CHAPTER 1

As a Guinea Pig in South Sudan

I stepped off the aircraft in Entebbe, Uganda: in Africa once again. The U.S. Air Force simply gave me orders and sent me on my way; I was an American soldier stepping off onto Ugandan soil. I came to Africa to do an Army job and as I got further from my Air Force “tribe” I merged into the American military “tribe” with soldier as the simplest description. Uganda was to be just a brief introduction before continuing to my final posting in South Sudan. During my preparation, I often wondered if I would really do anything worthwhile while in South Sudan. Would I be defending our nation or national interests? Would I be helping people? Would I contribute to a greater project?

I am a U.S. Air Force officer, but by virtue of having been a reservist, I have spent only about two-thirds of my time in the Air Force on active duty. I’m an academic, a profession often critical of the policies and methods of the U.S. government. Yet, I have participated in these activities from the inside doing my best to advance U.S. policies under several different administrations, albeit at a fairly junior level. Perhaps most importantly I am a husband, a father, and a Christian.

Understanding the reasons behind defending your country during World War II would seem to have been much simpler than today. In the 1940s, a threat to the American way-of-life both appeared in Europe and directly attacked us in the Pacific. During the Cold War in the all-volunteer military, an officer’s attention focused toward the major “enemy”: the Soviet Union. In the past few years, hundreds of thousands have served heroically in Iraq and Afghanistan; thousands lost their lives. Many fellow soldiers paid the ultimate price for their service to the country. Now as a professional officer, how do I believe that my service is worthwhile?

The prelude to my story here began in December 2011 when I found out my turn had come up to be deployed for at least a year, somewhere. Since this
notice came with little information and I did not want to wait and perhaps get little actual notice, I took matters into my own hands and volunteered to work for the United Nations in South Sudan. I wanted to go back to Africa and I had been interested in working for the United Nations so this seemed a perfect fit. With any deployment, I would be leaving my family for at least a year; this, though, is part of a military life.

A virtual THUD echoed through my computer as the emails arrived. It was February and my preparation began in earnest when the Air Force sent me two long predeployment checklists. I had volunteered and I knew the lists were coming. The military bureaucracy, however, still has a power to oppress when you’re faced with six pages of tasks to do along with your usual work. After completing the checklists and winding up my job at the Pentagon, I was off to three weeks of predeployment training at Quantico Marine Corps Base. Our class of future UN peacekeepers listened to speakers and took part in active training such as self-defense and driving four-wheel-drive vehicles in the forest of West Virginia. Our training ended with several more lectures and then our commander sent us out the door with a few thoughts. He emphasized how, even though we would be working for the United Nations, we first serve the United States: The American chain of command comes first. But he emphasized that as peacekeepers we are also U.S. military diplomats. Above all, though, we should “give an honest American effort. The American people expect nothing less!” This advice would prove useful in the months ahead.

After our training ended, I had a couple of days with my family before they returned me to Quantico and turned me over to the U.S. Army for my ride to the airport. I hugged Laura and my three kids good-bye and I was off on my trip into the world of the United Nations in South Sudan, beginning in Africa with my nighttime arrival in Uganda.

But, the story really began not with my arrival in Africa in the depth of the night but many years before. Where I was and who I was were products of where I had been before. As a historian and sometimes-anthropologist, I could not get past this simple question of identity. Most important, I am a husband and a father. I am also a U.S. Air Force officer and an academic. I served on active duty in the Air Force after college, but then became a reservist and went to graduate school. Along the way I spent much time in Africa, traveling and working. On 9/10 (i.e., the day before September 11, 2001) I arrived in Abuja, Nigeria, to work in the U.S. Embassy’s Office of Defense Cooperation. I left Nigeria, got married, and returned to Africa several months later. This time, though, I did not wear a uniform; I went to Tanzania to carry out my PhD field research.