

John Dau: A Survivor's Story

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Photograph by Mark Thiessen

John Dau has done a lot of living in his 34 years. One of the "lost boys of Sudan," he's now a father himself, with a new life in the U.S.

"Lost boy" seems a strange moniker for John Dau. At 34 and an elegant six foot eight (two meters), he's hardly a boy. But he's proud of the name—"lost boy of Sudan," to be exact. Dau is one of the thousands of African males in southern Sudan attacked in the 1980s and '90s by the Arab Sudanese government in the north. For 16 years, Dau was either on the run—from Arab militia and the Sudanese Army, from wild animals, from starvation and thirst—or living in refugee camps. In 2001, he was among the lucky few chosen to immigrate to the United States, a place he had never heard of until he learned to read at the age of 17.

When I think of Sudan, I like to remember life in my village. The land there was good, with plenty of water and grasslands for the cattle and goats that my people, the Dinka, survive on. But in 1983, when I was ten, the troubles began. Sudan's Arab president, Gaafar Muhammad Nimeiri, declared that Sudan would become a Muslim state and that sharia law would be the law of the land. But we did not want this. So John Garang, a Dinka, formed the SPLA, the Sudanese People's Liberation Army, to resist the government. We

Africans were the true Sudanese, he said, not the Arab colonialists who had come into our land from the north. SPLA recruits trained in Ethiopia, but sometimes they came to our village.

We children could hear the adults talking in worried tones of fighting near us, villages attacked. Soon refugees began coming to our village. We welcomed them, and my father, who was the village leader, helped feed them, even slaughtering our cows for food. We began to hear the adults say that the Arabs were killing Dinka boys particularly, so that the boys would not grow up and join the army. We grew very scared. My mother started cooking small meals, because food was scarce and because she said our stomachs must get used to less food. She told us that if the village was attacked, we, her children, must hold hands tightly, so we would not get separated as we ran.

One night as I slept—it was August, the rainy season, in 1987—I began to hear a dull thumping that seemed to be slapping me in the ear. In my sleep it was just something annoying, but then I woke up and scrambled outside the crowded hut I shared with other children. Everyone was running, and the sky was lit up by mortar blasts. I saw my father run past, so I ran after him. The women and children were running and crying. I could hear bullets, *zzzzing zzzing*, whistling past us. I can still hear that sound. I thought that the end of the world the Bible talks about was here.

I kept running, following my father, out of the village into the bush. And then he kneeled down in the tall grass, to watch for soldiers, and I caught up to him, and it was not my father. It was our neighbor Abraham. He told me to be very quiet, and he grabbed me and we crawled through the tall grass to the bush. I was so scared. “Where is my family?” I asked. “They are coming, they are coming,” he said, and he pulled me by the arm and made me keep running, dragging me along with him. I could hear Abraham’s heart pounding.

At dawn we met a woman and her two girls from our village, and we joined them, heading east toward Ethiopia, where we thought we would be safe. My knees were scraped from falling as we ran, my feet were bloody, and I was naked, because I had left the village that way. None of us had taken anything as we fled. No food, no cooking pots. We ate almost nothing—wild roots, a pumpkin from a farmer’s field. At night the mosquitoes would torment us as we tried to sleep.

Then, one day, a group of militia ambushed us. The men grabbed Abraham, forced him to the ground, and began beating him with a stick, telling him to give them money. He had no money, so they took his shirt and left him in the dirt, his back bloody. I felt lucky, because they had not killed Abraham. I do not know why they let him live.

We kept going, now heading southeast to avoid the militia, but on the seventh day, we ran into another militia. Again, they beat Abraham, and this time they beat me, too, over and over on the head with a stick. While they were beating us, they abducted the woman and girls. That was the last time we saw them.

Now, there were just the two of us with our wounds. We had to keep moving, following narrow footpaths through grasses so high they were over our heads. We stole pumpkins from farmers’ fields when we could, but often we just chewed grass stems to help our hunger. We would listen for the sound of frogs, then follow that sound to find water pools. We were very careful when we went near water, as that is where others would come, including Arab militia. Abraham taught me how to stay almost submerged in the pools, with my head far back, so that only my nose would be above the water level to breathe. It was good he taught me this, because once Arabs did come to swim and relax at a river we were in. They never saw us.

What horrified me most was the night. I was afraid of wild animals, leopards and hyenas, and it was

very, very cold, about 40°F (4.4°C). I had no clothes or covering to stay warm, so I would sleep close to Abraham.

It went on like this for several weeks, until we got near a town called Pibor Post. Here we met another group of refugees, this one with two men and 17 boys, all of them naked like me. The youngest was only about five or six. We joined them, and that gave me new life. I felt like I had comrades. Of course, being in a bigger group also caused problems. Now it was mid-October and getting drier and drier. We had a hard time finding food for so many of us, and it was much harder to move without being seen. We began walking at night and sleeping in the forest during the day. We started sending out a boy and an adult on reconnaissance before we moved on. We lost one adult that way, and a boy also disappeared. We thought maybe a leopard got him.

We were in the territory of a hostile tribe called the Murle, most of whom were cooperating with the Arabs. As the season grew hotter and drier, food became harder and harder to find. We were getting very weak, but we kept going, toward a river called Kanger. When we got there, the riverbed was dry. No water, and hot, hot sun. We were so thirsty, and we were starving. At one point, Murle hunters killed the second man from our new group, leaving Abraham as the only adult.

We moved on, looking for water. We were crying, because we were so thirsty, but no tears came. We wanted to stop, give up, but Abraham kept pushing us to move on, saying we would find water soon. When we did not, some of the boys refused to go on. At last, we found a muddy pool, threw ourselves into it, and ate the mud, just for moisture. It had been days since we had water to drink. Our tongues were swollen, our skins gray, we couldn't talk. Abraham urinated into a little container and gave it to me to drink. Now only four of us boys were left with Abraham. Along the path, we saw dead bodies, sometimes vultures eating them. I prayed, I sang Christian songs in my mind to ask for water. Then on the second day, we came to a swampy area and ran into it and drank and drank.

Once we had water, we focused on our hunger. We found tortoises and roasted them. That was the first time I had eaten protein since I left my village. We also collected grasshoppers and threw them into the open fire to cook. We spent three weeks there in those Kanger marshes, trying to regain our strength.

Then we continued on, finally crossing the border into western Ethiopia. This was the home of the Anyuak people, and most were pro-SPLA, so they helped us, giving us maize to take with us.

When the SPLA had come to our village, they had mentioned a camp near the Sudan-Ethiopia border called Pinyudu. That was where we had been heading all along. Finally, in late November we made it there. We had spent four months trying to reach it.

But Pinyudu was not good. Refugees were pouring in, and local Ethiopians were trying to help them; the UN did not arrive till several weeks later. I was selected leader of a group of 200 boys, and we had to take care of ourselves. We had almost nothing to eat—just a small amount of fortified cereal—and no shelter. It was so hot, as high as 116°F (46.7°C). The ground burned our feet as we ran from tree to tree for shade. Soon, cholera hit the camp, and life became very bad. My boys were dying all around me. I was trying to help them, but I could not. If they became sick in the morning, they could be dead by afternoon. We dug shallow graves in the dirt with sticks and our hands, just a few inches deep, to bury them. But their limbs became stiff after a few hours and poked up out of the ground. At night hyenas would come and eat the bodies. Some of the boys began to act crazy. They could not take the horrors. It was a terrible time.

After the cholera epidemic, other diseases attacked—measles, chicken pox, whooping cough. They killed a lot more boys. I don't know why I survived, maybe it was something that God planned.

Then, slowly, the camp became organized. My group grew to 1,200 boys, and we built mud-and-thatch shelters. We were given clothes, too. I had a T-shirt with some symbols on it. Years later, when I learned to read, I realized the symbols said U.S.A. We were taught how to dig latrines and began getting more food, even milk. We would leave the milk in the hot sun until it curdled, something we Dinka love. Still, some boys would leave the camp, and locals accused them of raiding fields and orchards. Some boys were abducted by Anyuak; we heard they used the boys' bodies to trap leopards for their skins.

After four years at Pinyudu, adults at the camp told us we must flee, because the camp was going to be attacked by locals. The only choice was to cross back into Sudan. We figured out a way to make backpacks out of meal sacks and pieces of plastic to put food in. Then we all left the camp together, 27,000 of us, almost all boys, walking down a narrow path single file. The line went on for days.

When we got to Gilo River, it was very full and strong, and we could see crocodiles waiting away from shore. We were gathered there on the riverbank when suddenly Ethiopian rebels attacked, firing on us. I dived into the river and began swimming as hard as I could. Another boy dived almost on top of me, but he could not swim well, and he clutched at me. I tried to help him, but I didn't have the strength, and the river was forcing us both under. I had to leave him. Somehow, I made it to the other side. We lost about 9,000 boys and a few men that day on the Gilo River. But 18,000 of us, mostly Dinka boys, had made it back to our homeland.

John Dau's ordeal was far from over. The lost boys spent nine months in the SPLA-held town of Pochala, until the Sudanese government began bombing the town. Dau left with 1,200 boys, and little adult supervision, and fled south toward Kenya. For the next six months, the boys suffered starvation, thirst, and ambushes and bombing attacks by the Sudanese government. Some 800 boys eventually made it to the massive Kakuma refugee camp in northern Kenya. Dau spent the next ten years there. In an outdoor classroom, he was taught reading, English, math, geography, history, and civics. He's now working on a bachelor's degree at Syracuse University, and he's established a fund to build the Duk Lost Boys Clinic in southern Sudan. Many of his friends and family remain in refugee camps in eastern Africa.