

## The sketches that saved my life

Barney Thompson



Patricia Parker was captured by Sudanese rebels in Darfur by a man who had already ordered the execution of two other charity workers. She tells our correspondent about her dramatic escape.

A few hours after she and her son had been captured by the Sudanese Liberation Army in Darfur, Patricia Parker found herself at something of a loose end. Much of the shock of being fired upon, of seeing two truckloads of heavily armed soldiers roar up, take over their 4x4 and kidnap them, had worn off during the long drive to the rebel base. To the pair's relief, the rebels' anger and nervousness was also dissipating; to their dismay, they were showing every sign of settling down for a long wait. Hopes of a quick release — that everything would be cleared up as a terrible misunderstanding — were fading. Furtive calls on the satellite phone to the United Nations in the hope that they might organise a rescue party had come to nothing; it was the weekend, and the staff who might have the right maps and knowhow to trace their signal were off-duty. The rebel base was in a village called Kulkul; you won't find it on the Times atlas. So after a couple of hours Parker, a keen and accomplished artist, sat down and got out her sketchbook. "Before long one of the soldiers came and sat near me," she recalls. "When we were captured all the rebels were very nervous, but I remembered him as the one man who had stayed incredibly calm." Having drawn some of her surroundings, she risked a quick drawing of the soldier, mindful that he, as a Muslim, might object to having his image put on paper. There was no adverse response, so she tried her luck with a larger, more considered picture. "In the end I was very pleased with it," she says. It turned out to be the best way to make human contact with their captors: "I didn't know it at the time, but he was the second-in-command — he was called Adam Musa — and was the cousin of the rebel leader." The sketch made an impression: before long other soldiers were trying to strike heroic poses within Parker's line of vision.

Parker had made her first trip to Darfur four years earlier, in 2001, before the present conflict broke out. It was an unintended visit, and should have been a one-off. At the time she was a volunteer fundraiser for Save the Children. Her son, Alastair, was working in Khartoum, and she saw a chance to combine a trip to see him with a quick look at the charity's work. "I arrived in Khartoum and his first words were: 'I've organised a five-day trip to Darfur for you!'" They flew to El-Fasher, in northern Darfur. Parker arrived in the middle of a drought, which was exacerbating a level of poverty that was already shocking. Two thousand people had abandoned their villages to camp around the lake, which had itself dried up. "We went on a trip 90 miles north of El-Fasher with some representatives from Save the Children. "Suddenly, in the middle of this country — it is very flat, with small hills in the distance and the occasional patch of scrub — we came across a nine-year-old boy carrying a jerry can. He had walked for seven hours to queue to fill his can with water, and was walking seven hours back. The Save the Children people we were with, who were Darfurians themselves, didn't believe that he could have done it, but we asked him to describe his route and it turned out that he was telling the truth." They gave the boy a lift back to his home, near a village called Um Ga'al. "His mother lived away from the village, near a wadi [riverbed] so that her goats could eat the shrubs. The father wasn't there; he was just another mouth to feed, so he had left."

Parker was stunned when the mother brought them a bowl of goat's milk. "She had four children, and she was giving us the evening meal. It was everything she and her family had." And there might have ended another brief European encounter with African misery, if what Parker calls "the Surrey housewife in me" had not started thinking. She went back, first to Khartoum to raise awareness of the poverty of Darfur among the capital's great and good and then to carry on the work in Britain. Within six months she had raised more than £50,000 and founded a charity to buy goats for families so that they had a supply of milk. "Kids for Kids — geddit?" The charity broadened its work to supplying donkeys as working animals, providing water pumps (the first one went to Um Ga'al), training midwives and any other scheme that would leave the local population a little more self-sufficient and give them a chance of surviving conflict. Getting out of the larger towns and into the far-flung villages is very much the goal of Kids for Kids, but Parker also backs the growing calls for the African Union peacekeepers — at present an ineffectual force of 7,000 soldiers for the entire region — to be given some teeth. "The AU is having to lease its planes, it doesn't have its own — why not? It should be able to protect people, but it hasn't even been able to stop the fighting. Then you need real negotiators to go in and do some proper negotiating. "Three years ago the figure quoted by everybody for the number of dead was 200,000. It is still the figure that the media uses, and yet people are killed and women raped daily. But there is no oil in Darfur, nothing the international community wants, so there has been a diplomatic hush."

It was in March 2005 that Parker, on one of her twice-yearly trips to Darfur, found herself an unwilling guest of the SLA. "By this time most of the area in which we were providing help was in rebel hands," she says. "Only the towns and their satellite villages were under government control." It was while trying to reach a settlement of about 1,000 families near El-Fasher that their vehicle, containing her, her son and two Sudanese colleagues, was intercepted by a pair of trucks "bristling with soldiers" who were brandishing Kalashnikovs and rocket-propelled grenade launchers. "They were all unbelievably thin, and all very nervous. And their commander was very angry." She didn't know that the commander was a man called Salah Bob, who is believed to have ordered the shooting of two Save the Children workers — as well as one of his own men who had allegedly refused to carry out the order — in December 2004. It now seems likely that he will be named as a wanted war criminal. "We drove for a very long time, and were harangued all the way." As Parker herself says, "you would never mistake me for an African", and there is no way in the world that you would mistake her for an agent of the Sudanese Government. But she was told by her captors — and she can think of no reason to disbelieve them — that government forces had been putting Save the Children and UN flags on their vehicles before launching some of their attacks.

Looking very English and having Kids for Kids painted on the side of their 4x4 had not been enough to mark them out as neutrals. Who were they? What were they doing in the middle of northern Darfur, so far from the operations of most aid agencies? Many of the latter have withdrawn from the furthest reaches of the region, either as a result of direct attacks on their staff and facilities or after criticism of the Government led to obstruction of their work. Parker and her companions were a rarity in an area where the battle lines change day by day.



All four were taken to a remote hut near Kulkul, and Salah Bob left them with half a dozen of his men (more were to arrive later). Their mobile phones had been confiscated, but for some reason they were allowed to keep the Thuraya satellite phone and after several requests Parker's son was given permission to use it. While he was busy trying to make four or five calls look like only one, Parker decided to make a speech. "I told the soldiers about Kids for Kids. I said that we were representing ordinary families who wanted to help other ordinary families. I appealed to them as family men. At the end I said: 'And I want to see your leader'. To my great surprise, they agreed. We were driven to Kulkul, and soon I found myself inside a large circle of men with guns, in complete darkness, standing next to Salah Bob."

She saw straight away that something was wrong. "He was very agitated and had been chewing that leaf" — tombac, better known by its Yemeni name khat, is a stimulant similar to amphetamine — "and drinking the local brew.



"I looked around for Adam Musa, and told our Sudanese colleagues to stay very close to me. I felt that we were probably OK, but they might not be." She sat down, in an ostentatious effort to create her own space, and accidentally revealed some bare skin between sock and trouser. To her horror, Salah Bob started to run his finger over this patch of skin. "Then all of a sudden he grabbed my arm. He shouted: 'Don't you understand that I could have you killed at any moment?' I was determined not to show that it hurt, so I laughed. I kept smiling and I said: 'Of course I do — but I also know about Sudanese hospitality and I know that I am perfectly safe'."

He looked at me, and then let go of my arm. "I am happy for you to leave now," he said — except that by this time it was pitch black and we had to spend the night there. All four were released in the morning.



This encounter has done nothing to deter Parker from trying to reach the remotest villages. Two thirds of the population live in such places, she says, and if they don't have a future, then neither does Darfur. She claims that Kids for Kids has helped 100,000 Darfurians, and is appealing for the funds to do more.

More surprisingly, Parker's abduction seems to have made her more, not less, sympathetic to the rebels. She says that the media has given them a disproportionate amount of blame for the fighting. "You can't defend people who use violence, but it is ridiculous to expect a group of poorly educated young men brutalised by war to be equipped to negotiate a peace settlement."

A conversation she had with Adam Musa, the subject of her first sketch, illustrates for her the pointlessness of lecturing the rebels about negotiations. "He said to us, 'Neither we, nor the Government, nor the international community can do anything — it's all in the hands of God.' He told us that his family had been killed by bombing or in Janjawid raids," a reference to the common tactic, denied by the Government, of attacking villages from the air before letting the feared Arab militia run amok on the ground. "He said that he had walked for 16 days to get to safety and passed 90 villages that had been destroyed and 'many mass graves'. He had been shot four times — he showed his wounds to my son.

"He was 27 and hadn't finished school. How can you expect someone like that to negotiate properly?"

### How the current conflict began

Darfur means "the land of the Fur", a black African Muslim people. For many years the Fur, along with other African communities, have struggled with nomadic Arabs for access to grazing land and water. In 1983 and 1984 famine killed about 95,000 Darfurians, out of a population of 3 million. The present conflict began in late 2002 when Arab militias started attacking settled African communities. The latter formed into two main rebel groups, the Justice and Equality Movement and the larger Sudanese Liberation Army, although there are various splinter groups. The Janjawid is an Arab militia said to be armed and funded by the Government — a claim Khartoum denies. Its campaign of rape, murder, mutilation and devastation has led to accusations of ethnic cleansing and genocide. It is thought that up to 400,000 people may have been killed in the current conflict, with more than 2.5 million displaced.

The UN has called for a 20,000-strong peacekeeping force to replace the African Union troops there, but Sudan has strongly objected. The AU mission is due to expire on December 31. No plans for peacekeeping forces have been made after this date.

To help villagers in Darfur, contact Kids for Kids via their website [www.kidsforkids.org.uk](http://www.kidsforkids.org.uk)