. Within a year, I started feeling that I needed a new challenge; I had already excelled in all that I could do in Nanyuki, and I was now ready for a bigger challenge. There were no study opportunities that came the way that interested me. I would always miss on the few that would do, much to my disillusionment. Within no time, I was fast losing interest in working in Nanyuki, and I knew that something needed to be done. I had also searched for a college within the town that enabled me to pursue my studies, but there was none at the time. My peers who had opted to join college rather than the military were progressing well with their studies, and there was no way I was going to let this pass me. With no hope in sight, I took my first annual leave to give me time to think things through and figure out what I wanted for my life.

"Hey, dad, I am fed up with the slowness of my growth in Nanyuki. There are no serious opportunities coming my way, and I am contemplating leaving the military so that I can

pursue my education," I told my dad when I got home for my annual leave. "Whatever happens, the issue of leaving the military should never arise; let's agree on that first. Remember how we struggled to see you through education; now that you have a job, quitting is never an option. I have always told you never to forget where you have come from," my father responded. "But dad, we agreed that I am in this to pursue my studies first," I shot back. "You have just worked for barely a year; these chances will keep coming up to a point you will no longer need them. Just be patient. The problem with young people nowadays is that they want things to be prompt," my dad responded. "Okay then, I hope this doesn't take forever. My former classmates are almost finishing college, and here I am with only a form four certificate," I said. "Do they have a job? Do they know how life will pan out for them after school? You are way ahead of them if you can see things from the bigger picture," my dad said. He had a point. I had never thought along this line.

My leave went well, and I was on a bus back to Nanyuki within no time. This time, my heart appreciated all that God had accorded me, rather than incessant complaints. Also, I had gotten know to my way around Nairobi pretty well. I was no longer not the naive young boy anymore. My parents didn't have to bother me any more about whether I would find my way or not. They did not need to trouble themselves with that.

Getting to Nanyuki, the first thing a soldier would do was read the part 1 orders that had been given out while I was away. Two of the courses I had always wished to pursue in my military life had been advertised, and I had all the requisite

qualifications. The first one was a diploma in aeronautical engineering from the defense forces technical college. This is always the envy of everyone in the army. Getting selected for the course feels like you have been commissioned into an officer as your work is now cut out from the rest of your colleagues. It had been my wish while growing up to be a pilot.

The cost of training a pilot in Kenya is around 5 million Kenyan shillings, accounting for tuition fees only. With the other expenses, this cost is pushed to upwards of 7 million Kenyan shillings. This makes the course a preserve of the children of the high and mighty in the land unless one is lucky enough to land a scholarship. Coming from a very humble background, the information on the organizations that sponsor needy students could hardly reach us. Thus, the dream of becoming a pilot just remained a dream. The opportunity to pursue an aeronautical engineering course was, therefore, a blessing in disguise. The aeronautical engineers that come from my village are just a handful.

The other opportunity was to pursue a career in intelligence. I had watched several movies and had always been fascinated by the precision by which intelligence officers busted criminal gangs. Back here in Kenya, I had watched several high-level security operations carried out with precision, and this greatly excited my heart. A chance of becoming one of the elite security officers in the country was too good to let go of.

I was at a crossroads like the proverbial hyena. I wanted to pursue both careers, which was practically impossible. Calling

my dad to seek advice from him; he was for the engineering route. I bet this was because it would give him bragging points that his son was an aeronautical engineer. The idea of being an elite intelligence officer was too good for me to let go. My heart grew more inclined to the intelligence course than the aeronautical engineering one. A qualification in aeronautical engineering would be more useful in the future if I chose to leave the military. The more I thought about this, the more undecided I became.

The deadline for applying for these two courses was fast approaching, and here I was still mulling around the same to figure out which way to go. In the end, I chose to apply for both; whichever came first, I would pursue. This was being inconsiderate of my colleagues as if I got selected for both, I would have wasted one slot that could have helped someone else for no reason. In such a case, the law of the jungle applies. I submitted my applications for both courses and went on with my duties.

As the days passed, I found myself working in the same office with one of my college mates. The girl was beautiful, and I found myself crafting the best strategy to shoot my shot. Gathering enough courage, I managed to convince her out for a date. One coffee date led to the other, and within no time, we were dating.

Dating my colleague opened another battleground for me. Several times I found myself in collision with my bosses. At some point, I found myself being summoned to confirm whether my colleague and I were dating. "Sir, I thought the

law prohibits romantic relationships between a commissioned officer and a non-commissioned officer and not people of the same rank," I shot at the officer interrogating us. "Young man, I have been in the military long before you were born; what makes you think that you can teach me the law?" the officer quipped. "It is not a matter of how long you have been in the military; I just requested that you show me the law that prohibits me from dating a lady we are of the same rank," I responded.

"Get out of my office. I didn't know the military had employed another lawyer," the officer shot at me. "I am not a lawyer and probably will never be one; only that you probably need to come to terms with the fact that the military has started employing young people with brains. You will be rendered redundant within no time," I rudely responded. The officer was taken aback by my response; it was unheard of in the military for anyone to respond to their senior in such a manner. To date, I have never known where I drew the courage from, but one thing was sure; the point was home, and the officer realized I was no pushover.

"Did you have to respond to him in such a manner?" my girl asked me as we stepped out. "These people need to be told the truth. It is time they stopped enforcing non-existent laws," I responded. "My dear, remember the autocracy in this system. There is no room for activism in the military. You don't have to wear painful scars because of engaging in unnecessary fights," she responded. She was right. The military is one rigid system resistant to change and will always deal with any one of a divergent view ruthlessly. "You are right," I told her after a

deep thought. "Maybe this is not the right place for me as I will always speak out if I feel someone is unfairly targeting me," I continued. "You need to just tone down. Some wars are better off left unfought; their scars are unnecessary. Do you think that altercation ended there?" she asked. "Definitely not," I responded. "I hope you will see my point; that altercation was unnecessary," she continued.

During the disciplinary proceedings arising from the same matter, I calmly tried to explain my point and justify my defense by pointing out the prejudice in the officer we had had an altercation the previous day. "The officer might have been wrong, but your tone was disrespectful and in contempt of military order," said the officer presiding over the proceedings. "I admit that and apologize for the same, but kindly help us with this issue, sir. Is it wrong for me to be in a relationship with a colleague of the same rank?" I asked. "There is nothing wrong with that. The law only prohibits romantic relationships between officers and non-commissioned officers," the presiding officer responded. "We are only dealing with the disrespectful altercation with your senior here," the officer continued. "I understand my mistake and apologize for the same," I responded. "You are a young officer and have a bright future ahead of you in the military. I don't want to jeopardize your career by recording this in your file. Let this be the last time this happens. Are we together?" the presiding officer said. "Yes, sir," I responded with a sigh of relief. "Good, these proceedings stand dismissed," he responded.

"How did it go?" my girl and colleagues shot at me after the proceedings. "I was let off the hook, but with a warning," I

responded to them. "Oh, thank God you were lucky," they replied. "Yeah, that was too close. I will be careful next time," I said. "You always court trouble; stop fighting with these people. You can't defeat them," one of my colleagues told me. "All my friends can't be wrong," I told myself.

The next few days found me pondering whether to go on with this relationship or not. Was I ready for a relationship that was putting my future at stake, yet I was barely 20? I decided to cross over to Laikipia Airbase to visit my family and friends. The man of the house had two boys my age, and I thought hearing their opinion about this would make more sense as this would not be biased due to the fact that they are not military men.

"This is ridiculous, and you wanna put your career at risk? Besides, you already mentioned that this girl parties, is this the kind of lady that you would wish to take to your mum? Bro, if you want to have a peaceful life, focus on marrying a girl who is not a military officer like you. Supposing she climbs up the ranks faster than you, will you be okay taking commands from her, especially when you have had fights in the house," one of the boys started. All this time, I uttered no word, deciding to concentrate on the computer game that we were playing as I listened to them. "Bro, there are so many beautiful girls out here; leave the military girls," the second guy quipped. "I think he doesn't believe us. We should take him to the swimming pool within the barracks here and the basketball court so that he can get an idea of what we are talking about," the first guy responded. "Sounds a good idea," I finally spoke. "See this

one, he was pretending not to be listening, but now we have his attention," the second guy said as we all burst into laughter.

That afternoon at the swimming pool, I got to meet one of the most beautiful and principled ladies I have come to know in my lifetime. This beautiful girl, I later came to find out that her name was Faith Kangai, was a form two student at Kenya High School back then. The following day was a Sunday, and we chose to attend church within the barracks; to my amusement, the girl I had met the previous day at the pool was leading the service in Praise and worship. "These are the kind of girls I should be hanging out with," I whispered to my friend. "See now, we have been vindicated," he responded.

Although we never got to date or end up together, my interactions with this young girl changed my perspective on many things. She remains one of the few friends I have kept for all this long, and her life and marriage are a testament that you can still hold your principles and be successful in life, both in career and marriage, in a world where many young women choose shortcuts on their way to success in life.

Getting back to the camp, I had made up my mind that I no longer needed to pursue this relationship further. "Dear X, thank you for the times we have had and everything we have shared over time. However, I feel that I need to focus on my life, discovering myself and purpose in this life and my career too. In these circumstances, this relationship is no longer tenable, and I wish to end it at this point. I wish you well in

life, and I will always respect you," read the message I sent to my girlfriend as I stepped into my house.

"Is this some kind of a joke, after all we have been through together? You cant do this to me," was the response she sent back. "Your text substantiates my point. This relationship is costing us our peace and a lot more hence my decision to call it quits. If we were meant to be, we will, but for now, let's take a break. Kindly respect my position," I responded. The drama that followed this remains inked in my mind. This girl tried to feign all manner of reasons to get back together or blackmail me.

At some point, the same was taking a toll on me. She had faked pregnancy to ensure that we got back together, and this almost won me back until my lady friends confirmed this was not the case. "You think you are off the hook? Not so boy, now please go to the VCT and get tested," was the message she sent me after the pregnancy trap failed to work. This text greatly jolted me. This was the only girl I had had a sexual relationship with. I wondered why she would send me such a text.

The next few days would turn out to be some of the most painful days of my life. Did this girl try to imply that she had infected me with HIV/AIDS? Where had she contracted this from, yet we had been tested before pass-out and had all been given a clean bill of health? Being HIV positive at 19 years old, what was the essence of continuing to live? Many questions with few answers lingered in my mind. As this happened, a flu wave struck us in the camp. You can guess

what was going through my mind as I coughed and sneezed. This almost acted as confirmation that I had contracted this deadly virus with no known cure to date. At times the thought of signing my gun, then shooting this girl dead, and then turning the gun on myself crossed my mind. Why would someone who had treated me so inhumanly be left to live anyway?

My close colleagues had noticed something wrong with me as I used to sit down under a tree and shed bitter tears whenever I was free. I had started to keep a lot to myself, something that was strange to me to them. "Prince, what's wrong with you? What's eating you up?" one of my close friends, Vero (not her real name), asked me as she settled down beside me. "Nothing," I responded as tears flowed freely down my cheeks. "You can't tell me there is nothing wrong with you when you are here by yourself crying," she asked. "Besides, you have recently lost a lot of weight and become a hermit; what's wrong? Talk to me; you know you can always trust me," she continued. "I have lost weight? So this infection is real?" I thought to myself. "It's my ex," I told Vero after so much pestering. "What's up with her? I thought you guys parted ways?" she asked.

"And that's where the problem is. This fool wrote me a message that she had infected me with HIV; how now? How can I live with this from the age of nineteen? Am thinking of signing my gun and shooting her dead," I ranted. Vero was taken aback. She hadn't seen me in such a fit of rage before. "Hey, calm down. Do you realize that shooting her dead and taking her life doesn't solve anything? What's the story? Kindly

elaborate," she prodded further. I went on to explain to her everything that had happened and how we had gotten to this point.

After I was done, she roared in laughter. I looked at her, stunned. What was the laughing matter? Was she making fun of my problems? "Bro, you can't be this naïve, honestly. Can't you see that all that this girl is trying to do is just blackmail? Why do you give her the luxury of seeing you suffer? First, it was pregnancy, and when that didn't work, she advanced to HIV, and then boom, you are here depressed. She must be happy that her trick is finally working," Vero told me. "You mean...." I started. "I mean that this is not true. If she had contracted HIV, she would be equally depressed," Vero interjected. "How can we confirm this?" I asked her. "Leave this to me; I will sort this out," she responded reassuringly. "Now get up and let us head to the basketball court and play a game. I know you are a good basketball player," she continued, pulling me up to my feet, leaving me with no room to turn her down.

"Mary (not her real name), you are accused of knowingly infecting Prince with HIV. Do you know that this is a criminal offense and that we are handing over this matter to the police to investigate it further and charge you in court? I hope you understand that this practically ends your military career," the squadron commander told Mary in my presence. Vero had escalated this matter up the ranks, and we had now been called to the office for the hearing of the same. "Sir, this is not true. I didn't infect him. How can I do that when personally I am HIV negative?" she responded. "What does this message that you

send him mean then?" the officer asked. "I was angry at how he casually ended our relationship, and I chose to blackmail him. I didn't think he would take it this seriously," she responded. "How should we believe this?" the officer asked. "You can send the two of us to the VCT to get tested and have the results sent directly to you. If you find any of us positive, then I will carry the blame," Mary told the officer. "Perfect, you both head there now. I will call the officer testing you and relay the instructions," the officer told us.

We silently walked to the VCT center within the barracks. The atmosphere was tense, and no one wanted to talk to the other. As we sat at the reception waiting for my turn, one thing was clear in my mind; if this came out negative, I was never going to date a military officer again. Mary had managed to create a negative attitude in me towards dating a colleague. Within a short time, we were called in, and the tests were done. The testing officer explained to us the outcomes. As this was not a matter to be hidden, the specimens were placed before us for us to wait to see the results. The moments we sat there waiting for the results to show up were the longest in my life to date. Both specimens turned out negative. "Kindly redo the tests; maybe the first kits were faulty," I requested the officer. "Okay, we will do this until you are satisfied," he responded. The second and third specimens turned out negative too.

"Did you have to lie to me all this long? Do you imagine the pain you have caused me to go through?" I angrily asked Mary. "Good riddance, do I look like I care?" she rudely responded. At this point, I lost my cool and slapped her. The altercation degenerated into a scuffle, and we had to be separated. To date,

she remains the only lady to have ever lost my respect and also the only one I have ever slapped.

"Did I send you guys to the VCT for tests or to fight? Prince, did you have to slap her?" the squadron commander asked us back at the office. "Sir, you can't imagine the pain this lady here has made me go through. I was almost taking my life," I responded. "I understand, but slapping her doesn't solve the situation but rather escalates it," the officer replied. "I know, sir. I should have controlled my emotions. I am sorry for that," I responded. "Mary, you owe Prince an apology for the pain you have caused him. This was totally uncalled for and brainless," the officer told Mary. "I am sorry for all this and the pain I have caused you," Mary told me. "Apologies for slapping you," I responded. "You now see why we don't encourage these kinds of relationships? If the two of you were armed and on duty, what could have happened?" the squadron commander asked us. "I now understand, sir. Going forward, I will focus on my career," I responded. "We are not saying that it is wrong for you to love a colleague, but before you make any serious decisions, you must make sure you understand each other first. They must be your best friend; first, someone you trust will always have your best interests at heart," he advised.

"Now, what have you been crying over all this time?" Vero asked me when we met later on. "You cannot understand what I was going through, but thanks for the concern," I responded. "That's what friends are for. You owe me a weekend treat for this," she said jokingly. "Sure, how about visiting Ol-pejeta over the weekend now that we are not on duty? I have always

wanted to visit the place and take part in lion tracking. After this, we can go for a swim or coffee date in the evening," I posed. "Sounds a good idea.... We can rope in a few more friends so that we make the ol-pejeta experience more memorable," Vero responded. "Yes, why not? A land cruiser has a capacity of 7, so we can have 5 of our friends; as long as Mary is not in the mix am good," I said. "I know, right," Vero responded before bursting into laughter.

The ol-pejeta experience turned out to be a very good decision. The guides and activities there did not disappoint. Coming from the military, we knew what it meant to be there on time to participate in the lion tracking. A visit to the canine anti-poaching unit was also quite informative. We were glad that this is open to visitors to come and learn a thing or two. The park is one of Africa's most organized safari parks and is home to all the big 5. This young boy from Makueni was having the best time of his life. Riding with the rhinos in the endangered species conservancy remains an experience etched in my mind forever.

"One day is not enough for this; maybe we should come back here for three or four days," I said to the group as we headed back to the barracks at the end of the day. "Sure. The only problem is getting the leave days at the same time for all of us," Vero responded. She was right; getting leave days at the same time was quite challenging since we all belonged to the same squadron. "And probably before this happens, you will have been selected to join the prestigious Defence Forces Technical College or the elite School of Military Intelligence and forgotten about us," my other colleague said. "Wherever I

go, it will be impossible to forget about you guys. You have become family to me." I reassuringly told them. "These words will mean something once you get to the city. Only then can we know that you are a true friend," Vero shot back. "Come on, guys, you have known the kind of person I am. We will always be family," I responded. To date, this group has remained close to each other, although we lost one of us defending the country. May God continue resting his soul in peace.

TRAINING TO BECOME AN INTELLIGENCE OFFICER

As the days progressed, I started losing hope in the applications I had made. Days had progressed into weeks and ultimately months without any word from the defense headquarters on the same. I had seen my colleagues leave for other courses, but here I was, still waiting. "I think I should consider pursuing other careers. These ones that I applied for have taken so long for their feedback to come," I told Vero one evening as we played chess at the mess. "You need to have patience and be positive with life. I am sure the defense headquarters will communicate the candidates chosen to all military units. Just be patient," she responded.

True to her word, the feedback for the intelligence course came back a month later, and this poor boy from Makueni had been selected for the prestigious course. I was over the moon. Within no time, I would be performing the roles I had been watching on TV but now in real life. "Congratulations, bro, I am so happy for you," Vero told me when we caught up at the basketball court. We had both been good basketball players in our school days, and this is one of the things that drew us closer to each other. She had grown to become the most trusted friend I had. "I will definitely miss you," I told her as we tried three-pointers on the basketball court. "Same here; you have been a good friend. You have become like family to me. I hope relocating back to Nairobi won't change this," she responded. "You have my word on this," I told her reassuringly. This was

the last time we were playing a match here together, and this was an emotional one.

"I hope God settles you in your career of choice," I told her as we walked to the barracks. "I hope so too. I hope I join you in the intelligence field someday. It has always been my dream, but you remember that when this application came, I had lost my mum, and so I missed out on them as I was away," she responded. "Oh yeah, I remember and am so sorry about that. I am sure that this will not be the last cohort they are training. You can try your luck next year," I responded. "Yeah, I will surely do that. Meanwhile, I wish you well in the next phase of your life," she said. "Thank you, I wish you well too," I responded.

The following day, I loaded my luggage onto the truck that was to convey me to my new unit, The Directorate of Military Intelligence, to start a new life. I had enjoyed my life in Nanyuki, and this was one emotional farewell. As the truck made its way to Nairobi, I reminisced on the good times I had had there and the good people I had met and transformed into trusted friends. From Faith, the girl who changed my perspective on dating, to Vero, a colleague who had turned to be family, I knew I would be visiting this place quite often. I had also made good networks in the church where I fellowshiped, and Pastor Paul Mwaniki had instilled sound Christian doctrine and discipline in me.

Before coming here, I was always late for church services and attended church services as an afterthought. The church here started at 7 am on the dot, whether there were congregants or

not. I had joined a youth outreach team that conducted church missions in secondary schools and colleges here. I had seen people being left out during these trips for arriving late. This, coupled with my growth in my Christianity, changed my perspective altogether. The outreach group had grown so closely knit that I knew I would be traveling from Nairobi to attend the same from time to time. They had become a second family here after my colleagues.

Nairobi was a lifestyle shock to me. Life was too expensive here compared to Nanyuki. The cost of housing here was more than three times my house rent in Nanyuki. "How do you guys survive in this city with the salary we earn?" I asked one of the senior colleagues I found here. "It is tough here, but what do we do?" he responded. "We are optimistic that the next salary review coming up in a month's time will consider the high cost of living here; otherwise, we are doomed," he continued. "They should surely consider," I responded.

Back at the School of military intelligence, one thing stood between me and the career I so badly wanted to pursue; the aptitude test. I had heard stories of people being rigged in. the narrative of who one knew on the higher echelons was also being propagated in low tones. I had no one in the military. My cousin and I were among the first members of our family to join the same. The other two who had preceded us were still junior officers who probably couldn't help me here. "The only way through this is to pass the aptitude test so well that it would be practically impossible to throw me out," I told myself.

I emerged the best in the aptitude test, a great relief. I became one of the first officers whose admission to the School of military intelligence had been confirmed. Life here was a bit different. We wore civilian clothes, unlike in Nanyuki or other military units where one had to don the jungle green combat uniform during working hours. This set us apart from the rest of the officers. The biggest problem with this is that our colleagues in the other military units always treated us with suspicion. We would walk into the mess, and our colleagues would go silent or finish their drinks and walk out. The fear that we were always spying on them made us not have a good relationship with them.

That aside, I always looked forward to excelling in this career and was very keen for the classes to begin. I am lucky to have passed through the hands of Col (Rtd) Cyrus Oguna, one of the best intelligence officers of our time. He was the commandant of the School at the time. The classes began in earnest. This time around, I was keen not to make the mistake I had made in Isiolo during the mine warfare class. I was glad to have decided not to date my colleagues, as this played a key role in ensuring that I was never distracted during classes. The classes were also smaller in size compared with the Isiolo ones, which ensured that the lecturers could fully engage the students.

As time went on, I became more security conscious. I found myself being able to tell a security threat or breach from afar compared to when I was performing normal military duties. Intelligence training opens one's mind to a new way of thinking and perceiving things. How an intelligence officer

would react to a situation is totally different from how a normal duty officer would do the same.

One of the best moments in this class ought to be the surveillance practicals. We had been kitted with enough funds to help us carry out the practicals in town. The usage of the money depended on where our target chose to go. During this operation, we had to make sure we didn't arouse the curiosity of the undercover officers in the city, as that would easily blow our cover. The success of the exercise was anchored on not being exposed, nor our cover being blown at any point. This poor boy from Makueni had just a basic grasp of the city center. Beyond that, I could easily get lost.

In my entire life, I had never entered a 4 or 5-star hotel, and from the look of things, this is where we were going to carry out the exercise. That night, I found myself searching the web for videos enlightening one on the mannerisms and etiquette in these big hotels lest I step in and act stupid. In the back of my mind, I knew I could always order coffee or any other beverage in case I failed to understand the menu. I also familiarized myself with the use of the GPS handsets we had been provided with and also google maps, as at the end of the day, I needed to find my way back to the college.

“You are not supposed to act in a manner that makes the target think that you are surveilling them. For communication with other members of your team, use the surveillance radio earpieces we have provided you with. A mobile phone call will most likely distract you, and before the call is connected, you will have lost your target, and that is an anticlimax,” the officer

briefing us stated. "The target will try as much as possible to evade you and lose you, but you need to do your best to keep up with them. You have to adapt the formation we have taught you in class. At no time should the four of you be found in your teams running after the target across a street. Remember, we will have members of the teaching staff closely monitoring the exercise," the officer concluded his brief.

I was probably the only country boy in my team as the others were more conversant with the city. Our target proved to be a difficult one taking us through all the big hotels in town. Getting into the Grand regency hotel was a whole new experience for me. I had never stepped into such a facility before. Here we almost lost our target as we admired the ambience and this was noted and explained to us during the debrief. We also almost lost the target as we walked down the streets in town, and this disoriented us a bit until one of us sighted him on the next street across the road. At the end of the day, this was an eye-opener.

"Wow, this is incredible. I thank God for giving me a chance to be taking part in this at this time," I said to my colleagues on our way back to the college after the exercise. "Thank him also that you didn't get lost in the city today," one of my colleagues quipped. "Yeah, sure, but I had done a thorough research on the use of the GPS and locked the coordinates of the college so in the event I got lost, I could have found my way back to the college," I responded. "You need to familiarize yourself with the city, not using GPS all the time. Make good use of your weekends; otherwise, it is not all the time the military will provide you with the GPS," he said. "I know. Besides, I have

just been in the city for only two months now, so I bet am doing quite well. I will be running this town within no time," I responded, oozing confidence and not wanting my colleague to pin me down.

Despite our few setbacks during the exercise, we adjudged the best surveillance team. This gave me confidence that I could actually excel in this field. The following phases in training would see us train on interrogation and combating espionage, subversion, and sabotage. The interrogation exercise fascinated me most, and I came out the best student in the same. Getting the commandant's comment that I could become a very good intelligence officer was a huge confidence boost.

Within no time, we were on the road headed to the field for some combat intelligence training. We stopped at Kajiado town and found a Maasai guy selling some very nice oranges. "The weather out there may be very hostile; how about we buy all these oranges in preparation for the same?" I asked my friend. We knew the task ahead of us was not easy as it involved route marches across the hilly terrain. "How can you buy all the oranges in the morning? What will I be left selling the rest of the day?" the Maasai fellow charged at us. We were startled for a moment before we let out a burst of huge laughter. We had thought that buying the oranges as a whole package was a huge plus to the seller, not knowing that he enjoyed standing there the entire day selling them piece by piece. The seller thought that we were disrespecting him. This almost degenerated into a commotion before one of our colleagues, a fellow Maasai, intervened and cooled down the temperatures. In the end, we

left without the oranges as the fellow declined to engage us further.

The work was clearly cut out and eye-opening in the training area. In normal military circumstances, operation briefs were the preserve of the commissioned officers. It is they who prepared the brief and the model to be shared with the rest of the troops. In intelligence operations, every intelligence officer had to be conversant with the same and have the requisite knowledge on how to prepare the same. "These guys should commission us now," I jokingly said one day in class. "You realize that in the intelligence fraternity, you are answerable to the commander directly and not through the chains of command that you have known back in your other formations and units. The information you gather is disseminated on a need-to-know basis.

Moreover, the military trusts you and the other person you have been sent out with to adequately execute the task at hand," the lecturer responded. "In most cases, it will be just the two of you out there in the field, and the commander will trust the information you bring back. Remember, the safety of the other troops is dependent on the timely intelligence information that you share, so basically, you are treated as a commissioned officer," he continued. "And that's my point, sir. Our commanders should consider commissioning us," I responded. "Seems you so badly want to get commissioned; you can try your luck when that comes up in the course of your career, provided you have the requisite qualifications. That's a story for another day; for now, let's concentrate on what brought us here," he responded.

The day of the first practicals came, and this reminded us of the route marches we had done back in college in Eldoret. The only difference this time was that no one could apply force on you if you lagged behind. This motivated us the more as we competed with each other on which team would check back the first, having checked in on all the checkpoints on the navigation map. On this one, we had to accept one truth; my team and I were good in class and on other fronts but not on this one. Physical training and fitness had never been my thing. This is where we drew the line in my military career. We checked back last, but we were moved up three slots as the teams ahead of us had not checked in on all the checkpoints in the navigation. This was a sigh of relief for us as we were saved from redoing the exercise the following day. What was left for us was the final exercise, and for this one, we knew we had to be mentally strong and prepared as the route was longer, and this was a night exercise. It is also what mattered most in our combat intelligence training out here. No one wished to be told that they had failed the course, so we knew that we had to put our best foot forward on this one.

"This is the exercise that determines whether you will join the intelligence fraternity or not, so we urge each one of you to take it seriously. The defense forces chief and military intelligence director will be here to oversee the exercise. We have trained you and equipped you with all the skills you need. The ball is now in your courts. We hope you will not fail us in front of our commanders," the commandant told us on the D-day of the exercise. We spent the entire day going through all that we had learned in class and perfecting our models in

readiness for the presentations to be done once the commanders arrived. The presentation was key to our passing of the training as one had to prove their grasp of everything we had been taught.

"Prince, you are our savior in our team. You are the only one who can eloquently articulate this presentation to the commanders," my team members told me. I understood their confidence in me, going by the presentations I had done prior to this one in class. "Pray that anxiety and fear don't take a toll on me when the time comes. You know very well that I have never stood before such senior people before. That's the only concern you should have; otherwise, I am game," I responded. "Bro, some of us have never even stood before a party with our friends to address them on anything. We have seen your capabilities, and we know you can do this. Our Faith is in you," one of my colleagues responded. "I understand, but all I can say is that I will do my best. I also wouldn't wish us to fail in this course because we are the best team so far, but let us see how this goes," I responded.

I had been the clarion national debate chairman during my days in high school and although this was a platform where I had interacted with people from all walks of life before, standing before the chief of defense forces to make a presentation, barely two years after joining the military was a different story altogether. Before the guest arrived, the team leaders were called upon to ballot so as to determine the order in which we would do our presentations. Luckily for my team and me, we took the last slot. This allowed us to identify the other teams' mistakes and capitalize on the same. By the time

we were called upon to make our presentation. My confidence levels were at an all-time high.

The opening remarks announced the arrival of the team they had waited so much to listen to and caught the attention of everyone. For the next thirty minutes, I forgot the guests seated before me and their ranks and articulately took them through our model and what we intended to achieve at the end of it all. In the end, I stood calmly before them, waiting for the reaction from everyone before me. Everyone, including the boss himself, gave my team and me a standing ovation, which rarely happens in military circles. "Young officer, congratulations. I didn't know that we had people so perfect and eloquent in presentations in the English language until today. Your grasp of the model is absolutely amazing. I am giving you a small token of 50,000 shillings as an appreciation as you have greatly surpassed our expectations," the chief of defense forces said to me. "What an honor! What a moment to be alive! I was over the moon as I marched forward to receive my prize. "Thank you, sir, for the compliment and the present," was all I could manage to utter. "Take his name and details. These are the kind of people we need at the defense headquarters," the Director of military intelligence said to his aide. This is how I eventually found myself working in the defense headquarters intelligence command center after the completion of my course.

"Thank you so much, Prince, for that presentation. You have made our course a success," one of my team members told me as we embarked on the night navigation. This was the only bit that stood between us now and an illustrious career in the

intelligence fraternity. "Welcome, guys. I thank God I didn't freak out. Now we have to get it right in this navigation exercise. This is what stands between our way now. I have carried you all through; now, let everyone put their best foot forward," I said to my team. "Sure. We must hack this one. We need to graduate with the highest grades possible," one of my team members responded.

"By the way, we know every coin is rightfully yours about the prize money, but how about sharing the spoils with us a little bit? You know we helped in preparing everything," one of my colleagues told me as we hit the road. "Sure, and I thank you guys for making this happen. I will give out 20,000 shillings to the 5 of you to share amongst yourselves," I responded. "Thank you, bro, that's so kind of you. When raising this issue, I didn't think you could share such a huge amount. I actually expected you to give us a thousand shillings each," the colleague responded. "We did this together, and as such, I have to recognize your efforts in the same," I replied.

By midnight, we were left with only two checkpoints, and these took a bit of time as they were not too obvious. We quickly called on the other teams and realized that we were the leading team at this point. On reaching the second last checkpoint, we found the commandant, the chief of the defense forces, and the other guests there. "Well done, Prince and your colleagues. You are the first team to check in here. Now work towards beating the timelines for this exercise," the commandant told us. We had two hours to figure out the last checkpoint if we were to beat the timelines for the exercise.

"Guys, we can do this. Let's synchronize our watches and get it right on our GPS handsets,' I said to my team members. "For the first time, we are leading in the navigation, and this feels so good; let's not drop our lead," I continued. "True, we must win this. I'm sure everyone doesn't believe that we are leading this one," one of our team members responded. The morale and mental strength of the team were high. We had prepared for this day well, both physically and psychologically. Within one and half hours, we had hacked the challenge, and we were at the last checkpoint with thirty minutes to spare. We were over the moon. We had been considered the weakest team physically, but we had developed ourselves gradually throughout the training, and here we were.

Going back to the college the following day, we were left with the final phase of the training to crack, coupled with the final exams. I was the only one in the class who knew about his deployment at the end of the course, courtesy of the instructions by the Director of military intelligence. Within a month, we were through with the last phase and were preparing for the final exams. With the heroics in the field and throughout the course, I knew I could easily emerge the best student if I managed to pass the final exams well. This was all the motivation I needed to adequately prepare for these final exams. The results of the same were to be known during the end-of-course party, where our rankings would be displayed.

After writing the exams to my satisfaction, I looked forward to the closing day when wheat would be separated from the chaff. I faced steep competition from two other guys, who happened to be my team members. We had no doubt that one of us would

take the ultimate crown. How I wished this could be me. All we could do was wait for the results to be announced on the final day. The dress code for the closing address was to be the best official outfits we had. The chief guest of honor in this was the Director of military intelligence. Getting the honor of greeting the boss a second time would be a dream come true. I have always had this principle in life that, at times, we don't need a connection to the high and mighty, but your talents and heroics in your field of expertise will introduce you.

On the closing party day, we expected the results to be pinned on the noticeboard at the entrance, much to our disappointment. The school administration had decided to keep us in suspense till the last minute. "It's so obvious that you are the best overall student, bro. I wish you well in the next phase in your career," one of my strongest challengers said to me. "Don't be so sure. I don't know how well I have passed the final exams. Besides, you have been on my neck since day one, so who knows, you might have done better than me in the final exams," I responded. "May the best of us win this though you stand the best chance between us," he answered.

We sat pensively as we listened to the addresses of the lecturers one by one. All my heart longed for was the commandant's speech as he was the one tasked with revealing the best student overall. I had never become number two throughout my life, and I wished this was not the first time. Most of the other students were not so much concerned with who the best student would be as this was so obvious that it would be one of the three of us.

"I am glad to announce that all of you have met our expectations as intelligence officers and that you have all qualified to become intelligence officers in the military. We wish you well in the next phase of your careers and urge you to serve the country with the highest levels of professionalism, diligence, patriotism, and humility as you have exhibited throughout your stay here," the commandant started his speech. "Nevertheless, in every competition, there must be a winner. This doesn't mean that the rest of you haven't passed well enough to join the intelligence fraternity. We are all satisfied with the grades of each one of you. That said, the best student overall is....." he paused for a moment. "We all held our breaths. I closed my eyes as I waited for the commandant to announce the name of the winner. This moment of suspense seemed to last for so long. "The best overall student in this course is none other than Prince. Congratulations. You have exhibited a high level of professionalism and grasp of the concepts taught in class and in the field," he finally announced. I literally jumped up from my seat. My two other contenders hugged me to congratulate me as I walked forward to receive my prize from the Director of military intelligence. This was a dream come true, this was the second time it was happening, and yours truly was over the moon.

"You have done well; you have done everyone proud. Now go out there and serve the nation diligently," the Director of military intelligence said to me as he handed over the prize to me. "I look forward to a good working relationship with you at the headquarters and wherever else you will be called upon to assist," he concluded. "Thank you, sir," was the response that

came out of my mouth. As I walked back to my seat, I could only reminisce about where God had brought me from. This naïve young son of a peasant from Makueni had managed to beat all the odds to write his name in the hall of fame in one of the prestigious colleges in the military. (Up to this point, I was the only one in the room who knew his deployment after this, courtesy of my heroics both in the classroom and in the field).

After the course, we proceeded on a one-week leave, after which everyone was to report to their deployment post. "You remember me telling you to exercise patience when you were almost giving up on your career due to frustrations in Nanyuki? See how you have achieved all that you badly wanted to one year ago," my father said to me back at home. "This life requires patience, and everything will fall into place at its opportune time," he continued. He was right. One year down the line, I had managed to figure out my life in the military, something that was giving me sleepless nights the previous time I was home for my leave. During my entire stay here, I looked forward to reporting to my desk at the defense headquarters. Who would have thought that this son of a peasant would be working in the same building with the chief of defense forces and the defense cabinet secretary? This had been the preserve of the children of the high and mighty, but my skill and expertise had introduced me in a way they couldn't ignore.

LIFE IN THE WORLD OF INTELLIGENCE

The following Monday, I was at the department of defense headquarters gate way before 8 am. I was so psyched up to go. "How can we help you?" one of the officers at the main gate asked me. "I have been posted here and today is the reporting date," I responded. After identifying myself, the officer crosschecked my name from the list they had and ushered me in. "Kindly direct me to the offices. I have never stepped in here, so I don't know my around," I humbly told the officer. He was kind enough to show me around, and I easily located the offices.

"Welcome new officers," one of the intelligence operations command center senior officers told us. I had been joined by two other colleagues who had also been posted here. "Thank you, sir," we responded in unison. "Please find an empty work desk and have a seat. One of the senior officers above me will brief and deploy you in a short while."

Meanwhile, you can familiarize yourself with the office," he continued. We went around the building and got to know the floors that housed the offices of the chief of defense forces, other senior military officers, and the cabinet secretary. "What a privilege to be working here," I said to my colleagues.

"After looking at your qualifications and strengths, we have decided to deploy you to the Somali desk. The officer at the far right corner will brief you on what is required of you. You will occupy the workstation next to him," the senior officer briefing

us told me. "The person that used to occupy that desk has proceeded on terminal leave pending discharge from the service," he continued. That is how I found myself thrust into intelligence collection and analysis against the Al-Shabaab insurgents.

"My name is George, and I am in charge of the Somali desk," the officer I had been assigned to introduced himself. "I am sure you are aware of the havoc that the Al-Shabab has been reigning on us over the past few months. Here we basically monitor the situation in collaboration with the intelligence officers out there in the field and prepare briefs for the commander for further action. I will take you through the sources where we research for the information, the analysis process, and how you corroborate this information which is what our intelligence officers out there in the field are collecting," he continued.

This was around 2011. The Al-Shabaab had started attacking vital installations and tourist camps along the coastal line. The narrative had changed from piracy to terrorism, and this could no longer be ignored. The country had been jolted by the 1998 American embassy bomb blast and the Kikambala bombing; hence the activities of this group could not be left unmonitored. The main goal was to avert any threat to the country's sovereignty and protect our territorial borders. The situation was getting dire day by day, necessitating the formation of the Somali desk to counter the activities of this group.

Within a few weeks, I had learned my way around and was able to prepare detailed and timely intelligence reports on the same. Our troops out there in the operation area used part of our intelligence reports. The liaison department also relayed the information to the other security organs in the country on a need-to-know basis. The president and the chief of defense forces also had to get the intelligence reports compiled from what we prepared and what the other intelligence organs reported. The work was clearly cut out for us, and we found ourselves working for very long hours. The bottom line is we all loved what we were doing and hence didn't have a problem with this.

"Prince, there is a counter-terrorism course running at the School of military intelligence for the next two weeks, and we have nominated you to attend the same so as to horn your skills in this game. How do you see that?" the officer in charge of the command center told me one day. "That's a brilliant idea and a chance can't let go. Thank you for considering me, sir," I responded. I knew the only way I could horn my skills here was by taking up all training opportunities that came my way. "Ok, prepare yourself. You will report to the college on Monday. After the training, you report back here immediately. There is no going on leave after that; as you see, we have a shortage of personnel here," the commander continued. "Ok, sir. This is noted," I responded.

"You came here just a few months ago, and now the senior officers are considering you for advance courses over us, yet we have been here for years? Young man go slow; this is the defense headquarters,' one of my seniors told me once the

senior officer had left. "Sir, where is all this coming from? I didn't know of any course running anywhere until he mentioned that he had selected me to attend the same. How does this offend you?" I calmly responded, trying hard to keep my cool. "You may not understand now until it starts eating you up," the senior responded. "Sir, with all due respect, I can work in any part of this country provided I am discharging my duties as a military officer. It doesn't have to be intelligence duties; actually, what I signed for at the recruitment center was general duty," I angrily responded. "Ok, the boss, we shall see," the senior mockingly responded. "We shall see nothing. The last time I checked, God doesn't come from your village," I angrily retorted. By now, this altercation had gotten the other officers' attention, who tried to cool down the tempers.

"Sir, kindly give this chance to senior Tom. I think he needs it more than I. I will continue perfecting my skills using the help of George and can take up any other training opportunity in the future," I told the commander who had given me the opportunity in his office. "Where is all this coming from? Please have a seat and explain to me," the commander responded. I went on to explain to him what had transpired in the command center. "So you now question my orders here? Who do you think you are?" the officer angrily asked Tom after summoning him to his office. "I am sorry, sir. I didn't think it could get to this point," he remorsefully responded, sensing that things were about to get out of hand. "You are proceeding for retraining when the next command course comes up. It seems you don't understand how you should deal with your juniors," the commander told Senior Tom. "Ok, sir,

once again, I am sorry for this. It won't happen again," he responded. "Get out of my office!" the commander ordered him. "Listen, I am the one who gives orders here. You are proceeding to the counter-terrorism course on Monday as agreed. Let anyone who has any question about this face me on the same," the commander told me after senior Tom had stepped out of the offices. "Ok, sir, I will go prepare myself for the same," I responded as I stepped out of the office.

I knew this was a new battleground opened and perpetual enmity brewed. Being sent back for retraining is the biggest humiliation for a military officer. I knew Senior Tom would never forgive me for the same and that we would never correlate well after that. "You shouldn't have rushed to report him to the boss. He will surely make your life here difficult. Pray to God that by the time the commander leaves his position, Senior Tom to be posted out of here. Otherwise, one of you will have to leave," George said to me as we walked out for lunch. "It is ok. I am prepared for whatever will come my way. When I applied to join the intelligence fraternity, I never knew such an officer existed. His threats were uncalled for. I honestly know no one here," I responded. "And that should be your worry. Tom has been around this building for nearly twenty years now, so he knows his way around," George said. "The bottom line is that he is not God. He will one day leave this place," I replied. "That aside, I am so happy that you have been selected for the counter-terrorism course. You will be able to help me a lot when you come back. That course is one of the best opportunities you can ever get in this office, that's why

Tom was mad at you being selected for the same, yet you joined us the other day,' George told me. "Oh, thank you.

I look forward to a more exciting working relationship with you once I come back," I responded. George was a good man with no ill intentions. I could tell this from the word go as he always looked up to me.

The following Monday, I was glad to be reunited with my colleagues who had been deployed to other intelligence cells and fields. The School of military intelligence always has a good vibe. We were all eager to catch up during the breaks and learn how each of us was doing in our respective fields and experiences. "Boss, how does it feel working in the same building with the top military bosses?" one of my colleagues asked me. "Hectic. The workload is too much up there; you don't even realize that the bosses are within most of the time. The fulfilling bit is when we are able to avail timely intelligence reports that avert attacks on our installations. Besides that, there are numerous petty fights here and there, but I am managing," I responded, referring to my spat with Tom. "These petty fights are everywhere. There are people who feel threatened by our presence, thinking that we are here to take up their slots. Coming here in itself was an ugly fight for most of us," one of my colleagues responded. "Oh, so the same is happening in your offices? I thought mine was an isolated case," I asked. "You think this old generation doesn't know that we have better academic qualifications than them? Do you think they will just sit back and watch us being selected for advance courses instead of them, yet this was at their disposal a few months ago? They definitely have to fight

back, and the spat will continue becoming uglier," one of my colleagues responded.

The directorate had expanded in the recent past, thus necessitating the recruitment of new blood to fill in the vacancies caused by the same. That's how we had found ourselves in a directorate with a huge generational gap between us and those we had found here. There were exciting career growth opportunities for us since we were young and more qualified than the older generation, much to the latter's chagrin. "The best way to handle this is to stay away from the aggression from the older generation. Let us do our work and leave it to the commanders to make their own decisions. Our expertise will always speak for itself," one of us posed. He was right. The petty fights would never do anyone good.

Back in the class, we found the syllabus too demanding as it had been compressed to be covered over a short period of time. This made us come for classes even on the weekend. One thing we admired was the expertise and the precision of the Israelis who were training us. Their grasp of counter-terrorism techniques and skills was out of this world. "I wish Kenya would reach these levels one day," I said to my colleagues during one of the breaks. "Bro, appreciate the far we have come from. We are far, way ahead of our neighbors in matters of intelligence," one of my colleagues responded. "Being ahead of our neighbors is not enough. We now need to be competing with the rest of the world," I shot back. "That's true but also remember that intelligence infrastructure is very expensive. Besides that, how much do you think it costs to train one intelligence officer?" one of my colleagues

responded. "Besides, we are a third-world country, and there is no way we can compare with the likes of Israel and the US on matters of intelligence. Let's be real," another colleague added before I could respond. "I don't deny all that you guys are saying but aren't you amazed by the precision with which these guys carry out their exercises? I mean, they are just good in what they do," I managed to argue my point. "They sure are," we all came to an agreement as we walked back to the class.

"Prince, I hope you understand that this is a multi-agency class with its students drawn from across all the intelligence agencies of the country, even outside the military," the commandant said to me when we caught up along the corridors in the college one day. "Yes, sir. I understand that and appreciate that I was considered for this opportunity," I responded. "We pride ourselves in producing the best intelligence brains in this country, and that's why our officers are heading various intelligence agencies in this country. As such, we can't afford to lose the best student position to members of the other agencies. Our Faith and pride is in you. Do your best not to let us down," the commandant continued. "I understand, sir, and although I don't know how well trained the other officers are, I will do my best not to let you down," I responded. "This is the best intelligence training school around, and having passed through my hands, and I have Faith in your abilities. Do us proud," the commandant said. "I won't let you down, sir," I responded as I walked back to class. With this, I knew the pressure on my shoulders, and I knew that I had to be at my best as I had already won the trust of my

bosses. All I needed to do was work hard and give my best in the examination room and leave the rest to the examiners to determine the best of the best among us. I was aware that each agency had sent the crème de la crème to represent them in this, and there was no way I was going to underrate anyone.

The model of testing of the Israelis was very different from what we were used to. Their examinations were quite detailed and extensive. "Bro, I have never been in such an examination room before," I remember saying this to my colleagues. "This was no joke. If you manage to pass the exams, let alone be the best, give yourself credit. You are really good at what you do," one of my colleagues responded. Everyone had felt a pinch on this one. We were all in agreement that this one was open; we couldn't pinpoint the best amongst us like in the previous course, where it was obvious that the contest was among three officers only, yours truly included.

During the closing party, I kept my expectations very low on this one to avoid disappointment. It thus came as a huge shock hearing the senior Israeli instructor calling out my name as the best student. My colleagues cheered wildly; we had managed to keep our reputation as the best among the rest. This time around, it was the commandant who dipped his hand in his pockets and rewarded me with 30,000 shillings. "Congratulations, Prince, you have a very bright future ahead of you," he said as he handed me my certificates. I wished my mother would have been present here to witness this, but unfortunately, no civilians were allowed into the party. She would have been very proud of what her son was becoming.

“We are glad we selected you for the course. You have done us proud,” my commander back at the defense headquarters told me when I reported back to duty the following Monday. “Thank you, sir. I am equally glad that you accorded me the honor. The course was an eye opener and a huge resource. I believe I will be able to discharge my duties with more expertise going forward,” I responded. “Welcome back. You can now proceed to your desk. George will brief you on what has been happening, and now you two can pick it up from there,” the commander said. “Ok, sir. Once again, thank you for the chance,” I said as I walked back to my desk. By this time, senior Tom had already proceeded for retraining. I felt sorry for him for what he was going through out there, but there was very little I could do about that at this point.

The year is 2011, and the Al-Shabaab is attacking vital installations in Kenya. The government has been contemplating invading Somalia but are the attacks a justifiable reason enough to invoke article 51 of the UN charter, which gives the legal basis for these actions? That's the main question we have been grappling with for quite a while now. Should we or should we investigate on the situation further? Whichever the case, we fully understood the need to be in good books with the UN Security Council and the consequences of the opposite.

We had received advanced training in readiness for any situation that would arise. I had gone for two other advanced courses and excelled in the same. A special collection team had been formed to monitor the situation along the coastal line, which seems to be a preferred favorite to the Al-Shabaab. I had

been included in that team under the command of one very good officer who had a naval background. We had moved out of Nairobi and set base in Kiunga, a vantage point. We were reporting directly to the Director of military intelligence, and this team was really good. We had been assembled from the top crème of the young blood that had been injected into the directorate since its expansion. The morale of the team was high, and the Director had strong Faith in our capabilities. This also happened to be our first acid test in the field, away from the offices where we had operated from.

Kiunga was desolate or deserted. The town had no life compared to what we had been used to in Nairobi. The weather here was also painfully hostile; very hot days coupled with very cold nights were more than we had anticipated. We knew we were not here for leisure. That the government would entrust just a couple of us, barely a section, with the huge task before us tells you of the extent of our training. The main headache for us there was the Boni forest. The forest was so thick, making aerial surveillance an impossible mission here. The Unmanned aerial surveillance vehicles (UAVs) that we launched were of very little help here. This forest had been one of the biggest hideouts for the Al-Shabaab. Invading the forest was almost a suicidal mission, and the risk was too high to take. Coupled with the ocean, these two acted as launch pads for the Al-Shabaab whenever they wanted to attack the nation. We knew that the fight was going a very long way, so we had to keep the casualty levels as low as possible.

One day the worst happened. The Al-Shabaab had struck a tourist joint within the area and killed a French tourist before

abducting his wife, who was disabled. This attack was going to have far-reaching effects with European nations expected to issue travel advisories to their citizens. The US government was also expected to follow suit. The Kenyan government had to act on this one as this would aid in mitigating the effects of the attack. The best team on the ground to do this was our special collection team, headed by the naval intelligence officer who, for the purpose of hiding his identity, we will refer to as Sam in this book. The commanders were calling, asking for explanations and briefs on the situation on the ground. The instructions were very clear; pursue the insurgents as far as we can as the team back in Nairobi assembled combat support for us.

A naval patrol boat was quickly availed for our use. "Gentlemen, we all understand the gravity of the mission we are embarking on. The military has kitted us with the best weapons in the region. We have also been extensively trained, and it is time we put these skills into practice," Major Sam hurriedly briefed us. "Kindly let us ensure that we have our safety jackets on at all times. I will issue more orders as we go on. This is the route, and this is the alleged insurgents' escape boat which they are using," he continued. With the use of technology, we were able to capture the position of the escape boat and its coordinates. "I urge each and every one of us to pay keen attention to the orders I will be giving. At the end of it all, we all need to come back alive. We have families depending on us, right? In the event of any incident, let us try to remain as calm as possible, and I am sure we will quickly figure out a solution," he concluded his short brief. We said a

short word of prayer as we boarded the patrol boat to set out for the sea.

This was the first time in my life I was going into the deep seas, and it was happening in the most unlikely of situations, a military operation. The watermanship classes I had attended at the School of combat engineering in Isiolo during my formative days in the military started replaying in my mind. I had to be prepared for any eventuality in the sea. The words of Major Sam were also very fresh in our minds. This was the proverbial baptism by fire. We all cocked our guns and tested them to ascertain their functionality before setting out. I found myself thinking of my family and loved ones. Though the patriotic call of duty superseded anything else, I was alive because I had people who depended on me and wanted me back alive. In our group, only two had a naval background. The rest of us had been drawn from the army and the air force.

The speed boat we were using was more powerful than the terrorists' escape boat. We were fast closing in on them, and it was only a matter of time before we caught up with them, though they seemed well versed with the sea. We were optimistic that we would be within shooting range within a couple of minutes. We were also aware that the terrorists would try to use the French tourist as a human shield. They were already firing warning shots at us, but fortunately, we were not within their effective range, so we did not need to respond.

The worst happened just before we got to them; we were hit by a strong tide that threw us 100m high. At this point, I

remember shouting out the name of Jesus. The tide threw our boat high above the sea three times before it capsized. The ensuing moments were hugely traumatizing. We had certainly lost the terrorists; they had managed to avoid the tide. Now most important thing was saving our lives and securing our weapons. The life jackets came in handy to make us remain afloat. We were lucky that the terrorists did not turn back and attack us, as that would have been tragic; none of us would have survived at that point.

"Guys, is everyone ok? Let's take a quick roll call," major Sam called out. From where he was, he was doing his best to make sure that everyone was safe. This was one of the moments that his expertise greatly saved his troops. He was a good swimmer and a highly trained seaman, and this came in handy. "Fred is missing," one of my colleagues responded. He happened to be the only one we couldn't trace. Before we set out for the sea, we had been advised to make sure that our life jackets were on, but he had ignored this, saying that he was a good swimmer.

For the next one hour, Major Sam and three others who were qualified lifeguards mounted a spirited search and rescue mission to try and see if they could rescue the said officer. The rest of us had been instructed to remain calm and just ensure that we were floating. All this time, so many things were going through my mind. How were we to get out of there? How would we communicate with the headquarters or the troops back on the mainland to let them know of what had befallen us since all the communication gadgets had been damaged when our boat capsized? We were at the mercy of God. Our rescue hugely depended on a ship, fishing boat, or even an aircraft

overflying, noticing us; otherwise, the people back in camp knew that we were still in the course of our pursuit.

"We sadly haven't been able to locate Fred, and if he has been underwater all this time, it is very certain that we have lost him. It is painful as he was a good friend to most of you, but the most important thing here is to remain positive and mentally strong. We can't afford to lose any other officer," Major Sam told us once they were back. Our hearts sank. Fred was a good soul and one of the most skilled officers on our team. He was good at what he did, and his precision was unmatched. I must admit that yes, I beat him in class, but he was way ahead in the field. Noticing the mood in the team, Major Sam decided to engage all of us in singing and some water exercises.

This worked wonders as it shifted our minds from the situation we had found ourselves in. For the next couple of hours, we were able to forget that we were stranded, deep on the high seas. As time progressed, this effect was being watered down, though. The sea was taking its toll on us. Its smell was unpleasant, leading to us vomiting so badly. The effect of this was the loss of energy, and Maj Sam had a very hard time trying to cheer everyone up.

It was now 5 hours since we had capsized, and no one had yet known about the incident. No help was forthcoming. I was starting to lose hope. Maj.Sam swam to where I was ostensibly to cheer me up. "Now, if you throw in the towel, you will have killed the morale of the rest of the group. Please cheer up," he said to me. "Sir, are you sure we will come out of this alive, or

is our fate sealed?" I asked him. He could read the despair written all over my face. "Prince, do you believe in God?" Maj Sam asked me. "Yes, I do, but I have never found myself in the situation we are in right now," I responded. "Even right now, he still remains God, mighty to save us. You need to have Faith in God. I Am persuaded that the God I serve will not watch us perish. Just hold on; help will come," Maj Sam responded. I was amazed by the level of his Faith. This was the first senior military officer I had come across with such strong Faith in God.

After what seemed like hours, a KWS chopper overflowed us. The pilot got curious to know what was happening and circled the place enough times to figure out that these were people who were in dire need of rescue. When he flew away, our hearts almost stopped. "What did you guys expect him to do anyway? Land the chopper on water? I'm sure he will give the word to the guys on the mainland, and help is finally coming," Major Sam said to us. He was right; we were just being emotional because of our situation. Thirty minutes later, a patrol boat finally came to our rescue. There was a huge sigh of relief as we boarded the patrol boat back to the mainland. By the time we reached the jetty, several ambulances were waiting to rush us to the hospital. Most of us had passed out by then. One hour later, we were airlifted to Coast PGH for specialized medical care. I would wish to note that the Kenyan military has one of the best casualty evacuation systems in the world. I have interacted with other military forces of other countries, and we must give credit to the Kenyan forces on this one.

A day later, we were given a clean bill of health and were on our flight back to Nairobi. "Men, that was so close," I started the conversation. "This experience has made me change my perspective about life. I didn't know things can change at the stroke of a second," my colleague responded. "By the way, thank you, sir, for your selfless efforts. You are part of the reason we are alive today," I said to Maj Sam. "The way you guys were fast losing hope is a story for another day. All of you owe me a gift as an appreciation," Major Sam responded. "Sure, sir, let's get to Nairobi," I replied. During the rest of the journey, we all tried to recreate the scene and heartily laughed at how each one of us had conducted ourselves during the whole episode. The only painful bit was the story of Fred (not his real name). Despite multi-agency rescue efforts, he had not been found. His weapon was also missing. We all felt for his family and his loved ones; his young wife should have been going through a lot. The search and rescue operations were still on, and we all prayed that his body was found. At least this would help in bringing closure to the family.

After this, we all resumed our duties. The situation was getting out of hand, prompting the commander-in-chief to invoke article 51 of the UN charter on 14th October 2011. This day remains so dear to the military and is celebrated every year in honor of the soldiers who have paid the ultimate price in the war against the Al-Shabaab terrorists. I was in my house watching and following everything very closely on this day. If there is a moment I have ever been proud of being associated with the military, it was this moment. Crossing over to Somalia was an act of huge patriotism and selflessness. At the time, we

were poorly kitted; most of the sophisticated weapons and equipment the military currently has have been procured within the course of this war. At the time the troops were crossing over, they had no bulletproof vests, for example. All they had were simplistic & aged. traditionally had, the expertise, and the will to protect the country. They were also accompanied by very able intelligence officers who greatly helped their operations. This war provided the first instance where the other troops worked with the intelligence officers. Previously, they had always viewed us with suspicion, thinking our duty was only to spy on them and report on their mischiefs to the commanders. Getting to understand that our core duty was offering support to them in their combat operations by providing timely intelligence reports to their commanders fostered a good working relationship between us.

THE AMPHIBIOUS LANDING

During the entire year of 2012, the Kenyan troops were gaining ground in the war against the al-Shabaab. We had captured major towns, and the axis was clear. The ultimate goal was to capture Kismayu. Being the point of entry into Somalia through the sea, the Al-Shabaab had made sure that they took control of this very important port. This ensured that they could always get their resupplies easily, and it ensured that they had enough finances to run their affairs as they controlled trade here.

Kismayu was the umbilical cord of the Al-Shabaab, and taking it over would cut off their source of financial power, thereby crippling their operations. We knew that this was one town they wouldn't let go of easily as they guarded their interests in this town without any room for mistake. On our side, for us to gain substantial ground in the war against the Alshabaab, we knew taking Kismayu was not a question of if but rather when. We had to dismantle their source of financial power in order to register the success we so much needed in securing our country. The war had come with its own costs, and at this point, we all agreed that we needed to change strategy, take over Kismayo, and then the other things follow later.

Advancing all the way from Dhobley through Beles Qoogani, Tabda all through to Kismayo had proved to be a tall order. One of the other options we had would be bombing down the town. Still, with the Human rights organizations, the international community, and the UN Security Council, that was an unacceptable option as thousands of civilians were

living and working in Kisimayu. We all agreed that we needed to brainstorm on the best possible approach here and deliberate about it in a week's time.

"Why can't we do amphibious landing?" one of the intelligence officers we worked with in the operations command center asked. "What is that?" we all responded in unison. The officer took to the stage and took us through a presentation he had prepared on the same. "Wow, this is a great idea," the senior officer in the room responded at the end of the presentation. "It sure is, sir. The only major concern here is to make sure that all the players are coordinated without any room for mistakes. A single mistake can cost us an entire battalion," the officer making the presentation made his final remarks.

Everyone in the office agreed with one simple fact; we finally got the solution to our headache. Even so, we all knew this would be a very delicate operation. The officer presenting was right when he said that a slight error was enough to cost us an entire battalion. "Gentlemen, we have to make sure that everything is coordinated to perfection. This is a very delicate operation, and we can't afford to lose anyone," the commander said.

For the next couple of weeks, simulations after simulations were done to arrive at the best course of action. The idea was to have the combat engineers deploy a simulation of all our infantry weapons, go to a safe distance, and electronically detonate the same. This deception would give the terrorists the thinking that we were attacking them from the land. As there was only one axis that we had used towards the port town, the

terrorists would definitely respond to the deceptive fire coming from the land. At this point, we would launch our assault from the sea. By the time the terrorists realized the trick that had been used on them, we would have taken over the town and overthrown them. The mission would have been successful. We only needed to get it right in the coordination of all the troops involved here.

"I think we have done enough preparation, and it is time we executed this. We will have to move this command center to Manda Bay for the purposes of this operation. All of you are to prepare to move to Manda with immediate effect. This operation will be codenamed operation Sledge Hammer," the senior officer briefing us stated. "We have organized the movement of the troops as you advised in the simulation that we finally adopted. The infantry unit and special units being launched from the sea will be conveyed to the Mtongwe naval base awaiting further orders. All the other troops will be moved into the positions we all agreed," He continued.

"Once in Manda, we will redo the simulation and thoroughly brush on it for one week before we can give the commander the final word on this. Each and every one of you is required to practice the role they have been assigned in the command center once we get to Manda. Remember, we have no room for a mistake in this exercise," he continued. "Sir, have the logistics for the operation center staff been addressed? The last time we were in Manda, there was a lot of back and forth with the naval base there. We need to be as settled as possible so that we can carry out our duties with less stress," I asked the senior officer. "Thank you for your concern. We have

addressed all the challenges you guys faced the last time you were there. Any officer who goes against what we have agreed with them concerning your logistics will be liable for disciplinary action," the commander responded. We were satisfied and ready to go.

Part of the team here was to go by air and the rest by road. Having used both on numerous trips to this side, I opted for the road option. It was what I considered safer to me, going by my experiences. Some of my colleagues thought that I avoided the flight option so that I could avoid the work of setting up the command center, but that was not the case. Being adventurous, I knew the journey by road would take us at least three days, with a whole day of rest, so why not? Besides, the land cruisers we were using were very comfortable, and I figured out that a whole day at the beach before we embarked on the exercise would be enough to release all the pressure I had and re-energize.

After a whole week of final preparation in Manda Bay, the date was set, and the operation was authorized. By now, all troops had moved to their positions. So secretive was the exercise that anyone who wasn't taking part in it had no idea of what was happening, including the other military staff in the barracks. This success depended on how best we could keep our plans close to our chest. MV Jasiri, one of the most sophisticated naval ships we have, was one of the naval ships taking part. The acquisition of this naval warship from Spain had been mired with controversy, and it had been a great joy to finally see it sail to our Mtongwe navy base. The 85m long war machine is fitted with long-range cannons, missile launchers,

machine guns, and sophisticated radar and communications systems. It is also armed enough to function as an offshore patrol vessel. We had built the model of this operation revolving around this warship as the main operation was being launched from the sea. Although all the other naval ships were to be deployed in this exercise, our success largely depended on this naval ship. Its arrival had been a blessing in disguise. We were the first African Military to attempt an amphibious landing in an enemy territory.

On 27th September 2012, with no leakage of the information to our journalists as they would have compromised our exercise by irresponsibly reporting about the exercise prematurely- I have severally discussed the shortcomings of the fourth estate from a security perspective in this book- we moved into place. The troops setting up the rifle simulation on land were busy doing their work being covered by the special forces. The troops being launched from the sea had also embarked on their journey from Mtongwe to Kismayo. The deal was to arrive in the wee hours of the night. The Joint Helicopter command was on standby to provide air cover when called upon. We had several combat helicopters and fighter jets at Manda ready for deployment. Every expert needed for this operation was present.

The next couple of hours at the command center were hectic. The commanders needed periodic briefs on how the operation was proceeding. Accurate briefs had to be ready to be used by our intelligence bosses in briefing the military commanders. Every senior military chief had taken their spot at the Manda bay, from the chief of defense forces, his deputy, the

commander Kenya army, the commander Kenya air force to the commander Kenya navy. Each had a duty to ensure that his troops were not the cause of a lapse in the operation.

Toward midnight, everything was set. The rifle simulation deception had been set up. The troops in the sea were approaching Kismayo. "Guys, what is left at this point is the coordination of all the troops to ensure everyone plays their part at the right time. Remember, the troop commanders are relying on us. I know the last 48 hours have been hectic for all of you, but we can't afford to close our eyes even a second at this point. We are only less than three hours away from victory. We have come so far to lose this one, guys, let's do this," our intelligence boss motivated us, noting the level of exhaustion in us. "Sir, we are charged and greatly motivated to see the success of this operation. You have nothing to worry about," we responded as we turned back to our computers. "Okay, guys, let's keep going," he said as he walked out. We had been subdivided into sections. Each section was handling troops in a particular area, performing a different task from the other. The commanders' conduct largely depended on the commands and instructions from the command center. Each section was also to monitor the troops under its jurisdiction to ensure their safety as we didn't want to lose any officer in the operation.

Around 1 am, the moment of truth had come. We watched with bated breath as the troops disembarked from the naval ships on the high seas and boarded patrol boats that were launching them into Kismayo. This was the point where we couldn't afford to go wrong on anything. As this was happening, the combat engineers on the other end were rapidly firing their

rifle simulations, creating the impression that we were attacking the town from the land. This took the attention of the terrorists as they mounted their response to that side, giving us all the time we needed to take over Kismayo from the sea. This is all we had taken weeks to plan, and everything was panning out so well.

By the time the Alshabab were turning back, we had taken our positions in the defense and struck down their bases. There was no chance for a comeback. To date, these guys are still looking for the brains behind that rifle simulation that deceived them that we were taking over Kismayo. By 2 am, operation Sledge Hammer was declared a success. Shouts of joy and gunshots rent the air to celebrate the victory. This was one of the moments I was proud to be associated with the Kenya Defence Forces. We had managed an unprecedented amphibious landing in Africa. By the time the Kenyan media was reporting the operation, we were through with the same hence no cause for alarm.

A FIELD INTELLIGENCE OFFICER

Towards the end of 2012, I was called upon to replace one of my colleagues in the field of Diff. This was an opportunity I had been waiting for. I had gotten all the experience in the other fields of intelligence apart from being out there as a field intelligence officer. That following Monday, I boarded one of the military trucks that were heading to Garissa. From here, I would find a way to connect with another military vehicle heading to Diff. I had never been on this route, so this was one of the few journeys that I couldn't afford to sleep. The road to Garissa is one smooth ride.

Safe for the tension that now existed due to the war on Al-Shabaab, Garissa town was a town full of life, as I came to discover. Despite several attacks on entertainment joints and churches, the people remained unbowed. The churches still conducted their services, albeit with police protection this time round. The entertainment joints never closed. The terrorism atrocities did not trigger any animosity between the communities that lived here as they continued to co-exist peacefully. I spent a week here as I waited for any military vehicle heading to Diff. Due to the security situation, the military had prohibited its officers from going beyond this point in a civilian vehicle unless when providing escort services or armed. The security around Garissa military camp had also been heightened in lieu of the attacks that had been happening.

The following Monday, my journey to Diff happened. The road beyond Garissa is not tarmacked, hence why the Al-Shabaab

used to have a field day here planting landmines. Getting to Diff from here was not a walk in the park. Everyone knew that we could come under an attack any minute. Getting to Dadaab, the biggest refugee camp in the region, we breathed a huge sigh of relief as the driver steered the truck into the police station for a breather. From here, we had to pass through Kulan before we got to Liboi. This was an area notorious for the massacre of non-muslims. The terrorists used to have a field day there. It is usually said when one had passed through Kulan safely, the chances of them reaching their destination were high.

From Liboi, as we headed to Diff, our phones started registering the Hormuud network. This was a reminder that we were driving along the outline, just a kilometer or two from the enemy territory. The first time one gets to Diff, they may confuse the town with being desolate and conclude that there are very few activities that take place here. That was the assumption I made until my colleague took me around the town the following day for orientation and handover purposes.

"You have to identify your cover here. You understand you are working in the town, not back in the military camp. You must be able to justify your presence in the town, and the locals must never suspect you of being an intelligence officer lest they give you away Judas Iscariot style," my colleague started his brief. "This town is run by a cartel of unscrupulous businessmen, both locals, politicians, and senior government officials who control the contraband business here. You must deal with this issue carefully as this is how you can easily lose your life. The bottom line is never accept to play into their

games; just do your work and leave the rest to the authorities to decide. They will approach you countless times, offering bribes for you to allow them to conduct their business in peace as you are their main threat. The moment you accept that bribe, you become their slave, and from there, they will always use blackmail to have their way with you. Be firm and fair and observe fidelity to the law," my colleague continued.

"Do we have other non-muslims working in the town apart from members of the security forces?" I asked my colleague. "We have a clinical officer and a medical lab technician at the health center here. They are good guys, and I am sure you will get along well with them," he responded. He continued to brief me on the security situation here and what had necessitated the changeover before their time was over.

There were four intelligence officers stationed there. During one of their patrols, one of them had betrayed them and driven their vehicle into Diff Somalia, handing over the others to the enemy. The officer briefing me had doubted the driver's plans and jumped out of the vehicle, and that's how he managed to save his life. The traitor had been apprehended, charged in a court-martial, and sentenced to life in prison. I hope wherever he is, and he regrets his stupid and unpatriotic acts. These are some of the things we had to grapple with from time to time in our course of duty, and it happens in every part of the world. Several years later the line, the captured intelligence officers have never been found, and it is my prayer that one day their families will be brought to a closure.

"I guess I will have to assume the cover of a teacher in order to survive here," I told my colleague. "That's not bad, but remember you will be in the school alone. The best cover here is being a medic, a health records officer, or a caregiver. This will mean working hand in hand with the guys at the hospital, which is a huge plus for you and your security," he responded. His point made sense. "Lastly, it is important for you to learn a thing or two about the Muslim religion. Adopt a Muslim name and learn how they pray. If possible, attend prayers in the mosque; it will save you a lot in a way. I wish you well in your tour of duty here," he concluded his brief.

The following few months would expose me to the world of cartels and contrabands. I would learn how this business was conducted and realized that it was one very lucrative trade for the barons who controlled the same. KRA officials were working hand in hand with the security agents in this region to combat the same, but the unscrupulous individuals always found a way of evading the dragnet. We always felt that this was a case of an inside job. Someone must have been revealing our plans to the criminals on the other end, making it easy for them to evade us. The cat and mouse chase had gone on for so long. The headquarters felt like we had played into the cartel's bedroom and badly needed to vindicate ourselves.

"Sir, how about we plan an ambush on our own without involving the other security agencies?" I once confronted my commander on the same issue. "I have a feeling that there is someone who has been selling our secrets to the other side, making the cartels avoid all our dragnets," I tried explaining my point. "You have a point," I was relieved when my

immediate commander agreed with my views. We then intricately planned one of the operations that have ever rocked these cartels and shook them to the core. We laid an ambush without the other agencies being aware of the operation and nabbed three trailers fully loaded with sugar and other foodstuffs being smuggled into the country. The value of the contraband goods we nabbed ran into millions of shillings. The drivers were arrested, and since we did not have prosecuting powers, we handed them over to the police.

The next step was sending the incident report immediately to the defense headquarters on the seizure. This closed all room for negotiations for the release of the contraband goods, a move that greatly offended some of the other agencies. The headquarters immediately responded that we wait for further instructions and make sure that nothing was lost from among what we had seized. Anyone who knows military order knows that we needed no other instruction beyond this. There was no amount of persuasion that could make us release the contraband goods.

The calls that were coming through from very high-profile persons who I can't mention here for obvious reasons were shocking. Colossal amounts of money were offered to us in exchange for the seizure. When this didn't work, all manner of threats came, ranging from threats to our lives and even careers. We still held our ground, and insults were. I think the cartels had never met people who were not interested in their illicit money before, and this shook them to bits.

After a huge tussle, the decision was made to burn down all the seizure and the vehicles. This was another very proud moment for me as an intelligence officer. Seeing the parliament recognize our efforts in bursting the contraband cartel was hugely fulfilling. As the seizure went up in flames, one thing was very certain, my time in Diff was up; my cover had been blown, and I was proud of what we had been able to achieve. "Sir, it has been a pleasure working with you. I appreciate your level of professionalism and the support you have offered me in the course of my duties here. I hope we will get another opportunity to work together in the future," I said to my boss as I bid him goodbye.

My next stint was in Liboi, although this one was short-lived and uneventful. The heroics at Diff enabled me to be selected to join our forces across the other side in Somalia. This was a no-mean duty, but I was glad that there were people who still believed in my professionalism and ethics. Before crossing over, I badly need some days off to visit my family back in Ukambani and Nairobi. I had also badly missed my girlfriend, and seeing her ask when I would be traveling back to Nairobi on a daily basis was taking a toll on me. Luckily, my leaver request was approved.

On the day I was traveling to Nairobi, a Military plane landed in Liboi, bringing medical resupplies. A huge number of officers were on leave, and we were all jostling for the few slots available. Everybody was making his case to the senior officer whom they knew to reserve a seat on the plane. After all the canvassing, I managed to hike a seat on the plane. This

was a huge relief to those of us who made it. I made a call to my girl, explaining that I would be seeing her in 2 hours' time.

After taking off, the worst anyone can wish for while up in the air happened; the pilot announced that the plane had developed mechanical problems and that it wasn't gaining attitude. The next few moments were torturous to everyone on board. The pilots were making frantic efforts to see if this could work. I tend to think that some of the people onboard even peed on themselves. By the time the pilot announced that the plane had miraculously decided to behave, some aboard had already passed out. Resuscitation efforts were needed. This remains to be the most eventful flight I have ever found myself in. By the time we were landing in Nairobi, we only wanted to alight from this one.

THE INTRIGUES OF THE BATTLEFRONT

After my leave days, I boarded a flight from Nairobi that was headed to Housing, my new deployment for combat support. Unlike the previous flight, this one was less eventful. Housing was supposed to be home for the next twelve months or so. On landing, I proceeded to the tent that housed the intelligence officers here. I was hugely relieved when my friends offered me a bucket of water to freshen up.

While in the bathroom, the Alshabaab decided to announce their arrival for a tete-a-tete with us in a very subtle way, firing two rocket-propelled grenades at us. An RPG is not something that you would wish to be fired near you in your entire lifetime. Its impact is so huge, and its sound can easily burst your eardrums. At this point, I had just applied soap all over my body, including my eyes. My good time in the bathroom was rudely cut short, and I had to rush back to my trench, maneuver style.

The next several hours were a fierce exchange of fire between the terrorists and us. This is one of the few times they have mounted a spirited fight on Kenyan troops. After close to 7 hours, we were getting into a serious crisis; we badly needed a huge resupply of ammunition lest the terrorists run us down. The troop at the rear had tried offering combat support in vain.

The military fighter jets had also tried to strike in Vain. The distance between the terrorists and us was so close that an airstrike would finish us together with the terrorists. Ammo

resupply via road transport would take ages to arrive and would probably not serve the purpose. One hero pilot of the MD-500 decided to rescue us by taking the risk of overflying the contact area and dropping our ammo from the air. I call him a hero since even before taking off, he knew that his life chances were too high. The Al-Shabaab would easily have shot down his chopper.

At this point, there was no time to contemplate any course of action. All we needed was a brave move to save our live, and this hero pilot came in handy. The precision by which he airdropped the ammunition was also unprecedented. There was a huge danger if the same landed on the enemy side as this would have given them easy victory, but this officer was good at what he was doing.

After the ammo resupply, the contact ended within an hour or so. We had managed to tear down the terrorists, but we were exhausted. Most of us had never experienced such a prolonged contact in our entire military life. "Now, wear your clothes, officer," one of my colleagues jokingly told me. It is now that I realized that for the hours we had been fighting, I was in my birthday suit. The soap had also dried up on my? I just laughed that I had braved all the night's cold barechested. These are some of the intrigues of the war front.

Taking stock of the impact of the contact, we had managed to inflict pain on the enemy side. Hundreds of terrorists lay dead at the end of the contact. The casualty levels on our side were minimal, though sadly we had lost two officers. The terrorists had also managed to flee with one of our 60mm mortars and a

few of its ammo. This was the only huge blow to our side as a 60mm mortar is a deadly and advanced weapon. All our other weapons and equipment were intact.

After this, normalcy returned to the camp, and we were able to carry out our defense duties in peace. A month later, after this, the al-Shabaab tried to train themselves on how to operate the 60mm mortar they had looted from us. The session was transmitted live from their network, and we watched with bated breath, praying that they didn't manage to hack on how to use the same. They were seemingly in high spirits and chanting their own incantations as they practiced the drill they thought was the right one. There were about three hundred of them here.

A 60mm mortar is fired at an elevated angle, not at ninety degrees. When one fires the same at ninety degrees, the bomb goes up and comes right back to the firing position. This is exactly what the terrorists did. Once the round had been fired, they started celebrations and ululations, not knowing that the same would come back to them within seconds, killing all of them instantly and destroying the mortar completely. This was a huge sigh of relief as them knowing how to use the mortar and it being in operational mode in the wrong hands would have been catastrophic. "God couldn't allow them to know how to use that weapon; otherwise, they could have greatly troubled us," I said to my colleagues as we walked away, satisfied with what had happened.

I didn't manage to finish my tour of duty here as the call of duty demanded that I report back to Nairobi. It had been quite

an eventful short stint, and I had learned a lot. This time around, I was not going back to Nairobi by air but rather by road, the riskiest form of transport here. I had no choice as there was no flight that was scheduled that route, and I urgently needed to report back to Nairobi. I loaded my luggage onto the military truck, bid my colleagues goodbye, and jumped on it. We were a convoy of three trucks, all proceeding for various military duties.

Along the way, one of the trucks had a puncture, and we had to stop to change the same. After this, we proceeded to Garissa, where we had to have another break as the drivers repaired the puncture in the town. We couldn't proceed the rest of the journey with one of the trucks lacking a spare tyre. It had been the norm to carry out the repairs at a particular spares shop in the town. As this was happening, I decided to go to the town and buy a few things.

As the drivers were busy repairing the puncture, two terrorists riding on a motorbike shot the three of them, killing all of them on the spot. From where I was standing, I managed to shoot one of them dead as they escaped. I was in civilian attire, and thus it was impossible for them to figure out that I was a colleague of the three that they had innocently murdered. The rider of the motorbike managed to escape.

This incident triggered an angry reaction from the military camp. The anger with the locals was due to the feeling that it was them that were hiding the terrorists, hence abetting the attacks on us. The response was sporadic; the officers stormed out of the camp, baying for the blood of anyone who they

suspected was a sympathizer of the terrorists. The military camp commander tried so hard to plead with them not to retaliate, but his pleas fell on deaf ears. There was only one plea that they needed; leaving their weapons behind. We were relieved by this, as had they stormed out armed, the effects of the same would have been tragic.

We all know what happened on that day as it was aired live. To date, I fully support the actions on that day. After everything had subsided, we were appalled by the politics that were being played about the same. The area MP hypocritically demanded a statement from the military on the incident terming it unacceptable on their own terms. We watched disgustingly as this fellow spewed nonsense on national television. Were the officers who had been murdered in cold blood children of a lesser God? Didn't they have loved ones who depended on them?

"He should be grateful that no life was lost in the incident," I said to one of my colleagues as we left the town for Nairobi the following day. "These politicians are the reason for some of the problems we face here. I wish he would have come to issue his statement from here," one of my colleagues responded. "True. There is no way you can politicize military operations," I responded. "I am glad that my tour of duty here has ended, and I will not have to go through all this again," I continued. "Are you leaving the military or something?" my colleague asked. "Why?" I shot back. "My brothers, as long as you are in this system, never rule out finding yourself here again," he responded. He was right, as half of our operations were on this side.

Getting back to Nairobi, senior Tom had been promoted. I knew the time for payback had come. The next couple of months would be characterized by endless scuffles. Whenever he got a chance to pin me down, he would execute this with so much vengeance that he left the other officers who had not been present during our earlier altercation asking themselves so many questions. The boss who had sent Tom for retraining had since been promoted and posted out. I was left on my own to deal with whatever Tom was throwing my way. Some of the old members who understood the genesis of our altercation could only sympathize with me.

"What is Tom's problem with you? Some of us who are new here don't understand," one of the new colleagues asked me one day. "Never mind, bro, these things do happen. The good thing is that he won't be in power forever," I responded. "Please explain to us what happened so that we can also avoid finding ourselves in a similar situation," the colleague prodded further. I went on to explain to him everything that had transpired between us. "It is such a pity that a man old enough to be your father is engaging in such petty fights with you, yet he has only three years left before he retires," my colleague responded. "That should give you the reason he doesn't have a family. The man is just frustrated that he has wasted all his life chasing the wind. The only way to vent his frustration is transferring the same to young officers who he sees as a threat to his stay here, not knowing he is living on borrowed time," I responded. "Such a pity," my colleague said.

"Prince, you are proceeding to a course being run by the French intelligence guys in Isiolo today in the evening," Tom

told me one day. He had kept this under wraps to the last minute so that I couldn't have a chance of finding a way to delete my name from the same. Failing to attend the said course was a chargeable offense under military rules and procedures. "You think you will be in power here forever? You are soon leaving the military, and I wonder who you will be treating with such malice back in the village, yet you have no wife or children. Could that be the reason you frustrate people's children who have proved to have better brains than you?" I angrily confronted Tom that day along the corridors.

I had made sure that we were just the two of us; otherwise, he would have found evidence to charge me with using insubordinate language. "Prince, you have the guts to tell me this to my face?" he asked, evidently shocked by my courage. "Yes, you remain to be the most stupid officer I have worked with in this military. At your age, you should be mentoring us, not fighting us. I'm too young to be in fights with you, but you probably can't understand that since you have no child of your own," I responded. I knew this was hitting below the belt, but this fellow had made me pass through hell. For the first time, I was contemplating leaving the military purely because of him. "Maybe you should consult fertility doctors to help you. That way, you will stop mistreating people's children," I told him as I walked away.

Getting to Isiolo, what this fellow thought was a way of punishing me, was actually a thriller and one of the best courses I have ever attended in the military. I was glad I had been selected for this as it opened a new door in the military, giving me a new lease on life. Much to the chagrin of Tom, this

course placed me in a better team than where I was previously working. He no longer had the powers to control anything concerning me as I was no longer under his control.

All this time, the Al-Shabaab had been greatly weakened. Any time our troops came in contact with the insurgents, we managed to inflict serious casualties on their end. With this trend continuing, their fighting strength had been greatly weakened. Other security agents were decisively dealing with the radicalization of youths at the coast. This meant that their recruitment efforts were greatly affected; hence they couldn't find enough replacements for the fighters they had lost in the war.

With their decreasing fighting strength, the insurgents were now changing tact, resulting in attacking vital installations and crowded places. It was no longer safe to congregate anywhere in the country. This change of tact was the biggest headache now for security agents. Mechanisms needed to be implemented to avert these terror gangs and bust them before they perpetrated their atrocities. We also needed to bust their insiders and financiers and decisively deal with them. This is what had necessitated the training with the French intelligence guys, and I was glad that Tom had actually pushed me into this. The police were also strengthening their capacity, and the other intelligence agencies needed a multiagency approach.

In the second half of 2013, a lot was happening in the country. The intelligence and security organs had managed to avert some attacks that would have been catastrophic. Nevertheless, bad blood existed between the security agencies as some

would feel intimidated by others. Public knowledge is that the military guys don't get along well with the police due to several issues ranging from ethics to professionalism. While it is a criminal offense that can end one's military career to be accused of taking bribes, it is public knowledge of what happens on the other side. It is also public knowledge of the level of professionalism of both forces. I am not trying to discredit one, but my interest is to show you the origin of this bad blood, which sometimes threatened our cooperation. These views are personal and do not necessarily translate to the military position on the same. Many would argue that I am biased since I have a military background, but the jury is out there.

THE WESTGATE ATTACK

Around September 2013, intelligence reports started coming in that the Alshabaab were planning to attack one of the major shopping malls in the country. This was not information that the security organs could play with. All efforts had to be focused on this one so that we could avert the attack. The next few days were busy; we at least needed to get everything right on this one. As the days progressed, the information was coming out clear on the targeted malls and the reasons the Alshabaab was targeting the same.

One of these malls happened to be Westgate. The intelligence reports on this were very clear. It had been established that these fellows had managed to infiltrate the mall and were working from the inside. A detailed report had been made and forwarded to the commanders for execution. The headache in this was that the KDF couldn't go first. In matters of internal security, the constitution of Kenya states that we come in as a secondary force to the police. We therefore could only come in when the police were incapacitated. The people who have been pushing for the amendment of the constitution should have long considered this clause, but unfortunately, in Kenya, everything is about vested political interests. That said, the only legal position to do was to let the police do their work. All the information that they needed was handed over. The date of this attack was known 21st September 2013.

That week, an important military function was also happening: cadets' commissioning at the Kenya military academy in Lanet. The president was going to preside over that function, and it

was definitely going to draw huge crowds, including the families of the cadets being commissioned. The Al-Shabaab had had a dalliance with crowds. Before, it was unthinkable that anyone would dare a military camp as those guys don't take chances on the security of their installations. Still, with the attempt at Nyali Barracks, this assumption could no longer be tolerated. With the security situation in the country, the security of the president had to be guaranteed. There were no chances that could be taken at that event.

An advance team from the military had been dispatched that week on Tuesday to supplement the president's security in covering the event. Everyone that mattered in the military command was also attending this event. I happened to be in one of the teams that were leaving for Nakuru. I had never attended such an event since my passing out parade years back as I had charted a different career in the military, and I really looked forward to it. The next two days were spent planning the event and ensuring that the security systems were enough to secure the event. I was a little disappointed that I was deployed to cover an area a little bit far from the parade square. I would have really wished to watch the parade and commissioning exercise here, but then again, we had come here for duty and we had to accomplish our mission.

The commissioning parade went on well without any security scare. The president congratulated the Kenyan Military for its sacrifices in the war against terror to ensure our country was safe. He also called upon the new cadets to uphold the ethics, professionalism, selflessness, and patriotism with which their peers in uniform discharged their duties. The newly

commissioned officers were also charged to observe fidelity to the law and lack partiality in the discharge of their duties.

After the hustle and bustle of the day, it was a sigh of relief when the president boarded his plane back to the city. With the other guests leaving, including the newly commissioned officers' families, it was time for us to relax a bit as we planned our travel back to the city. It is normal procedure that military trucks don't move during the weekend unless with clearance. We had not sought that clearance since we had to report back to the city on Monday, so we thought, why not spend the weekend in Nakuru? Besides, we also had some other military duties here on that Monday before we left.

That Saturday started as a very promising day. We all looked forward to enjoying our weekend here and proceeded to one of the lakeside hotels for a weekend of fun. All this was cut short by some breaking news on TV that the Alshabaab had attacked the Westgate mall and that they had taken it over, and thousands of innocent people were held hostage inside the mall. The scenes on TV were very disturbing. "Bro, prepare yourself psychologically that we will be recalled back to Nairobi with immediate effect," my colleague said to me. "That is given. We better go back to the barracks and start packing our luggage," I responded. "This is going to be messy. This could probably have been avoided with the intelligence information that was there. Fingers will be pointed in this one, and I am sure heads will roll," a colleague responded. True to his word, all manner of blame games have existed to date on what exactly transpired on that day.

As we drove back to the barracks, our commander for this Nakuru mission called. "Where are you guys? We are needed immediately back in Nairobi," she asked. "We are heading back to the barracks, madam. We figured out that this would be the case and took the cue," I responded. "Perfect, you guys make work easier for me. Kindly prepare yourselves in readiness to leave. We should be leaving in the next thirty minutes or so," she responded. "Okay, madam, this is noted," I said as we hung up the call. This happened to be one of the kindest officers I had worked with. She treated everyone with respect and humanity, one of the few senior officers who always listened to their troops. Anyone who worked with her always prayed for her that she would continue excelling in the military, but then in this trade, good people don't go too far.

The journey back to Nairobi was full of pressure and constant calls about how far we were. All intelligence personnel based in Nairobi were needed back. We kept tabs on the situation on the ground. By now, the police had moved in but seemed hugely clueless on what to do. The terrorists were shooting indiscriminately at innocent shoppers. There was an event that was going on here before the terrorists struck. Being a weekend worsened things as the mall was frequently frequented by diplomats, top businesses, the middle class, and senior citizens.

The presence of members of the president's family in the mall complicated matters. By now, the Military's elite Special Forces based in Gilgil had been summoned. Two choppers had been dispatched to Gilgil to convey the troops. These are probably Kenya's best-trained officers in close-quarter battles.

Their precision and expertise remain unmatched. By the time they were landing in Nairobi, we had also reported back to the offices and were monitoring the situation and doing what we were best at.

"We hope the police officers will let these guys do their work without sideshows. We are at a time we don't need supremacy wars," I said to my colleague in the office. "The police have been briefed, and the military has been called to take over the operation, but I hope you know the kind of people we have at the helm of the police and the internal security docket," my colleague responded. I understood his point very well; part of our problems had been the other side's leadership. "Let's hope that they won't compromise this operation," is all I could say.

By the time the Special Forces troops were going in, the casualty levels had not escalated to what we now know. At this point, the police officers were supposed to withdraw and let the Special Forces troops take over the operation. Even the rest of the military was only aiding in coordinating these troops and securing the building as we had the utmost faith in the capabilities of this team from Gilgil. Unfortunately, the police opted not to cede ground and instead shot at the Special Forces, killing one instantly. What happened next was retaliation; before the whole saga was sorted, two police officers also lay dead. This remains to be one of the most shameful acts in the history of the cooperation between the military and the police. As all this was happening, the terrorists were having a field day killing innocent people.

The stand-off between the two forces lasted for quite some time. It is in public knowledge that the command of this operation was coming from two quarters which ought not to have been the case. The chief of defense forces was on the ground coordinating his troops. By the time the military took over the operation, the police leadership ought to have ceded the same command. Still, it seemed they were bent on earning bragging points at the expense of the lives being brutally massacred. The top government officials called a crisis meeting to sort out the crisis here. By the time that this was sorted, the damage had already been done.

Hero Kenyans, including the sons of the then Garrisa senator, the late Yusuf Haji were laying their lives on the line to save lives here. The heroics of Abdul Haji would endear him to the hearts of Kenyans. This would see him elected to succeed his father as the senator of Garrisa unopposed after his father's demise. Other licensed firearm holders and brave Kenyans were also doing the same. The Special Forces were finally able to bring their A-game into this and contain the situation. Most of the terrorists had been killed.

At this point, the few surviving chose to torch the mattresses here and engage in other theatrics to delay the closure of the operation. At this point, the media chose to report otherwise. This is one of the times that I have supported the president when he calls out the Kenyan media on how they report issues. This is one of the times I felt that the media did not report accurately concerning this operation. At times the sense of patriotism should supersede the desire to increase viewership

of one's media station, although I fully understand that people are in business.

For the next few days, the military's Special Forces and bomb experts combed the building to ensure that the terrorists hadn't planted mines and bombs inside the building before meeting their fate. By the time the operation was completed, scores of innocent people had lost their lives. The president's family had not been spared hither. This remains one of the darkest moments for Kenya.

My colleague had earlier predicted that heads would roll after this. The then cabinet secretary for internal security was put on the spot over his handling of this operation. Members of parliament had also questioned his expertise and competency in the sensitive docket he held. His previous experience was thoroughly questioned and criticized. There were calls to the president to appoint one of the seasoned army generals to head this crucial docket or an experienced person. The president finally cracked the whip and fired the said cabinet secretary, paving the way for the late Nkaissery to take over and restore normalcy. We have since seen an improvement in the coordination between the police and the military, as witnessed in the Dusit D2 attack.

LIFE IN HAKATI

The start of 2014 saw the escalation of the tiff I had with senior Tom. All the senior officers who this fellow feared had been promoted and posted out by now. This left him with all the power to deal with me as he wished. I had been prepared for this day, though. Towards the end of January 2014, I was attached to the Hakati Military camp in Busia. I figured out that even though this came as a punishment to me, I had another opportunity to explore Western Kenya, a place I only learned about in Maps. All my other military operations had either taken me to the north, coast, or Eldoret, but not towards the lakeside. I longed for this journey as it would give me a breather from the tough times I was facing in the office. The frustrations this fellow had put me through had thrown me to the bottle full throttle in a bid to forget what I used to go through in the office.

Getting to Hakata, the place was overly peaceful, unlike the other military operation areas I had been to. The biggest danger here was HIV prevalence, though. A true story of how a whole squadron of an army engineers unit perished here, including their catechist, due to the virus was told in hushed tones. This was one of the warnings one was given when they landed here; if they chose to play around, the result would be the 21 gun salute and a reverse arm drill as they were being lowered to their graves. The stories we used to get from this camp were enough to make any pervert or playboy rethink his ways and consider giving his life to Christ.

Settling in Hakata wasn't a big issue. Life here was good, and although this was almost akin to demotion, I was content with what life had chosen to offer me at this particular point. For the first time, I was starting to add weight as there was no one stressing me here. The pressure that also came with working in the big offices was also off my shoulders. One thing I was struggling to live with here was the thunder strikes and lightning. Severally had I found myself under the bed during these thunder strikes. I had not been used to these kinds of evenings and nights where I come from.

The myths of the people from this area and how they were experts in sending thunder to someone didn't make things any better. It was said that the thunder they sent one's way never missed its address and that it was always some case of superstitions when one was struck by the same. Yours truly had not seen the light by now and believed that what these people used to believe in was true. This made me not interact so much with the people of this area. I preferred to keep myself to the camp or cross over to Uganda.

One morning while here, I picked up my phone and called my good friend Collins. He had been in the tyre business in Nairobi's Buruburu area, and I needed to strike a deal with him. His phone went unanswered several times. This was very unlike him as we had been very close friends; hence there was no way he could ignore my calls. There was no one else I could call to ask them to connect me to Collins, so I let the same slide and decided to call him later on in the day. During the lunchtime news, I came to learn that Collins had been involved in a grisly road accident along Mombasa road and

perished on the spot leaving behind a young wife and two girls. That I couldn't get time to go bury one of my closest friends still pains me. May his soul continue resting well.

While at Hakati Military Camp in Busia, we used to get our supplies from (Eldoret, or is it Eldoret?) I come in peace. So on this particular day, I was an escort for the truck going for canteen resupply at Eldoret. It was the middle of the month, and I was dead broke. Seeing the DEFCO guys load crates of beer and boxes of whiskey onto the lorry was traumatizing. My throat needed to be quenched as yours truly had not seen the light back then. You had talked about being in missions at Nanyuki, Kindly quantify this.

I walked to my boss and requested him to allow me two Made of Black cans to quench my throat, and I pay at the end of the month in vain. On our journey back, I sat in the truck, very mad at this guy. Who did he think he was? Was the alcohol his? That was the level of depression and despair I had come to. At times I would look back and ask myself how we had come to this. If I had avoided the altercation with the officer in my formative years in the intelligence fraternity, we would probably have never come to this.

As you approach this town from Eldoret, reaching kipkaren, there is a steep slope. Our truck was pressurized, and the pressure went low, locking the steering wheel. The breaks also failed. The vehicle continued moving in a straight trajectory toward the direction where the steering wheel was facing before it locked. The driver was hooting in a desperate attempt to alert anyone nearby that there was a problem with the truck.

We came to a stop inside one of the shops there, next to the counter. You should have seen the shopkeeper exiting via the back door screaming that satan had visited her without sending emissaries first. Luckily, there were no casualties, only several crates of beer broken. None of us who were in the truck can explain how we got out unhurt from this one, not even a scratch. We had to spend a few days here before the recovery.

As months passed on, my ex-girlfriend and I were expecting our son, my first child. I badly needed to be in Nairobi this time, but the call of duty demanded otherwise. The long distance between us had caused a huge strain on our relationship, and the fights were endless. Every other time the issue of when I was traveling back to Nairobi came up, it always ended in a bitter exchange between us. On her side, she felt I was probably avoiding her since she was expecting a child, but on my end, I was getting frustrated that I couldn't make it to Nairobi as much as I wanted. The whole scenario made me feel like I had failed as a man even though I was doing all I could to provide whatever was needed.

One day, on my errands in Uganda, I chose to purchase some items that were being sold cheaper there but damn expensive in Nairobi. My colleague who I thought was my good friend was proceeding for leave and I thought I could send him to deliver the same to my then girlfriend in Nairobi. I knew she badly needed the items I had bought, and by so doing, I hoped it could mend our then not-so-rosy relationship. For them to connect once my colleague was in Nairobi, I gave my colleague her contacts and bid him goodbye at the bus park as

he proceeded on his leave. That is one of the worst mistakes I have made in my life.

What was supposed to mend fences became the actual thorn in my flesh. My friends back in Nairobi would call and tell me how my colleague had suddenly become a constant figure in my girlfriend's house. He had a one million shilling loan to squander, and this proverbial prodigal son decided to ruin my relationship with this lady. With loads of money to spend, this prodigal son won the heart of this virtue-less woman. Surviving on my salary only without the luxury of the loan this fellow was enjoying, I couldn't match the soft life that this fellow was offering. I had always thought I had associated myself with a lady of morals until this happened. All manner of insults were thrown my way for lack of money. I tried telling this lady that this money was short-lived and that she would be the one left to regret her decisions in vain.

The resentment and anger that was building up in me were growing to dangerous levels. "I will have to kill this fool," I remember telling one of my colleagues after explaining to him what I was going through. "I know this is painful, but kindly, you will need to realize that killing this fellow will cause you more troubles than you think," my colleague, who was senior to me by rank, told me. "I would rather kill both of them and go to jail," I responded. "Don't be stupid, bro; that thought should get out of your mind forever. Can you sacrifice your freedom because of someone who is not even your wife? How will this even benefit you?" my colleague responded.

In Hakati, there were prisoners who used to come work here. We always escorted them back to the prison in the evening. I had personally never been on this escort, but that day, my colleague arranged so that I would escort the prisoners back with him. Getting to the prison, he requested that we be allowed to tour the facility inside, and we were granted. "Is this the life you would want to live?" he asked me. "Definitely not," I responded without a second thought. The living conditions were deplorable. The prisoners were always in tattered uniforms, even during the cold mornings. Their accommodation areas were heavily infested with Lice and bedbugs. "How do people even survive in these circumstances?" I wondered. "That's a story for another day. I had just brought you here so that you can see what killing your colleague can subject you to. This is the life Mugo, and his friends live currently," he responded.

Mugo had been our colleague who had been busted in a robbery with violence incident in Nairobi years back. The incident had seen him dismissed from the military and handed over to the police for prosecution. The case had dragged on in court for a while before they were finally found guilty and sentenced to Life in prison. I could imagine how his stupid actions had landed him in trouble and ended his otherwise promising career. "Remember, capital offenders are not held here but in Kamiti, Kodiaga, Naivasha, and Manyani. If this life here shakes you, what of life in Kamiti where Mugo is serving his sentence?" my colleague asked. "Pathetic," I replied. "Then stop this nonsense you are thinking of. It is painful that your close friend and colleague has betrayed you,

but it is not worthy of your freedom. If she were meant for you, she would definitely come back, and if not, I am sure you will find a virtuous woman to settle with," he advised. "There is no question of coming back; that chapter is closed. I can forgive any other mistake but not sexual immorality," I responded. "Well, I wish you the very best in life, and I pray that you heal. You have a whole life before you, even if that is not in the military, as I have been observing your interest in this career has greatly faded in recent times," he said.

"Sir, you know what I have had to go through. It pains me that all this has been caused by personal difference with someone who can't even perform the duties I used to," I responded, referring to my differences with Tom. For the one year I had been here, I had made up my mind that my time in the military was fast coming to an end. My differences with Tom had pushed me from my career line to something I had never envisioned myself in. "I understand, but go slow. Make sure you are making the right decision. Besides, Tom is retiring in the next three years," my colleague responded. "Three years is a long time in the intelligence world for you to have killed one's career completely," I responded. "Well, I don't know the dynamics of the career you chose to pursue, but I wish you well in life," my colleague responded.

THE START OF THE END

Towards the end of 2014, in a bid to punish me further, Tom managed to have me posted back to my former unit. His pedestrian thinking was that he had managed to post me back to Nanyuki, which was not the case as my former unit details had been changed from Nanyuki to Joint Helicopter command in Embakasi. Either way, he had managed to end my intelligence career, although Joint Helicopter Command was a soft landing. I had gotten a new lease of life here when I found that they had a functional intelligence office, although it didn't deal with what I had been used to. The people I found working in that office also viewed me as a threat to them due to my extensive training.

Here, we mainly handled aircraft crash investigations and incidences which were not so common going by the expertise of the military. The only other duty we performed here was handling the issuance of gate passes and the replacement of military ID cards for personnel who had lost the same. Basically, the work here had been greatly scaled down. Most of the time, we found ourselves idle, and this meant being used for other general duties. Mine was a case of a demotion from being the group accountant of a leading company into a village school bursar. I basically couldn't fit in no matter how much I tried.

At this point, it is good to note that one of my fights with Tom had been when I enrolled for my degree course at the university. During my time in the intelligence sector, he made sure to frustrate my efforts at acquiring my degree. He would

always send me out of Nairobi during examination time, yet I was not the only one doing evening classes. This had been the motive behind sending me to Hakati military camp so that I could miss a whole academic year. When this didn't work, and on finding that I had found a way of maneuvering my way around the same, the next option was to post me back to the unit. This time around, he had succeeded but not to the extent he had wished. I would say that I never met a wicked man full of ill will worse than this fellow.

This was my seventh year in the military, yet I was still not settled down in one career. On the other end, my peers continued to excel in their careers each day. Most of them had advanced up the ranks due to their career choices, but here I was in a very prestigious career but being frustrated by a man who was bitter with everything. Taking up another career line would take me at least three more years before I reached the levels from which I could start climbing up the ranks. This meant that I would have to stay in the same rank for ten years, despite having met all the qualifications. These are the levels one reaches; out of frustration, they go full throttle on the bottle. I have been there, witnessed this, and know the feeling firsthand.

As life progressed, one thing was certain: I was in my final years in the military. I needed a new lease of life out there in the civilian world. By now, it was never a question of if but rather when. Towards the end of March 2015, I was selected as a security escort for aircraft resupply to Garissa Military camp. It had been a while before I traveled this route. All the other days, I had done this route with civilian attire, but now I was

heading back here in full combat uniform as I was no longer in the intelligence core. The last time I was here, the terrorists shot three of our drivers dead. The angry retaliation of the military had drawn hypocritical reactions from the area's political leaders.

"How is the security situation here nowadays?" I asked one of my colleagues on arrival. "Pretty fine. The local politicians have been successful in lobbying the government to have a university college here, and things are starting to look up again, although students from the other parts of the country are still cagey with joining the institution," he responded. He was referring to the Garissa university college, a constituent college of Moi University which had been born from intense lobbying of the government. "How do these students survive here if we feel threatened yet we are security officers?" I asked my colleague. "Well, it is where KUCCPS has placed them, so I bet they have no choice but to learn how to cope with the environment," he responded. The idea of having a university college in Garissa was okay, but the timing was wrong. I felt that this decision should have been made later after the security situation had gone back to normal. These were just personal views, though I was too junior to make sense. Besides, I had been maliciously moved away from the intelligence core and pushed away as a punishment. We chose to mind what had brought us there lest we offend other quarters and find ourselves in deeper troubles. I had had enough confrontations with Tom and didn't need any other battleground.

The morning of 2nd April 2015 remains a painful memory to many Kenyans. Gunshots woke us up. At first, we thought that it was the terrorists shooting at us as they used to do that to test whether we were alert. The fact that this was early morning hours ruled out that theory out as they were used to doing that late in the night. The sustained gunfire was telling that something was amiss somewhere. "These gunshots are coming from the direction of the Garissa University College," my colleague who had been here for a while told me. Within the next two minutes or so, we got a confirmation that the university was under attack.

It was around 5.30 am, and the terrorists started by hurling an explosion at the gate, thus gaining access. The Christian union of the college was holding their morning prayers and the attackers stormed the prayer room, holding the students there hostage. Next was the girls' hostel before proceeding to every building where they thought that the students could have been. The situation was bad. Holding the students in the prayer room hostage was to use them as human shields or as a bargaining chip should they be cornered.

As usual, the military is second to the police in internal affairs; hence we had to wait for them to do their work first. We would be called up once they needed any reinforcement, so we had to remain on standby. I have discussed this situation in an earlier context herein and its disadvantages. Some of the courageous ones had managed to escape. I would say they were lucky and not just courageous; scores of others had been gunned down as they escaped. The situation was bad.

This time around, the police flew in their Recce squad members to help deal with the situation as the Special Forces troops were held up elsewhere. These were equally well-trained officers, but the issue of human shields was complicating the situation here. The recce squad officers are very good at what they do, too; that is the reason they are tasked with the president's security. The scenes of students crying out for help on TV broke people's hearts. I have always questioned the rationale of airing such happenings before the affected families have been notified of the situation.

After 15 hours of fierce gunfire, the cabinet secretary for interior announced that the operation had ended and that all the terrorists had been killed. One hundred forty-seven people lay dead, mostly young people whose lives had been cut short by the terrorists. The terrorists had also managed to kill one recce squad officer, a huge loss. We could all feel the pain that the family of those who had lost their lives that day were going through. This probably remains one of the worst terrorist attacks on Kenyan soil. I am glad that universities and colleges have been able to upgrade their security infrastructure to deter a future repeat of this. The only problem is that we are always more reactive than proactive as a third-world country. I have always had a view that this could have been avoided. It was not the right time to start Garissa University in as much as the region badly needed an institution of higher learning.

Returning to Nairobi, my mind started mulling around changing my career to pursue aeronautical engineering. I was now working in a unit where I could easily access that, so getting this course was not a big deal. The only thing that

bothered me at this point was the fact that the course would take me at least three and half years to complete. That said, I would take around five more years before getting promoted to the next rank if I chose to pursue this route. You may argue that I was becoming more obsessed with the ranks, but why do people seek career growth anyway? Stagnating in one level for ten years can be hugely frustrating, more so if you know you are good at what you do and that it is only (a fool) an inconsiderate officer somewhere frustrating you for no reason. Most of my peers had advanced in their chosen career paths, which added more sorrow to me. I had even seen people in the intelligence fraternity advance or even cross over to other government agencies like the national intelligence service. However, with Tom still in the military, I knew that this was largely a dream.

"Five years is quite short, and you won't realize how fast time moves. If your heart is in aeronautical engineering, please go ahead and apply," one of my bosses at my new unit told me. "Don't you think I will have stagnated in the same rank for ten years?" I asked him. "Which is better between staying in a field you know you will never advance and changing your career to something that offers you very exciting opportunities in life?" he responded. "Besides, with your seniority, you will move up the ladder so fast, and within no time, you will have caught up with your peers. Aeronautical engineering is a career that doesn't confine you to the military. You can actually pursue this out there," he continued. "Sir, you know the stress of military courses, waking up at 3 am and all that. Having worked for seven years now, I don't think I can take that,

unless it is a promotional course but being in a class for four years? That's a little bit too much," I responded. "You are lucky that you got into the military at eighteen years of age. You are barely 25, and most of the new soldiers are older than you. If I were you, I would think about this course and make a decision," he said. "Thank you, sir; I will think about it and hope I will be able to make a sound decision," I said as I walked out of his offices.

I went on with my intelligence duties in the unit as I continued thinking about restarting my military career on a different trajectory altogether. The first unfortunate incident for me to cover in my new unit would be an air crash in Bargoni. Two of our best pilots were out there on operational duties when their aircraft developed mechanical problems hence occasioning the crash. The crash happened on the weekend, and I was not on duty then. I had traveled upcountry when the call came. "We will be leaving tomorrow very early in the morning to Bargoni. Make sure you have all the equipment you need to have," the person on the other end told me. He was a senior pilot and officer who would go on to become my last commanding officer before I left the military. "Okay, sir," I responded.

"I have to leave for Nairobi. There has been an air crash, and I am part of the team that has been selected to go find out what exactly happened," I told my parents. "Can't you go in the afternoon after we have had the meetings that had brought you here?" my mother asked. "No, please. I need to ensure that all the equipment I need for this assignment is okay and working well and that the batteries for the cameras are charged. If I go in the evening, it won't be possible to do all this," I responded.

"Will this career you chose ever allow you time to be with your family without interruptions?" she asked. There had been several times I had been forced to cut short my leave days and report back to work when duty called, and this is what she was referring to. "Unfortunately, when duty calls, I have no choice," I responded. "Okay, have a safe journey," she said at last.

The entire afternoon that Sunday was spent in the office, making sure I had all that was needed to cover the crash scene. Luckily, the pilots had survived the incident and had been airlifted to Mombasa for further medical attention. I have earlier mentioned in this book that one of the military's biggest strengths is their medical evacuation systems. This has helped save the lives of scores of officers.

That morning, my mind was a bit disturbed to learn that we were flying in an aircraft similar to the one that had crashed over that weekend. We had had concerns about these aircraft ever since they had been procured. They had killed several of our officers hence making us question their safety. I had really wished we could have flown using the American MD-500 series, but I had no power to decide on that. Although what we were using was much bigger than the MD-500, we stood no chance in it should we develop any mechanical issue. On such a mission, anyone would choose life over comforts.

Getting to Bargoni, we were shocked at the crash scene. "These pilots really tried," was the first comment from the senior pilot we had flown herewith. From the crash scene, we could gather that the pilots had tried controlling the aircraft

before finally coming to a stop after hitting a tree and throwing the co-pilot out of the aircraft. At the time of the crash, the PIC (pilot in command) was still trapped inside the helicopter. They had crashed shortly after take-off, so the troops manning the army camp rushed to the scene to rescue the senior officer trapped inside. Luckily, the aircraft didn't burst into flames, as that would have ended the lives of the two officers. "This would have been catastrophic had the aircraft been armed," the senior officer continued making his comments. This was a fighter helicopter, and one of its strengths was its maneuver capabilities, thus making it a useful resource in the war against the Alshabaab. Had it been armed at the time of the crash, the most likely outcome would have been bursting into flames.

"Prince, make sure you capture everything from this point," the officer told me, pointing to the spot from which the crash trajectory had started. "Remember, what we take to Nairobi is what will be used in the board of inquiry to determine the cause of the accident," he continued. "Okay, sir, that is noted," I said as I turned to concentrate on my work. "Did you guys manage to secure the black box?" the senior pilot asked the officers who had been guarding the crash scene. "Sir, we don't even know what that is," was the response that came. At this point, we all burst into laughter but then realized that it was not their fault as they came from units that rarely interacted with the air units. "Oh, sorry, I understand," the senior pilot told them as he climbed onto the wreckage in search of the same. There were two crucial recoveries we needed to make from the wreckage; the black box and the cockpit video recorder. These two needed to be sent back to the manufacturer so that we

could be able to determine the cause of the air crash. Luckily, we were able to recover the same without much ado.

We spent the entire day here, piecing up all the information we could. Preliminary investigations pointed to engine failure. Bad weather and visibility as a cause of the crash were ruled out. The question of pilot error was also ruled out as it was evident that they had really struggled to control the plane before it finally crashed. Besides, the pilot commanding the aircraft was one of the best in the military and actual a senior trainer. "Gentlemen, I think we are done with what we came to do here, although it is a bit late for us to fly back to Nairobi. This means we will have to spend the night here and fly back to Nairobi tomorrow," the senior pilot told us at the end of the day. The journey back to Nairobi the following day was quite uneventful, and we thanked God for the flight mercies.

As the days progressed, the applications for the Defence Forces Technical College intake for their September intake that year were opened. I was still not yet decided on whether to pursue that course or not at this point. With the advice of my friends, I applied for the course as I continued toying with the idea. Besides, I didn't think that it would be difficult to delete my name from the same in case I changed my mind.

One fine morning, some very disturbing news came in from Bargoni. Another aircraft had crashed in the same area, and this time round, it was the MD-500 which I had always considered safe. Unfortunately for this one, the pilots had perished in the crash. They had tried jumping off the helicopter in a bid to save their lives but were unsuccessful. The

helicopter was armed as they were headed for an airstrike, and thus the thought of jumping off as they understood that they stood no chance in the aircraft once it hit the ground as it would definitely go up in flames. I have earlier mentioned that once an aircraft is armed, the pilots inside stand no chance once it hits the ground in that state.

The situation on the ground was bad from the pictures we were getting. This time around, I was not one of the officers selected to fly to the scene and carry out preliminary investigations; my colleague did. I had an appointment at the Defence Memorial Hospital, so I couldn't have managed to fly to Bargoni for this one. Besides, it was only fair to let my colleague cover this one as we all needed exposure and to hone our skills. At the memorial, I was present when the bodies of the departed officers were flown in, and it was not a pleasant scene. The impact of the ground had badly charred their bodies, and looking at them made me shed a tear.

Both of the officers who perished in that crash were very good friends. The co-pilot was a very young officer who had barely been in the military for about four years. The pilot in command was a man with a vast experience in flying, probably one of the best in the trade. Despite being an expert in what he did and a senior military officer, he was a good and humble man who interacted with all ranks and filed in the military with ease. We all loved him. They all had young families, and I could only imagine their spouses and the senior pilot's son's pain at this particular time. "This will be difficult for the families. I think they will need counseling before being allowed to view the bodies," I said after viewing their remains. "True, this is not

easy," one of the officers who had accompanied me said as we walked away.

As time passed, the feedback from the application we had made for the diploma in aeronautical engineering course from the defense forces technical college came, and I had made the cut. Unfortunately, by now, I had made up my mind that the military was not a career I wanted to pursue beyond the point I had. The frustrations from the military guys who I had worked with had taken a toll on me, and to ease my sorrows, I found myself hitting the bottle hard. My drinking fashioned me for constant collisions with the military. At this point, the once diligent officer had degenerated into a daily drunkard who always showed up for work late and drunk.

"Prince, you have been selected for the prestigious aeronautical engineering course. I hope you will change your ways to be the person I met when you first reported to this unit; otherwise, with the college's strictness, you will surely be dismissed from the military," one of my seniors here told me. "If this will lead to my dismissal from the military, then it is not a bad idea after all," I responded. "Are you out of your mind? Do you have an idea of what you are wishing yourself?" the officer asked me. "I do besides, I have written several resignation letters in vain. That should tell you I am tired of being here and that I badly want to leave this place," I responded. "Well, I have no control over that. My duty here is to inform you of your selection and ensure you are well suited for the course. If you have any problem with that line, kindly tell me. I will gladly help," he said. "No, sir. I am good to go," was my response. "Okay. I wish you all the best and make sure you make the best decision

for your future. You are required to report to the college next Monday ready for the course," my senior said. "Thank you, sir. I will be there in time. Let's see how this goes," I responded as I stepped out of the office.

"Good morning, class. I want to congratulate and welcome all of you to the defense forces technical college. The fact that you have made the cut to be here is no mean feat. That said, we will give all of you an aptitude test to confirm whether the grades in your certificates are really yours or if you cheated in your form four exams. The aptitude test will basically test your IQ, and if you did your fourth form examinations without any assistance, you have nothing to worry about here," the commandant told us. Most of the officers I was in class with had finished their form four education in the last year or two, while I had eight years since leaving secondary school. Coupling that with the drills that had been pushed down my throat and the rigorous military training I had gone through, I probably would have been the most concerned about whether I would pass the aptitude test. I, however, trusted my brains and capacities, so I had nothing to worry about, although I wished I hadn't applied for the course in the first place. During the aptitude test, I would go on to beat the rest of the class and emerge at the top. The commandant challenged the young officers to pull up their socks, noting that being shown dust by a man who had been out in the field for eight years was not good for them.

We were all eager to find ourselves in our first lecture, more so the practical. We were shown around for the purposes of the officers drawn from the other units. At some point, I laughed at

their conduct when we visited the hangar but then again remembered it was their first time, so any naivety or ignorance could be forgiven. Aeronautical engineering is a wide field that includes airframe and engine, radio and radar, and electrical and instrumentation. If I was to pursue this course to the end, my interest was airframe and engine, as this was the main area of study. Airframe and engine basically deal with the aircraft's structure and engine. Basically, this is the main engineer of the aircraft, and I figured out that I would best fit in here. Luckily, we were all placed into classes according to the courses we had chosen to pursue.

As time progressed, the school program started taking a toll on me. "I raised these issues with our commander back at the unit, but he ignored me. It is not possible to keep up with a military college program after being here for eight years unless it is something one is really interested in," I said to my colleague in class one day. "I thought you were here of your own volition," he responded. "Unfortunately, that's not the case. By the time the feedback on the selection to this course was coming, I had already made up my mind to leave the military," I responded. "Then why did you join then?" he asked. "My brother, are you forgetting the military procedures? We are not in the civilian world," I responded. "I understand you now. I bet life will be very difficult for you here then," he replied.

He was right. Every dawn in the college presented its own challenge for me. I was glad to have learned a thing or two about the world of airframes and engines, and my most memorable days here were when we wore flight suits and headed to the hangar for practicals. By the time the years

ended, though, I was done with the military, at least in this life. I had made up my mind that I needed to try something new in the civilian world. 22nd December 2015 was my last day in the office. I took a walk and never looked back, and I don't regret that decision; it was for my good.