Ukraine — A Journey to the Front

Lviv

It's a long way from the midlands of England to Ukraine. Especially if you're mad enough to drive. On a sunny day in mid May 2025, a selection of British volunteers — young, old, eager, even eccentric — stand outside a church in Lviv as a friendly and very tall priest throws holy water on the dozen or so pick-up trucks that make up our convoy. He's singing a prayer — in Ukrainian of course — but it's pretty clear to everyone present why we, and our vehicles, are being blessed. When he asks us to join him in an English recitation of the Lord's Prayer, there's nothing sheepish in the the response. It begins to occur to us that perhaps the three day drive through Britain, France, and Belgium; the autobahn through endless and almost hypnotic German forests; not to mention some rather dicey moments with Polish lorry drivers, may not have been the worst of it.

MedivacTrucksToUkraine does what it says on the tin. This is their eighth, and largest, convoy. Paul Parsons is the driving force behind this particular organisation — one of many in Britain doing this kind of work — and has so far found and delivered more than seventy trucks to the front, brim-full of medical equipment to the tune of — to date — well over a million pounds. My car, a trusty 2014 Nissan, is carrying water-pumps and some state-of-the-art eye scanning equipment, vital for removing shrapnel from the horrific sort of wounds that are all too common in this war. We see some of these injuries first hand as we get shown around the hospital where some of our cargo is delivered. Long clean corridors on several floors house veterans in various states of rehabilitation, some recently arrived from the front, still bandaged and bloodied. Many others missing limbs and being fitted for prosthetics. Those that have suffered enemy captivity the most obvious from their criminal malnourishment. The area around the hospital is a building site, such is the need to expand. A nurse tells me this is just a civilian hospital, 'but we are all army hospitals now…'

To Kyiv

A 7am briefing precedes our exit from Lviv. No longer can we get away with our relaxed approach to driving and communications — from here on we are accompanied by locals, army or intelligence. Our phones are generally off and most importantly our location services disconnected. Although we are now to drive in a far stricter convoy, our phone and digital footprint has to show anything but. We are given burner phones with Ukrainian sims, and we now only stop at prearranged service stations. A few of the Brits who are not venturing further into the country wave us off. I'm driving with my father, who has been part of a previous convoy up to this point, but from here on out, it's new to us both. A sort of boy's own adventure. In a war zone.

It's flat. Vast plains of rape and plough stretch unbroken for miles either side of the road, which is as straight as anything the Romans could think up. Huge grain silos pop up from time to time — their true scale only clear from the way they dwarf the train trucks that are lined up beneath them. There is some effort from one of our chase cars, driven by Archie, a British volunteer not much over twenty, to keep us moving at pace, but it's a losing battle, and self-preservation wins out. The slightly slower speed gives my father time to spot wildlife. Birds of prey, kestrels, even a booted eagle — ducks too, but most importantly the odd stork, ludicrously perched in their giant nests atop a telegraph pole or tree. The onion spires of golden churches stand out against the sky here and there as the villages pass by, tiny cottages dotted among the scrub and trees.

Our first fuel stop adds some levity when three people nearly fill up with LPG before someone has the sense to find out what the Ukrainian for Diesel is. It's a good reminder that we are in no way professionals. But the war still seems very far away — there is plenty of fuel, and no obvious sign of anything out of the ordinary to the west of Kyiv. The odd statue from previous eras reminds us

this country is no stranger to it though. Here a tank on a plinth, there a MiG-15 casually erupting from a village roundabout. But as we get further east, there are subtle signs of things to come. Tank transporters pass us, empty, traveling back on the road to the Polish border — and of course there are no planes in the sky. Small cemeteries in every settlement become a constant reminder of the human cost, so clearly visible from the road with their flags fluttering in the breeze over each grave. After six hours or so we stop for lunch just outside Zhytomyr. It's the first place I see young guys who are clearly in the army — short haircuts and boots a giveaway. My father meets a Brit who is delivering four ambulances in another convoy from England. It's his fourteenth trip.

As we near Kyiv we see the first real signs of destruction. Buildings blown up, not by aircraft, but by tanks. The Battle of Hostomel took place just to the north of this road. As we cross elevated sections of motorway and bridges, it becomes clear that one side of the carriageway has often been dismantled. Oleh, our Ukrainian guide, tells me that the remaining bridges are mined as well, in case the Russians get this far. I see two men in a field wearing mine-clearance gear, the cumbersome body armour and face guard visible from quite a distance. I presume they are training. One sweeps a metal detector from side to side, the other puts stakes in the ground. In other places women stand at the side of the road, holding bunches of flowers or selling jars of honey.

Kyiv is a big city, and the Dnieper is huge. Everywhere I look there are the signs of bustle and life, and more importantly a clear sense of future. New buildings seem to be going up everywhere, residential as well as business. And there is traffic. Lots of it. We creep towards the river with seemingly three million other Kyivans. There is a curious duality everywhere. We pass a marina with a fancy yacht broker on one side of the road. On the other is a vast billboard advertising a drone factory. The war is here, but life goes on.

Beyond Kyiv, the sight of uniforms and military vehicles becomes quite common. The countryside flattens out again, the fields open up into huge great squares of hundreds upon hundreds of acres of dark brown soil, and beyond that, in the distance, thin lines of trees. It's worth making a point of the size of this country. It may have been a healthy 1,300 miles from the midlands to the far side of the Polish border, but that's four or five countries' worth of traveling. Ukraine is some 900 miles across on its own. It's like driving the width of Britain, but only in Norfolk (except somehow it's even flatter than Norfolk, if that's possible), and then doing that same drive another eight times. And all that distance is just field after field of this black earth — *chernozem* as the Ukrainians call it. No stones, or chalk, or flint. And no hills either. Just soil… and you could spread it like butter. My father comments about the vast unending flatness of Ukraine — 'you could almost drive forever,' — 'We have,' I reply.

It's no wonder it's so hard to fight here, he later reminds me, his own army background adding weight to this remark. There is so little cover, and the open areas must take forever to cross. I'm suddenly reminded of the countless drone videos I have seen online of tanks — and people — *not* making it across.

Poltava

In Poltava, a city in central Ukraine of roughly a quarter of a million, we stop for the night in a charming hotel, if rather faded in its glory. This is the first time I get to see the direct impact that expeditions like this are making out here. We hand over a variety of kit to various outfits all doing different, but incredibly important jobs. Some goes to the 403rd Separate Drone Battalion — Archil, a Georgian who has been fighting in Ukraine since 2014 meets us in a vehicle that Paul had delivered a year ago, still in good working order. They have made an eight hour round trip to meet us. In another handover, a contact made last year in Sumy, a dentist, Ihor from the 92nd Brigade, takes delivery of a tooth X-ray machine and an ultrasound. Asod, Ciri and their Sgt. Ihor from the

3rd Air Assault Brigade, all drone operators, are very keen to show us first hand what they fly when at the front line.

It's very clear that some of these soldiers have made a real connection with the regular members of our outfit over the years they've been doing this. Archie especially, having made so many trips, clearly has a strong rapport with some of them, and it occurs to me that they are probably no older than him. Hearing the stories, and indeed seeing video footage of what they do on a daily basis to their enemy, in a very clear case of kill or be killed, is undeniably shocking. The private effects they show us of some of their fallen enemies prove just how close to each other the two sides are getting during skirmishes. It's incredibly personal, and they've had to utterly normalise it. Life has clearly become quite cheap for them, and certainly their attitude to the Russians who are in their country is utter contempt. It's impossible not to make the judgement that this is going to be a deep hatred that will not shift for generations. The fact that they are having to do what they do at such a young age is the greatest tragedy of all. It brings home the massive importance that was being placed on rehabilitation when we were in Lviv. There we were taken round an incredible clinic called Unbroken, whose team work pretty tirelessly to help these veterans, some really just boys and girls, to adjust to normal life after being soldiers. In a war where they have had to embrace hell, they are going to need all the help they can get.

At dinner I meet and chat to Oleh's brother. It's almost a relief to talk to someone who has clung on to a vaguely normal life. He works in IT as a programmer, and though his industry is obviously heavily involved with the manufacture of modern war materiel, he is keen to point out he is not a soldier. He tells me about the night of the invasion. He says he had a dream that night about bombs going off, only to wake to the reality. After leaving his wife down in the shelter, he then spent the night driving round Kyiv looking for his daughter, who was out. He watched first hand the chaos of that night evolve, not knowing how far the Russians were going to get, or whether Ukraine would even be able to resist. It's a fascinating comparison to where Ukraine is now. There's a confidence in the ranks, particularly the younger ones. I hear them no longer talking just of survival, but of victory. But while life goes on as normally as it can for some, there is no escaping the deep sadness that underlines all of this. Michael, another of our group, tells me of two old ladies he chatted to at a stop on our journey earlier in the day. He asked them 'how is life here?' — 'It's very hard,' they replied, 'our husbands and sons are at the war, and we cry every day.'

It's hard not to be moved to tears. Only a day or two ago I spent an unbelievably sobering morning walking around a cemetery in Lviv. At 9am, a message came over the tannoy, and though I couldn't understand, it ended with the repeated crack of a gavel. It didn't stop at nine, but struck on thirty-eight times — the day's toll. Six graves were being dug that morning. In one cemetery. In one city. The faces of the dead smiled out from large pictures on every headstone. The most recent was twenty-seven. The youngest was nineteen.

The Road to Konotop

Two air raid warnings in the night, but as in Lviv and Kyiv, they are largely ignored until the specific route of the missile is known. We leave Poltava later in the morning, and set off on the worst road in the world. I think 50mph is slow at first, before realising we will be lucky to go 10. It must have been bad before the war, because a few years is not enough time to ravage this road to this extent. It's more a collection of potholes spoiled by some tarmac than the other way around. We drive largely on the verge for what seems like hours, weaving in and out, whilst my father — who's birthday it is — tells me about the joys of his earlier walk around the city centre and the memorial to the Battle of Poltava in 1709, when the Swedes invaded and were kicked out by the Cossacks and Peter the Great.

We pick up our new army escort at a small farm en route, important now as we are approaching checkpoints and need help to explain what on earth we are doing here. We stop unexpectedly in a tiny village just beyond Lypova Dolyna. Amazingly, the car being driven by a former British Army staff officer and an intelligence officer has nearly run out of fuel. Much ribbing ensues, but to be fair to them, they are probably both far more used to having someone else check their fuel tanks. Paul comes to the rescue in great style by buying a length of hose from the bemused Ukrainian village shop owner and syphoning one tank to another. All is well, the disgusting taste of diesel notwithstanding.

Our new Ukrainian army escorts consist of Daria, who was a civilian last year when she last met the team, and has since joined up to help with the public face of the army, and Makar, a senior lieutenant who helps command some 850 men of the 25th Assault Brigade. He's clearly quite a senior officer, despite his rank, and it's a reminder of how big and how quickly the army has had to grow that a lieutenant has so many men in his charge. We stop for a photo op outside Konotop before some of the vehicles are taken off our hands by the 25th. A very eager curator shows us around the museum in the town. Several of the rooms are empty and clearly many of the finer exhibits have been taken away to safety. They have remedied this by gathering a display of captured Russian equipment and crashed drones, and in another couple of rooms turning the museum into a gallery for local artists. It's a wonderful example of making do. A bench exists in this museum on which sat Ukraine's famous poet Taras Shevchenko. Daria is persuaded to recite some lines by heart from his poem *Testament*, which she has known since childhood.

When I am dead, bury me
In my beloved Ukraine,
My tomb upon a grave mound high
Amid the spreading plain,
So that the fields, the boundless steppes,
The Dnieper's plunging shore
My eyes could see, my ears could hear
The mighty river roar.

The Trenches

Driving with our remaining five vehicles deep into the forest, we arrive eventually at a rear position inhabited by troops who are rotating out of the front line. It's something of a rest stop for them, but of course quite an apprehensive moment for us. Drones are a worry here, and everything is done to disperse the vehicles in the wood and cover them with camouflage netting. Drone jitters soon abate on account of the new enemy. Mosquitoes. Whether they smelled two dozen pasty English ankles from several miles away, or were sent by the Russians, I can't quite decide. After much adjustment of clothing and a gallon of DEET, we acclimatise. It is a fully entrenched camp, surrounded in fact by trenches with loopholes which were much closer to the front line earlier in the war, before the Kursk incursion, where these guys have been fighting.

Our bunks are deep underground in long bunkers with six feet of earth piled on top. Though reasonably basic, there is electricity inside via a daisy-chain of extension cables, and heat provided by a stove. It is by no means cold at this time of year though. The latrine is much as you'd expect, and water comes from bottles or a large jerry can hung over a pole as a wash station. The soldiers cook us a great stew and are delighted to show us some of their armoured vehicles and equipment as a treat. Other than this, the absence of personal weapons is notable, except for an AK-74 above the bunk next to mine. There is no alcohol. I share out some chocolate I have in my pocket instead. We are each presented with a Vyshyvanka, the traditional Ukrainian embroidered shirts, and shoulder badges from the 25th. Makar tears the badge from his own uniform and gives it to me, which is an

honour I won't soon forget. He is taking my car when we finally hand over the last vehicles at Sumy. Paul and Archie are presented with a medal for all the incredible work they have done. The sense of gratitude and comradeship is very evident, and Archie is clearly moved.

The Train

It's a surprisingly good night's sleep all things considered, and we prepare to set off again at 8am with the unanimous conclusion that we have had quite an adventure. A final photo as a group in our Vyshyvanka shirts — it's Ukraine's national day — before driving to Sumy to hand over the last of our kit and then board the train to Kyiv. At a final fuel stop on the way, we are buzzed by a pair of Ukrainian F-16s. Not many miles behind where we slept, life is still very normal, and Sumy itself seems quite unaffected. But the day we leave, the Russians hit a civilian bus in the city, killing nine people. We are only stopped at one checkpoint on the way into Sumy, and our phones are checked at some length by an officer. He's looking for any photos showing Ukrainian kit, and any Russian numbers in our contacts, but with the help of our friends, we are eventually allowed through.

In Sumy, as we hand over the last vehicles to the 80th Separate Airborne Assault Galician Brigade, Paul asks about the fate of some of the trucks delivered in the previous expedition. Most are still in use. Some have been destroyed. Their colonel is there to thank us all.

There is something of a rush to get to the train on time, but we make it. It's an old and charming sleeper. Very hot, no running water, but a fearsome conductress makes tea from a huge urn at the end of the carriage. The train pauses for a while at Vorozhba, which I'm a little concerned to see is only five miles from the Russian border. All schools are evacuated here, and children are compulsorily removed from the area. Adults continue their lives however, despite the obvious signs of drone and missile damage to rooftops, and 20mm shell and bullet holes in the walls by the tracks. It's a long journey, but the train pulls into Kyiv on time in the evening, and after a final supper we board the overnight sleeper to Lviv, and the end of the journey.

I have the chance for a final conversation with Oleh on the train after some drinks. He tells me he used to be in a band, and we swap stories about our shared career. He joined up early in the war, but having three children, eventually went back to civilian life. He tells me that early in the war many felt differently about the Russians than they do now, but after the Bucha massacre, nothing was the same. Oleh talks with great emotion about people he knows who have fought and died. Vasyl Slipak, an opera singer, joined up early in the war. Friends asked him if he really wanted to risk his life when he had such a brilliant career as an international star. A spiritual man by all accounts, he said he'd made his peace with it, and that it was important to him to fight for Ukraine. He was shot by a sniper and killed in 2016. Oleh mentions another, Bogdan, a history teacher at a university. someone he clearly thought so highly of that he felt him too important to risk. 'I spoke to his brother, and on his last call with him he asked "*do you understand that people are dying there?"* Bogdan said "*It wouldn't be the worst death to die here for this."* I wanted to protect him, but eventually it happened that he died for us.' Clearly moved, he adds 'I don't know who first told this phrase, but — if there are no people who are ready to die for the nation, then the nation is dead.'