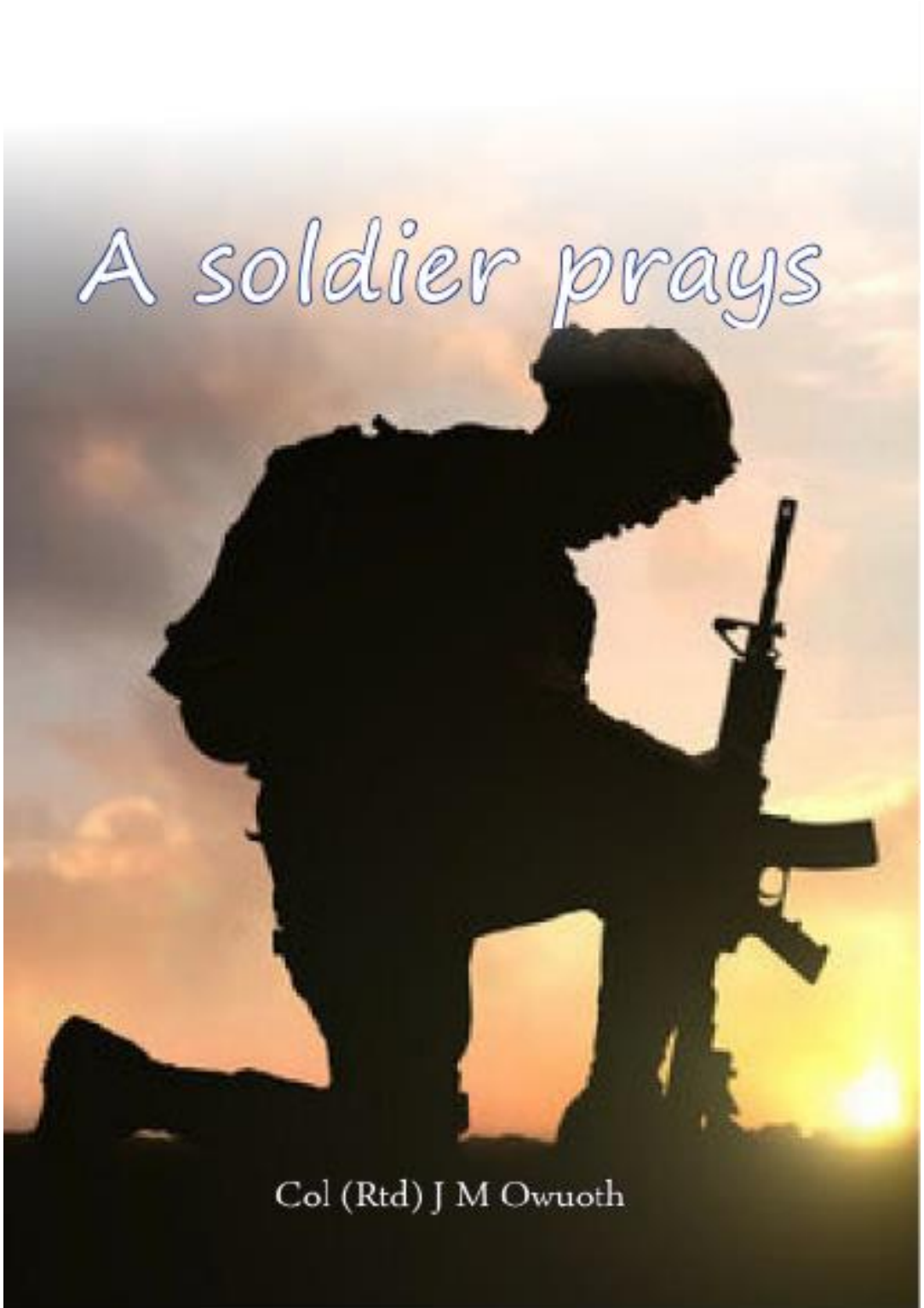
A soldier prays



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A SOLDIER PRAYS

By

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The panorama gleams with a heartland beauty and the Minaret towers shimmers in the morning light**.** The Marabou stork, ever detached, takes off in a flap of wings and the vagrant strains of the beautiful sounds of the Muezzin's call penetrates the silence in the far distance. The prayer call, whispers, falls and murmurs with the wind as it has

done for almost a century and a half; it is God's sound coming from the voice of the Muezzin. It first ruffles the Somali dirt, it lifts off and bounces onto the scrubland brush and heads towards the sea welcoming the fishermen - and the pirates too - back from their demanding and risky nightly sojourn; it politely massages the Ocean of the Indians whispering and reminding the lapping waves of that third day of creation. It then plunges into the deep warm waters and blesses the sea creatures, the Lobster and the Mackerel, the Shrimp and the Whale, the Shark and the red Snapper. And then from the deep it rises again back inland to my lonely location, a lonely soldier in a

foreign land on overnight duty and thirsting for prayer.

It could be baffling, but it remains ironic, that my place of prayer is in a dangerous location far from home, it is air conditioned full time, aloof and also partly under the ground. It could also easily be my grave.

My place of prayer is in a fox hole on the Somalia's war front. The fox hole, trench, bunker, dirt hole or "*Handaki*" as it is called in Swahili is a hole dug in the ground where the soldier in combat digs in to give him some level of protection from the enemy's direct fire and exploding ordinance.

I have been in the *Handaki* for the last four months as part of Burundi contingent in the African Mission in Somalia (AMISOM). AMISOM has been tasked to sanitise Somalia from the Al Shabab, extremist Islamic group intent to impose and spread their brand of austere Islam. The engagements against the enemy combatants have been few and short; but they have been intensive and deadly when they occur.

So we the soldiers while away the hours in waiting but in total silence.

And silence speaks and it always speaks loudly to me, a lonely soul struggling to stay awake, under a brooding night sky. Here the quest for prayer

comes out on its own volition from the deep atavistic depth of the soul, it comes as natural as an unexplained emptiness which sweeps me above and beyond the realities of life and wipes out the need for the physical need of food or warmth or rest or worry. To me it becomes an application of mind to the divine, the soul, memory, imagination and will.

All great religions have been founded from such silences as the hunger for communing with the divine springs up, gnawing deep, persistent and sharp.

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In a war theatre, you don't have to be old. The experience ages you. You find yourself learning so much, you learn the smell of blood, the sound of pain, the gasp of death, the anger of fighting and few other things that could never be taught in training. And then you also learn how to pray. Indeed confronted daily with the spectre of untimely death, one really has few choices whether to pray or not… It is the only choice. Prayer which with time had only posed itself in the limitless space of the soul has therefore come back to me so naturally, a familiar yearning and stirring once so embedded with my childhood experiences. It is the quest for God. It can't be hidden; it leaps out and

reveals itself under pressure bursting forth like water in a dry wadi.

The thirst of God always exists and daily the muezzin calls brings it to me so much to the fore- It cannot fail to do so, when the profoundest human questions always abound within me. How did humanity come into being? What happens after death? Are we-human beings- all truly alone? What is the truth? How long is eternity? What is love?

The questions to me remain as pressing and mysterious as they have always been.

It is evening; the darkness falls suddenly like a curtain as it always does. It is promising to be a black night, a cloaked moon appears as the sun

dives deep to the west. And I tie down my shoe laces, grab my rifle and slither in the *Handaki*. But then, I pause as I feel that particular yearning to make my peace, to commune with that unexplained all powerful being. The prayers then flow, not from the guts or the head or from the heart but deep from the soul. It is as meek as it is quietly liberating. The prayer for the soldier in the warfront does not bother to seize the moment; it lets it be.

My fox-hole comrade in a meditative silence nods, he finds himself also bowing reverently to that unknown powerful spirit– he fully understands and he too communes.

There are no atheists in fox holes…….. END