

# GIRLS CUTTING THEIR LOCKS

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**UKRAINIAN  
INSTITUTE  
OF NATIONAL  
REMEMBRANCE**

УДК 821.161.2'06-92-94:355.422(477)АТО"2014/..."=111

П44

### **Podobna Yevgeniya**

П44 Girls cutting their locks. A book of memories / the Russo-Ukrainian War / Yevgeniya Podobna, texts; Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance, Luta Sprava Publishing, Kyiv, 2020. – 344 p.

ISBN 978-617-7420-77-3

The book is full of stories and memories of 25 women in the military who fought in the "Anti-Terrorist Operation" (ATO) as a part of the Armed forces of Ukraine and as a part of volunteer battalions in 2014-2018 as shooters, machine gunners, medics, motor gunners, snipers etc. These are the stories about military operations in Luhansk oblast and Donetsk oblast, Ukrainian towns and villages, their liberation from invaders, remembering comrades, locals, military manners and customs, as well as reflections on being a woman in the army in different times of war. The stories are accompanied by photographs from the war zone.

For everybody who is interested in and concerned about the Russo-Ukrainian War, the War in Donbass.

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Published by the Ukrainian Institute  
of National Remembrance  
Not for sale



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**Yevgeniya Podobna**

# **GIRLS CUTTING THEIR LOCKS**



Kyiv  
2020

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## GIRLS CUTTING THEIR LOCKS...

*Girls cutting their locks*

*Wearing combat boots*

*With no happiness on the way*

*And a bleeding heart by their side*

*Дівчата зрізають коси*

*І туго шнурують берці,*

*Їм щастя приснилось, здалося.*

*Кровить забинтоване серце.*

Olena Zadorozhna

**T**hese stories were written between November 2017 and July 2018. Time does not stop. Not for anybody. Some of the women featured here are leading slightly different lives right now. Two of the volunteers became soldiers in the Armed forces of Ukraine. And one of them is now a mother to a little boy.

“A war has a face of a man, not a woman” – Svetlana Alexievich, a Belarusian writer, once said. We used to think that a woman should bring life into the world, not take it. However, the Russo-Ukrainian War forced hundreds of Ukrainian women to paint their faces and pick up guns. Girls from all around Ukraine went to Donbass to save lives as paramedics, to help the army with the essentials as volunteers, and many of them were liberating towns and villages in Donbass region with men as intelligence agents, gunners, snipers, motor gunners etc.

25 stories. Women of war. They made it out of the Battle of Ilovaisk and saved lives in the Battle of Avdiivka. They were a part of the deadly battle near Lutuhyne and the Battle of Svitlodarsk. They have dealt with invaded towns and villages of Donbass. They managed to get on with extremely difficult situations behind enemy lines and evacuated lost soldiers from the front lines. Some girls took this step to be closer to their loved ones, others realised that the army is the next logical step after volunteering or decided to keep fighting after Maidan. The thing is that two of the women featured here are Russian natives, who came to fight on the side of Ukraine. There are women who's been



here for 4 month and others who's been here for 4 years. They are so different. Each and every story is unique. They are filled with bravery, fear, failure and victory, strength and weakness, pure love and pain of loss like there are no words to describe.

These stories aren't censored. They will tell you about war as it is. They will tell you about the day-to-day, about the fights that one day will get into history books, about destroying common knowledge of any war as a totally "male world" and a difficult path to lives they had before. Our goal was to make a record of females' soldier stories. Surely, we didn't have the opportunity to open up a conversation with all of them. Some women refused to take part in this due to safety reasons (mainly, intelligence and sniper units), others declined our proposition due to their beliefs (two women thought of this project as "sexist") and some girls we were just unable to find. Most of the stories were recorded on the front lines, others in Kyiv, Kharkiv, Sviatohirsk, Bahmut. Each and every story is incredibly unique and will not leave you indifferent.

## **P. S.**

**T**wo years have passed since the first edition came out. There's been a lot of changes in the lives of our heroines. Four women became mothers. Some of them are back to life as civilians. Others became a part of Women Veterans' Movement. Two women are gone.

*Yana Chervona* died on April 2nd, 2019, near a village called Novozvanivka, Luhansk region, due to a towed 152 mm field gun, which is banned by the Minsk agreements. She was buried in Kharkiv. She left behind a son and a daughter.

*Olha Nikishyna (Ostapenko)* died on May 10th, 2020, in the Joint Forces Operation zone. She's buried in Poltava.

Rest in peace.



# Yuliia Matviienko

«Bilka/Squirrel\*»



\* A code name.



“When you hear a gunshot, everyone is running and yelling: 300! And you’re not running, you’re praying silently for this young boy to die. You know what kind of a shot it was; you know he’s not going to survive and that he doesn’t deserve to live as a vegetable... Half an hour ago he was protecting you, you were walking behind him, and now you’re praying for his death... Then it’s going to be easier for everybody, though you’re still hoping for a miracle, which is never going to happen... There is probably no soul by that point, it’s just not there anymore...

You’re not running to save him, cause you’re going to lose it, and you have to figure out the next move, how to get this son of a bitch, how to outsmart him, how to kill him, and your boys will live... He is clever, impudent and experienced. He’s killed a lot of our guys. And he’s not going by the book, he’s improvising. You can’t get distracted. You have to distract him, to make him believe. You’re trying to trick him. You’re doing it with the help of a boy who died, who shared bullets with you just yesterday... He was killed by him as well. And you’re talking to them, you’re asking them for help in stopping this bastard... You’re asking those who have died to help you, silently, so no one would know. You don’t believe God, you believe them, you believe that they’re gone, but they didn’t leave you. They can help you to avenge them from above.”

(FROM YULIIA MATVIIENKO’S FACEBOOK PAGE)



I am a sniper. How did that happen? Well, that's a long story. When the war broke down, girls were trying to understand what can we do to help. At first, we helped with food at checkpoints, we helped our guys defending the city hall in Zaporizhzhia, because we were afraid what happened in Luhansk, Donetsk and Kharkiv



can happen here. Our friends, our husbands, our brothers were gathering to protect administration buildings. We were gathering supplies for the guys on the front lines in the supermarkets, at the markets, and at the events of all kinds in the city. Then the supplies were transported by self-defence units into the war zone. They were able to get pretty much

everywhere. For example, in Dnipro soldiers made some of the supplies into boxes and these boxes were shipped and delivered by aviation, when they had a chance.

Then we had to deal with August 2014, Ilovaisk, huge losses in Starobesheve, Russians invading our borders. People have died. So many casualties. They got into our morgue in Zaporizhzhia as well. The guys from self-defence units were responsible for getting them out. And just like that I realised that I wasn't doing enough. I should do more. Girls started going to the front lines. I can't remember one quiet day in 2014. We were always going somewhere, getting our hands on something... Often, we were contacted by relatives of the guys who were lost, captured. They were asking for help in finding them. We were gathering information from our wounded, from people who were captured before, and delivering that information to the Security Service of Ukraine. Since the fall of 2014 volunteers have already split the divisions between them. All kinds of things happened. Sometimes we were contacted by these poor bastards who were just lazy and other guys were really struggling, they weren't getting anything. I myself have been to the 55th brigade, the 37th battalion, and to the guys from the National Guard of Ukraine who were on the frontlines back then.

These guys were a part of our family now. We were living for them. We were afraid to come back home. We saw this peace and quiet and we just couldn't stand it. We were worried, we didn't know how they were doing. They were so far away. And we couldn't help them in any way. Then Debaltseve happened and I realised that the best thing I could do is just go and stand beside them. No uniform, no boots, no weapon can save a life. You just need to be standing beside them with a weapon in your hands and keeping this war away from home. Whatever we did



before, we couldn't stop the killings. So, I had a clear understanding why am I going there, why am I joining the army, going to the war.

My battalion was located near Shyrokyne. At the time our enemies have already had women snipers. I also had friends in this field. They said that men are especially afraid of us because we are a little bit better at this job and they don't know exactly what to expect. Due to physiology we are a little more resilient and attentive. If they are afraid of us, they must have a reason. So, I decided to become a person who will be able to influence at least a small part of war, even the smallest one, to save a life is the most important thing. Our battalion commander believed in me. He said that if I decided to do this, I will be able to. I am stubborn and motivated. And he knew what I did before, what I've seen before. Although, no one actually wanted us in the army and obviously not during the war. Even now we are not particularly welcome to try combat occupations.

"Why would you do that? There's no place here for a woman. Nothing to do."— our battalion commander was told. The ones who already knew us decided that they will protect us. We're here, right? We started learning. Instructors were strict. They did the best they could until we passed out, had bruises, abrasions on elbows and knees, dislocated shoulders and so on. Sometimes I looked like a piece of chopped meat. Something like that. Sometimes we hated them, but there was no stopping. We continued with our training no matter what, because we wanted to show them that we can. And we did.

The boys who wanted to protect us or stay away from us realised that they have to come to terms with the fact that we're here and that they need to give us information that will help us and teach us something. They taught us how to do our combat boots like in Afghanistan, how to make booby traps, to mask, how to deal with

stress. We were lucky, because we were in a battalion of volunteers. They were passionate. When newbies came, we were the ones who taught them and gave advice. By then soldiers knew that if we came to have a rest near them, they will be safe and sound. We want let our guard down. We want close our eyes. No enemy will be unseen. They treated us totally different. However, we had to earn it with blood and sweat.

By the way, what do you think the main difference between men and women snipers is (in sports as well, I think)? If a man is exhausted, he needs to rest, to restore, to take some time. If a woman is exhausted, she is capable of anything, she feels fresh and strong somehow. It is a mystery of nature. We are capable of pretty much anything. There was one time when a sniper-instructor called me and said: "I have a bunch of 19-year-olds here. They want to learn. How can I teach them? They are kids." I told him that if he wants for them to survive, he needs to teach them how to do that. With blood and sweat. There is no other way to help. You have to teach them to survive. This is what our instructors did with us. This is caring.

At first, we had something like a month and a half of service. It was the first time I had an automatic rifle in my hands. I did all the necessary tests. And then I started learning my craft. Trenches, testing grounds. We were learning everything by hand. They often tell me that I'm not very good at all the terms and stuff, ballistics, but there's no questioning my shooting. I don't get tired. Only if I'm sick. I am good with cold. It's worse with humid, when it's raining and you're lying in the gutter, which is your position at the time, knowing that you're going to be there for a while... I got used to it by now.

When my boys are safe and sound, I'm good. I need to shoot first, to cover them, before "they" make a shot. I don't shoot when they're not shooting. I usually see the target; I follow it and I don't shoot

if my boys are safe. I have my own code. Though, if my boys are in trouble, I can break all of the rules and work until they are safe. They have to get back in one piece. They have to get back alive to their loved ones. I don't always work on the positions stated for me if I see a threat for my people because of it. Commanders had to get used to it. I need to preserve the front line and save the boys. That is the main thing in this kind of war.

My targets... I usually say to myself that I will think about it later. It's easier when you're still at war. I don't think about it. I don't want to think about it. There are moments, when, say, we'll never say it out loud, but we are not robots. Yes, soldiers sometimes do have to make a kill. That is the job. But when someone says: "You are soldiers, you can...". No way! Not long ago we were civilians. Just like you. Like everybody else. I've never even held a gun before. I don't like to take picture with guns even now. When I was a volunteer, I usually took pictures with flowers, with anything other than guns. We were forced to do this. We were forced to pick up guns by people who invaded our country. And, yes, men do cry. Sometimes they just cannot deal with it. They start drinking. In which cases I usually yell at them.

I've had moments of wanting to give up. I was done. I wanted to go home. I had a realization that I feel sorry for the people I've shot. I will never say it out loud, though. Men are watching me, for Christ's sake. I must be tough. When someone is feeling blue, I have to brighten up their day. I can cry later, really. I've had moments of being far away. Feeling cold, shaking... it's called a panic attack. You're cold, you're hot, you're shaking. And then you're fine. That's just how it is. We're only human. I won't shy away from saying it again. Guys have them too. Especially those who've been in a knife fight. It's difficult, when it's so close. I know that many of those who've been demobilized



think about it. Even if it was just this one dead guy, they can't forget him, they see his eyes.

It all depends. Everyone has their own limits. Someone can be broken right away, others in a year or so. And appearances are deceptive. You can see a big guy, all pumped-up, who won't be able to get out of a blindage after the first shooting. "Come out. All good now." – you're saying. And he just can't. He's panicking. We also had a guy, a boy really, 19-ish, scrawny, glasses on. During scouting, he witnessed two people blowing up on a mine. There were injured, he was injured. One guy had a pelvic fracture. This skinny guy helped himself and all the



others, he pulled out the injured ones and waited for the reinforcement, so he could show them, where they were. And all you can see is a child, four-eyed, dweeby. No one could expect that. And here you go. You never know what to expect during a war.

We have to lie in positions and observe for long periods of time. Usually it's a day or a night. We don't do 24-hour shifts. I've never had one of these. Snipers can be foolish and think that if you're in position, you need to kill someone, to make a mark. In fact, we often just come, lie, observe and don't make a single shot. Obviously, anything is possible. But we do have our own rules. If they don't do anything,

we don't do anything. If someone is wounded, I'm not even talking about a lost soldier to a sniper shot, then I'm allowed to work in full capacity. And, of course, we do reconnaissance, we cover and so on.

Yes, this is a weird war. Our priority has not changed. We can't let this go further. And we should try to go further in their direction. Sometimes they are still trying to get past our front line. Other times we can see that they are too close to civilians and we have to get them away from there. There is no Minsk Protocol or other agreements for them. Debaltseve should be ours due to these agreements. As well as many other towns and villages. What will happen next? Nobody knows. If we are able to adhere to our vows, we have to protect Ukrainian people. Now, due to these agreements, we are not able to protect Ukrainians who got stuck in Novoazovsk, Donetsk, Luhansk and other invaded territories. We don't have the opportunity.

We are forced to break our vows. Yes, we do protect our people in the peaceful part of Ukraine. We do the best we can to prevent our enemy from crossing the lines. but we're not protecting people who got stuck in the invaded part of Ukraine, in Crimea. We just don't. Yes, it's politics. I get that. And we will help them. And the guys who've already demobilised would come back in a second to stand beside us if there were a "go". Most of them can't do anything but come back to Debaltseve, Novoazovsk and other places where they lost their friends; to come back to Crimea, because they were forced to leave. We have a lot of people from Crimea, Donetsk, Luhansk. And it's not like they have nowhere to go. No, they are relocated. They have places to live with their families. But they are fighting. Plenty of people like that.

Many people say that this war is all about staying in trenches, but there is a reason for that. We have a purpose. And it's a lie that we get irritated by night clubs and weddings when we go back to the

peaceful part of Ukraine. I don't. When I see things like that, I know what I'm fighting for. I do this, so they would live freely, safe and sound. I don't want my children to ever know what a bullet is, I don't want them to collect casings, I don't want them to know the difference between a 120mm mortar and an 81mm mortar. Once I was asked to bring fragments and casings to the school museum. On the one hand, it's good, it's for remembering. On the other hand, I don't want them to even know what that is. My husband is here as well. At first, he was a part of a self-defence unit, then he went there. Here. Whatever. He is very smart. He's an engineer. He's responsible for communication.

What will happen after the war? The saddest thing is that my children will have grown up by then, probably. They won't need me. I don't hug them now. And then if I do, they would say: "Mom, what are you doing? We're past that." Well, I might be wrong. I want to spend time with my kids. I was an economist once... I will get back into the life. I don't see the point in staying in the army after the war. As of now. For myself. Even though, there is at least a women's rights movement in the army. There was once a case when two women were awarded with the Orders for Courage. And documents said that one of them was a seamstress, and the other was a medical orderly. The Chief of the General Staff, Viktor Muzhenko, is congratulating them, and we're asking him, maybe something is bothering him... maybe the fact that he awarded a seamstress and a medical orderly, when one of them is a sniper and the other one is a spotter. I was the medical orderly. We came to Kyiv wanting to get some respect for women like us, to have equal rights with men.

It is weird, but mostly I get called out by men who are just sitting at home on their couches and voice their patriotism. They love to tell me that I am a woman and I have to be where I belong, that



there is a place for me. I usually agree. I say that I will gladly come back to be with my kids once they get up and take my place. As soon as the men who's calling us out go to war, we'll come back, no questions asked. Sometimes they say that we're just slacking off, that we're not useful at all. And I usually invite them over to see what we're doing here. I'm not going to tell you. Just come and see it with your own eyes.



I will remember a lot. Good and bad. Although, there is no good in war, only pain and death. But it came into our home, so we don't have any other option. We have to do what we have to do. If the God exists, he will forgive us all.

A photograph of a soldier in camouflage gear lying on a dirt mound in a field with sparse vegetation. The soldier is wearing a helmet and is positioned in the lower right foreground. The background shows a dirt mound with some green plants and bare tree branches under a clear sky.

# Olena Bilozerska

**UVB\* “RIGHT SECTOR” / UKRAINIAN  
VOLUNTEER ARMY, THE ARMED FORCES  
OF UKRAINE, UKRAINIAN NAVAL  
INFANTRY CORPS, THE 503RD REGIMENT**

*\* Ukrainian volunteer battalions.*



**W**hen it was a done deal, the war broke down, I was sure as hell that I'm going. Long before it started, I was a member of the Ukrainian National Assembly – Ukrainian People's Self-Defence, where we trained like no one else. I've been training in the woods since 2004. Even then our commander was saying that there is going to be a war with Russia. It's inevitable. Not many people believed him at the time. I didn't. But he taught us a lot. When the war broke down, we just packed and left. There was no other option for me. The Ukrainian National Assembly – Ukrainian People's Self-Defence was one of the founders of the "Right sector". They would obviously leave later on. At the time our whole community transformed into the "Right sector" automatically. There were lots of other people, we were stuck at the base for long periods of time, they wouldn't give us ammunition, so some of the people left for other divisions. I've lost my dear friend who was in the Aidar Battalion. Some of the people left for the 131st intelligence battalion.

I wasn't raised as a woman who belongs in the kitchen. We've never even raised this type of question in our family. My beloved ones supported my decision. I left for the East with my husband. At first, we came to Dnipro, trained in the suburbs. Then I was checking cars at checkpoints for a while. I was picked for this job, because I had my own weapon. Here we were. A cop, six people from the "Right sector" and a poorly built checkpoint. At the time everything was a mess. Nobody knew anything. Someone's going somewhere... There was this one time, when we got a call from one of the neighbouring checkpoints: "There is a black car coming your way. Everyone is armed and wearing balaclavas." We're asking: "Who are they?" They say: "We don't know. We just let them through." Yes, these kinds of things happened back then. Total chaos.

I got into ATO zone in the end of April, but I wasn't really involved until June 28th. And I didn't realise at the time, that I was at war.

I didn't realise it when I heard bullets swooshing and blasts coming my way, or when I saw ruined houses, dead and wounded. I only realised it when I was walking down the street in Dnipro in my uniform with a rifle. It was surreal, not real. Me. With a loaded weapon. In the city!

I knew beforehand that I was going to be a sniper. I was a decent shooter. I had the juice. I'm stubborn and patient. I'm not very strong physically and I'm not a good runner, so I wasn't going to be a stormtrooper. What else would I do? Although, I didn't become sniper at once. I left for the East with my own weapon – a carbine. We bought every possible cartridge from every available store in Dnipropetrovsk Oblast. Where else would we get them at the time? We bought a 1938 German rifle. It was beautiful. And it was stolen while I was on leave.

I was running around with a worn-out Dragunov sniper rifle for a year. I started learning, I shot and killed my first gunman. Little by little I learned the craft. Now I have a Ukrainian-made weapon by "Zbroyar" company. I named her Halia. Because she is a handful. She needs a special care and she's Ukrainian, so the name came from here as well. The last one was Yulia. Each weapon has a name. I love my ammo. I try to keep it to myself. Literally.

When we were moving towards the East I wasn't scared. I was scared when we were waiting for our first "go", because you don't know what to expect. During our first time we get into their rear, like 15 km into their rear. We were lying in ambush. We got off easy. No fighting. I saw an illuminating shell for the first time back then. It seemed like a daylight, like they can see us clearly. It was scary. it's not scary, once you've started doing something. It's scary before that.

When dawn broke, we got into the village. We didn't know the numbers. Dogs were barking. And some grandma could see us and tell on us. Intelligence agents taught to kill civilians who "made" them,



because they can tell on them. Though I'm not familiar with any such case, when Ukrainian army or volunteer army would adhere to the rule. The very understanding makes you better at hiding.

Then we made an ambush and went to get ourselves some ammo. We were told that there is a small group of separatists with weapons. Our goal was to kill them and take their weapons. We made an exemplary ambush. We sat there for a couple of days. Then we saw a Ukrainian intelligence unit riding on an IFV (infantry fighting vehicle). They stopped near us a couple of times. If they had no flags, we would have shot them. Then we realised that they scared off these guys we were waiting for. And when they came close to us once again, our commander told me to let my hair down and go to them. I had a flag. It saved me multiple times from a friendly fire. So, I did come out with this flag above my head, and that's how we get acquainted with the 93rd brigade. We visited their base, got to meet their commander Oleh Mikats. It was probably the first time the "Right sector" got into a relationship with the army. On the 6th of July we were fighting for Karlivka together. That was my first fight.

We were shot at, getting out with a bang. Machine guns and snipers. We were moving like this for 2 kms. Fun, yeah. Well, that is what we thought before it got worse. At the time it was a huge dose of adrenaline. I wasn't myself for a while. 4 days have past and we tried again. I didn't want to go. And then I realised that if I show fear once, they won't let me do this again. That was my main motivation.

By the way, I got food poisoning right before our first operation. We have to go and I have a fever and all of the symptoms. My husband wanted me to stay. I didn't. I was literally dying the whole night. I passed out on the ground right before we were leaving a checkpoint. They're waking me up, saying we have to go, and I'm terribly weak, pale, I'm blacking out. Now I would say: "I can't. You go without me." At the time

it would have been construed as me being afraid. And it's really difficult for a woman to have her commander take her with men on a mission. Showing weakness is deadly. I was afraid of it. I took off my helmet, threw it in the car. I took off other things and gave it to my husband. And something else to someone else. I was left with my uniform, my rifle and my cartridge. That's it. I was shaking when we got to the village. Once we started fighting, I forgot all about feeling unwell.

It was easier for us in volunteer battalions. I cannot say that there was some kind of gender equality right from the start. No. Though, it was easier than in other divisions. I admit that I'm no athlete. I spent most of my life working on my computer. It was really difficult for me physically. But girls had no privilege to show weakness. We were resilient by nature. Even now I only bring 10 kilos of weight with me. Max. It was all about manoeuvre back then. And we were a part of an intelligence unit. I rarely got picked. Sometimes I was fighting tooth and nail to go on a mission. And I always think carefully before going on a mission. If I know it's too much, I won't even ask. If I know I'm the best for a mission, I will stand my ground. I felt that I'm accepted when I shot my first separatist. They saw my composure during a mission. Guys respected me before, but they wanted me to do less during a mission. Every girl had to prove herself.

I was responsible for all kinds of work. For example, sometimes I got out of a trench fully and took pictures/videos for our intelligence agents. I took panoramic shots with my professional camera from my past life. You can imagine me standing with a tripod. One panoramic video usually takes up to 10 minutes. And there is a separatist like 400 metres from me. Maybe closer. A human factor did me a favour once or twice. They weren't watching 24/7 and they probably weren't expecting us to be so daring. Once I had like 30 more seconds





of work and they noticed me and took a shot. It was close. It took me 7 km to get there. If I stop, I'll have to do it again. So, I stay and continue. They probably thought that I was a scarecrow, because no human would stay after a bullet went right past, and I didn't flinch, I needed this video. They didn't make a single shot after that.

Then Avdiivka happened. July 2014. We were coming from a field and they were shooting at us with machine guns from apartment buildings. We got out of our cars and hid. When we got into the town, I was ordered to hold a position in the bushes and cover our guys who were going towards a street. I didn't even think that they would see me perfectly from above. I had no time to get a grip and they've already started shooting. I got out of there, all sad, because I failed my mission. And here I see we shake hands. I'm confused. It turns out while I was trying to get a grip and separatists were shooting at me, twenty guys were able to get closer to them. That same day I was lying on the ground with two submachine gunners. Watching the street, no one's here. And here we go, some people are running our way, one by one, near the fence. Boys are yelling: "Separatists! Fire!" And I was able to see that they were teenagers, civilians, they wanted to see what war looks like. I yelled: "Stand down! Civilians!" Thank goodness I made it.

November 2014 was all about Opytne. Breaking down. We're walking and stumbling upon a pond and fishermen. We took their phones, so they don't tell on us. We told them to stay here and quiet. When we're back, we'll give them their phones. They were scared, asking us if they could check on their fish. Eventually, we gave them back their phones. And they're trying to give us fish. Even after we acted like jerks, they were human to us.

Something always got in the way of me being a sniper. It was either my lack of knowledge, or there was no rifle, or there was no time to visit a firing range. This last year I don't do daylight, I only go out in the

night time with a thermal imager. It's more difficult for me during a day. Sniper is someone who can shoot a target 800 metres away and more. There are people who can do this with a 1.5 kms target. I don't. I can't.

Was it difficult for me to take the first shot? No, it wasn't. You see a silhouette, you realize that if you miss your chance and don't shoot, you or your comrades will be shot. That's it. If you don't do your job, you should be ashamed of yourself. After my first shot, when I was coming back from my shift in the morning, I was congratulated by almost everyone I saw on the way. Although, I didn't tell anyone. You never really know whether you got it or not. He usually falls and you can't really see whether you killed or wounded him, or maybe he used his superspeed and hid. Snipers never talk about numbers. And if they do, it's only among themselves and only about confirmed targets. Unconfirmed targets could reach up to triple more. Your partner can confirm, if he or she has great optical instruments. A video would have to do as well. And there is option three. Intelligence. That's how they knew it for the first time.

Snipers don't like to talk about their work. They don't usually show their faces. They do interviews in balaclavas. They don't usually get captured. Capture is death. I don't hide my face, my name, so I've been told many times that I'm not a real sniper, just for the press. People are entitled to their own opinions. Why would I hide my face? I am at home. I am not an intelligence agent. I am not a part of the Security Service or anything. I'm not even a sniper if we're talking terminology. As I am not working 1.5 km, I only go 600 meters, if that. In fact, I'm just a regular shooter. And for vatnyks\* I have been a symbol of Ukrainian

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\* Vatnyk is a political slur in Belarusian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Russian, and Ukrainian based on an internet meme that was introduced in 2011 by Anton Chadskiy, which denotes someone who slavishly follows Kremlin propaganda and espouses jingoism. It has become especially popular since the beginning of the Russo-Ukrainian War.



“Nazism” since like 2007-2008, no less. So, I won’t be able to go for a usual foot soldier. If I get captured, I will probably end up like Mykola Karpiuk with 20-25 years in prison. Even if I was a medic, I would end up like that, because they know me very well on the other side. I am actually proud of it. So, I have nothing to lose.

I get threats all the time. My phone, internet, everywhere. “you bitch, come and get us, we’ll bury you”. That sort of thing. Social media is a lucky pick. If I lost a string of my hair over every case like that, I would have none by now. I don’t react and I don’t count them. They do come in once in a while, but... that’s just how it is. There was a time

when Dmytro Yarosh posted a video of my work. I shot three separatists who were trying to get to us. Then, there was a whole hour devoted to me on a Russian tv-show. Prime time. No shit. Horrible lies, obviously. What else?

There are no special conditions a woman needs. I can bear whatever a man can bear. The hardest thing for me is to get over my physical weakness. There was this one time I was getting ready for my shift and I didn't know much, so I took 26 kilos of weight. Weapons, equipment, a sleeping bag, clothes and my cameras, of course. I was a journalist, for God's sake. I can't go on without making pictures or videos. And it's actually needed for my job pretty often. I had 3 kilometres to go. I did my best. When I got there, I saw some kind of an apocalypse. The enemies used the wind blowing our way and set a fire. It's closing in on us. We don't have any water. If it doesn't stop, all of the equipment will blow up like nothing else. We're done. Everybody's doing something. Getting our things, digging, shooting, covering those who are digging. I'm just standing here so weak I can't move a muscle. "Get ready. If nothing changes in a few minutes, we'll evacuate." – my husband says (he was with me). And that is when I got really scared. I can only run back with my weapon. I have lots of expensive equipment in my backpack, which was bought with the help from volunteers. I know I can't take it with me. I just can't. And I don't know what to do. I was so weak at that point. Fortunately, it was all good. No damages. We put out the fire. I can't carry sandbags. I can't throw them. I can, however, put soil and sand in it and make them ready. So, I try to do what I can. It still needs to be done.

Patience is crucial in my line of work. Waiting around at the same position for an enemy to show up sooner or later even if he's too careful. Sometimes we work in pairs. The best partner for me is someone

who's working with a machine gun, an assault rifle or a submachine gun. The most important part is that this person must be reliable. Often after I make a shot there's no response for quite a long time. They have to evacuate a person or a body, so they won't be showing up for quite a long time. The response can be very powerful, thought it won't be right after. This actually shows that you did it. They avenge their people. By the way, theory usually gets beaten up by practice. I mean, in training programs.

We stayed near Vodiane and Opytne for a while. Getting rid of enemies. I wasn't doing more than I was doing, but still. Sometimes we stumbled upon their intelligence units, sometimes we ambushed them. We had this girl, an intelligence agent, with a code name "Lisa". She was great. She was able to carry the weight without getting tired. Then she was killed. The first winter was very loud. Heavy fighting over the airport and all. We had this situation, when we missed something and the enemies came close. Our base was set on fire. I was blasted by an explosion. Post-concussion syndrome, tearing of ligaments. I was on crutches for the whole winter. I didn't do much fighting. There was another situation. With tracer ammunition. A bullet came close to my cheek and burned me. It wasn't even meant for me. It was an accident. Though, I do have something to remember it by. The other time, at night, we were coming out of a blindage to start a shift and my comrade noticed that I messed up my body armour. A little bit. And bam! A bullet came between us.

Fortunately, my husband always supported me. He never tried to stop me. His son is also here. From his first marriage. "How can I ask other people's children go to war and hide my own?" – he said. We taught him everything we know. He's a great soldier, very capable, learning fast. Our parents are obviously worried. Parents always worry

about their children. You think that parents of a girl are more worried than parents of a boy? A mom can cry, she can try to persuade you not to go. Eventually they accept and support you. I have great in-laws. They are my second parents and they are very supportive.

In 2014 we were working near Donetsk airport. In 2015 we were located near Volnovakha. The longest time I've spent was near Mariupol. Since the beginning of 2016 I've been located near Shyrokyne and Vodiane. Thankfully, I haven't done anything I regret during this war. I can only think of my physical weakness as of something bad. My biggest fear is to be a burden for my guys, to let them down.

Many people think that it is an accomplishment to kill three separatist a night here, near Mariupol. I think it isn't an accomplishment, it's just luck. It was on Independence Day between 9 and 10 pm. They probably thought we were drunk. Me and my partner got to our position at night, because we weren't able to get there while they were shooting heavily. My partner had a rifle. It was his first time on this position. He was asked to throw sandbags, because they would get ruined every day. He got one and they started shooting at us. We decided to postpone fortification, because separatists were especially angry that day. And here I see they are trying to get to us. Six of them. Out of trenches. Giving each other weapons. Scary. If I had a machine gunner with me, all six of them would be dead. I was only able to shoot three of them.

The main thing I learned during this war is that motivation is at the top of everything else. For example, our division has a diabetic who needs to have his insulin 2-3 times a day. He's an intelligence officer. We also have a guy with a prosthesis. All types of things. And all of them are great warriors.

As for me, I think that snipers should be women. In general. This profession suits us better. Though, we did have a talented sapper



and grenade launcher operator among us as well. The girl called “Vega”. She had like 60 kilos in her, but she was able to cope with a grenade launcher and with all the necessary equipment. We also had a girl named “Lisa”. I’ve mentioned her before. She’s gone now. She participated in biathlons before the war. She was a master in shooting. She would be an incredible sniper, if she wasn’t so active, so fiery. It’s difficult to be a sniper with these kinds of characteristics. She made an awesome intelligence agent, though. Running for 7 kilometers was as easy as pie for her. Despite her heart condition. She was unique. Circumstances of her death are pretty vague. She didn’t die here. She was found with a gunshot wound in Mariupol.

It was difficult to get used to heavy firing. Guys usually are fine by the end of the week. For me it was longer. My recipe is to find





the best possible safe place, so I could rest and sleep when I have time. When you realize that you've done all you could for your safety, you feel better. 2014 was pretty difficult. We were standing at a checkpoint with the army, talking, getting to know one another. And the next day one of them is injured or dead. There was this one time when I was caught by heavy firing in a tent. Night. You can't see a thing. Mines are everywhere. I can't find my things. I don't see where our blindage is, I just can't see. I did find it, eventually. Since then, though, I'm trying to sleep in the safest possible place, even if it's soggy, uncomfortable and so on.

I found a great resting place in Shyrokyne. No shell, even 152 mm one, would get through. No heat. It's winter time. I was bunking there in a cold, cold weather. The water was frozen. Other people stayed



in a comfortable place. They only got here when there was no other way. We could get a potbelly stove, but it was difficult to fire it up every day. One day I was carrying and chopping wood all day and I was able to feel the warmth for like two hours. I was living like this for three weeks. I didn't even catch a cold. Though, I did take a lot of pills. And I was perfectly safe.

Actually, it was summer, when I got there for the first time. We've been there for like three days. We walked through the village where the scent of TNT was mixed with sea breeze... I've seen lots of ruined villages, but this sort of a resort-town with no living soul... It got me deep. I actually loved Mariupol more than Donetsk.

The most difficult thing for me is to hide all the time. When there is some sort of an inspection coming up, we have to hide, because we're a part of Ukrainian volunteer army, illegals, we shouldn't be there.

Once we arranged to work on particular positions, as our people are getting hurt more and more, the separatists are going especially crazy, there's some kind of an inspection on the way. I usually get recognized by journalists, so I have to hide from them as well. If they write that they saw me, it means that Ukrainian volunteer army is here and our commander will be punished for covering for us, and we will have to leave this place. Or volunteers can take a picture, post it on Facebook, use geolocation... and that's it. I have to hide.

We have other problems as well. When someone from Ukrainian volunteer army or Ukrainian volunteer battalion dies, everyone is writing about it in all kinds of social media. And there is no information coming from the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine. People begin to cry and yell, and blame the Ministry: "covering up losses", "the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine pays no respect to volunteer soldiers". People are raising hell. Commanders are getting hurt. Nearly losing their positions. It all comes down to this: we are getting kicked out. So, who's feeling better after this hysteria? No matter how many times you're trying to explain, they just don't get it. Officially, we're not here at all. The Ministry simply can't have any information on us. It would be a lot better if these people quietly helped their families. With a funeral or otherwise. No hysteria, please.

I recently got through an officer training program. It was worse than hell. I put a lot of efforts, because if you want to do something, do it right. So, I studied the hell out of it. All of the books. It was extremely difficult, because I had to go through a college program in four months. There were times when I was crying, wanted to give up. It was more difficult than being at war. Mentally and physically. However, I succeeded and became an artillery officer. I passed exams with flying colours. I did my target in the first run.



Fortunately, not many people from my division have died. People die as civilians as well. Our grandparents, our cousins, our family. We have to move on. Maybe, that is how I'm wired. I don't have a PTSD. Obviously, I'm worried for my comrades, but when I'm like 20 kilometres from the front line, something clicks and I think as a civilian and vice versa. Firecrackers and fireworks don't scare me. I don't feel guilty about my targets. I haven't started it. I was forced to pick up a rifle by people who are trying to destroy our country, our nation. Even those three separatists I killed at night (by the way, they were actually from Russia). I didn't go to them. They came to me. They wanted to kill us. I was only protecting my people and myself. I don't believe that this conflict will



ever be over in any kind of civil or diplomatic way. I would go for it, but I think it's impossible. So, what's left? At all times priests were giving blessings to the warriors who were protecting their land.

As soon as the war is over, I'm going to leave. I only got my rank, because the war is not going to be over anytime soon. And if so, I should do better, I should grow and improve as a person. Deep down, though, I am a civilian. I will probably go back to being a journalist. Or maybe start working for a non-profit. For now, I am exactly where I need to be.

# Viktoriiia Dvoretska

«Dyka/Wild»

AIDAR BATTALION





**M**arch, 2014. Crimea has already been annexed. Our sotnyk\* during Maidan told us: “This is war”. We’ve been living with packed backpacks, getting ready, for a while. Our comrade, Pasha Vedmid, deceased, started training us and we couldn’t wait to go. At first, we thought we were going to Crimea. We were wrong. Nobody sent us here. May, 2014. People are going to Luhansk straight from Maidan.

Where? Nobody knows. No battalions at the time. There was a meeting for sotnyks (I was present), where people voted for creating

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\* Sotnyk was a military rank among the Cossack starshyna (military officers), Strelets Troops (17th century) in the Ukrainian Insurgent Army, the Ukrainian Galician Army, and the Ukrainian People’s Army. It’s being used in modern times as well.



divisions form Maidan. Nobody knew exactly how it's going to work. 8th of May, midnight, first buses are loaded and ready to go. Gone. They didn't let me go, because I had to look after Mariyinsky Park. Preserve peace. Coordinate. I was angry and sad. I was bugging sotnyks for ten days, saying I'm not doing anything until I'm on the bus. 19th of May. I'm on the bus. "Stop hounding us and go!" – they said.

Luhanska oblast. Our battalion still has no name. The battalion came to be to protect Luhansk territories. We knew that for sure. Most of the people were from Maidan. Locals joined as well. 50 or 80 people. Roughly after May 25th, after the presidential election, when we were fighting for Novoaidar, our battalion got its name "Aidar". I was asked to join the 11th battalion, "Kyivan Rus", but all of my friends from Maidan were going to "Aidar", so I joined them.

Our journey was a strange one. No one knew where we were going. No one fully understood what was happening. We were wearing sneakers, trainers. Someone was lucky enough to get combat boots. Someone was probably scared. I haven't told anyone where I was going. I didn't tell my mom. "We're going to be done in two weeks. It would be better not to say anything." – I thought. When we got there, we realized what was going on. We discovered that some of the villages wasn't ours anymore. Well, we didn't call it like that. We just knew there were some sort of separatist groups. No military. There was like one IFV, covered by mobilized soldiers who didn't know what they were doing here. So chaotic. No fear, though. Yet.

I see war as crawling through a field in my headscarf from Maidan, exploding shells all around me... I only had my uniform as a part of camouflage, my dubochok\*, and my jeans. I think I had

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\* The name of the uniform; "dub" is "an oak" in Ukrainian.



my combat boots as well. I came and I saw girls with guns. “I imagined it a little differently” – I thought.

I can't say I felt discriminated. When I came, my commander, who I knew from Maidan and with whom I've been sharing intelligence information this whole ride, looked at me, I looked at him, and he said: “I knew you were coming. I just didn't know whether it would be on the first or on the second bus.”

I had a great team. No one told me to go home and cook borscht\*. I was pretty familiar with different kinds of weaponry, because

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\* Borscht is one of the most famous dishes of Ukrainian cuisine, made with beetroots as one of the main ingredients, which give the dish its distinctive red color.



my father was a hunter. Although, an automatic rifle was new to me, yes. We had this one guy named Pasha who had a mock-up automatic rifle and he taught us how to use it. I used my first automatic rifle in Metalist (a village in Luhansk oblast). I didn't go to Shchastya. We only had 50 automatic rifles at the time. 50 people went, we stayed. We're waiting, our hair turning white. Artillery and aviation were on. We're sitting and waiting. The next day we all got weapons and I went to Metalist.

When we got Shchastya, we had another post and a golf-club. We were an intelligence unit, so we went there, because we knew that they would try to force us out of Shchastya. Our goal was to get there, to notice and to warn. We didn't know what to do next. Five of us. Ambushed. I was wounded. I had fragments in my knee, my side,

a strong post-concussion syndrome. We were fighting in a basement. Too many grenades. We survived. All of us. Now I don't believe grenades mean death. Special forces couldn't comprehend either.

We were shooting back. I threw a grenade for the first time. "When I say so, you take it, you get it in, you take it out and you throw it" – explained my commander. I say: "Okay!" When you throw it above the wall, they can get a hold of you with that grenade. Can't say I wasn't scared. I was. I was really scared. When you're so close, you can hear their voices, you're throwing curse words at each other. We didn't know whether we're going to make it or not. Five of us and as we found out later, 60 of them.

Our guys were shooting at this house and it helped us. We were in the basement and they were above us with all the heavy artillery going at it. Oh, these sounds. When we decided to go out... no connection, no communication. We're almost done. Losing consciousness. Two of us were injured a bit worse. We knew that if we stay a little longer, we will lose it and we won't ever be able to get out. We took each other, using belts, in a pure darkness... ruins everywhere... We were coming out and greeted by the 8th regiment, special forces. It's great they didn't shoot us. They got us out. Then this regiment got ambushed. They lost a few people.

I got sent to the hospital and got back in three days. Battalion commander said that I still have to go through a dropping bottle, get the necessary medication in. I had to stay for a week. I didn't get a chance to see my commander. He passed. Our team wasn't the same. I had nowhere to go. I've been working on 200s since then.

Seems like I got the worst out of this war. Massively. We had 15 dead a day in 2014. Most of them were friends. The first addition of "Aidar" is pretty much gone. We had to call their families and tell them

what happened. They were yelling at us and calling us back in a day or two. Sometimes we weren't able to send our guys back, because we didn't have enough vehicles. They were asking all these questions. "Did you remember to include a little cross? You didn't forget to put on an underwear, did you? This or that." We had to think of everything. We had to put on their clothes. Maybe a headscarf to cover him up. Sometimes we sent out closed caskets. No other way. We had to make sure they won't open it. To triple check.

Scary times. Exhumations. There was this one time I got poisoning after being too close to a body in a full decomposition mode. We had to dig out our guys who were killed in action on September 5th. We had to organize everything. And I inhaled it. I felt so bad. Then I had a special mask on at all times. We were surrounded by dead people. Almost daily. I came back at 2 am and tried to get a shuteye. Nope. 3 am. I'm taking off my shoes and get called out. "There is a body. We have to take it back." Going again. There were people who were dealing with them, so many of them. Dead. Lost. It was very difficult. I was okay until I got back home. It all came crashing. I remember all of them. By name. By cause of death. For a year I remembered every little detail. Now I'm forgetting little by little.

I had a friend in the battalion, Andriana. Now I am a godmother to her son. We're sitting and talking, and I'm saying that I envy her, because she can go to the front line. Many people got captured. We had to help. I think I didn't speak with my own mother as much as did with mothers of our beloved and lost. We had Lutuhyne as well. I remember people over there were not friendly, separatists all the way. We went there with busses full of medicine and food. We got shot at, three times at least. They take it all and say: "I know that you were shooting at us at night from that tank. On purpose. You just want us to think it's Russia."



Then we had a checkpoint called “Fasad”. When we were done with all of the exhumations, I came to my commander and told him I should head a company or leave. Here I became an acting commander of a diversion and intelligence company. We were standing there and having “the most fun” times. We spent close to a month on the 29th checkpoint.

I have a weird response to fear. I start laughing. And when I became a commander... you have no right to fear. If a commander is hysterical while giving orders, hysteria will cover everybody. I had a whole company for the last 20 months of service. One year near Marinka – 4 strongpoints. Sometimes I felt fear, probably, but I kept it to myself. Now, when I begin to get out of it, I think: “God, what the hell were you doing?” Then I realize that I did what I had to. Our officers

weren't as strong. Sometimes I couldn't realize how a grown man who has 15 people under his command can be so irresponsible...

My service has two phases. A year and a half, a few months of rest and a year and eight months. The second part, when I was a commander, was harder than the first one. It is difficult to be a commander. You are always the bad one. You make them dig, you're a bad one. You make them fortify, do something, you're a bad one (obviously, he'll shut up and get it when he's being shot at). You make them wear body armour, you're a bad one. When they're calling me now, I'm asking them: "Was I the worst?" We didn't get along with commanders of different companies, so I was always in charge, and we didn't have a single dead one in a year and 8 months. Two were slightly wounded. I am happy I could get our guys out of there with no casualties. I was afraid for them, so I was very strict. Maybe too strict sometimes. Maybe I did go overboard with discipline. "I'm okay with being bad as long as they are alive." – I was thinking.

July, 2015. I was demobilized for the first time. I went on studying. I even did go and vote. I got back for the first time, because I thought I didn't do enough, I could do more. I haven't really had this "coming back to life as a civilian". We were pushing the idea of "an invisible battalion" – an inequality in the army. When I was mobilized, I was a clerk in the documents. I was wounded and I was a clerk in the documents. Then they made me the head of a bathhouse. I trained for a day to get it up and running in a harsh environment. Ridiculous, right. So, I am a qualified bathhouse attendant, a curator. Officially I was a bathhouse attendant and at the same time I was a commander of a whole company of intelligence agents.

April, 2016. I have a military rank and I'm going to have a company under my command. We came close to Marinka, started

moving ahead. It was a difficult rotation. I had a huge area to protect. When I got back it was more like an army. They're giving you a map. They're using terms to explain what is needed to be done. I believe I hasn't slept for a month. Until I got a hold of things, until I knew who I can trust with what. I was checking on all the positions 24/7, until it was handled. I was doing everything myself, choosing positions, establishing a connection etc. Difficult times as well.

July, 2016. I got into a hospital. I was just exhausted. Then two of our guys have died. "Taisik" – the head of intelligence, and "Komaryk" – a sapper. It was a first mission I wasn't on, because I went through a dropping bottle before that. I got up due to what I have heard: we have a 200 and a 300. I was riding a bike around strongpoints and thinking how can we get them out. We decided to go in a group. I was walking last, carrying automatic rifles, body armour, so it would be easier for the guys to carry them out. After that I was out again. Injections, dropping bottle medicine. Then I realized that I have to delegate. And we were good by then. I knew all the trenches were fine, everything is how it is supposed to be. The weather wasn't nice, though. Raining, mud everywhere...

Then we got to Svitlodarsk, to a village called Novoluhanske. We got there on April 2017 and in the middle of October I transferred to the 169th Training Centre. The line of defence in Novoluhanske was smaller. I was in charge of a fire support company and responsible for the front line, reserves and a checkpoint. It was okay. Surely, lots of work to do, yeah...

I decided to make a transfer to the rear with totally different plans and intentions. I had some health problems. And I was in a serious relationship. His name was Anton. We were talking about going back to being civilians, live a life. I transferred to the 169th Training







Centre in October 2017, so I could do it slowly, step by step. And... my boyfriend... he had a day left of service. He was blown up. It was supposed to be his last mission.

We haven't been together for a long time, but we were close. I've never given him a notice and then, in like three days everything changed. I don't even know how that have happened. I didn't really care a lot about myself or my life, and he was the opposite of that, he was stabilizing me. He was able to straighten everything out. "Okay, you're a commander out there and here you should give me the keys, you don't have to patch up this car." – he said. He was preparing me for getting back to being a civilian. He succeeded. How can I do this now? Why?

You need to come back, eventually. On the one hand, I'm drawn back there. I could do that again; I could do another term. However, it won't be easier to come back to being a civilian any more than it is. I came here when I was 21. Now I'm turning 26. It's a long time to be out. Socially. I was pretty ambitious back then. Nothing could stop me from achieving my goals. Now I can hardly know what to do next. It's good when you're a great soldier, you're up for it, you can lead, be a commander. What should I do as a civilian now, though? I don't want to downshift. I've been thinking about going back, but we made some decisions and I want to honour them. Yes, it was Anton's idea to leave more than mine. He really wanted to leave. So, for now I'm fulfilling my duties until the end of my term. Then we'll see. I'll think of something. I want to have a dream. I want to know where I'm going. Now I have no idea. I just have to live.

# Andriana Susak

AIDAR BATTALION





**M**aidan, Crimea, what's next? Everybody was thinking what to do, where should they go, what could they do to help? Dima Dibrivnyi ("Hrusha/Pear", deceased) came to see me during our May celebrations and asked if I had a passport with me. I said: "Yes." And he said: "Let's go." I asked him where and he said: "Somewhere East. Five days." It's funny and ridiculous how I was happy back then that it's going to take a few days, thinking: "I'll just take a few days off and go." I didn't even go home. I had some of my stuff in the International Convention Center "Ukrainian House", so I just took them and went away.

Each of us was given a sleeping pad, a backpack that you could see on tourists and an iron mug. May 8th. We left the "Ukrainian House" to go to Luhansk oblast. I didn't know where I was going, what were we going to do there. When we came, they said that we're going to guard Luhansk branch of the Security Service of Ukraine. Each of us will be given a weapon and we will be protecting the building from a takeover.

There was like a hundred of us at the time. All kinds of people. Soldiers from the Soviet–Afghan War, 17-year-old kids, anyone who could go straight from Maidan. We were told not say where we were. Even when we were going through Kharkiv, we had body armour pressed against windows in our bus. The police were escorting us. We came to a village called Nianchyne, Luhansk oblast, into the woods near the border with Russia. That’s it. We were waiting for weapons for four days. Then we were told we’re not going to be there for five days. A little longer. At least till the presidential election. I called my parents. I called my work. I said I was in Luhansk oblast. My dad started yelling: “What are you doing there? Come home!” I said I was drafted, that I took some medical courses and went as a nurse. People at my work said nothing. They were empathetic. They didn’t let me go until I was demobilized from the Armed Forces of Ukraine.

We came to a village called Polovinkino. We made it feel like home, if you can call it that. The war started right there and then for me. We didn’t have many girls at the time. Mostly medics, few soldiers. No one wanted to stay in the army headquarters and deal with documents (no action for the moment, right?). I was asked to. People continue to come from Maidan. I had to deal with documents for mobilization of 150 people out of 230 volunteers in a week or two.

We had our first mission with wounded on May 25th, 2014, on the day of our presidential election. It was the day Ukraine found out about what was going on. We arrested 14 terrorists. Half of them called themselves “Don Cossacks” and the other half had documents that stated they were a part of a terrorist organization – the Luhansk People’s Republic (the LPR). They were managed by Volodymyr Maretskyi, a priest from a village called Raihorodka, Luhansk oblast, who belonged to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow

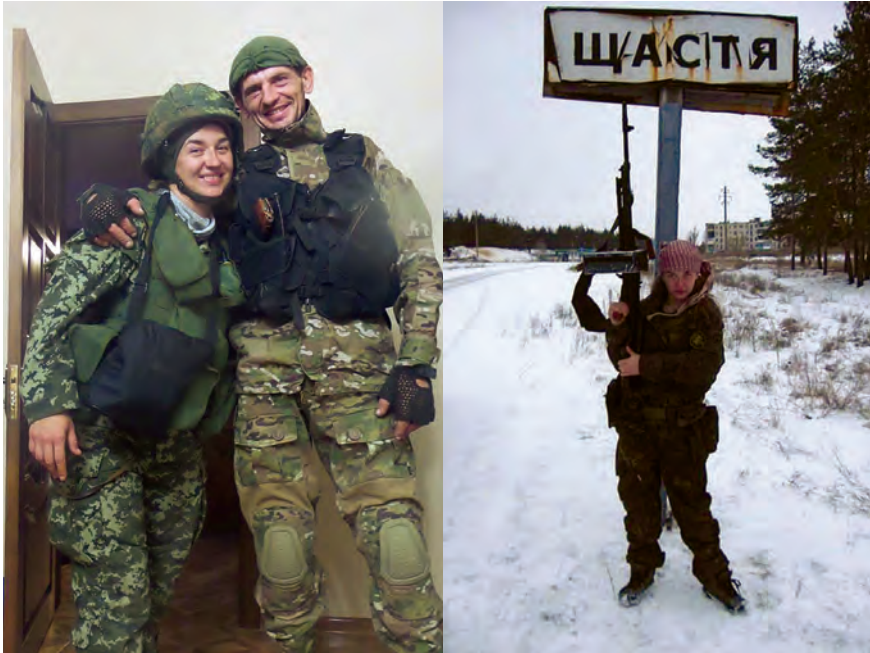
Patriarchate. Our guys apprehended so-called Cossacks and Crimean priests in religious habit with automatic weapons. Then the Security Service of Ukraine came to take them away. And we were thinking how should we call ourselves. We had this guy with a code name “Mum/Mamka”, who named this battalion “Aidar”.

Then our People’s Deputies decided to visit us, to see what were we doing here, what kind of a group we were. When Yuriy Lutsenko came, I started complaining to him about our problems, including that not everybody fits to be mobilized. There were people over the age, under the age, people who’ve been to prison. He promised to take care of everything, but no one became official at the time. These kids and soldiers from the Soviet–Afghan War were never official. Dead and buried. That’s it.

Everyone started their training, going to a firing range. And I was sitting on my ass, dealing with papers. June 14th. The first mission. Shchastya. I went to see our commander (I didn’t have a team at the time, but I knew everybody) and asked him to order me to go on the mission. He smiled at me. Then we had a serious conversation and he did let me go on that mission. He only asked who I want to go with. I said: “Team Black.”

“Aidar” had several teams at the time and I knew that the others just wouldn’t take me. It was the fourth war for the Black team commander and all the other members were just like me, unexperienced. They were shocked when I joined them. I’m going on the mission to Shchastya. How so? I said I know nothing; I just got an order. I put on my balaclava and was ready to go. In the evening we came to camping near Shchastya. Then we had an order to go and secure a checkpoint. Many of them didn’t realize I was a girl as I was wearing a balaclava. I was one of the two. Me and Nadia Savchenko.





I had no clue how to fire a gun, and I had to do in on my first day. I didn't know how to discharge a weapon, so I was carrying it up the whole way from the checkpoint. I didn't want to shot a comrade walking before me. When we came back, we found out that we've apprehended and killed several enemies. I also remember this one time when I realized that If I don't shoot, one of my comrades might die. I became aware of it when an enemy came out of the woods, he was standing very close, and I just couldn't shoot. My comrade with a code name "Suharyk" helped me out. He saved me. Then it just became a job.

Then we came to a village called Metalist. In the morning we got a call from a comrade named Yura Kryzhberskyi, who said that they're in the middle of a fight and they're running out of supplies.



He told me where they were in Luhansk and gave me some kind of an address. They had wounded. I didn't know what to do or where to go. We gathered all the necessary supplies and put it in a regular car. There was no place for me, so I was sitting in the trunk. We reached Shchastya and that was it, because guys didn't know where to go. We changed cars and the next car stopped at some point as well. Then I was walking and running, and I finally got to my black team.

By that time, I knew that Yura and Nadia, and six more of our comrades have already been captured. We were hoping, though, that we could catch up to them and get them back. So, we went on a mission. We got back in a chain and kept walking. Then our team was separated from the rest due to the heavy fire and the fact that we were in a hostile environment. Eleven of us. 45 minutes of fighting. Nobody knew if we were still alive. We had like 800 metres between us. We were running out of supplies. My first comrade was killed. He was lying beside me. "Kamaz". We kept fighting until we saw an IFV of our enemies. They started shooting. We retrieved. I have no idea how we survived back then. I was running, yelling, we were falling, we were helping each other up. And our people didn't know that we were alive. They were trying to come closer, but they couldn't. They were told we were dead. Our artillery was working full time. On our enemies and on us. We weren't able to get to Metalist and get our comrades back. We retrieved.

We secured the checkpoint near Metalist on our second try. This time we had less fighting. They knew we'll come again and they had casualties. 11 of us, but we did stir up some trouble. We had this checkpoint till September 5th.

After the fighting near Metalist I was one of the guys. Officially. Then we had missions, intelligence operations. I had this joke that every

17th an IFV shoots at me. June 17th, the first try to secure Metalist. July 17th, an intelligence operation in Luhansk. We started at 7 am and got back at midnight, probably. It was hard. We were walking for like 14 kilometres. They weren't shooting at us, but they saw us. And yet again Russians started shooting with an IFV. We had to go back through their field filled with shells. There was no other way. Hard to forget. You make a step, you're alive. You make another one, you're alive. The best trip ever.

After Metalist we were clearing certain territories of the enemy troops. Raihorodka, Khrystove, Heorhiivka, Donetsk airport, Lutuhyne, where we had huge losses. One of our best divisions was gone. All of them 12 people.

In Heorhiivka my future husband was wounded. We've been together since the beginning. May 9th, we left for Luhansk oblast. May 11th, we realized that we've chosen each other for the rest of our lives. Back than in Heorhiivka we've had a rough day. My husband got fragments in his shoulder, a knee and under his heart, and one of our comrades, "Skelet/Skeleton", was severely wounded. When we fought in Lutuhyne, my husband was still recovering as there was only a week between these fights. Almost everyone on his team died there. He went nuts, obviously. We had a ceremony after we were demobilized. In July, when we had no severe casualties. No wedding, just our parents.

Then we had another one of our heavy battles in a village of Khriashchuvate, which we've secured before. We secured it, but not for long. Russian soldiers decided to pay a visit. Khriashchuvate is one of the hardest for me, personally. We were shot at from every side and angle, and with all kinds of weapons. They even used white phosphorus munitions. These things are extremely dangerous and forbidden. They can evaporate everything on the ground and beneath it. Everyone was

against us in that village. Even locals. Luhansk was almost secured at the time. Roads were closed for the enemies to get in their supplies. We were there for 11 days. Then we had a rotation. It was harsh. A hundred people comes in, 40 at most comes out. This whole time we had no connection to the outside world. Our beloved ones didn't know what was happening here.

Then Russians outdone themselves. They brought everything they could. IVVs, tanks, fully loaded Russian soldiers. They were good. You could see they were no miners. They were professionals, obviously. We're in the middle of a fight, I'm walking and seeing my comrades fall dead. Khriashchuvate was probably the hardest for me. We couldn't walk normally for 11 days. Even to show our heads. You're going to pee and here it is, a mortar shell coming at you. There's no water, no wells nearby, no way to get our wounded out of here. You start getting them out, they start shooting at us, because they're located higher than us. We were like targets at a firing range. Locals were also wounded and we had to get them out as well. To some sort of a hospital. Under a heavy shooting, no less. When we were entering the village, there was a fight. When we entered, we saw a dead woman and started thinking whether she died during this shooting or not. Then we came closer and saw that she's been here for a while. Decomposition and all. Not us. She was killed way before. We did get out wounded civilians from Khriashchuvate.

Locals... We've had many locals in our battalion. They've met us in Nianchyne in these first days. Many of them are still here. Most of them are from invaded territories. They have nowhere to go. My commander is from Donetsk oblast. He's from Makiivka. He lost everything.

When we got to Shchcastya, they practically hated us. After a while they realized that we're in this together and they changed their

minds. Totally. Especially kids. They were running around and yelling: “Glory to Ukraine!”\*. I remember when we were clearing places, people would come out and give us milk and water. Sometimes they even said: “We’re with you.” Many and many people speak Ukrainian. Older women in Raihorodka were waiving at us with tears in their eyes. They were happy to see us.

Khriashchuvate was different. We didn’t talk much. People were hiding in a school basement, in other places. We weren’t particularly welcome there. They were yelling at us, saying we’re Nazi, fascists, that we’re here because Americans are paying us. I remember this woman who spoke Ukrainian and she was baking something. It smelled so good. Like you would feel at your granny’s. She came out and talked to me and I was shaking a little bit. All kinds of situations. There were people who just didn’t care. Ukraine, Russia, whatever. No more shooting, please.

One time we were told that in a town of Zolote people were starving. We gathered our supplies and my husband went there to help them. He gave them porridge, sunflower oil. Everyone got some. Equally. And here we go, an older man takes this package and throws it into a garbage can. Yeah, we got people like that too. However, it is a mistake to think that everyone here is a separatist. Not true. Many people have supported us. They were afraid, but they did help us. In Polovynkyne locals gave us half a pig, so we had something to eat. They brought us berries. They let us into their bathhouses, so we could get clean. They helped us with information. When we came to Luhansk oblast, a lot of locals joined us. one by one.

September 5th was the end of this offensive part. Minsk protocol and other agreements, giving up territories. General headquarters couldn’t come up with a solid plan. We had no communication between divisions. Constantly ambushed by Russians. All these things led to our

division being ambushed and shot at on September 5th. And it was organized by a group of people called “Rusych” and led by a maniac from Saint Petersburg Oleksii Milchakov. They were torturing our people, humiliating them, branding, beating up and shooting them dead while making videos. Almost everyone who was captured by them died. I’m saying “Hi!”, because, you know, the world is round and karma is a bitch.

We had to take their bodies home... Our guys from Aidar brought back 40+ people, including the 80th brigade. Time had passed. Decomposition, you know... You’re standing there, near the morgue and looking at what’s left of them. All you see is an arm. “Here, a tattoo. Maybe you saw this on someone? What about this bracelet, a piece of flag?” And lots of people had these on Maidan... How can you see who’s in front of you?

Then we were mostly doing trench warfare. I wasn’t happy about that at all. I really wanted to go and secure Donetsk airport, but I didn’t get a chance to do that. We’ve already had our orders, we were mobilized. Actually, I didn’t have an order, I was a seamstress on paper. Yep, that’s right. Women weren’t able to get a decent, a real job. Well, we did, not on paper, though. Later it became a reality.

Talking about memorable events, “Aidar” was a part of the fight on the route called “Bahmut” (officially, Lysychansk – Luhansk). The very same 32nd checkpoint, where our guys from “Aidar” were captured. I was contacted about the exchange. It was the last time I’ve dealt with things like that. My commander and my husband didn’t know where I was. I lied about going to Svatove and instead I was standing in my usual clothes on the bridge in Shchastya, waiting for a meeting with the other side. I had three notes in my pocket. For my parents, for my husband and for my team. I did that twice. Writing notes. The

exchange was somewhat successful. We've got two people back. Then the Security Service of Ukraine took over these kinds of things. It was the right move. The government should do these things.

There was also a case I'd rather forget. Again, we were contacted about the exchange. They started asking for money. Seemingly, for treatment. I found money. Our commander chipped in and I took everything I had. A mother of one of the captured came to us. We were supposed to meet them at 9 pm on the bridge in a place called Stanytsia Luhanska. We came and waited. We were shot at and still waiting. 1 am. We realized that they played us. No one is going to come. The mother refused to go. She said she's not going to leave without her son. Later we found out that he was no longer alive at that point. People who called us were frauds. "How could that be? You told me he was alive. He's been dead for over a year." – she said to me. What could I say to her? I'd give anything for him to be alive.

When the trench war started, pretty casual for us, the 32nd and the 31st checkpoints were not ours anymore, the 29th was shot at... I had friends over there, our soldiers from the Soviet–Afghan War. We had radio transmitters modified to hear separatists. So, we were listening and trying to make out what they were saying, to decode. We were trying to find out, where they're going to shoot from. The 29th checkpoint. I'm calling them to ask what they need in terms of weapons. We had some information that they're going to face tanks, so I offered them an anti-tank guided missile. We had one. Me and my husband got into a car and left. We came and saw what was going on, we wanted to join, but the guys said that it would be better if we cover the 25th checkpoint, so no one is going to use it as a gateway. So, we went there with a team.

It was cold, no trenches, weapons and vehicles were no good... Hennadiy Moskal and our comrades from "Aidar" helped us. They got



us some sort of a military engineering vehicle. During the night. Logs and accumulators for tanks. We've been there for a while. We went through three rotations with the National Guard. That is also the place where I was waiting to be demobilized. I was pregnant at the time. I was supposed to be demobilized when I was three months pregnant. Well, I did when I was five months pregnant. When I found out that we're going to have a baby, the guys were joking that they're going to make us a family blindage and will deliver the baby.

The trench war was awful for me. I wanted to do something. And I had to just sit around. At least we were there with my husband. I still went on missions. The 29th checkpoint was still under a heavy fire and our guys couldn't see from where. So, we decided to go as a bait. We were going to use a tank, just going around, they will be shooting at us and the guys would figure out their location. And we're going to bail. And that is what we did. Successfully. After a while I wasn't able to put on a bulletproof vest, because of my belly. Well, I could somehow put it on, but it was heavy and the equipment was heavy, so I didn't.

The mission near Pervomaisk was supposed to be one of the last ones for me. My husband didn't want me to go. Shocker, yeah. I was trying to convince him in any possible way. I told him: "You know that I'm still going to go. I'll just go from the other side. Let's just do this: I know I shouldn't, so I'll go as a medic, I'll sit in a car and if we have wounded, I'll take them." An that is what we would do. The mission didn't happen. We weren't able to fight. I was angry. I was able to shoot with an anti-tank guided missile, though, when I was four months pregnant... And then I was demobilized.

When I was leaving, I was crying so hard, because I knew I won't be coming back. The war comes into you and it never leaves you. I left my friends there. It's huge. It's like to give birth to a child. I'm still



there. Mentally. Some things you can't forget. Like this one time we were taking back our severely wounded comrade, I was singing to him, he was crying and trying to smile. He was dying and I was singing a lullaby. How can I ever forget that?

Surely, I want to go back. But I have a son and I have to take care of him. My husband took another term. Mariia Belrinska, an airborne intelligence agent and a volunteer, helped me. She said: "You know you can help in other ways. You can fight this war right here. It may even be harder." Summer, 2014. A bit of sleep and let's go. No idea when there is going to be the next time to get a shuteye. You want to get another part of our country back. And now... what the hell? Especially the information part. Again, Marusia said to me:

“You can fight in a different way. With information. Because we are losing it. Information warfare.” It is far more difficult to get through to someone, to change their mind, than to shoot them. That is how we got into shooting a movie, to go around the world showing it, talking to people, telling the truth, fighting with the help of information. Also, I am coordinating a project called “Mandry veteranok” (eng. Female veterans traveling around the world), which was created for rehabilitation purposes and for our girls to see a bit of the world.

It’s difficult for me to count how many people from Maidan survived. Some of them are still missing. There are two boys, brothers. Their mom was looking for them. I was looking for them. Nothing. Soon they will be pronounced dead...



# **Olha Simonova**

**THE 24TH MECHANIZED BRIGADE**



I am Russian and came to Ukraine at the end of 2014. Now, after all these years, I regret only one thing – that I did not come earlier. I lived in Cheliabinsk, went in for sports. Every day was the same. I didn't watch TV. When Crimea was being annexed, it was unclear what was happening. The TV streamed nonsense. Reasonable

Russians were shocked by all these actions. In the summer, I talked to people from Kyiv, Lviv, and my friends from this side, and the truth began to emerge: something totally insane was happening here.

First, I collected information and looked for ways to help. Then I realized I needed to be there, because, from Cheliabinsk, it would be almost impossible to help, except to transfer money. At some point, I just made a decision, packed up and left. At first, they were wary of me. Yet, my entire biography can be found on the Internet; I have nothing to hide...

I started to communicate with people, get acquainted, find out what was going on. At first, I got to the “Pivnich” volunteer battalion, which was then with the “Zoloti Vorota” battalion. For three months we were preparing to go to the anti-terrorist operation zone, but in the end, we were abandoned. Disbanded, scattered. No one sent us to the front. Although it was a really friendly and motivated team, everyone really wanted to go to the front line. I don’t know, maybe, it was money laundering – to teach us and then dismiss... Now everyone from that group is in the field. One way or another, they all got to the front. I lost a lot of time when they taught us, although, of course, I learned a lot there. It was then that the battles of Debaltseve started, and we just watched the news on TV and clenched our fists – everyone wanted to go there as soon as possible... We knew that we were needed there. We kept on going and asking when they would send us there. We said we were ready...

I got to the front line in the spring of 2015. First, I got to the medical brigade. I completed a tactical EMS training. I evacuated the wounded with a doctor. I was lucky because no training can compare with working side by side with a qualified doctor. At the stage of evacuation, paramedics are best oriented, do not get lost, and have

the necessary skills. We received wounded people who had already been taken out in armored vehicles. We did not have direct fire contact with the enemy, but we were shelled by artillery, mortars, which did not fly over our “zero” positions. I still wonder how our car wasn’t hit back then.

Then I joined the “Dnipro-1” volunteer battalion and went to Pisky. We worked in Avdiivka, then in Vodiane. Then the battalion was located at checkpoints, somewhere on the third line. At that time, the process of transferring volunteer battalions to the Armed Forces began. When “Dnipro-1” settled in the rear, 90% of the people who fought there probably left. Recertification began when people with veteran identification cards and those who fought were thrown out. Now there are only a few of those people left in “Dnipro-1.” For example, there are those who damaged their health in the first years of the war and who have nowhere to go. The same can be said about the guys from Donetsk and Luhansk regions – they also have nowhere to go. Someone acquired a family and decided to settle down... People had different reasons. Those who wanted to continue fighting went to the army.

We thought for a long time about where to go to serve, looked at the divisions and came to the conclusion that we needed to sign a contract. By the way, volunteer battalions provided many good officers. Some have completed officer courses; others have graduated from universities. I thought first about the 128th brigade, where some of our guys went. Then I wanted to go to the 93rd. We were stationed next to them in Pisky back in 2015. Women were reluctant to join the army back then, and I can see why now. In the end, I opted for the 24th brigade. I read about it and agreed. I’m still there.

If you ask me about the people, I’m fighting against... I don’t consider them my compatriots. There was a man who once told me, “Why did you come here? You are all of a kind in Russia.” I replied



that there was no need to jump to conclusions. I understand why he said that. He had every right to think so because these people came to his house. Yet, he shouldn't have lumped all Russians together. Later, this man came up to me and said that he had changed his mind. Sometimes they joke about "harsh Cheliabinsk residents," "cast-iron toilets" and that we spread a knife on bread.

I can't change my nationality or my place of birth. Fortunately, a person is not a tree and has the right to choose where and who to live with. 2014 was the year when I had to make a choice. There are chatterboxes, liberals who come here because they were nailed down there. I don't really believe them. There are Russians and Belarusians who came here, took up arms and started to fight. They earned the right to live here with their blood. Ironically, I serve in the Lviv brigade. Separatists are trembling when we come because it's "the Westerners," "Bandera supporters," "Lviv punishers."

I was always perceived adequately. I never put emphasis on my gender, but I never beat my breast, saying, "I'm a man." I'm just doing my job. In some ways, worse than others, in some ways, maybe, a little better. I won't throw an F-1 grenade at 50 meters, for example. Not that every guy can do it. I don't ask for anything special for myself, I try to work so that no one would even think of putting me in the rear or placing me on the radio. The first fight shows who is who. If a girl is a grenade launcher, she can't hide in a dugout during the shelling, she must be handed a grenade launcher and told where to shoot.

At first, of course, they kept an eye on me, but I carry water with everyone, unload cars with food, dig trenches and carry bags. Of course, I can peel potatoes, but I can also clean a machine gun. In the evening, when the shelling begins, someone hides in a dugout while someone takes up arms. I was probably lucky with the commanders and the



people I serve with – they always treated me as an equal. After working as a paramedic, I served as a senior marksman and spent some time in a reconnaissance platoon. Later, I trained as an infantry fighting vehicle gunner and recently as an infantry fighting vehicle commander. I always use my favorite DShK machine gun. If, for example, my weapon is temporarily unavailable, and I am on the “zero” position, then I work with a machine gun.

In the past, I was an athlete; I have been into sports for a long time. I graduated from the Olympic reserve basketball school, played for the university team. Then I quitted basketball and got interested in martial arts – karate, hand-to-hand combat. I trained children and

performed myself. I rode all kinds of transport and ran everywhere I could. I went into rafting, hiking, mountaineering, snowboarding, mountain climbing, cycling. It hardened me a lot, taught me to control my emotions. You know when they will give you strength, and when, on the contrary, it is better to hide emotions as deeply as possible and be guided by a cold mind. This is especially true of war. If you don't shoot, they'll shoot you or your friend. You see it as a job, as something that just needs to be done.

There is always a desire to master something new, to learn. You start with a gun, then a machine gun, then use a larger caliber... You need to learn and improve your skills all the time when you're at war. I would like to get a sergeant's position later. But I don't want to work at headquarters.

My first shelling was in 2015 in Luhanske. We had just stopped by; we didn't have time to unload our things when the shooting started and we were told to hide. You don't know where to run, you run after everyone... At that time, I didn't understand what was happening, but I realized what a shelling was. It was scary when we were once shelled with phosphorous mines in Pisky. They burn the ground a meter deep, I think. You can't hide from them... You just stand there and realize this is the end. You can't run away, and there's nothing you can do. This was in 2015. I was terrified when the equipment in Donetsk made noise. It seemed the earth was shaking. And you were just trying to guess what it was – tanks, self-propelled guns? How many of them were there that the floor was shaking. When tanks work, it is really scary. You see, it is the will of chance whether it will hit you or not. Either one thing or the other.

In the village of Luhanske on Svitlodarsk arc, there was a strong shelling – everyone was crammed into the basement, sort

of a mass grave. It was getting closer, closer, closer... Someone got hysterical. We were all wearing helmets and armor – if it hit us, at least, it wouldn't break our heads. One fighter kept on saying, "I have pea soup boiling there! I need to get out – it's going to burn! It will burn!" We told him to sit down. He asked me if I liked pea soup. I was shaking all over, but I didn't show that I was scared – I was sitting and smiling. He went on, "If we get out, will we eat?" I'll remember this phrase for the rest of my life. I told him, "We'll eat if we get out of here, but I hate pea soup."

How to deal with fear? The more experienced you become, the more adequately you assess the situation: by whistling, you determine the kind of weapon, caliber, you know when they shoot at close range or when they just shoot somewhere in your direction. Fear has many eyes, but experience makes it possible to understand when it is really dangerous, and you should be afraid. I don't panic. I clearly understand when and what to do: when to hide, and when you can stick out or shoot back. You need to keep a cool head. There's no other way. Otherwise, you just sit and joke, laugh at it all.

I don't make friends with other women in the military. We do not see eye to eye. I look at the quality of female personnel, and the presence of many women in the army does not excite me. There are good fighters, but most of them – the ones who came during the last two years – are not clear to me. I don't understand some of them – why are they walking around here with makeup, why are they here? If you remove 80% of women from the army, its combat capability will not change. Even more, some problems will disappear, such as pregnancy and fights among guys over some women.

Of course, there is also men's fault because they must finally learn to see a woman in war as a soldier, not a girl. If she came to the trenches, then give her a shovel and let her work with everyone. If she

doesn't do it right, help her learn to do it right, but don't do it for her. No need to make a fuss that we have a woman here, so everyone should leave their work and build a new warm toilet for her. I live together with everyone, although according to the regulations, there should be a separate dugout for a woman. So, what's the point? Friends told me a story. A 20-year-old girl came to them, majoring in accounting. She had higher education, so she completed officer training and was given command of a platoon. That was awful... Her orders were complete nonsense, but formally she was an officer. They have to understand why they come here and realize their responsibility.

Everything is fine with everyday life – good hygiene, if you want, can be practiced everywhere. I can't afford long hair. To wash it, you need more water, which means that there will be less of it for my fellow soldiers. So, I cut my hair short. I don't understand loose hair or styling, painted nails or makeup when you are wearing a military uniform. If you want to put on mascara or eyeliner, you're welcome, but please be reasonable.

In fact, I just don't care – I always have work to do. Well, everyone has a reason to come. I'm not a fan of certain relationships here. Women get pregnant all the time. In combat units, this is unacceptable, and it must be written either in the contract or in the Charter. She gets pregnant, goes on maternity leave, and in the meantime, no one can be appointed to her position. As a result, a machine gunner, for example, is absent for several months. If you want children, serve in the rear. We're at war here.

I am friends with my guys, they treat me as a sister. Sometimes, when someone jokingly hinted at something more, I also, as if joking, rejected them. Everyone laughed and never returned to the subject. How can you serve, fight and fall in love at the same time? This will



immediately cause problems: the wrong look, the wrong approach – and conflicts begin among the guys. It's nonsense. My boyfriend is in a different unit, and it was our common decision to serve separately so as not to interfere with each other's fighting. We have mutual support and absolute trust. He is an experienced warrior, and I am confident in his abilities.

My temper seems to have deteriorated during the war. I didn't have many female friends before, but now it's even harder. There are many wonderful girls, who serve in different places. I rarely cross paths with them but willingly communicate. I have become more impatient, especially in relation to all sorts of household items. Queues, people – so annoying. I've become tougher, 100 percent, and I have more gray hair now.

There is no war without losses. Everyone who goes there understands what they are doing. Maybe they do not fully realize it, but they still know that they might be the one who gets killed. I don't really want to get injured... because you see how difficult it is for people



to return home with injuries, especially after they have lost limbs. We recently buried a boy, who was 21 years old... You can't get away from this. There was a man, and now he's gone. You think, "Yes, we have four people on that position... Oh, no, only three are left." Cynically, one person leaves, and another takes their place. It just makes it easier to accept death.

Thoughts of leaving all this come every winter: to survive the winter is a tragedy for me. Every winter, I think that this time I will definitely kick up the bucket. All jokes aside, everyone should be responsible for the choices they make. I'm not used to leaving things unfinished. We're not done here, so we have to go all the way. Otherwise, how can you live with it? How can you stay at home and think all the time, "How are my guys doing? It's not over yet." I have nowhere to go. My family doesn't really know what I do here. Friends ... A few remained, they have their own life there.

I don't think I'll ever return to my homeland. When I left, I knew it would be like this. I have already obtained Ukrainian citizenship,



not without the help of lawyers and activists. I see a future in this country. Maybe, we won't see it, maybe, the next generation or people through generations will. But it's definitely there. I don't see Ukraine as a temporary place of living. I want to stay here; I want to do something. The system resists but gradually breaks down. The same is in the army: the old system is clinging, trying to hold on, but the mechanism of change is already underway. There are people who think different. Russia is the successor to the Soviet Union, where everyone wants to return to the past, not realizing that it will never be the way it used to. Ukraine needs to choose its own direction and path to move forward...



I honestly don't know what will happen when the war is over. Somewhere in the world, there is always a war. Humanity has been and will be at war throughout its history, so professional military personnel will always be needed. Maybe I'll participate in another war. Maybe after the war I will return to sports, perform as before, train children, who knows. However, war is not the best thing for an athlete because it damages health. You know, planning is a pointless and ungrateful activity. One minute you're standing here, and the next, you're dead. So, what's the point of thinking ahead?

# Oleksandra Osypenko

«Kot/Cat»

THE 53RD SEPARATE MECHANIZED  
BRIGADE, THE ARMED FORCES  
OF UKRAINE



I wanted to be in the army since I was a little kid. So, I graduated from high school and joined a military college in Ternopil oblast. I spent two years there. We lived like in barracks, we studied all the necessary things. Military education and training at its best. When I graduated, I wanted to continue with my education, but it didn't happen and I decided to join the army right away.

It wasn't easy. I had to put a lot of effort as I was offered, like many other girls, to cook or to be responsible for communication. And I am a fighter, I wanted a position that would reflect that. Eventually I had to go through a training, to show my best, to pass an exam. I doubt many people have to do that when they come to a military commissariat. I passed and was ordered to join the 53rd brigade. I was supposed to be a sniper. Another surprise. "No, you're not going to be a sniper. Machine gunner. Or going home." – I was told. Going home is not for me, so I studied to be a machine gunner. For a little longer than a month. Joined the brigade. My commander personally assessed me, my work with a rifle, what I know, what I can do and said that I could be a good sniper, and sent me to study.

Summer, 2016. I'm in the army. I am a tomboy, so not everybody realized right away that I was a girl. And it was great, because they treated me like a younger brother. Sure, sometimes I was told there's no place for a girl here. Very rarely, though. They saw my work. I was in an intelligence unit for a while, now I'm a foot soldier. I like it even better, because our intelligence units usually located further away from the epicentre and I want to be right in the middle of everything.

My first rotation was in Zaitseve, near Horlivka. When we were entering Zaitseve late at night, we had a few surprises waiting for us. Our GAZ-66 was filled with people and the next one had our things in it. Both cars were hit. I didn't realize at the moment what was going on,

what kind of weapon they were using, but when we got hit, we realized that that is it, our life has changed.

I don't speak with locals. It's a taboo for me. Had too many negative outcomes, so I try to stay away. Yes, there were cases, when they were coming and asking for help or food, and we were helping them, sharing our food, and obviously we weren't asking for something in return.

After I finished my studying, I joined an intelligence unit as a sniper. I made my first shot with a different kind of weapon, an automatic grenade launcher, though I was a machine gunner. We've had all kinds of situations in Zaitseve. All quiet, crazy days. They were shooting at us with grenade launchers, machine guns, DShK 1938. We've only had like 400-500 metres between us. Sometimes we got into it with their intelligence units. Cut out their surveillance. They didn't come back. Usually.

Then the Battle of Svitlodarsk happened. We were "welcome" there as well. The guys who were there before us told us where should we make ourselves at home. Half an hour and we're under a heavy shooting. 10 minutes and we have no home. Usually the first days are the worst. And the last days as well. When we were near Svitlodarsk (I was still a part of an intelligence unit), we went on missions to make our enemies lives a little worse.

The third rotation – Novotoshkovske, Luhansk oblast, near Popasna, the 29th checkpoint. The village wasn't far, so they were "quieter". Artillery wasn't working full time on us, of course. Like, for example, they did with Troitske. They were shooting even at civilians over there. Once, a 120 mm shell came into a yard of locals. A young man died (I don't know his age, but people said he was a teenager) and a granny had a post-concussion syndrome. My job was to get to the

checkpoint and guard it. No one was allowed to come through. During fights I usually work with a recoilless rifle. I was taught how to handle it once; a bit of practice and I am quite good at it. 2 or three shots and I knew how to handle it pretty well. The first one was very strong. I think I got a bit of a post-concussion syndrome. Now I'm get used it.

Surely, I was afraid. Somehow, I'm afraid before the fight, and once it has started, I am totally calm and collected. It's like I'm watching myself from the side and act accordingly. We get newbies from time to time and I've seen that they could get lost. I try to ditch them, to control them or to help them, so we would have it under control during the fight. Of course, we're scared, but we have to deal with it, we can't fight with it.

I like my job. I like being on the frontlines. I remember this on time in Troitske, they were shooting at us, I still have images in my head. They started shooting. As usual. Bullets, shells. Guys came out of a blindage. I just left an intelligence unit and became a foot soldier. I haven't had my orders yet. At first, I thought of staying in a blindage. Then I decided that I should go and help our guys however I can, even if it's just handing over bullets. I got out of a blindage, I heard a whistling sound and a shell came right into. 10 seconds have passed. At most. I was shocked. I'm glad I got out. I'm alive. Actually, I think that it is safer in the trenches. Even if we got hit, there's more space, more chances of survival.

Surely, this war has changed me. I became rough, a bit fiery. I can get scared from a firecracker, yeah. I know that I'm in the downtown. I am a civilian here. And I will get down if I here a loud sound. I got used to it. That is my reaction, reflexes. I had a case like this in Kharkiv. People thought I was crazy. It's okay. I will get used to a life as a civilian, in a peaceful place.

There are some positive things as well. I have a lot of friends from all around Ukraine. They will be happy to see me. We call each other, we talk, we find out how things are going. Surely, many people want to come back to their divisions, where they are loved, understood, cherished. It's not the same here. There is no absolute trust, no unity, no absolute confidence in your comrades... when you know they will help you if something happens.

Life as a civilian is different. People usually don't understand us. I came to my school one time. Like half a year ago. Many of my teachers said to me: "How can you kill people? Why are you doing this? Can't someone else do it?" I had a simple answer for that: "If not me, who?" One of my teachers said: "You are an idiot. Why did you go there?" I asked him in return: "If there were no idiots like me, what would happen to you?"

My mom was against it. She still is. She wants everything to be over. At least, for me. How can I leave and live a normal life right now, when my friends are there? They are over there and I will be sitting here, far away from them? I think that was is forever. Especially in my case, with my profession. I have all these images in my head. People I killed. Some people say it to my face. That I'm a killer. It gets me, but I've made my peace with that.

It was difficult to shoot for the first time. And the first 200 hit me pretty hard. I used to think of them as people, human beings, who was breathing, walking, drinking, eating just like me. He had a family. Kids, probably. And one sniper helped me with this. He told me: "Think of them as targets. And don't think about it too much." Yeah, it was easier with the second, and the third...

Usually I worked nights and mornings. Sometimes I went out at night, like 3 am, so I could be where I supposed to be by dawn.

Ready to work. They're hiding, but they do get out sometimes... Snipers rarely kill regular soldiers. Me too. I have to deal with the one in charge. If you look closely, you can see who gives orders the most. If you watch them for a few days, you can know for sure who is a soldier and who is a commander. I had a case when I had to take out a commander with the help of a private. I shot him in the leg and a commander... well, he's not with us anymore. A wounded soldier usually screams, everyone comes running, a commander is usually one of the first ones... I've had cases when I wounded them on purpose. I got used to it by now. It's just a job for me now. I often have these images in my head, right before, when they are still alive...

Sometimes you can see the result of you work, sometimes you can't. Then you get to know through intelligence. Or social media. They write about who died as well. There was this one time, in Troitske, at night. They were working in pairs. A breastwork saved me. It was a woman who shot at me. I saw the light and realized where she was and I shot her with a machine gun. Later I found out that she was a she. This is probably the only person I feel sorry for. They made a eulogy for her, writing about her kids, how they're going to live alone, because she had no relatives. It got to me. Kids without a mother.

I know that the same thing can happen to me too. I can get shot or killed. I got used to it after there three years. It helps during the fighting. You know it can happen at any moment. We're not immortal. But emotions shouldn't cloud our judgement. One of my comrades have recently died. We went on missions in Troitske together many times. It is probably the hardest thing form at war – to lose someone. The first thing that comes to your minds is: "Better me, than him." Seeing death, burying a person you've slept next to, ate from the same bowl. It is hard. And that is how all the anger and hate accumulate. You want to get even.



When I joined the army, I changed my appearance, my style. I cut my hair. I had long hair. I knew the boys would hit on me, so I decided to make myself look like them. I've changed. A lot. Now I prefer sportswear. Sometimes people think I'm a guy. Of course, I still have admirers, but I can only see them as comrades. No other way.

I'm not planning ahead. Now I'm studying to be a customs officer. I want to take a break after my term is over. Stay at home for a while. To put myself together. To get used to a peaceful life. It gets to you, you know. The war. Mentally, psychologically. It affects your health. I need to rest. I still call my guys once in two days. Until it's over, I'll probably be getting back.



# Tetiana Dunduk- Kucheriava

«Tanchik/Tank»

“EVACUATION-200”,  
A HUMANITARIAN PROJECT, THE  
ARMED FORCES OF UKRAINE

I wanted to join the military since I was a child. My mum also wanted to do this back in the day. So, I had it in my blood. It wasn't easy. Joining the army. In 2011 I was done with the program for reserve officers, but I wasn't very welcome as I was a girl. When the war broke down, I was serving in the military branch of National Technical University «Kharkiv Polytechnic Institute». I was an officer in the division of mental and psychological well-being. Later I realized that it's no good to be an officer with such a specific direction, you never know what is going to happen next and what kind of skills would you need.

I signed up for a Red Cross training. First aid and all. In me free time I was learning how to operate a tank. It was difficult, because I didn't have much free time. Thanks to my comrades I was able to make it. First, I was learning on mock-up tanks, then I was able to have a go on a real one. Step by step I learned how to deal with other armoured fighting vehicles. I was doing everything I could to be useful. And if there was a need, I wanted to be able to take our wounded back. Th war is on. Who knows what's going to happen next?

Then I took courses on civil-military co-operation, where we had a psychological testing as well as physical and professional trainings in order to be ready for ATO. The results were supposed to tell them how should they put us in groups. Due to my professional and psychological characteristics I became a part of a search party for a humanitarian project called "Evacuation-200". As I found out later, I was the first female on this mission.

I was asked if I was afraid. What does that mean? Afraid? Not afraid? They don't ask guys if they are afraid. They just go and protect me. I wake up in a peaceful place. If I can do something, I have to do it. When we were on our way, I told everybody that I'm not going to sit

around, because what is the point? I hate “tourists”, people who go there in order to be a veteran. My work started with registration, organization and documentation. I was responsible for transporting bodies of our fallen soldiers. I was quick on my feet and soon they were taking me on missions.

My first mission in the grey zone was quiet as I didn't leave the checkpoint. We were looking for a body of a soldier who've been gone for a very long time. My actions were rational, I did what I was told to do, I was trying to be quick and efficient. Eventually they started taking me full time. Then, once in while I was in charge.

Since then my job revolved around transporting bodies, looking for them, evacuate. Once we even had an exhumation. I might sound cynical, but I decided to give myself a switch. Once I'm going on a mission, I just have to do my job. I know my weaknesses and I have to work through them. For example, I was trying not to keep in mind all the names of our fallen soldiers. I still remember each and every one, though. It's been two years since that rotations. Another rule: don't look at the faces. Surely, it was difficult. But I was able to put myself together and work. How? No idea. It's a mystery.

I was told that when I come back, it will all come crushing. Thank God, it didn't happen. I do think about them from time to time. I have images in my head. Horrifying. I'd rather forget that. As you may understand, sometimes we didn't have a whole body. People who were there, who've seen it, who've done it... It can't just go away. I know that. My motivation was that I was doing something honourable. If you can call it that. Parents, wives, kids were waiting to see, to bury as a human being, as Christians, their kids, husbands, fathers. Waiting is the worst. Knowing that I'm doing good work helped me. As well as the idea that I vowed to protect my people, to serve.

If we knew the exact, more or less, place where someone died, we would need like an hour to evacuate and transport a body. Sometimes it took time. Sometimes we were looking for a soldier and came across remains of a civilian. Sometimes we had to go twice to find a body.

The most difficult mission I had was in December 2016 near Svitlodarsk arc, the notorious “woods”. We were supposed to find one of the “they’re not here” guys. We had to do the exchange. We had an agreement. An hour of ceasefire, so we could go in and find their guy. We were wearing special clothes, special vests as a warning that we are a search party, don’t shoot. We came across an intelligence unit. Maybe they didn’t know about the agreement. Or that’s how they honour their words. I don’t know for sure. They started shooting right at us. There were like 20 metres between us. Maybe less, I’m not sure. When I was lying on the ground, I could see their boots moving. We didn’t have any weapons. The bullets were whistling around. Branches were falling on us from everywhere. We knew they were supposed to kill us. Then we decided to get rid of our special clothes, our vests. It seemed like they lost us for a second and it helped us to regroup and crawl back. I had to crawl for like 40 minutes. Our people thought we were gone. Nobody knew where we were or what happened to us. During this rotation I was under a fire twice. The first time was near Shyrokyne, where we went to take our intelligence officer back. But that shooting wasn’t as bad as this one. And we were far away...

The realization came later. Maybe in two weeks. And only because my mom saw me on TV (I used to tell her that I’m in Kramatorsk, dealing with papers). It got me thinking. Such a heavy fire. They were shooting us dead. One millimetre, a ricochet. I’m gone. I did get afraid after that, but my work was more important than my fear.



I had two days of my rotation left, so I was told to sit and deal with documents. No more missions.

We usually had these black suits, so we would look different for the other side. We had no weapons. That's the rule. I've only been twice to the line of separation. Stanytsia Luhanska and Shchastya. To exchange and to take home.

Sometimes we had to look for or transport bodies from the other side. To tell you the truth, I have no emotions for them. Good or nothing, right? For me they were just bodies I had to transport to the other side. Moreover, we treated them with respect. It actually helped us once. When we transported a body in a coffin, they were shocked, because we are soulless creatures who murder children. And here you go, such a humane way of treating. It got to them and they gave us the remains of two soldiers who died in 2014. We had to do a forensic medical examination to try and find out who they were.

It was very difficult mentally and psychologically. Taking home our soldiers. I remember this one time when we were in Shchastya and had to take home a soldier who died in the Battle of Svitlodarsk on December 18th, 2016. The guy who studied with him was standing next to us when we uncovered him. Literally. I will never forget his eyes in that moment. He was always so energetic, so enthusiastic. And when he saw his friend, he couldn't hold his tears. This is the worst. Looking into the eyes of friends and relatives of the fallen soldiers. It's unbelievable.

I think the most difficult thing for me was to bring this one guy to his parents. To see all the grief and sadness. Some people blamed us. It's hard to imagine what they must have felt in that moment. We had this one case. A boy died after being shot in the head. And usually the face doesn't look the same after that. We brought him and his parents

said: “He’s not our son. Why did you bring him? Why are doing this to us?” We had to persuade them. Thankfully, his uncle recognized him: “Yes, it’s him.” Tried to console them... How can you look these parents in the eyes? Before they saw a body there’s still a chance. Might be a mistake. Everyone hopes till the last second. Then you see how this hope fades away. This emptiness in the eyes. Like the life itself left them. For me it’s like watching someone die in your hands...

We’ve had other cases as well. Thankful relatives. Especially with the guys we couldn’t bring home for a long time. They had time to process, to come to terms with their loss. A son, a brother, a husband, a father. Some people weren’t hoping anymore that they would be able to bury a body. Many people were relieved that it was over. We had a case in 2014 when we were transporting remains from a morgue in Dnipro to Kharkiv. His wife was sitting beside me. It’s difficult to find words in a moment like this. You want to say something, but you don’t know what to say. So, we were in a car for a couple of hours and I think I was talking gibberish, but I felt like she needed it. She was very grateful for transporting his body and for moral support. We usually tried to help with documents as well as with evacuation, exhumation or transporting, because there are so many things one has to do with papers.

My rotation lasted roughly three months. If I was offered to do that again, I most definitely would agree. I’m ready. Everyone is supposed to do what they do best. And if I can be of help, I would gladly do another rotation. However, there is a strong “but”, my husband would say no. I actually met him, Oleh Dunduk, a major in airborne forces, during this rotation. Everything happens for a reason, they say.

After what happened near Svitlodarsk, when I was put on a desk duty, I got a call from civil-military co-operation officers and volunteers.





They offered me to make a little new year's holiday for local kids and then bring their letters for soldiers. Naturally, I agreed. I can't sit around for a long time. After that they needed to make a stop in Pisky. I went there with them and met my husband. We talked, got to know each other, we didn't get to see much of each other, obviously. I tried to make



some time and visit him. As a girlfriend, then as a wife. We got married in October 2017. Military life is something special, to tell you the truth. It's been a year and I still see my husband once in a while. I hope we'll be together soon.

Waiting for a loved one to come back is very hard. And it's especially hard when you yourself are a soldier, you know everything. People who've never been there see things differently. More abstract, I don't know. And I know that any time could be the time a shell comes into a blindage, they could get hit... It's extremely difficult, but I always hold my ground. I try not to show him that I'm worried, because I understand how he feels. The only thing I keep telling him is: "You remember that you're not alone, right?" We are a military family after all.

I know all the nuances and details. “I’m going.” – he says. And I don’t call him, I’m waiting for him to call me. I know that he can’t talk sometimes. I know that I can’t really plan anything in our life. And I never hold grudges, because I understand. Unfortunately, these kinds of things happen to other guys. This mutual understanding helps us a lot, because it’s very difficult. Long distance and all.

Now there is a place for women in the army. Despite my firm thinking on this matter, I still believe that women should think clearly and choose occupations, where they can do their best. There are things that men do better. I don’t really understand how men and women become artillery, machine gunners after only three months of training now. In order to do this job, you must have certain abilities, knowledge, experience. People often call me the only female tank driver in Ukraine. And I always say that I’m not a female tank driver, I am a woman who learned how to operate it. In order to be a tank driver, you need to know a lot, you must have an extensive training. At the same time, I am very happy that now there are so many possibilities for women in the military. Many occupations were forbidden. Especially in the military academies. It means that now we’re going to have officer ranks among us. Totally equal.

# Yuliia Filipovych

«Veha»

“RIGHT SECTOR” / UKRAINIAN  
VOLUNTEER ARMY



I was a student before the war broke down. I got in the same year Maidan started. I graduated from college. I did great on my EIT (external independent testing). I was planning on doing what everybody else does at my age. I wanted to study, to have a career. And here we go. Maidan. I boycotted everyone and everything. I said that I don't want to study with all of this corruption and left. I thought that we're going to change something here and I will continue with my studies. I couldn't even imagine for how long will I be fighting.

Patriotism has no gender. If you love your country, you love your country. It doesn't matter whether you're a boy or a girl. I believed that I could be useful for my country. At first, I thought I would be able to get to the front lines right away. I wanted to help those who were fighting. When everything started, the first battalion went to the East straight from Maidan. It was the National Guard of Ukraine and I wanted to go with them, but I wasn't brave enough at the time. I got back home and went straight to the military commissariat. Nobody knew what to do with us, volunteers, at the time. Especially with women. Some say I'm too young or a girl, others came up with different reasons, and every single one of them told me "no". I started looking for volunteer battalions. I wrote to "Donbas" and "Aidar" or "Azov", can't really remember. Then I stumbled upon the "Right sector" headquarters in Lviv. I came in, we talked and I was sent out for training.

Training was hard. More mentally, then physically. Lots of stereotypes. Women on the front line were a rare occurrence at the time. Someone always tried to persuade me not to go. It only made my motivation stronger: to learn, to become a skilled professional and a worthy soldier. Studying was easy. I did what I could and what I couldn't in order to be on the same level with others. I liked it. I was able and capable. It was a volunteer battalion, so there was no clear



hierarchy, no military occupational specialty, only people who wanted to be there. We also didn't have enough weapons and equipment. Although, everyone had a chance to work with different kinds of weaponry and choose the one. Then we had an additional training at the 169th Training Centre. We were waiting like no one else to get to the front line. So much waiting...

It took some time for me to realize what exactly I want to do. Besides studying what I was supposed to study, I was trying to read all I could about weapons. And when the time came, one of my comrades





couldn't operate a grenade launcher, and I've been reading about it like the night before. I was able to reload it and fire. That's how I became a grenade launcher operator. I started going on missions with a grenade launcher and a backpack...

Surely, they didn't take me right away. They promised to take me the next time, and the next time and so on. Our division had a lot of older men and they've probably felt protective, like a father would, so they tried to persuade me not to go. Our commander saw my capabilities, my desire, and ordered me to go. I was beyond happy. After the first mission I knew that I'm far more than just capable. We weren't only trained physically, but mentally as well. We were true to the idea, obviously. I was ready. I was calm and collected despite knowing that anything can happen. I believe that mental state is one of the most important things at war.

My first mission was near Shyrokyne. I remember this one. It was pretty hard-core. I was worried sick back then, because we were going through the grey zone. We were ambushed. It was a long fight. We've had difficulties retrieving. We lost a comrade. Everything's changed after this mission. It was like "before" and "after". The first death on our team. That's when we realized how serious it was. We became aware of responsibility to protect each other. We started planning our operations more carefully.

I spent my two years of service in the sector "M". Mostly in Shyrokyne, though we did spend long periods of time in Hnutove and Vodiane. In Shyrokyne we were nearly locals. We knew every nook and cranny. The first time I saw this village was on TV. Shootings, a soldier lying on the sea shore with a grenade launcher. I couldn't comprehend that. How can you fight on the sea shore? When I got there... It's actually pretty good. When you get back from a mission or just stand on the sea

shore performing your duties, it's just beautiful. Romantic. Like shooting movies romantic. There was this one time we were being shot at with a self-propelled gun and we were located in this beach house... when we got hit, it was almost beautiful, water running in circles. Distracted us from thinking about the danger. Not in a bad way. It helped us to concentrate better. More or less.

At first, when we got to Shyrokyne, we were shot at pretty heavily. We were about to get to our duties when I was told: "Be careful. One less cover. Got hit yesterday." And I'm thinking: "Wow...". We got to our position and immediately we were being shot at. I happened to get paired with a comrade who was making jokes all the time. He helped a lot. Then I realized I should take it easier. Don't switch on these bad feelings. Yes, I need to be careful. No, I don't need to get hyped up about all the bad things that could happen. In the most difficult situations, we were trying to distract ourselves with talking, joking. We've had this atmosphere of brotherhood, comradery in our battalion. We supported each other through and through.

Shooting was easy. No fear. I wasn't imagining an enemy at the moment. I wasn't seeing people in front of me. The opposite. I was thinking of all the people behind me. Hundreds of lives ruined. I was thinking about all of the houses in Shyrokyne, ruined, abandoned, children's clothing lying on the ground. I was motivated by it. I wanted to protect them. I wasn't pitying our enemies. It's a weakness. The need to protect Ukrainians was above all.

By then, there were no more locals in the village. It was for the best. We didn't have to worry about them during fights. There was this one time when we were located in a place where people were so scared. They didn't understand what was going on. They were panicking. Some of them were negative about us. It was difficult. So, yeah, it's better



in a place without people. Surely, we've had locals who talked to us and their fears and stereotypes were gone. They were good with us. We helped them with food supplies. We talked. Other people would ignore us. We stayed away. In general, we it was okay.

I believe that our body and our mind are trying to protect us by blocking certain memories. I don't remember many details of our fights. Often, I can't retrieve pieces of information that would help

me with a chronological classification of events. Mostly I remember something funny. For example, there was a mission, I was walking with an RPG\* on my back, it was loaded, but not in a very good condition as it turned out. The weather was preparing us for hell, no less. We were walking for a long time and when we reached the grey zone, I asked a comrade to adjust my RPG. Something weird had happened and a shot was made. Nobody got hurt, luckily. He only got a bruise on his leg. I was feeling pretty bad about it. What's interesting, though, it went in the right direction. Enemy lines. We thought it was it. Our mission was done. We waited. It turned out okay. After that we were trying to come up with ideas on how to improve our weapons.

Here I spent my 2015 and 2016. Probably the worst years of this war. Although, for me, honestly, these years were the best ones. I had experiences that shaped my life. I've got friends I will keep for the rest of my life. From all around Ukraine. It's invaluable. I keep in touch with everyone who's still there. I'm glad I joined at that exact moment. The hardest times. I'm glad I was a part of a volunteer battalion. Now it's a totally different war. I don't think I would do it right now. People who are fighting these days have different views, ideas, motivations.

The decision to come home came to me naturally. First, some people from our group signed contracts with the Armed Forces of Ukraine. Many of them were disappointed later on. Others decided to take a break after all of the losses. Our group, basically, disintegrated. So, a few comrades and I went home.

I don't have a veteran status. The Lviv Regional Council aligned us, volunteer soldiers, with veterans, but only on a regional level. I have

.....  
\* The RPG is a portable, reusable, unguided, shoulder-launched, anti-tank rocket-propelled grenade launcher.

an id, but I don't use it very often. There are volunteer soldiers who took it to court. They are proving that they are in fact veterans. I respect this decision. However, personally, I find it humiliating that you have to prove it. I was there for me. We were told we won't be paid. No benefits. No ids. And I didn't go there for benefits. I went there for my beliefs.

Sometimes people ask me if I was psychologically traumatized as "you've been through a lot". I think volunteer soldiers are less likely to have these problems, because we all knew where and why and what for. I was told once by a chaplain that I will need as much time to heal as I've been there. I didn't take it seriously back then. Now I know it's true. The first year was pretty difficult. I was watching news 24/7. I was calling my friends who stayed there as much as I could. I was waiting for something to happen. I wanted to go back. Although, I didn't want to sign a contract. Volunteer battalions were disintegrating one by one. I didn't see myself there anymore.

The most difficult thing at war is to stay true to yourself. It's very easy to lose oneself there. Under the circumstances. It is very important to have something else in your life after you get back. To grow. So, I was trying to master my military skills as well as trying to grow intellectually. Fighting isn't all about the shooting. Any war contains elements of politics, culture, information. These are important factors. You need to be versatile. So, when I got back, I decided to dedicate my time to activism.

I'm trying to help soldiers and volunteers, organizing all kinds of events. We need to work with youth. The next generation's already one step ahead of us. They are better. They are born smarter than us.

This realization helped me to get through and to get out of the place I've been stuck since I got back. However, my marriage saved me. Before I met my husband, I was pretty depressed. It was so hard.



Mentally and emotionally. I was about to go back. Any day now. Marriage helped me understand that I can fight in the rear as well. I could breathe again. I could live again. My husband is very proud of me. He supports me. Some people ask me: “Your husband’s not a soldier? How did that happen?” Usually I say: “Well, neither is your wife.” So, yeah, here we go. Discrimination. Happens sometimes. I don’t think I’ll go back, because I am responsible for the two of us now.



# Liudmyla Kalinina

“Stroitel/Builder”

THE 46<sup>TH</sup> ASSAULT BATTALION  
“DONBAS-UKRAINE”



I was born in the west of Donbas. Following the Russian occupation of Crimea in April, I can't remember the exact date, I heard that Semen Semenchenko is creating a volunteer unit, which didn't have a name back then. We've talked and I decided to join as a medic, because I've had medical training. We didn't really understand what was happening at the time. How much time are we going to spend there. I thought it would take a couple of months. 4, tops. And we're going to go home. I called and said that I am a medic and that I can drive.

May 18th. I came to a place near Staromyhailivka. Officially we didn't have a battalion at the time. It was a patriotic volunteer unit. I didn't go alone. We went there with my friend Mariia, her code name was "Masiania". I saw an automatic rifle for the first time the next day, May 19th. I didn't know how to use it.

A few days have passed and we were drinking tea with our guys. They went on a mission. And "Matvii" who was sort of like our chief of staff went with them. Then we started getting information that our guys were ambushed near Karlivka. Some of them were wounded. Others were hiding. One of our comrades, "Khimik/Chemist", had a car and we told our commander that we could go and see what was going on. We would go as civilians.

We didn't actually realize that we were already fighting this battle. The war broke down. My friend "Masiania", our comrade "Shamil", a guy from the "Right Sector" with a code name "Maks" and I got into the car. We came up with a story that we were two married couples. We decided to say that we came to buy some paint. Invaded territories. Makiivka. Paint. That's how you can see we've had zero military experience. It seems so ridiculous. Couldn't we come up with something better? "Masiania" was a local, "Shamil" was from Crimea,

and we've had a bit of a problem with "Maks", because he was a proud westerner, he only spoke Ukrainian. So, off we went. We didn't get to Karlivka, though. We've got a call on our way there. We had to go back immediately. Our guys were found. And there was a real jam in Karlivka.

We got back to our base and I saw this white minivan with holes in the doors. I saw mattresses soaked in blood. I found out that "Matvii" was dead. Seemed like we were drinking tea and talking just a minute ago. That is when I realized what was happening. It was pretty serious. We've already had five dead in our battalion. We couldn't comprehend that. Grannies and grandpas die, yes, that's true. Young men? Boys? No! And why? War? In Ukraine? No way! Not happening!

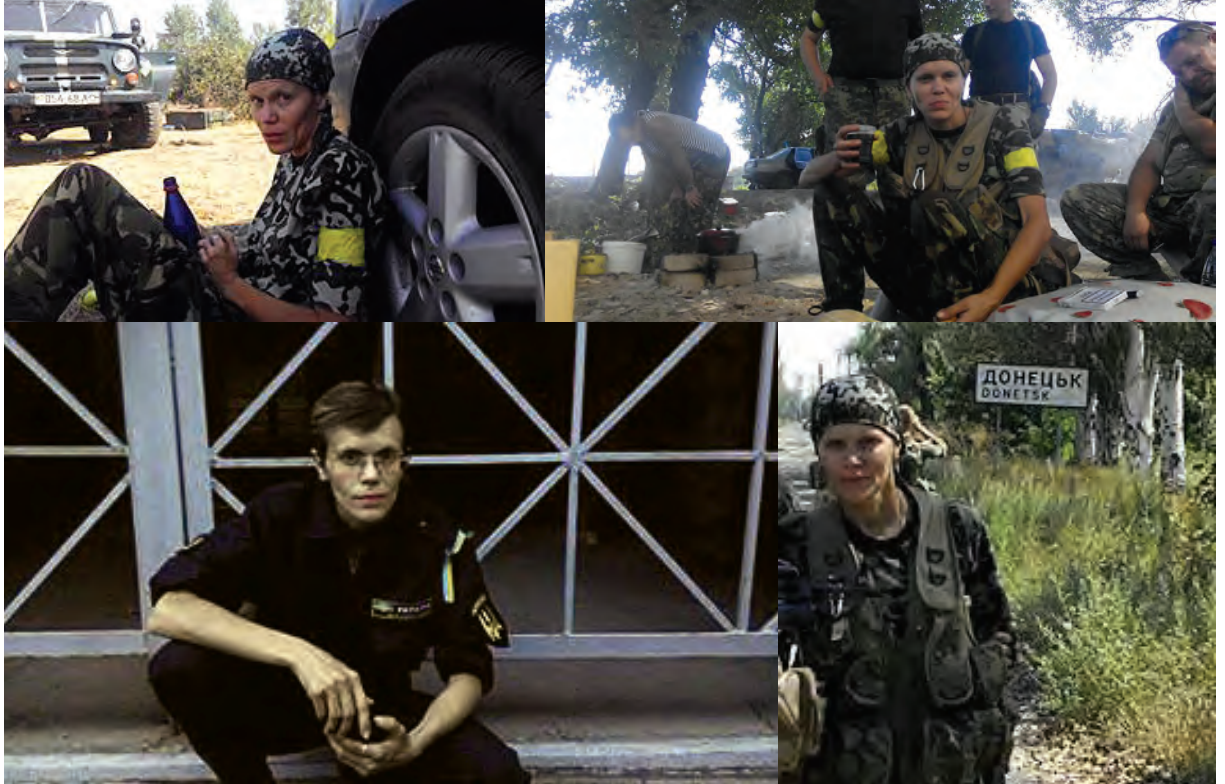
Semenchenko offered me to join an intelligence unit. We buried "Matvii". Our battalion was asked to join the National Guard of Ukraine. Many people were against it, especially the guys who fought in the battle of Karlivka. Mainly because it would be a part of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Ukraine. "We're not pigs." – they said.

I started learning the craft on the base of the National Guard of Ukraine. I learned how to handle a weapon, how to shoot. I was studying military strategy and so on. I was taught by people who were experienced due to Iraq and Afghanistan. Nobody felt sorry for us girls. We trained hard. Brutally. I still don't know whether it was for us, so we could learn and be able to survive, or they wanted us out. I don't know. Some of the girls left. They weren't able to cope with everything. Others joined, obviously. "Alina", "Koshka/Kitty". Strong women. That's how our term in a "Donbas" battalion started.

Pretty soon we had a new chief of staff – Viacheslav Vlasenko, code name "Filin/Eagle-owl". We started forming groups, developing a workforce. I got into an intelligence unit. Our team



of six people were trained as intelligence officers. At the beginning of July, we went to recently liberated Sloviansk. It was like a day after. It wasn't safe at all. We were scared. Shells everywhere. I couldn't even pee like a normal person. Guys had to form a circle and turn away, so we could pee on the ground. And the silence. The silence in Sloviansk left us speechless. Broken equipment and vehicles,



wires lying on the ground, buildings and houses ruined completely, no one's here. We got chills.

We got into Artemivsk with our safeties off and automatic rifles out of our windows. We were ready for any type of situation. We got there and made ourselves at home. We had information that there is a camp that serves as a base for terrorists in the nearest town called Chasovyi Yar. 12 of us changed into our usual clothes. And yet again, I believe God loves not only kids, but fools as well, because... someone decided that we (like all of us, twelve people!) should go there, to a small



town where everyone knows each other, pretending we were looking for an apartment! What can I say? Morons. Still, we got there and divided into small groups. We were walking for a while, trying to see what's what, to gather information. We saw some questionable people. Someone probably thought that we were questionable and suspicious. Then this town was cleared by an assault company. The camp was cleared as well, obviously.

The next stop was Popasna. There were a few attempts to enter this town. I've had many of my firsts here. I heard the sound of a BM-21 "Grad"

for the first time. Our comrades were killed here. Popasna also survived one of our brilliant plans. Masha, “Masiania”, and I were supposed to go there in our usual clothes. Again. She had a gun and I had a grenade in my pocket. We left Artemivsk. Roads were closed. Checkpoints were closed because of the heavy fire. And we are special, aren’t we? “We’re intelligence officers. We have to go and gather information.” – that’s what we had to say at each and every checkpoint. They were calling our guys, checking our story and letting us through. Top secret, no less.

The last checkpoint. It’s a village. I can hear the artillery working her magic. Suddenly I see women and a man. We stopped and told them we were looking for our brother who went to get some supplies. They asked us: “Where are you from?” We replied: “Krasnoarmiisk, but we were stopped in Bahmut. They didn’t want to let us through.” They said: “Poor kids... the war broke down.” One of the women, a granny actually, got into our car, she wanted us to give her a lift. While we were driving, she was telling us what’s what, shooting, artillery... our goal was to find out whether a bridge near Popasna is functional or not. We got to a checkpoint and our enemies were ready to go. Concrete blocks. A man standing like 200 meters from us. I see another one with a machine gun pointed at us. I have no idea how, but I firmly believe I reversed as fast as could. We were running away as fast as we could. They started shooting. The granny didn’t have time to realize what was happening. We started talking about our moves. She heard that and realized we weren’t looking for our brother. She was sitting there all green and blue, so pale. And when I, just in case, took a grenade out of my pocket, she jumped out of the car.

We decided to go to this village by the road (there was like an arroyo) and talk to locals. We get there and see three guys coming

out of the bushes. One of them has an automatic rifle and another one has a usual rifle. A group of gunmen. We were lucky that our car wasn't a military vehicle. We had a white license plate. We were fleeing really fast. Again. A dark-colored Zhiguli was chasing after us. They appeared as if from nowhere and were driving like maniacs. The road has already been broken by BM-21 "Grads". It was pretty difficult to speed up, but we were doing our best. We lost our tale closer to our checkpoint. That's how we found out where our guys could be ambushed. And we did find out that the bridge was fine. A man on a bike told us. A local.

The next day we went again. This time, as it should be, wearing a uniform. We went to a place near Komyshevakha in order to see whether their checkpoint is managed by separatists or not. We cleared them out multiple times. We got to the checkpoint. All 8 of us. We saw people in the distance. We told our people. The first assault company was working Komyshevakha at the time, 9 kms from us. And here we go. Someone is moving from the side of Popasna. It's a vehicle transporting corn. There is a person in a military uniform in a passenger seat. This vehicle is followed by a Daewoo. They're coming for us. We started firing and the driver of this vehicle was killed. The passenger jumped out of the car and ran. We did the same thing with the Daewoo. This car was full of weapons. We took it. People who were in that car probably got out as well. They had time. We captured one of them and started interrogating. He said they were preparing an ambush, planning to block the road with a vehicle transporting corn, and the Daewoo with all of the weapons was supposed to hide behind it. It was interesting... talking to him. Who are you? You seem just like us, another human being. We look alike, we talk alike. What's wrong? Why did you start this and why are you wearing this "LPR" tag?

Then I was a part of a mission to clear out Popasna. I got stuck on a filed. A burnt-out clutch. We were entering Popasna through the railways. Some of us were able to enter earlier, other weren't. They started shooting at us right away. There were three of us in a car. "Masiania", "Nerv/Nerve" and I. We jumped out of the car. Shooting. Chaos. We were firing in the wind. And here we go. Something fell of a tree. Later someone would say that we got rid of a cuckoo, a shooter lying in ambush.

We detained a lot of people because they had weapons. Mostly men, 20 to 30 years old. An interesting thing happened to us the next day while we were guarding the checkpoint where we've had our first captive. The first assault company was able to move a kilometre forward. They weren't able to get to this town as of yet. So, here we go. The head of intelligence is in the first car, then there is the second one and I could swear we didn't have this kind of a car. My first thought was: "They probably got it from someone, confiscated or something during a fight." Two men got out of it, looking calm. Who knows, maybe they're our army officers or "Aidar" soldiers. Maybe they were close and decided to stop by. Oh my God, we were so naïve! They were good. They were confident. They said they came to do this and that. So believable. However, we've had a comrade who took a closer look and saw a small Guards ribbon. The guy probably just forgot to take it off. The other one didn't have anything suspicious. Seems like they were gathering information as well. So, they decided to tail our head of intelligence "Iraklii". They were lucky to get that far. They were good actors, but this ribbon and our comrade's (code name "Dok/Doc") sharp eye didn't let them fool us. We searched their car and found weapons and lots of ribbons.

There was a time when the six of us got to Pervomaisk. We were sent like 20 kilometers away. Our guys were in Komyshevakha



back then. We went through Hirske where people were saying: “We don’t have separatists here. We scared them away. We don’t want this war here.” We got to Zolote-5 and stayed at a gas station. We tried to reach out to our people, but we weren’t able to. Then we decided that four of us would stay and “Masiania” and I would go to Komyshuvakha to tell others that there’s no checkpoints, no ambushes, no nothing, so it’s good to go.

We got to Pervomaisk, we went through suburbs... They have this nice bridge. After you passed the bridge, you finally get to town. There was a cemetery where we parked our cars. “Koshka/Kitty” stayed there. She was “lucky”. “Nerv/Nerve” and “Advokat/Lawyer” got into a high-rise to observe. We stayed at the right side. A local came and asked what were we doing there. One of ours answered: “We came to liberate you.” He said: “Why? What for?” We detained him for a little while, so he didn’t tell on us. And here comes a taxi. A family with a child. They told us that there is in fact a checkpoint. 50 people. They’ve got all of the necessary equipment. Heavy weaponry. We let them go. This family. Five minutes have passed and here we go. A motorbike. A rocket-propelled grenade. Automatic rifles. Crossroads. We’re staring at each other. We shouldn’t. This taxi. But how could we make them stay? We couldn’t force them or murder them. And there was a child in there. We even tried not to be scary.

“Masiania” told our people that we had an order to shoot, so we could find out where else were they hiding. We started firing, this bike tried maneuvering and a guy who was behind the wheel fell off. They started shooting back. We were going at it for 10 minutes and then we had an order to retrieve. We were putting our cars on the road one by one. While we were doing that our assault team

were waiting for an order to move. Then artillery started doing her magic. If we had an order, I believe we would be able to get Pervomaisk back.

Then we were ordered to go to Donetsk oblast. Right there and then we realized: This is war. Totally and completely. We got an order from Semenchenko to work Yasynuvata, Horlivka and Spartak. We've had two incredible informants in Spartak. Two brothers. Two patriots. They gave us valuable information on multiple occasions. Once we got out of Spartak, locals told on us, because when we were leaving, a group of separatists were coming our way. Often, they had three to five people on a checkpoint and a group of operatives nearby who were quick and ready to assist. We were lucky that day.

Once we had an assignment to go to the airport. We're going and I'm thinking that this is a road to Donetsk. We drove by our army soldiers. No one noticed us. No one stopped us. We were seeing these round things everywhere. I didn't know at the time that these were anti-tank mines. We were just passing them. Ruined houses. Dead bodies everywhere. They even started to decompose. We blissfully missed a turn to the airport. We almost got to Donetsk. We were happy as a child would be. We even started taking pictures. We got past the turn and saw a huge checkpoint. A few men were standing there. One of our comrades wanted to say hi and went for a handshake. Suddenly I see a flag... a flag... Separatists! We started running away, escaping... we were driving three cars. The first two were able to make a turn and the third one blocked the road. Army soldiers started firing... It was brutal. There actually is a video of this fight on the internet. Reporters found their way somehow. I saw how stupid it looked. We turned back and drove. The third car was just standing there. A comrade got out and wanted to change a flat tire...

I still don't know how it happened that our people didn't see us and our enemies didn't realize who we were and what was going on. Although, it happens pretty often. Confusion. When we didn't realize who was where, who went where. Communication was so bad. And our days were so dynamic. This war was mobile and dynamic. Sometimes we went on and disappeared for 2 or 3 days. Other times we were perceived as killers or famous marauders... Legends, no less. We were working multiple towns. We were lucky. We were really lucky. We could get pretty close to separatists and came out alive. We were lacking in knowledge, but intuition saved us on multiple occasions. And God, for sure. We were enthusiastic as hell. We were liberating a town after a town. We really believed that it will be over soon. We've been lucky for a while. Till Ilovaisk...

Now, a few years later, you see things differently. I think that if we stayed in Spartak in the summer of 2014, we wouldn't have the airport. And it was possible to take it and guard it. Instead we went to Ilovaisk, for some reason.

August 17th, 3am. Something close to 200 people were mobilized. It was bad from the beginning. It's never been that bad before. We've had flat tires, broke down cars, stomach bugs, someone was late etc. We were driving through Olenivka, Dokuchaievsk. People were very aggressive in Dokuchaievsk. I remember that vividly. We stopped in Kuteynykove. There were lots of ruined houses. August 18th, we drove through Hrabske. There were dead bodies of separatists that were decomposing, a burnt tank near a high rise... We've seen a whole lot, bodies and weapons, but we were incredibly uncomfortable here.

One woman comes to my mind pretty often. This one time "Masiania" and I went to buy some cigarettes in Kuteynykove. This woman told us that some of their people are on the side of separatists.

She hoped we could be of help. And she was offering her services. She wanted to help us however she could. Locals heard that. I'm afraid to think what has happened to her... The closer you get to the border, the harder it gets. Locals treated us worse and worse. They were turned against us, brainwashed. Propaganda was very successful.

We had an order to stay in Hrabske on the crossing. They started shooting at us with mortars. We went to Kobzari. There was a feeling that we were being led to Ilovaisk. They were using shells to follow us with. We go further, they start shooting again. And again, everything's ruined around us. That is how we got to Ilovaisk. August 18th. The first assault company was there, led by "Apis". I was supposed to be there for a day, but I stayed for 12 days. I didn't want to sleep at school with everybody that day. I don't know why. I slept in my car. And in the morning, we were under fire. Horrific and horrifying.

Ilovaisk has a very simple street system. You can see everything clearly. Semen gave us an order to stay in school by the bridge. We started looking for a way for our equipment, weapons and vehicles to get through from the right side of Ilovaisk. There were twelve of us at the time. I see a car, Lada Niva, with machine guns and automatic rifles. Some of us were patrolling and others were standing and watching... Who are these people coming at us? They're driving past us, watching us and we are watching them. I'm closing my door to let them through and one of them nodded as thank you. And then I see this word "Oplot" on the side of their car. I didn't even realize it at first... We're giving information over the radio: "There is someone named 'Oplot' going through". The answer was holy crap, our enemies. Yes. Confusion and chaos.

Then we were clearing out a depot. We've had this one captive, Slovak. He was quite interesting. He was dressed as if he was going on a safari. He had some ideas, to tell you the truth. Then we started

losing people. “Shults”, “Skif/Scyth” ... There was an enemy sniper near ATB-market. Oh, he was good. He shot straight through your neck. Someone is hit, another once comes to the rescue. Hit again. We got into a basement. So many people down there. Everyone is panicking. “They came to kill us.” They were horrified by us. I mean, they thought of us that way. We checked them out to see if there were any separatists among civilians. We needed to be careful. And we let them go. They thought we were going to crucify them. Everything was so chaotic. Someone got out of the bushes, took a shot and hid. And you're just standing there. No idea where to shoot. Our days in Ilovaisk. The first ones.

We've had many great talks with “Skif/Scyth” concerning languages. He was high-principled and patriotic. He only spoke Ukrainian. I spoke Russian. He had this infectious laugh. He was a great man. We were standing near the school at the time. Captives were inside, wounded were being treated, and “Skif/Scyth” was dead. I was in shock. Some of the wounded had died. The next night we were under heavy fire. Street lamps and lanterns. Felt like it was during a day. You can't forget something like that. And here you go... BM-21 “Grads”, mortars... “Filin/Eagle-owl” took us underground. When we got out, we saw burnt equipment and wounded soldiers. Then we found out that there is no way out.

Independence Day. We can hardly forget this one. Heavy fire. We weren't able to get out. August 25th, some people still tried to get out of this town. We've had “heroes” who came for a day or two, got scared and ran away. We also had people who said they have to escort captives and disappeared. Now they screaming out loud that they are heroes of Ilovaisk. People died every single day... All of the time... By then we knew that we were surrounded and we were kind of desperate.

We were screaming songs as loud as possible. Sometimes we didn't even go down when we were under fire. We weren't completely sane at the time, to tell you the truth. I suppose we wanted to get rid of desperation and fear in such a way.

August 27th, we tried to get out once again. We talked about retrieving through Mospino, Khartsyzk. August 28th, a period of silence was announced. They were extremely insolent. They were coming closer to look at us. And we were looking at them. We started moving in the morning. It was scary. We were on the road to Hrabske. Burnt cars all around us. We drove past the 93rd brigade. They were supposed to go behind us. They were the last ones. At first, we were really scared. When we got to Hrabske, we calmed down, turned on the radio with some kind of pop music playing. "Koshka/Kitty" was laughing and saying that she will buy some chicken as soon as we're home. "Dok/Doc" said he's going to get waisted.

Everything was okay on the road to Mnohopillia. We relaxed a little bit. We thought it was over. Heavy fire, deaths... We were so naï ve. We passed Ahronomichne. "Myrotvoretz" and "Dnipro-1" were stationed there. It was really cold. Especially for the summertime. I stole a jacket, because it was unimaginably cold. My teeth were chattering. I was shivering. We met with our command. They were negotiating with Russians at the time. Then the Chief of the General Staff Khomchak turned to us and asked: "We're going to get through this, right, girls?" We were a bit surprised. Of course, we're going to get through this. No questions. "Filin/Eagle-owl" knew we could have problems near Starobesheve. A few neighbourhoods could have Russians in control. We heard rumours that we're dealing with the regular Russian army as well as with separatists, but I still couldn't believe that we've already had a massive invasion.

We had an order to go back to our cars. We left for Krasnosil'ske. Then we got under heavy fire. Bombardment. We ran like crazy. Straight for the cellar. Automatically. A dog was killed with fragments right in front of us. Then again: "Line up! Go!" We had a white flag. The line of cars stretched out and we started moving. They started shooting at us right away. A green corridor wasn't green at all. It was a corridor of death. They knew this road very well, so every shot was perfect. Took a shot – hit, took a shot – hit. We couldn't believe our own eyes. Smoke, fire, people running, ruined cars with wounded people all around... Vehicles burning on the right side. Smoke is everywhere. We've got a chance to move ahead. Artillery's doing her magic once again on the right side. Snipers – on the left. At least that's what I thought. Cars everywhere. There was a boy with no legs. He tried to move with his hands. He was screaming so loud... louder than anything else. Sometimes I think it was a hallucination.

Someone's head dropped on our car. Hit again. Cars exploding. We're in some kind of a corn field. We got out of the car. Started fighting. Hard to say who's who. No communication. There were other battalions as well. The Armed Forces of Ukraine. How could you possibly figure out who's a friend and who's an enemy? There is a fight and you don't know who's fighting who. "Brest" and "Usach" started working them. They were successful. I started looking for some kind of a cover. I ran into a building and saw something pretty weird. Absurd even. There is a fight and here is an old man just sitting on his bed. We took off a blanket and saw two tankmen. Russians! Army! They were straight with us. Yes, we have an order to destroy you. We weren't supposed to go that far. We gave them to our comrades.

So many wounded. So many dead. Other comrades had captives as well. Interrogating here, fighting there... Tanks were nearby. Shooting

at us. There's one with a white flag. We're thinking, they're coming with peace. Nope! They're coming to take us. We started negotiating. They started shooting. "Tankist/Tankman" is dead, "Apis" is wounded, Alinka got hit with fragments, I was shell-shocked and shot. After that I don't remember much. I remember I was carried somewhere, I tried to call my mom... I regained consciousness in a cellar. It was dark. I thought I died. Buried and in hell. There were civilians as well. A Russian soldier lying near my feet. Wounded. Then we had to get out and we were captured. I had a scar on my finger from a long time ago. They thought I was a sniper and wanted to shoot me. Someone said I will die pretty soon, so there's no need. I remember our guys with holes in their heads. They were undressed, naked. No wounds. Just a bullet to the head. Other captives had to load them up.

We were lucky, in a way, that we were with Russians. They pitied separatists, they called them bastards. Many of them were not in their right mind, not completely. There were guys who tried talking to us. They believed that they were killing fascists, but here we were, regular people, no horns and hoofs, speaking Russian. We spent a night right on a field. No help from medics. We only had food for one. There were six of us. And it was so cold that night. Extremely cold.

Captives as well as wounded had to go on foot. The sorted us out as well. As it turns out they were supposed to give us, people from Donbas, to separatists, not to Russians. Even though a Russian with a code name "Lisa/Fox" gave his word that we wouldn't be taken by separatists. Our guys were indeed taken by them. Women stayed. Captives were lined up and taken. It was pretty scary to see how locals in Novokaterynivka reacted to Russians. They saw them as someone who came to liberate them. Though, there was this woman who asked separatists to give us water. After the capture we stayed with the Red



Cross. Then we had treatments. I remember how badly I wanted to call my mom and my children, to tell them I was alive.

Many of our guys were captured back then. Some of them are still missing. Our battalion disintegrated after that. Half of us stayed and the other half, me included, went with “Filin/Eagle-owl”. Ilovaisk divided our life into “before” and “after”. It will never be as it was before. Never. I have these pictures carved in my mind. They pop up from time to time. I can’t hide from them.



# Valeriia Burlakova

“Liera”

THE CARPATHIAN SICH VOLUNTEER  
PLATOON; THE 93RD AND THE 54TH  
MECHANIZED BRIGADES; THE 46TH  
ASSAULT BATTALION “DONBAS-  
UKRAINE”

I wanted to get to the front lines since the very beginning. I tried and tried to get into any battalion. Yes, I didn't have military experience, I've never served in the army, nothing. At first, I applied to "Donbas-Ukraine". I thought, maybe they'll offer me to be a part of the press service... Then I tried to get into "Kyiv-2". Nothing came out of it.

At first, I was going there as a reporter and as a volunteer. My first division was the Carpathian Sich volunteer platoon. In the end of 2014. I came as a reporter and they were looking for people. There were six of us. Five soldiers were supposed to be on duty. And they needed the sixth person. So, I spent the whole week in this division. Then their commander got back. He was driving our boys to the airport, so the others would rest for a while. He was pretty sad when he came back. Not enough people. My comrades were supposed to go home, to go to work. It was the time when volunteers came for like 10 days or a week and then they had to go back to work. They wanted to help as much as they could. I said that I will go to Kyiv, I'll quit and I'll come back. He asked me where was I working and when he found out I was a journalist at The Ukrainian Week magazine, he said: "Don't quit, it's a good magazine." I did quit. I came to the Carpathian Sich as a soldier and I stayed there till May 2015.

My first strongpoint was "Kamikadze", near "Respublika mist" checkpoint and Pisky. Our mission was to blow up another bridge nearby, on the road to the airport, in case separatists would take the airport and move ahead. I spent there my first week. Then we went to Pisky. I felt a bit inadequate, because I've never been to the very front lines before. Once I did it, but as a journalist and as a part of the 72nd brigade. I came to the 72nd looking... patriotic. I had braids with blue and yellow ribbons. Their commander looked at me and said: "Oh, God!" Then



he ordered me to go to Volnovakha with all the people I was supposed to interview.

Apart from that case I've only been to the second line. So, on the road to Pisky I asked a lot of questions. "When a shell is coming our way, what kind of a sound does it make and what should I do?" I didn't want to act like an idiot and I didn't want to die because of it. Though, when the time came, I was good to go. None of us was the best. It was 2014. Not much experience. We were learning. Every one of us. I was lucky to have friends with me. We've been through Maidan together. They didn't see me as... "What are you doing here, girl?" It was good right from the start. And every time I transferred, I wasn't the only one. A group of us did. It was easier to adjust, for sure.

There was this neighbourhood in Pisky with all of the high-rises and a church, where people lived in basements and cellars. And we were

on the other side. No locals. Pretty much. There was an old man who joined us and fought in the “Right Sector”. He had an incredible garden. Somehow, he was able to fight and to look after it, digging up shells and all. The garden was beautiful. He lived there and went on missions when he had to. We lived on the street named “Myru\*”. There was a family with a kid. Their dad was a bit cuckoo and didn’t really take care of his child, so the kid was wandering the streets by himself. If I’m not mistaken, they were transported out of there in the end of the spring 2015.

It was fun, what can I say. All of the weapons that they had they were using on us. I can vividly remember BM-21 “Grads”. They’ve had these all of the time. Shooting “Kamikadze” and “Respublika” as well as Pisky. It was a bit easier in Pisky, because there was a distance between all of us. Sometimes we were hit, sometimes the “Right Sector”, sometimes the army. They weren’t taking out the same target all over again like with “Kamikadze”. Still, the damages were pretty serious.

I’ve had to learn how to work with different kinds of weapons throughout these three years. At first, I had a usual Saiga semi-automatic rifle. Then I got an automatic grenade launcher (AGL). I learned to operate it in Pisky. Then I joined the Armed Forces of Ukraine, the 93rd brigade, and I was sent to a mine called “Butivka”. I was a shooter over there. An under-barrel grenade launcher is the best I could get there. A separate platoon used AGLs. Later, when I got to Svitlodarsk, I had two AGLs, because I knew how to handle them. Soon the command of the 54th brigade decided that some of us should go and handle artillery batteries. I was transferred there and I became a commander.

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\* Peace in Eng.

I was very chaotic about my decision concerning where to go after my volunteer battalion. The Carpathian Sich transformed into the 93rd brigade. I didn't try to figure out what's what in the army and I didn't know that there is a certain list of jobs that a woman can do, which was official in the Armed Forces of Ukraine till 2016. I was handed a piece of paper where it was stated that I will be a radiotelegraph operator, something like that. What the hell? I was offended, got into a fight with our commander and left. Later on, I found out that they weren't able to offer me anything else officially, because they couldn't. A woman couldn't be a shooter or a grenade launcher operator on paper.

A few comrades and I left for the 46th assault battalion "Donbas-Ukraine" and joined the department of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. They resided on the testing ground, not on the front lines. And Vasyl Slipak, yeah, the famous opera singer, offered me a place in the "Odin" division, which was about to transform into "Azov". However, it was clear that "Azov" won't be able to operate fully, maybe as an intelligence unit, if that. So, we went looking further. Started asking about the Armed Forces of Ukraine, thinking about joining the 53rd brigade, where the father of one of our guys was serving, but no, didn't work out... Then we remembered that soldiers of a volunteer battalion "OUN" were joining the 93rd brigade. And it was far easier for volunteer soldiers with experience to get all the paperwork done. The army knew how we operate and what we can do.

The Carpathian Sich transformed into the 93rd brigade and became a fully operating company, even though on papers soldiers of a certain platoon belonged to different divisions. "OUN" soldiers were sent wherever they were needed. At first, we were scattered as well. We were lucky. The commander of the 1st battalion with a code name



“Viter/Wind” took us all in and we went to Butivka. He went back to the headquarters to get our paperwork done.

I wanted to go there. I had an old friend Mykola Smirnov with a code name “Kit/Cat” who fought in “Kyivan Rus” battalion. Previously, he spent three to four months in Butivka and he really wanted to go back there. He joined us; he joined the 93rd brigade. He shared lots of stories, so we really wanted to go there as well.

We didn’t get there at once. At first, we had to deal with all the paperwork, military commissariats, registration and such. November 11th, 2015. We signed our contracts and finally got there. When I got out of the car, the first thing that came to my mind was: “Wow, it wasn’t as bad as I thought”. Though, the damages seemed awful. Eventually, I can’t say it was that bad during my time here. Mortars, shootings, 82mm calibre shells. I expected it to be hell on earth. It turned out okay, considering. It was pretty “fun” out there, but it was a bit better in the mines. I was a medic on papers. It was the only job available for a woman at the time.

It was different because most of the time in Pisky we were working with AGLs, covering the other position – “Nebo”. We didn’t see who was shooting at us and who we were shooting at.





We had help, but we didn't see people we were fighting against. So, the first time I saw a person who was shooting at me was in Butivka. My reaction was phenomenal! I squatted, closed my eyes and ears. There was a human being after all. And this human being came to kill us! I was quick to pull myself together. I can't say that I had some clear understanding, I just did it, automatically. Maybe I'm saying something horrible, but... you don't see them as people. It's not about their views. It's because it is your job at the moment. It's your job to take a shot. In general, it wasn't really bad during my time here. I remember something ridiculous. Someone was yelling hysterically over the radio: "We were being shot at, what shall we do?". Our commander was calm and collected: "Take a shot. You are soldiers, aren't you?"

I was serving with my fiancé. His code name was "Moriachok/Sailor". We met when we were registering in the 93rd brigade. We filled in available positions, so on papers he was a machine gunner even though he was a sapper. The same thing goes for another soldier with a code name "Rozpysnyi", who died later on in Svitlodarsk. They were together most of the time. Laying or clearing minefields, performing orders from our platoon and company commanders. They had this

one assignment and one of the shells... Later, they said it was a shell that was operated at a distance. A MON-50. Maybe separatists missed something... did something... One of the guys was seriously injured and my “Moriachok/Sailor” died.

We came to Butivka as a couple. It was amazing. When you meet someone as a civilian, you usually need time to get to know each other. You may think that you know someone and then you get into some kind of a situation and realize that you don’t know them at all. And here... We were together 24/7. You can see how they hold themselves in all kinds of situations. “Moriachok/Sailor” said that I was on the list of people from his team to go on missions and he talked to our commander about that. But he said that I won’t go, because “he doesn’t want to see girls with no legs”. There was a case when a girl lost her legs in the explosion. We did perform duties together. We didn’t have candlelit dinners, of course. But we did go to Pokrovsk once in a while to clean up, to eat, to take a walk. We wanted to get married and asked for a few days, but we were short on people, so we were promised, but we didn’t get a chance.

After his death I... I stopped having feelings. I don’t even have these strong emotions that I’m supposed to have when my friends die. Maybe it’s just me trying to protect myself. I’m not a psychologist and I can’t explain this. All of my feelings and emotions are blocked somehow. Even when “Mif/Myth” died, and he was like a brother to me, I wasn’t crying. Yes, he died. But after my “Moriachok/Sailor” died, I started seeing things, life and death, in a different way. Calm and collected, I guess.

I seemed okay for a while after his death. After the funeral I got back to Butivka. Right away. I believed it was the right decision. Soon I realized that it’s too much. I need to change things. I had bronchitis,

so I went for treatment. I talked to a psychologist and I got back on a horse. I got better.

I did a lot of writing. About him, about us. An hour after he died, maybe 40 minutes, everyone started coming to me, talking, asking, worrying, hugging... Someone tried philosophy on me. Like “we’re all going to die”. Everyone tried to pay attention to me. And I didn’t want to talk to people. I wasn’t crying. I wasn’t trying to shoot myself. I was just sitting around with my phone in my hands. Writing and such. Don’t bother me. I can’t even remember when I started doing this in Word and not on my Facebook page. An editor in the magazine I used to work for told me I should publish it. When will this come to an end? I can’t spend my whole life writing to someone who’s not with us anymore. I decided that 40 days is enough. So, I wrote a book in roughly 40 days. As a journalist I realized that I need to explain certain things. Then I thought that it’s not fair. If I’m writing a letter to him, he knows what I’m talking about. Yeah, it turned out confusing, I think. Not too many people aside from the guys from my company realized what was I talking about, who was I talking about.

After that there were conflicts with our command, because that mission wasn’t on papers. Someone didn’t put it there. It was like “they decided to do on their own”. My seriously injured friend “Kit/Cat” was supposed to pay his medical bills himself. “Moriachok’s/Sailor’s” mother wouldn’t be compensated for the death of her son. I started calling and asking why was it registered as “unofficial”. I recorded conversations with commanders. I wrote an article. I gave all of the materials to Olena Kozachenko, a journalist who made an investigation report. It helped to get it on. This mission was pronounced official. We were able to prove that there was an order. Even though the command were assuring us that the boys just “went for a walk”!

My attitude towards the 93rd has changed drastically. Moreover, we were supposed to leave in a while and let other people have their day in the sun. I wanted to stay on the front lines. I wanted to believe that things could be different. I decided to transfer.

My friend “Anhel/Angel” and I decided to join the 56th brigade, artillery. We came to our command saying we got in. They were happy to get rid of us after the media scandal. And we actually lived in totally inadequate conditions. I bugged them about it all of the time. They didn’t like that very much. They signed all the papers. And then our papers got lost. We decided that we’re not going to travel hundreds of kilometers once again. We won’t be able to. And we were fed up. I came home, to Kyiv, and wrote a letter to the military prosecutor’s office saying I left the brigade, because I can’t stay there anymore. So many violations. Concerning everyday life, lack of training, attitude towards soldiers etc. I talked about it for 10 pages. I spent like a month in Kyiv. No one talked to me about my statement.

“Anhel/Angel” and I decided to go to the “Right Sector”, to go “home, to the front lines”. Vasyl Slipak went with us. “Rozpysnyi” joined us in a few weeks, a sapper from the 93rd. When Vasyl died during an assault, 50 undocumented soldiers started signing contracts with the 54th brigade right then and there. We went to our commander and said that we already had contracts. We were afraid that he’s going to kick us out. The representatives of the military prosecutor came to question us, we talked and they tried to transfer us from the 93rd to the 54th officially. They were successful. I came to Svitlodrsk in the summer of 2016. Officially I transferred in October.

We’ve had women in our battalion. Quite a lot. Two of them had the same code name “Vidma/Witch”. We’ve also had “Perlynka/



Pearl” and “Ksena/Xena”. Our political commissar was a woman, Oksana Petrivna. Everyone had their own assignments. When we’re asked about discrimination, I think about the time when three girls were guarding a checkpoint on a highway and one of the positions was short on people and they asked to go there. A commander realized that he had women under his command and they were sent away from the front lines to do some meaningless jobs to Bakhmut. Luckily, I don’t have these kinds of stories.

At first, I was very bored in Svitlodarsk. It was a field and the distance between us and the enemy was huge. I remember summertime pretty well. Our commanders went to take a checkpoint and other guys,

two teams, were supposed to take on a separatist position “Murashnyk”. They were successful. Suddenly they were told to let it go. I remember hearing about it and being shocked. How could they do that without even consulting with Kyiv? All these injuries and losses. What for?

Then, during wintertime, we were working the woods once again. At the time I was working with an artillery battery. The guys were in the positions and they were not ordered to leave. Autumn/winter, 2016. So hard. It was “hot” almost all of the time. Our enemies were targeting civilians like crazy. I remember an old woman who was buried in her own home in Luhanske. And we had no positions in the village.

People treated us in a different way in Luhanske. I had an awesome dog named Arta. There were times when they treated us well. I was walking with my dog and a woman came up to me and said that I have to give him something for intestinal worms. She was a vet. Sometimes people gave us tomatoes. Some locals told on us. For example, one of us decided to go and clean a mortar during a day and just like that they were shooting at us. Our enemies couldn't possibly see us. They were too far away. Someone told them. Locals could see us pretty well.

I didn't have friends from Donetsk region before the war. I had my prejudices. And I met so many locals who came to fight as volunteers. I realized that they came to fight for Ukraine. I realized how great they were. How difficult it was for them. As some of them can't go home. Invaded territories and all. They can't see their parents. And they still came. They are incredible. Many of them fought, for sure. I didn't speak Russian for a while. I just didn't. But I spoke Russian with them. As they didn't betray Ukraine despite speaking Russian. They came to fight for Ukraine.

I loved working with a mortar. At first, it was scary. Will I be able to learn how to operate it? It's math after all. And then I got good at it. I have a friend who taught me, Ihor Slaiko. He had a lot of experience and was a good teacher. He's very calm. He taught me to work that way as well. Calm and thorough. I am lucky to have these people in my life, to work with them. We were a great team and they were great about me being a commander. It wasn't as good in the next division where I transferred later on. For example, we had military men who had ranks, but no experience. De facto they were privates. They were forced to do it. Not the best company. They still tried to be in charge sometimes. Still, it was possible to work with them and do good.

We've had losses in Svitlodarsk. Vasyl Slipak. The guys who were working the woods... Our comrade "Kruk/Raven". It was difficult for me when Vlad Kazarin died. He died of explosion like "Moriachok/Sailor". I was going back to the front lines at the time. On a train. I got a text. Vlad is 300. Manageable. I laughed and wrote to him jokingly, asking where he was staying and what he needed. 10 minutes. I didn't get an answer from him. A comrade who texted me about him texted again and said that Vlad is dead. I was shocked for the first time in a while. He was one of the youngest. Seemed like he was born for this. He was very good. A few days before this we were drinking coffee and joking that when the war is over, we'll go to Africa and will fight for them. He was good at it.

Is there a place for a woman in the army? It depends. There are irreplaceable women like Yulia Matviienko, "Bilka/Squarrel", a sniper. There are men who are useless. There are women and men who... yeah, you know. I am lucky. Our girls were awesome. They were where they were supposed to be. In the end, women are more motivated on the frontlines, because they have to work twice as hard as men. They



have to prove that they are capable. Constantly. When a man makes a mistake, everyone takes it easier than when a woman does it. For example, a man won't be sent away to the rear.

At first, I believed that we'll fight for a bit and go home. Then we realized it won't go that way. It's difficult to stay away. How can I be in Kyiv when someone is fighting for me over there? Now I'm back



home, but I have a go-bag just in case, so I would be able to run to the front lines if I have to. It's really scary to go back to life as a civilian. You don't know how will you act around people and how will they act around you. I try to avoid talking about the war, because I'm afraid to hear something I don't want to hear, and I'm afraid of my reaction. And my comrades understand me. I'm useful over there. It's easier for me. I'm used to it. I'm not ashamed... Now I'm working as a journalist once again. I love my job. Naturally, I write about what I know, about the war and military issues, and everything in between. Surely, I'm drown to go back. I am. Very much so. If I have to, I will.



# Iryna Harkavenko

“Marho”

UKRAINIAN VOLUNTEER BATTALIONS,  
“RIGHT SECTOR”, 2014–2015



I was born in Cherkasy oblast. For me it all started with the revolution. At first, I was one of the people responsible for defending our local Maidan. I didn't go to Kyiv, because my daughter was very young and my mom was extremely against it. Later on, it wasn't the easiest thing to do. Roadblocks, check-ups and all. When the war broke down, we started having 200s. My good friend Yevhen Voitsekhivskyi from "Aidar" was one of the first ones. When I started burying friends, I knew I had to do something. I felt it in my heart. I had to be there. I didn't know what exactly I'll be doing. It didn't really matter. Even as a cook. And when I decided to go, I realized that a woman and any war at the moment were two different things. Boys just didn't want to see women there. All of my attempts were unsuccessful.



I had a friend from Cherkasy oblast who was a part of “Donbas-Ukraine” battalion. I found out that there is a group of volunteers and journalists and they’re going to the frontlines with “Donbas-Ukraine” in order to help. I asked if I could go with them: “I have a friend over there. Just wanted to see what’s what.” They agreed. When we got there, I knew I won’t be coming back. Artemivsk, Popasna. Volunteers went back right away and I stayed for a week. There was a team of six people. They had some issues with the battalion, so they decided to go to the “Right Sector”. I was happy to go there.

We got there. I remember I was particularly impressed and it was a pivotal moment for me (I decided to stay), when I woke up at 6 am due to singing of the national anthem. I think it was July 2014. It felt so good.



They were so patriotic. This national spirit and all. The next day I've heard it again. And then I was told that it wasn't guys who sang. They said: "Let's go and you'll see for yourself." We went there and I saw captured separatists. Every morning they had some sort of lining up and they sang our national anthem. That's how they were adopted back into Ukraine. They weren't tortured. They had to learn the words of the national anthem, Ukrainian songs, Shevchenko's verses and so on. In order for them to think, to understand, to reconsider, because they were Ukrainians, who betrayed their homeland and for what? It was unclear.

Then the guys went back to "Donbas-Ukraine" battalion and I was supposed to go back home. I really didn't want to go. I was crying so hard. They drove me to a train station in Pokrovsk and I went home. I talked to my mother. I sugarcoated a few things, for sure. I said that there were a lot of women down there (in fact, one or two, tops). She agreed. I packed up my things and left. By myself this time.

I was accepted into the first assault company of the 5th volunteer battalion, "Right Sector". I got to know all of the guys a little bit better. Then the team of my fellow-citizens (from Cherkasy oblast) came for the second time and joined the battalion. They had experience, so they went



to Pisky right away. I stayed at the base, because I had none. I knew how to take a shot, because I worked for the police for a while, but that was it. I had to go through training. It wasn't easy, because volunteer battalions rarely had any weapons.

I realized that I want to do as much as possible for my country. I didn't want to leave it like this. For my children. At the time I knew it would be quite a while before we go back home. My comrade and a fellow-citizen Sasha wanted to send me home right away. He had me carry a machine gun, reload it and kept asking if I wanted to go home. My nails were bloody, but I've never even had a thought about going home.

I remember hearing on the radio that the firing started. It was getting dark and I heard shots. I got scared, but I wasn't panicking. Guys told me to go to one of the rooms and stay there. I sat there and I heard how they were shooting back. When they stopped shooting, I was afraid to come out. It was so quiet. I thought: "What if our guys were killed, our position was taken and soon they come in and capture me?" I did come out, eventually, and I saw my guys sipping tea and talking... They just forgot about me. I was so pissed at them.

After that most of the time I was in Pisky. Sometimes I was in Vodiane. We've had girls responsible for communication, medicine etc. One girl was in an assault company (code name "Ariika"). She was with us during missions all of the time. When I got there, the village was ours and all of the positions were set. The village was ruined, but not like it was when we were leaving, when it was pretty much gone. We were friends with the army soldiers (the 95th brigade was stationed nearby). I went around the whole village in order to know what's where and all. Where should I go if something happens.

When I got back, our commander was gone. He left for a while. At the time our assault company was pretty big and I had to put some guys in their places. Then they started respecting me and listening to me. The headquarters called for me and offered me the position of the sergeant major of the first assault company. When our commander with a code name "Podolianyn" had to leave, I was doing his job. I didn't have any clear responsibilities. I was supposed to keep soldiers in line, to work with all of the day-to-day like food, uniform, volunteering etc., to make reports on their positioning, to prepare the guys to go to the front lines and so on. Usually, the commander was asking me to choose who's going to the front lines in the morning. Soon they got used to me. They realized that I'm a soldier as well as a woman. So, they started treating me accordingly.

You know what's interesting, though? If they screwed up, they didn't go the front lines. That was their punishment. And it was the worst thing to hear. Everybody wanted to go, to do something.

Locals were peculiar, to say the least. Not too many patriots. There were people, whose children and grandchildren fought for the other side. And they didn't even try to hide it. There was this time when we've got a package full of cheese, cereal and all kinds of goods.



We offered locals to take some. Everyone got some. A woman who was one of the last ones was filling her bag with food and my comrade Sasha jokingly said: “You see, we’re not that scary, aren’t we? We don’t eat you; we’re giving you some food.” She actually took a lot and when she was at a safe distance, she said: “It would be better if you weren’t there. We’re with them”. And then she ran away like crazy. And you feel a little bit like shit, you feel sad, in the moments like this...

Locals lived in basements. An old woman used to get out of hers during a day, when it was quiet, and I kept asking her: “Why are you still here?” She didn’t want to leave her house. She got all of her things down to the basement and stayed there. Sometimes shells hit locals. Then neighbors would dig up a grave right in front of the house and bury someone. There was this one house near a club with a yard full of graves. A cemetery. How else would they bury the dead?

We were stationed at a place where we could see Donetsk perfectly. We saw all these gruesome fights for the airport. When you see what’s going on, when you realize that our comrades are trying to survive, to protect us... It was scary, horrifying. Especially the fact that you’re sitting here and you can’t help them. Half of the guys from the assault company were there. They were so young. 18-19 years old. I don’t want to say it, but I’m against it. They’re so young and inexperienced. They learned by doing things. I only heard one answer: They’re volunteers. It’s their decision. When we were leaving the airport, our boys were doing it as well as they can. They called (I was home by then) and said they were coming, so we won’t shoot them...

I experienced loss for the first time with my fellow-citizen “Chekh”, Zhenia Voitsekhivskiy. I was heartbroken. He was a good man. He had two sons. I still can’t believe he’s gone. The frontlines... so many losses. One after the other. You just got better after one death

and here's the other one. At first, I was devastated, confused, why was it happening? What will happen next? It was excruciating. The last time someone died, two boys from an intelligence unit, I realized I have no tears, no emotions. I just got into my room and sat there. It's probably the worst thing possible that can happen in the war – to stop feeling, when you don't cry, when you don't feel anything. Every day someone dies. Tomorrow someone will die. And you become numb. You don't feel anything. You start seeing death as something usual. The airport took a lot of our guys...

Fear... silence is your enemy. When it's quiet and you don't know what is going to happen next. When you hear people taking shots, you know what's happening, more or less, so it's a bit better. When it's quiet for a long period of time, you get nervous. What is going to happen?

There was a church in Pisky and it had some sort of a basement, a room beneath. I was sleeping there one night and boys were on the lookout. Everything was fine and quiet. The perimeter was clear, as they said on the radio. We got to bed. Suddenly I felt this shaking. A bombardment, no less. I thought our enemies were close and this is the end. Boys were quick and efficient with their ammunition equipment. So was I, wearing a helmet and a bulletproof vest. Ready to go. They stopped me and said: "You're staying here". They gave me an RPG-18 Mukha and a few grenades. It was dark. "Stay here." I was pretty scared. We were okay, though. No losses.

The other time we were going to Pisky at night and got under heavy fire from a 12.7mm caliber heavy machine gun KT-12.7. Our three cars were in pieces. We jumped out of them. 10 of us. No trees nearby. We were lying on the ground in the middle of this field like a big stain. As soon as someone shows his/her head, they shoot. I was lying on the ground and praying they won't get us with shells, because

it would be quite easy at the moment. Phones weren't working. Radios were unavailable. I was trying to make a call and the boys were covering me, so the light from my phone wouldn't "tell on us". Then we realized that there is a position nearby called "Nebo". And one more – "Biliardna", my previous position, a house. Boys wanted to crawl there, but I remembered that we were laying mines here earlier, so we could potentially blow up with our own equipment. Eventually I managed to get to our commander and he was able to get to the guys from the latter position. They said it was okay for us to crawl. So, we did. At first, we crawled, then we ran a bit to this position, to the next one and then we finally got to our position.

We've had a lovely New Year's Eve on the frontlines. 2014-2015. We were waiting. Earlier that evening volunteers came with mandarins, fruit, gifts. They even got us champagne. Our guys dressed up as Did Moroz\*. We've had protective clothing, white hoods and balaclavas. They were huge and I was skinny, so I could definitely pass for Snihuronka\*\* in a white dress. We were going from one base to the next one, congratulating guys. It was nice. Someone was making Olivier salad, which is a very popular dish to make on a New Year's Eve. The other one was loading a gun. Mandarins and songs. We thought they're going to be shooting at us. "Congratulating" us. As New Year comes an hour

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\* Did Moroz is a legendary figure similar to Father Christmas and Santa Claus who has his roots in Slavic paganism mythology. The tradition of Ded Moroz is mostly spread in East Slavic countries. Although at the beginning of the Soviet era communists banned Ded Moroz he soon became an important part of the Soviet culture. The literal translation is "Grandfather Frost".

\*\* Snihuronka or The Snow Maiden is a character in fairy tales. This character has no apparent roots in traditional Slavic mythology and customs and its first appearance in Russian folklore occurred in the 19th century. Since Soviet times, Snihuronka is also depicted as the granddaughter and helper of Did Moroz during the New Year parties for children.



earlier to them. No, they weren't shooting at us. They probably had a very good celebration.

I'm friends with some of the guys now. We became each other's godparents. "Anarkhist" is one of mine. This one time volunteers brought a package full of cards and drawings from kids. Some of them wrote their phone numbers. He called each and every one. Said hi and thanks. He told them not to worry, that we will protect them. We put all of the drawings in our rooms. All of the bracelets and other hand-made stuff we were wearing at all times.

I've had a jacket of my dear friend I've lost due to the airport massacre – Sviatoslav Horbenko, "Skeld". He just came to us and I had to send people there. I didn't want him to go, because he didn't have

enough training for a place like that. “Skeld” was very brave. He really wanted to go there. I said no. Firmly. “You’re not going anywhere.” The next morning a group of soldiers was supposed to go there and I was going home for a while. In the morning Sviatoslav came up to me, hugged me and said: “Margo, I’m going.” I sat him down and said: “Go to Pisky, get a grip, learn a few things and then go to the airport. Okay?” He said: “Sure.” I knew he was saying goodbye.

When I went back to our base, my soldiers called and said that “Skeld” was gone. I was in shock. I didn’t know he went to the airport. He broke a promise. He was 19 years old. He wanted to learn things. He was interested in everything... He was like a younger brother to me. When I came in, one of the boys said: “Sviatoslav said hi!” He told me everything. He spent a week there. I’m still wearing his jacket. I have all of my awards on it. And there was a child’s poem with a drawing of an angel in a pocket...

We said goodbye to him and went to Kyiv to bury him. Later, during the wakes, boys told me that he named his automatic rifle “Margo”. When we got back to our base, I entered my room, I opened a window and left for a minute to get my mug. When I got back, I saw a blue tit sitting on my bed. It looked at me and flew away... I want to believe it was him saying goodbye.

As it happened, I’ve been losing people I was closest to. Serhii Tabala, “Sievier/North”. He said goodbye to us as well. They came to our base, but we had too many soldiers, so they didn’t really have a place to stay, and as a woman I was alone in my room, so I offered them to stay at my place. I couldn’t sleep that night, because Sieriozha was fighting and talking in his sleep. I told him about it the next morning, and he said: “Yeah, I had a really bad dream last night.” We made some coffee, he sat there on a bed and told us: “Friends, if something happens

to me, please, do as I say. I'm a pagan, so I'm asking you to burn my body and spread my ashes over the Dnipro river." We told him: "Are you crazy? Stop."

In the morning our commander told us we've got to go to Pisky. All of us. Serhii had "Glory to Ukraine! and "Glory to the heroes!"\* tattooed on both his hands and I had our stripe on my neck. We decided to relax a bit and take an awesome picture. This picture is all over the internet now. Not too many people know the backstory. We've taken lots of pictures that day. We came to Pisky and he went for the airport. He never came back alive. Now this picture is everything I have left of him. I gave his things to his relatives. "Skeld's" things, his uniform, I still have at my place. I want to give it to a museum, but it's not that easy to give it up. I know I have to, but I kind of think that I'll betray him if I do that. Our guys never really leave us, they're with us at all times...

I probably wouldn't go back from there. There was a moment when I thought I found my second half, but he fooled me. He said: "Let's go and have a family...". I believed him and went back home. And he disappeared. I regret that as I didn't want to go home. On the other hand, it's good, because I have a daughter. She needs to have a mother around. She spent a whole year without me. She went to school for the first time, she achieved something for the first time. I regret not being there for her.

I have a special child. During Maidan she was watching TV and crying. She was 6 years old and she took it to heart. Everything that was going on. When I told her that I'm going to enlist, she supported me, no hysteria, no blaming. Many people judge me for my decision.

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\* Glory to Ukraine! and Glory to the heroes! is a two-part Ukrainian national salute. It came to be at the beginning of the 20th century in different variations. It became wildly popular among Ukrainians during the Ukrainian War of Independence of 1917-21. And it is popular now.



How could I leave my child? Is she not important to me? If you get killed, what will she do? And I'm thinking that if I was ever to get killed, my girl would know that her mom was fighting for freedom and for the better future, and that she died a hero. It's better than if she'd ask me 20 years later, why's she living in such a country, why didn't her mom do something, when she had a chance?

I have a huge pear in my yard. When I got back home from the frontlines for the first time, I was extremely tired, I wanted to go to bed. I came in and I was gone. You don't sleep at war. You kind of do, but you're still half awake. You can hear everything. And I blacked out. I was asleep and my mom was sitting near me. Suddenly, pears started coming down on our roof. I jumped on the floor and covered my head



with my hands. My mom was shocked: “Baby, what’s wrong?” Thankfully, it passed. What didn’t pass as quickly is that I could barely stand people. Friends wanted to go out and I was so pissed at drunk guys, I had this pure aggression towards people who threw away garbage on the ground. I had this heightened sense of moral and justice.

I don’t have a veteran status. They’re supposed to acknowledge me on a regional level. If so, okay. If not, whatever. This wasn’t my goal. I’ve lost so much. No card will bring it back. I gained as much. I’ve changed a lot. I look at my life differently. I see people differently. I found my way to God. Surely, I’m down back there. I work with Ukrainian Volunteer Battalions. I look at our government and I think that something is wrong. You fight for what is right and they stab you in the back. People die every day. They become paraplegic. And



they're forgotten. In other countries veterans are heroes. It's not even close to that here. 80% of our victories would be impossible without people who supported us in the rear. Food, money, morally. We wouldn't be able to survive without them.

I will always remember my friends, brothers, with whom I was close, with whom I shared life and death. I will never forget their eyes, voices and their stories.

You'll be in my heart as long as I live.

Yevhen Voitsekhivskyi, "Chekh".

Serhii Tabala, "Sievier/North".

Sviatoslav Horbenko, "Skeld".

Ales Cherkashyn, "Taras", a Belarusian native.





# Halyna Klempouz

“Perlynka/Pearl”

THE 54TH SEPARATE MECHANIZED  
BRIGADE, THE 46TH ASSAULT  
BATTALION “DONBAS-UKRAINE”



I went to the war in late 2014–early 2015 as a volunteer. At first, I helped local volunteers from home and didn't go there myself. I came for the first time to the Rivne battalion “Horyn.” The boys from the battalion who had been held captive were just returning – that was when I faced such serious problems for the first time. Then I went there with volunteers once or twice a month. Over time, my volunteer work spread to other battalions and brigades – I tried to help everyone I could, although it was not always possible.

In the fall of 2015, I had to bring home a soldier who was killed in action. He was my fellow countryman, Dmytro “Aramis.” We still don’t know the circumstances of his death. We were told it was a suicide. They called me and said, “We know you are in the Anti-Terrorist Operation Zone. Stay for a day to bring him to his parents.” I remember that day. It was really hard. It was November. In the morning, we bought a coffin, went to Krasnohorivka, where he died, took him and drove home. The road was long and difficult. Then was the funeral...

In the summer of 2016, I brought supplies, and it turned out that the brigade had been redeployed. I was sent to the Svitlodarsk Arc and told that there was a boy called Myroslav. He was very ill, and I was asked to bring him medicine and make sure that he took it. It was June 12, 2016. Then I stayed at the Arc with the “Right Sector”.

On June 28, there was a fierce battle when Vasyl Slipak, a famous opera singer (code name “Mif/Myth”), and a fighter of “Right Sector” was killed. The boys got the task and went to complete it, and I stayed on the position with the other girls. Vasyl, it seems, stayed with us for 10 to 12 days, and we talked every day. We didn’t even know he was a celebrity, only one of our girls knew. His face was familiar, but I thought we could have just met somewhere earlier in the ATO Zone. Then I saw an article about Vasyl. He had returned from France to Ukraine. I told him, “Vasyl, it’s you!” He replied, “It’s me. What’s the big deal?” I remember him as a great person. He was full of energy and shared it with everyone around. He was a people person, always smiling and joking. He sang us songs when we asked him. It was my first tremendous loss. He died in front of me.

After that, the members of the “Right Sector” had to sign contracts, and our guys started to do the same. They asked me for help. I, as a lawyer, could help them deal with a bureaucratic system, give



them advice and settle organizational issues. Then came the moment when I could not just stay in the position – I had to either sign a contract or go home.

It was difficult to make up my mind because at that time, I was still studying at Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University in Kharkiv. I had just begun my master's program. I had made a decision, went home, talked to my parents – said that I was needed there and that I would sign a contract. I saw that the army no longer needed volunteers, as in the beginning. At first, I helped with food, clothes, but later, the government began to provide those. I did not have the resources to provide something more substantial. So, I decided it was high time to help being there. The death of “Mif/Myth” played a big part. He was the pride of the nation, and I didn't want to let everyone down, let myself down, I wanted to be like him. So, I ended up in the 1st battalion of the 54th brigade.



Sometimes I was a signal operator at night because our guys went to the positions, and someone had to speak into the walkie-talkies instead of them. I used to cook food when the guys were tired. I drew up documents and helped draw up reports – I had to do various things. Then we had a conflict with the 54th brigade, and together we were transferred to the 46th assault battalion “Donbas-Ukraine.”

It was the summer of 2017. When we got there, the commander allowed us to take the positions we wanted. None of us girls who arrived in the battalion could have become a machine gunner. I learned to shoot a grenade launcher, and for a while, I was a grenade launcher operator. Then I realized that a grenade launcher was not my thing. I served as a paramedic for a while. As part of the “Donbas” battalion, we arrived at Chermalyk. There I had to administer injections. I was doing fine, no one complained. Later, we got a drone. A guy who had to operate the

drone couldn't cope with it. I realized that it was unwise of us not to use such a clever device. I consulted with experienced aerial reconnaissance specialists, learned how to operate the device and now I work with a drone in aerial reconnaissance.

At first, when I was a volunteer, the guys were overprotective. They didn't let me go to dangerous positions and did all the tasks themselves. They were worried about me. But that was only in the beginning. I'm stubborn, so I drove there no matter what. Sometimes I was scolded for that. Now they take it easier but still care about the girls. I can't say that this humiliates or oppresses us – on the contrary, it's a show of respect for us. Each girl sets her own priorities, and it all depends on your behaviour. If you show yourself as defenceless and weak – so you will be perceived, but if you stand toe to toe – you will be perceived as a fighter. I realize that I am physically weaker than men. I won't bring two buckets of water at a time, for example, so they can help me like this, in everyday life. I would not say that this is horribly wrong.

I got used to military life gradually, and it was not difficult to move to the dugout. Our grandparents, I think, may have had to live in worse conditions. Our position on the Svitlodarsk Arc – “Buton” – was built by us. It's not difficult – bring water, heat it, there is a stove – start a fire, and you will be warm. There is nothing complicated in this. There was, however, one story with a grass snake...

It happened in Chermalyk. I lived alone in a dugout and woke up to something rustling nearby. I thought of mice – we were used to them; they always live in dugouts and can sometimes run over our heads. Or frogs, these also come to the dugout because we live in the ground. That time I was taking something out of my medical bag, I took it off, and a grass snake lying on it fell on me. I started screaming, ran



out of the dugout and burst into tears. “Vidma,” my friend, came in and laughed, “Why are you yelling? It’s a small grass snake.” I calmed down and saw its yellow collar. The snake then was crawling around the dugout. I called it Vasylysk. So, it lived there for a while, it was my neighbour, and then ran away.

The cold was the hardest thing for me. My joints, especially legs, get cold very quickly. I am not afraid of the heat, but I can’t stand cold weather. I have a fever when I’m cold, but that is bearable. The worst thing there is to lose your fellow soldiers. I will remember for the rest of my life the identification of our guys after the fights on December 18, 2016, at the Svitlodarsk Arc. We were brought to Bakhmut, to the morgue, and it was very painful to identify the bodies of those who had been next to you a day or two ago. One of our soldiers, code name “Simianyn” ... When they brought him, not everyone could recognize him. His face was distorted... or maybe they just didn’t want to believe he was gone. I immediately recognized him.

Talking about women in the army... Not everyone has a place there. There are many worthy and motivated women who really strive to serve and defend their homeland. Such women are fighting next to me now – strong-willed, courageous. Each of them must be well aware that she is going to fight, to defend her country and to be ready to face different challenges. Some women are there to find a man, get married, get pregnant and go on maternity leave. I don’t understand this. There are a lot of them. If you have signed a contract, you have taken on certain responsibilities, and you must comply with them. Girls often meet their loved ones there, get married but understand that children are out of the question before the end of the contract. Unfortunately, there are women who come to arrange their personal lives; they get pregnant quickly. While they are on maternity leave,



no one else can occupy their position – the state does not allow it. The army is no place for flirting.

The code name “Perlynka” was given to me at “Horyn.” They had been thinking for a long time what to call me, but the decision came spontaneously. We were driving in a car, when I saw pheasants and started shouting, like, look, these are pheasants! But they didn’t see them. I wanted to tell them what I could see in the distance, “I am zorka\*,” so they called me like that. They teased me, saying that I would be called

.....  
\* Ukrainian for sharp-sighted.



like a cow. We arrived at the battalion base, where we met Andrii, a Chief Medical Officer. He heard that they called me “Zorka,” and said, “She’s not Zorka, she’s Perlynka. They started calling me “Perlynka.”

There’s more good than bad in the war. In peaceful times, I would never cross paths with those people. We had different hobbies and interests, but there we were together 24/7. I had many interesting acquaintances and widened my horizons. You grow up very quickly. No matter how old you are when you come here. The downside is that I lack development. I try to read books and learn English online in my spare time. What kind of a future can Ukraine have without



professionals? We must be proficient in foreign languages if we want to be a part of the world fully and completely. Therefore, everyone should speak at least English, and I try to master the language to the fluent level. In the evening, I can have an hour for self-development.

I think now is the time to pause because I am afraid of reaching a “point of no return.” I see those guys – what they were like in the

beginning and when they went home, and how uncomfortable and uninterested they were there. They cannot adapt to a peaceful life and find common ground with people who have not been at war. I don't want that. I feel I'm a little tired and have to take a break. Isolation in the same space, with the same people every day... They are wonderful, and I love them. I feel comfortable with them, but sometimes we get a little tired of each other. I need to stay at home with my family for a while. They miss me. My parents need to relax because it is not easy for them to live in constant fear for me for two years.

# Kateryna Lutsyk

THE 81ST AIRMOBILE BRIGADE



I graduated from a nursing school and all of us are reservists. After graduating I had to go to a local military commissariat in order to register. I came there (it was the time everyone was mobilized) and asked them about the situation with medics on the frontlines in general. Commissar said it's pretty bad. They are undermanned. Then I asked if they have women as medics. They said yes. In two days, I had all of the necessary check-ups and I went to a training facility.

I knew I was joining the army after my friend died at the frontlines. He died because there was no one to help him. A medic would be able to save his life, to stop the bleeding. But there was none and he died.

I didn't get to airborne forces right away. At a training centre we were assigned to different battalions and I got into a battalion of special operations. When I had all the necessary documents, I met a friend who asked me where was I stationed. He said: "Special operations? You won't be able to go to the frontlines right away. You'll have to go through an extensive training." And I wanted to go right away. He told me to join airborne forces. I asked for a transfer and got into the 122nd battalion of the 81st brigade. There's more. I also wanted to get there because my brother was a soldier in this field. When I joined, he got into my division and we served together. I didn't really know what the army was all about at the time. I learned everything on the go. At least boys have some kind of a training at school. I didn't even know how to address my commander at first...

How did the guys react? Differently... Some of them were making fun of me, mocking me. Only in the beginning, though. Everything's changed. I tried to blend in. Never asked for anything





special, never complained. I didn't ask for a separate shower or a room. We were living all together in a tent. The attitude towards me changed drastically after the first mission. We got along.

My first rotation was near Horlivka in Novohorodske. Shootings were moderate, not as severe as in Pisky and Avdiivka. We've had wounded and dead, though, unfortunately. If they were shooting us, they were doing it with grenade launchers, no less. On the one hand, it was interesting. Everything was new to me. Trenches, blindages. On the other hand. I've had my first patients. One guy had a penetrating head injury. I will never forget this case. I actually remember each and every one of them. Their faces, their names. But this one... I've got a call, we came, I did all I could and we took him to a hospital. Only then did I realize



what has happened. I did great. I'm a natural. But the realization, his wound... I was shaking a bit. Unfortunately, this guy didn't survive.

I was ready for whatever I had to face. However, it's one thing to do everything in a sterile environment, where patients undergo surgeries with anesthesia, and the other thing to do the same in such dire circumstances. There's the other moment. Wounded people could scream and curse you while you're trying to help them. At first, it was difficult to hear. Surely, they don't want to offend you. It's just pain and shock. Theoretically and as a medic I understand that, but it was getting to me for a while.

Everyone reacts differently to whatever had happened. Someone was panicking: "I'm going to die. I'm going to be disabled." Others were

hopeful. I remember this one time when a few guys were blown up and there was this guy Artem who almost lost his foot. He kept asking me whether he's going to be disabled or not. I told him everything is going to be fine. Then he told me: "Promise me that you'll dance with me if it's possible." Soon his foot was renewed due to modern technologies. I kept my promise and we danced at a ball for the officers.

After Novhorodske we went to Avdiivka. We were located at an industrial area. It was July 19th, 2016. A lot of wounded and heavy fire all of the time. When we got there, this industrial area was trashed. Not like now, but yeah, it was bad. A few buildings that we inhabited are gone now.

When I heard where we were going, I had all kinds of feelings. Thousands of thoughts in my head. On the one hand, I wanted to help, I wanted to be on the front lines. On the other hand, I was scared. What's out there? How will we evacuate people? Is there some kind of a road? The 90th battalion showed us what's what. Where it would be better to go on foot and where should we use a car. Then we were working with information they gave us in order to perfect this difficult task. I would ask my driver to go around and look for new ways to get to our people. We did a lot of that. Day and night. We needed to get used to working at night. We worked very well together. I could just get in, name the position and stay with a wounded person the whole way there. I knew he'll get us there fast and efficient.

Nevertheless, we weren't always able to evacuate guys. Due to heavy shooting. Once we had a situation with three injured (one of them was a future hero of Ukraine Valera Chybinieiev). I did what I could to help them and we were supposed to take them to our car in order to evacuate them. And here we go. Tanks. Heavy fire. We were able to get one of them in the car, then we were hit. A building we were

in was hit and we weren't able to come out for three to four hours. I was stabilizing them as much as I could. It's good that I usually take all kinds of medicine and equipment, not only for emergency operations. Parenteral administration helped a lot on the scene. When it became somewhat quiet and we were able to get out, the car would return and we would be able to get our boys out. Things like these happen all of the time.

The most difficult time in the industrial area was the first two weeks. We had so many wounded. We just got there. Everything was new. You've got to get used to these positions, to adapt to new surroundings. And, yes, the moment a new battalion comes in, they start shooting like maniacs. Maybe they want to scare us, I don't know.

We had one man down near Horlivka. And we had a lot of us down at the industrial area. Each and every case is difficult. I'm telling you this and I have goosebumps. Every death comes with a price. I blame myself. What if I got there a moment earlier? Then doctors do their work and their conclusion is that I did everything as I supposed to. I still blame myself. When you're doing a CPR and it's been 20 minutes, you know that it's over... The worst thing for me is to tell all these people, comrades and commanders who are standing behind me in wait, that a person is dead. It's the most difficult thing to do. I feel like... like it's the Judgement Day... It's horrible, and I have to say it.

I keep in touch with all of my patients. We talk to them, observe, see how their lives turned out. Everyone has to do something. To have a calling. I don't know whether I would be a sharp shooter, especially when I'm being shot at.

Talking about day-to-day activities, it all depends. If a person doesn't bother, it's the same with a civilian life. And vice versa. When



we were stationed in the industrial area, we were living all together in a basement. We had one shower. Guys tried to give me privacy, they separated my space with a shower curtain, so I could change. When we came in, the first day, guys were minding the perimeter and looking for whatever could be useful for us. They found this huge mirror and brought it to me. I laughed at first: “What will I do with it?” Then they got me some sort of a drawer, so eventually I had this nice corner for myself. I’d wash up in the morning, brush my hair, do my lashes a bit. That’s just how I used to do things as a civilian.

I also had a very understanding commander. It’s funny and a bit ridiculous, but he let me go into town to get a manicure. At first, I just cut my fingernails. Once we were minding an observation post, I was doing my nails, and out of the blue my commander’s asking me: “What happened with your nails? They were beautiful.” I said: “I just don’t have an opportunity.” He said: “Why didn’t you say so? We would let you go into town for an hour or two and you would do whatever you need to do.” I thought it was a joke. Then he told me once again, then when it’s quiet, I could go and do what I need to do. So, I did. Once a month I would go to Avdiivka to get a manicure.

When it was quiet, I got myself distracted with books. We had a huge library in this industrial area. Thanks to volunteers. A lot of books were about war, of course. We also had a room in a collective farming building, where we would gather in the evening to listen to one of our soldiers Oleksii Chushkin playing guitar. We would laugh and remember stuff, having a bit of rest.

I had a kitten named Hunter. I really wanted to have one and, on my birthday, guys got me a Scottish Fold kitten. We were staying near Horlivka back then. I was as happy as a child. I did worry a little bit, though. I knew we’re leaving Novhorodske pretty soon and we’re going



to be located in the industrial area. Hunter was with me all of the time. It wasn't easy to get him out of the yard when we were under fire. It was mi little ball of joy. Growing up, running around, biting everybody, playing...

I have brother-sister relationships with guys. You need to be reasonable in these conditions. When we were in a place of our permanent deployment, I noticed some of the guys visited my first-aid post just to have a conversation. I decided that it's not okay. Sometimes it was paired with things like "Do you need a husband?". I talked to them. I told them I came here for the same reason they did, I didn't come here looking for a boyfriend or a husband. I have a purpose and I have no intention of having a relationship here. I remember saying something like this: "We all came here for a reason, so let's do it together and be professional about it." Then we had a laugh





and it was the last time we talked about it. Surely, comrades were trying to care for me, to protect me, offering me another sleeping pad, so I felt a bit more comfortable. They were worried about me as a sister. The cared about me, they didn't hit on me.

I believe that women should join the army. Limitations and bans are irrelevant. Nonsense. If you can do it, why not? It's good that we started having all of these changes. Documents signed; limitations lifted. I have a lot of women soldiers I admire. If she is a great shooter, why is she supposed to deal with papers and cook borscht? I don't see the difference in gender concerning this. If a person is good at something, why he or she can't do it?

What's next? Since I joined as a volunteer, I was mobilized, I served a year. Then I signed a contract. And again. And again. Three years have passed. Until the war ends and our battalion is fighting tooth and nail, I won't leave. I know that I am needed here, so I'm not going anywhere.

After the war... I don't know. I wanted to work with surgeons. Now I got used to the army, to the uniform, so if I was to leave, I would still be working as a medic in a military hospital.



# Oksana Yakubova

**THE 30TH AND THE 54TH SEPARATE  
MECHANIZED BRIGADES**

I was drafted into the army. I am a financial expert, worked in the Ministry of Finance of Ukraine. The first time they summoned me to the military enlistment office was on March 19, 2014. They said they had enlisted me. I agreed. They called the 8th Army Corps, but they said, “No, we don’t take girls.” However, on March 30, 2014, they called again and told me to come. They asked me if I would join the army. The only thing I asked was: why me? They said that there were five financial experts: one of them did not serve, one had children, one could not be reached... Well, I was the only one left. On March 30, 2014, I was sent to the 30th separate mechanized brigade as a chief financial officer. I once served in the financial service of the State Emergency Service. I wasn’t a part of military personnel, but I had an officer’s rank. That’s why I was drafted. That’s how I joined the army.

When I arrived at the duty station, I was in shock. It was terrible. In fact, there was no army. The army was not ready for war, neither financially nor in terms of personnel, nor technically, nor in terms of armaments. There were many women who came together, did their work and went home at a set time. According to the documents, there had to be uniforms, equipment, beds, mattresses – some kind of a reserve in case of war. But there was nothing. When I came to the brigade, the first wave of the draftees had arrived. There were different people, those who wanted to fight and those who had been drunk since they arrived. My first acquaintance with the brigade commander... I’ll never forget it. He said, “Do you lack adrenaline? Or did you come here to solve your personal issues? Looking for adventure? Why did you come here?”

On April 3, we reached the area of the Isthmus of Perekop, near Crimea. That was Tsiurupynsk district. Chaplynka, Syvash.

The guys didn't know where they were taking us. It was a total mess. As a financial expert, I had to run a payroll, but there were neither lists of staff nor enrollment orders. We couldn't even make a list of surnames. Then a telegram came from Kyiv that we would serve for a year and had to pay salaries because the riots had already begun. Here's your money, they say – divide it equally. Together with a personnel officer, I made the first list of the brigade members at night. My assistants weren't financial experts, so we were going crazy trying to sort it out. Big bosses came, promised a salary of 2-3 thousand, and from the money that was given to us, we could give out 500 hryven per person.

Our second trip was even more difficult. There was no war at the time, but the first shellings near Crimea had already begun. I remember that we were driving near Chaplynka, there was no border yet, but we knew that de facto this was our territory, and that was theirs. There were 200 meters between us. We were driving behind the armored personnel carrier. The Russians were standing next to us, digging trenches, showing us things... They even showed us their naked butts once. They shouted nasty things...

The third trip was to the firing range. The brigade was entering the Anti-Terrorist Operation Zone. The second battalion was entering Rubizhne. No one knew where they were going. They were given money at the railway station right before entering a carriage. At that time, no one realized they would participate in hostilities. When we had handed out the money and were driving back, we learned that a group of our guys in an infantry fighting vehicle had been shot, all of them. Their vehicle broke down, and they asked local residents for help, but the latter handed them over to the militants. Those were our first battle casualties. Two were killed, seven were injured, and one was missing. It was a shock.

Then there were the first attacks near Syvash. I was carrying money in my suitcase, when the guys shouted, “Leave it,” pushed me into the trench and threw me a machine gun. The last time I fired a machine gun was at the training ten years ago. Then I saw a helicopter coming and shooting at us. Funny, but I hadn’t left my suitcase...

Then all the battalions entered the Anti-Terrorist Operation Zone. First, it was Savur-Mohyla. Many of our people died back then. Serhii Sobko, the commander of the 1st battalion, who was unknown to us at that time, was just a good guy. Now he is awarded the Hero of Ukraine. I met Serhii near Crimea. They had the most intelligent battalion of the brigade. Sobko was a great commander. He never shouted at anyone but he was listened to and always maintained discipline. I called him to ask what was going on near Savur-Mohyla. He answered, “We’ve taken it, but it’s so interesting... We thought that there were miners there, but they kept shooting at us.” I thought, “What is it? Why can’t officers cope with the miners? When we collected our wounded and dead, there was no way to turn on the light, so we collected everyone. Then it turned out that among them there were Russian regular military personnel, special operations troops.”

Then we had Stepanivka. The brigade was defeated there. It happened on August 12-13 – they called us and said that the connection with the brigade was lost. I came to work in the morning. The girls who worked in the military unit sat in silence – their men were there. No one knew their whereabouts. No one was talking. They only looked at their cellphones from time to time. Silence. Demonstrations began in Novohrad. Women demanded to explain where their husbands were, but no one told them anything.

Then the third wave of mobilization began. On August 14, the first fighters from Stepanivka contacted us and told us what had



happened. They reported who was seen alive and who was dead. That was the only information we had. On August 17-18, we knew that the situation was really bad – a lot of dead, wounded, prisoners. They bullied the prisoners' wives – they took a soldier's phone, called his wife and told that her husband was going to be shot. It was going on until 5 am, and at the end, they said, "Well, by the next night he will still be alive." The next night they called again, and the bullying continued...

On August 22-23, the first soldiers who were able to get out of there reached Novohrad. The militants posted a photo of three of our dead guys with their military IDs and said to come and take them. It was difficult to explain that there was no one to take the bodies – there was no brigade; Stepanivka was razed to the ground... We sent the first group to search for bodies in morgues, to identify soldiers based on the documents. We gathered the officers, and I went with them to assemble our brigade. At that time, the brigade's chief financial officer had returned from a peacekeeping mission in Liberia. So, I had become a Deputy Company Personnel Officer. I went to morgues, looked for our guys, drove their parents.

Once I saw a woman sitting there crying. She had two sons and a son-in-law there – they were all missing. I started looking and had found them: one son was in the hospital with a severed leg, the other was killed in a land mine blast. His wife went to identify the body, although she was advised not to. She was given a sedative. There were only his teeth. He was identified by his teeth. Once a soldier's mother was taken for identification. She recognized her son. While we were dealing with the documents – this is a long process – her son called her. He was alive. After that, his mother was taken to a hospital.

While our brigade was on the firing range, we secretly went to the Anti-Terrorist Operation Zone and helped the Rivne battalion

“Horyn.” Then I began to take care of the fifth battalion of our brigade, and it was not the best thing to do because it had a bad reputation. The battalion had problems with discipline – there were guys who drank a lot. The battalion commander asked me to be a Deputy Morale Officer. The command was in shock – a female morale officer? Girls do not hold such positions in the war. I understood that.

Nevertheless, everything worked out. After the events in Debaltseve, I finally realized that I could not leave the brigade. By some miracle, a few days later, I was appointed a Deputy Morale Officer. So, I had become a Deputy Commander of the battalion fighting on the front line. Perhaps, I was the first of the women at that time. I arrived in Kostiantynivka. We were going again, somewhere in the direction of Debaltseve. They brought me in and showed me where I was going to live. It was an abandoned summer kitchen, where the wallpaper was nailed down. The walls were terrible. There was no way to glue them, and they tried so hard to make me feel comfortable that they nailed the wallpaper to the wall. There was a bed, a wood stove, a table, a tablecloth and flowers on the table. That’s how the battalion greeted me. We got acquainted – a bunch of men and me. So, my service in the battalion began.

The guys’ reaction to me was ambiguous. Yet the sector commander’s reaction was the worst of all – he shouted like a madman when he saw me. Our brigade commander asked, “Why did you join the battalion? Why did you choose the most challenging one?” I replied, “I bet that in four months, it will be the best battalion.” But we didn’t have four months, because then it was decided that new brigades would be created – the 53rd and 54th. So, the fifth battalions of several brigades were to be sent to the 54th brigade. We were offered to stay in the 30th brigade – they had positions for us there. But this battalion had become



like family to me – how could I leave them? So, we had become the soldiers of the 54th separate mechanized brigade.

They brought us another group of draftees. They promised 30 people but sent more than 150. They didn't know where they were. I said, "Guys, this is a machine gun working." And they said, "What machine gun? We are in Kharkiv region!" Then we brought them to the place of deployment and said, "Let's make some trenches," but they would not... We asked them, shouted at them, ordered – nothing. They were like, "What trenches? We have tents." In the evening, there was shelling... At that time, Myronivske near Svitlodarsk was one of the grey zones. Now our positions have advanced significantly. We went to see how our young soldiers were coping. Although they were not on the front line, near them there was shelling. I put on my bulletproof vest and saw that the guys attached some bows to it and a bunny to my helmet... That was how I looked when I left. We came to our newcomers, and there they were – wide-eyed, wearing body armor and helmets, all scared. In the morning, all the trenches had been dug. Overnight! You should have seen those trenches! There were shovels and a couple of crowbars, the rest of the tools were on the front line. I don't know how they dug them...

When we were transferred to the 54th brigade, we had become the 1st battalion. That was what we wanted. Then there was a total mess – many did not have veteran identification cards... We collected documents from the battalion – which is 620 people – and went to Novohrad, to the military unit. We sorted out several boxes of documents, made references, applications, took photos. We spent ten days like that almost without sleep. Thus, the entire battalion received veteran identification cards.

Then we had to move to Zolote, Popasna district, but people had not received a salary. It turned out that we had not been taken

on the staff. We refused to bring people to the front line until there was an order of enrollment in the unit because we knew there were hostilities. People had to have at least some guarantees. Due to the formation of the brigade, there was a mess again – people couldn't get a leave, they had to be enlisted once again. There were no uniforms. The cartridges were not delivered on time. Then there was a delay with demobilization. In September 2015, we were taken to the firing range, and the battalion commander said goodbye to us on the way. Only I and the sergeant remained from the battalion command. I had to command the battalion for three months.

It took some time for the guys to see me as a commander. Many didn't understand how a woman could command men. Besides, I'm not tall, and they looked down on me. I had to regain the authority and respect of the fighters. It started when I first stood up for my soldiers in front of the high command. They saw that I cared for them. Providing the entire battalion with war veteran identity cards showed the guys that I was doing everything I could for them, and they began to trust me. Well, I was on the front line with them every day, went to the checkpoints, and was under shellfire with them. The guys saw that I wasn't hiding in the headquarters, and they began to respect me.

Once there was a case. The guys called and told me that one fighter, code name "Zyma," was acting weird. I went to scold him. I jumped in the car without armor and left. Probably, we lit up the headlights, or something else – I don't know, but the militants started shooting at the car. I jumped out of the car, fell on the ground... what's next? I was about to get up when suddenly someone fell on me, pressed me to the ground even harder and whispered, "Lie down, silly. When the fourth mine blows, we'll run." Then somebody put a helmet on my head. It turned out that that was the guy I was going

to scold. He saw what happened, came running to save me and covered me because he was wearing a bulletproof vest. It was he who put his helmet on me. We ran to the dugout, but, of course, I could not scold him after what happened. Later, he was injured while saving a fellow soldier.

There was a time, however, when I almost transferred back to the 30th brigade. We had constant conflicts with the commander of the 54th brigade – there was no battalion commander. The brigade was headed by Volodymyr Horbatiuk, and we got a new battalion commander – code name “Kupola” – Oleksii Otserklevych. We believed in them and decided to stay. Sometimes it was difficult. I was acting as the battalion commander and had to report about infantry fighting vehicles. I had to report like everyone else. It didn’t matter that I was a girl. Then the guys drew charts on a piece of paper for me, explained everything, told me about each vehicle. I used those charts for my reports. My fighters supported me and helped me as much as they could, and so did I.

Our next rotation was again at Svitlodarsk Arc, Luhanske and Myronivka districts. It was the most difficult location since the events in Debaltseve. Once we were told that all those who fought near Luhanske were heroes of Ukraine posthumously. If you look at the map, this is a salience, and if the battles like in Debaltseve reoccur, there could be another entrapment.

2016 was especially difficult as the fifth and sixth waves of mobilization followed. In the summer, the battalion commander gathered us and asked if we didn't mind the “Right Sector” fighting together with us. We didn’t mind, but the guys were warned that they were there off the record. They had to say they were volunteers. They went to take on the “Murashnyk”.

There were casualties that day. Our soldier from the 25th battalion, Vasyl Slipak, died there. At that time, we didn’t know

who the “Mif/Myth” was – when they showed him to me, I said that he wasn’t with us. We captured that place. Then was the order from the command to withdraw. They said that was “a violation of the Minsk agreements.” Despite the fact that a few days earlier, the president himself reiterated in one of his speeches that Debaltseve, according to the Minsk agreements, should have been controlled by us. We took a good position then, and they were so scared that they left all of their weapons behind when they ran away. They had a real hysteria in the interceptions – they thought that we went to Debaltseve and took three strongpoints instead of one. They began to shell their own positions.

We had been holding the “Murashnyk” for 5 hours. Everything was well-planned. The operation was very well thought-out; the militants did not have time to pull up the artillery and began to transport it from Avdiivka. If in Avdiivka we had been ordered to shoot, they wouldn’t have pulled it. That would be great, but we were ordered to retreat, so we left.

During our retreat, we had seven wounded, one was killed – a fighter Tatarчук. He came out at first, but later we were told that we had two seriously wounded people. Our officer went to the MT-LB (a light multipurpose tracked vehicle) to pull them out because the driver of the vehicle refused to go because of heavy shelling. That guy, Tatarчук, was a medical instructor, and he went back there to save the wounded. They gave him to us three days later. His head wasn’t there; it was charred – it had exploded somewhere very close to him. It was very hot then. We went to the morgue to identify the body. His mother said he had a tattoo on his body. The stench was so awful that we couldn’t approach to the morgue. They uncovered him – his body was swollen, and worms were crawling all over... It was impossible to find a tattoo there. We only recognized him by his tactical vest. The



body was in such a shape that no one took the responsibility to sign the act. The stench was overpowering. The sergeant could only get there by wetting a rag with gasoline and covering his nose. It wasn't until September that he was identified by his DNA. If we had held the height and had not retreated, we wouldn't have had such losses...

For a long time, there was no fear. At first, it wasn't there at all, because I believed in our soldiers. I came to the position and saw young boys. I knew that if you stuck your head out in the wrong place, you'd be shot. I started to feel it after the "woods" (the operation led by the 54th brigade to advance positions on December 18, 2016, when during several days of fierce fighting the Ukrainian army suffered heavy losses). I had a driver, who drove me to the turn to Svitlodarsk and said, "I won't go any further." Under these circumstances... It was a real madhouse.

Then, on January 23, 2017, the location of our battalion was shelled. It was heavy shelling. The fence was broken, and our car was destroyed. I was talking on the phone when I was blown away. I didn't even understand what had happened.

On February 2, Natasha Khoruzha died. After Natasha's death, I was devastated. I was supposed to go there, to the guys, when the shelling started and she died. It is only now that the psychologist explained to me that I was so devastated because a girl my age died... At the time something really weird was going on with me... Every day I went to the front line, to the worst places. I drove through the most dangerous areas. I started to enjoy them shooting at me... I didn't wear a bulletproof vest; I didn't wear a helmet. I went there and enjoyed that I could be killed at any moment. There was no fear at that time. I got sick when it was quiet. Every day I had a headache; I was having an IV to treat a concussion.

I had to call parents and tell them that their child was dead. I called the military enlistment office and asked if they could call the parents or not. If not, I'd call myself. It's better to call a father. The first question was typical: "Is there anyone with you right now?" I said to give the phone to someone nearby. I warned them that I was going to tell them bad news. Then I said it. I heard screams on the phone. They just had to go through it. I kept quiet for a moment and then told them what to do next, what they needed for the funeral.

They often hung up first. Then they came to their senses and called back to ask again if that was true. I said again that yes, that was true. The hardest thing for me was not to cry. I started to explain what to do next. Then I had to collect and look through the things of the deceased, identify them, draw up all the documents, and that was a lot of papers. After that, I needed to find a car, a person who would take the body, get permission to take it out...

It was scary to go through their things. They were still warm, some of them covered in wet mud – they were wearing those a moment ago. When the investigation began, I had to go through that the second

time. It was especially hard with Natasha Khoruzha. I got used to the fact that guys were killed all the time, but a girl... We came to collect her things, and there were toys, a blouse, a bra, a lipstick, a small backpack...

I needed to check how the body reached the place, send someone to the funeral. I never went to the funerals. I remember every fighter. I saw them in morgues, but I'd never seen them in a coffin. This played a cruel joke on me. In a morgue, I didn't fully realize they were gone. When I left the army, I talked to them; they were alive to me. The psychologist said that I had not buried them for myself, and that did not let me live a normal life. I kept thinking: What did we do wrong? I buried 140 of my fighters like that. I blame myself all the time and think about what we did wrong, what could we have done to help them survive? My body is here, but my thoughts are there...

I keep in touch with their relatives and parents. There were cases when the first reaction of their parents was aggression. Once a guy was seriously injured. We called his father, and he said, "It's your fault that this happened to my son. You are the commanders and you are responsible for him." I listened to him for an hour that I was the one to blame for what happened. The guy survived, remained disabled, but survived. His father apologized later, but I can't get the incident out of my head.

Once I called a wife of the victim, and she said, "Are you kidding?" Then she called back saying, "You are scammers, right? How could he die if he had to come back home in two days?" Then I thought what if we hadn't taken him there, and if we had placed him in another position, maybe he would have been alive? What if it was really our fault?

Once I called a dead boy's father. He was driving, so I asked him to stop the car. The boy was the only child in the family, the late child...



I told the father. He hung up. He called back after a while. He didn't cry, only asked me who I was. I told him. He said, "How do I live on? This is my only child. How can I live without him now?" I didn't know what to say. So, I started talking about the funeral...

These parents call me from time to time and we communicate. The mother of Andrii Baibuz, who died during the storming of the "woods", asks me all the time how her son died, "Well, do you know how he died? What did he say before he died? What was his voice like?" I'm telling her for the hundredth time about how he died, and then she asks again. She asks me to come, and I can't. I haven't been to the grave of any of our guys yet. I can't. I just can't.

A terrible situation was with the "Shaitan's" mother (our company commander Mykyta Yarovyi), who died on December 18, 2016, together with Andrii Baibuz. Their bodies were first taken by the separatists.



We knew for sure that they were already dead, but the separatists took our soldier's phone, called his mother and said that he was in the hospital...

My life was the life of a battalion. I just didn't separate myself from it. They were my family. The first year after demobilization, my thoughts were there. They call me like my children would call. During my entire service in the battalion, I encountered three and half a thousand people, and I remember all of them. I left the army, but I haven't returned from the war yet. There's something pulling me back all the time.

After returning, a real hell began. I didn't want to do anything at all. There was a bed at home, a kettle next to it, a TV on, and so the days passed – I didn't need anything. I haven't spoken for a month. At all. I was taken to a hospital. I needed somebody to hold my hand when I left the ward. My mental health began to affect my physical condition. I had serious health issues.

We have a lot of different programs. They talk a lot about rehabilitation, but I have seen from my own experience that here in Ukraine no one really knows what to do with people like us, how to get a person out of this state. I saw a psychologist who had been trying to help me for six months. She tried very hard, and we achieved certain results. Now I keep fighting it, but my thoughts are still at war – I can't forget it. I want to go back – it seems that now I am doing useless things...



# Olha Benda

THE 72ND MECHANIZED BRIGADE

**W**hen mobilization began, I knew that my husband will have to go. He asked me to tell them that I don't know where he is. That was it. I got into the army when I divorced him.

I really wanted to help. Anything. I went to our regional military commissariat and told them I wanted to serve. At first, they sent me to Vasylkiv, but they didn't have a position for me there and I was sent back. Like a day had passed and I found out that there is a position of a cook in a training centre in Starychi. I thought about it. I didn't know what exactly I wanted to do, but I knew for sure that I want to help. I didn't really care what I'm going to do there, I just wanted to join the army. So, I signed a contract. In two months, we were supposed to join the 59th brigade, but they didn't want to take girls, so we were transferred into the 72nd. April, 2016, I arrived.

We entered Avdiivka in October 2016. Guys from our platoon have already been to ATO and they were constantly telling me about the time they spent near Volnovakha. They said it was scary and asked me why the hell am I going there? I wasn't scared, I was fascinated. I wanted to see it with my own eyes, to feel it. Avdiivka didn't evoke any special feelings in me. A town like any other. Moreover, I didn't really have time to see anything. I was busy right from the start. I was responsible for delivering food supplies on positions. I had to divide the supplies among all of the companies. Load up the goods and deliver it to the first one, the second one, the third one etc. It was a bit difficult to get up and down, so I took off my bulletproof vest. Guys asked me: "Are you mad? You're not scared?" It wasn't scary, because it was quiet. They weren't shooting at us at the time.

I spent October and November at the battalion headquarters. At the end of November, I transferred into the first company. I served there till I got injured. We witnessed the worst shootings in January 2017. Hard times. Aside that, I was doing my job. I wasn't paying attention to anything else. Whatever's happening, everyone should eat. Surely, I was worried about our guys. In January I had to hide. I remember being shot at with BM-21 "Grads" vividly. January 29th marked the beginning of the most difficult time for me. We fought for the position called "Almaz". At first, I didn't know what was going on. They started shooting roughly at 7 am and after that we were under heavy fire. It lasted a whole week. Pretty hard-core. I slept in a cellar. I was done running up and down all of the time, so I decided to stay there.

Boys treated me well. They supported me. Sometimes they helped me with peeling potatoes, carrying wood or throwing out garbage. They brought me chocolate a couple times. I met my husband there. It happened in December 2016 when I was delivering food supplies. It was the last position for the day. He came out, jumped on my car and said: "God! Food! We haven't eaten in two days." I replied: "Take everything you need!" That's how we met. Then he came to our position a couple times, said hi and that's it. I was transferred to his platoon for a few days. We started talking. And we started dating after a while. So, there is a place for romance even in times of war. There was a shooting nearby, explosions... We had a gazebo on our position. So, we were sitting there at a table, drinking tea and coffee, talking... Isn't it romantic?

I cooked for 70 people a day max, usually less. The first team had their meal and left. I'm cooking for the second time for the second team as they're coming back. Then the third one... 20 to 40 people a day.



I had to cook one and a half of a bucket of potatoes, if we're going for mashed potatoes. And if we're going for some soup or borscht for guys, one bucket is enough. I woke up at 6 am and started cooking. On the morning I'd go for something that I can do faster like macaroni. Then I cook lunch. I had a bit of free time between lunch and dinner, so I usually tried to rest or sleep.

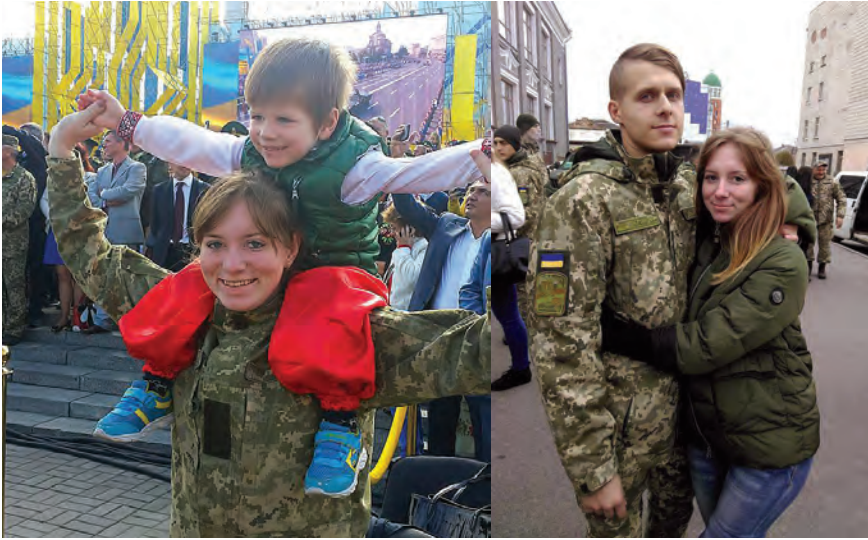
The menu was created with only one goal: don't go for the same thing every single day. Who would want to eat the same thing a few days in a row? Guys didn't have any special orders. Home-cooked meal.



That's all. Macaroni, pilau, potato, rice, porridge with sauces. Roasted potatoes with salo\* and fish. After I got a stove, obviously. They really loved pilau. It was easy to make, at least for me in such conditions, and it was good, so I made it for guys every other day. I don't have any secrets. I just knew all the proportions and I cooked it for quite a while on an open fire. Maybe that's why it was so good.

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\* Salo is a traditional Ukrainian food consisting of cured slabs of fatback (rarely pork belly), with or without skin. It is usually dry salt or brine cured.



And then I was injured. 6 am. It was an arrival all right. It arrived next door. I was thrown out of my bed with an explosion wave. My bed “jumped” to the ceiling, fell down and blocked a way out. After the first explosion I was just lying on the ground. A window was blocked as well. I tried to get out, but this bed didn’t let me. I started screaming for help. Guys hid in the cellar after the first explosion. And then I heard the second one. I had a gut feeling it’s coming for me. I jumped on the ground; I knew I had to be as close as possible to the ground. I was thinking: “That’s it. I woke up the first time. The second one... no way”. I knew that when guys got hit, when it came like 5-6 meters away from them, they were like a tammy, like a bolter. And here... well, it was a lot closer. To tell you the truth, I wasn’t scared, I was terrified. I was so scared... and then I heard a voice of a comrade. He was screaming and looking for me. I did get through that bed. He asked where was it hurting. I said my leg hurts and passed out.





I woke up when they were applying a tourniquet. I found out that one of my legs was amputated in a hospital in Pokrovsk. I asked someone to adjust my leg and they said: “What leg? You don’t have this one.”. Then they uncovered me... I was afraid to move both my legs. When they uncovered me, I saw that it was in bandages and it wasn’t there. I don’t even remember what I was feeling at the moment. I was just crying my eyes out. I was said. I was hurt. No leg – how’s that? I couldn’t comprehend that. When I was done with anesthesia, I started calling my boyfriend. He said he’s on the way and that he knows everything. He came and supported me, helped me, he did everything in his power. I remember him saying: “All good, don’t you worry. We just have to walk a bit slower from now on.”. He never left my sight.

My parents and Liosha’s support helped me to get through this and move on. It was important for me that Liosha didn’t leave



me because I didn't have a leg. He didn't say: "Sorry, bye." He took care of me and helped me walk again. There was this guy Ihor. My Liosha got him out. When I came to a hospital for rehabilitation, he was there. The same thing. I started waking him up – going to a store, going for a walk, going out, I wasn't leaving him alone. I was exercising and I made him exercise. I tried to shake him up a bit. And others in the hospital. I was

active all of the time. I was training in order to stand on my two feet once again. Men watched me and became alive again. Even those who had no desire to move for a few months.

My first walk happened in a hospital in Kyiv. I was injured on Sunday and I was in Kyiv by Wednesday. They let me “go” for a walk lying in a medical bed. Then I realized that roads in Kyiv aren’t as bad as footpaths. I was shaking like a maniac and my leg hurt. The sun was shining and I was having ice-cream. One of the soldiers gave it to me. I also had some problems with memory at the time. I kept forgetting what I was doing for a bit. When I was able to sit in a wheelchair, I tried “going for a walk” on my own. It was difficult. My body wasn’t listening to me. Stressful times for my body.

I have a son Dima. He’s three years old. I asked not to bring him while I was in the process of rehabilitation. I didn’t want him to see me like this. When I was feeling better, he came to visit me. He only saw me in my uniform a couple of times, so was fascinated: “Wow, mom, so cool!”. When he’s bugging me to go somewhere, I tell him: “My boy, I need to get my leg on.”. He’s giving it to me and says: “Put it on and let’s go.”. I needed time to get used to a prosthetic. Even now it bugs me sometimes. If I’m sitting for a long time, I have to apply cream and give baths to my leg. People who’ve been wearing prosthetics for 25 years say that it’s still uncomfortable. Every time you repair your prosthetic, it feels like a new one. You need to get used to it, to adjust it once in a while.

I’m still serving, but now in a military commissariat. I’m also a sophomore at O.S. Popov Odesa National Academy of Telecommunications. I’ve got a driver’s licence. I took part in the Invictus Games, which is an international adaptive multi-sport event, where wounded, injured or sick armed services personnel and their



associated veterans take part in nine sports. I recently won a beauty pageant among women in the military. Volunteers set up an amazing photoshoot for me and these pictures won. I also got an award “Ukrainian woman” in the nomination for “Heroism”. The main thing is that on December 16th, 2017, Liosha and I got married. We went to a jewelry store in order to buy me earrings, but he looked at rings and said: “Wanna buy it?” The same day we applied. We became a married couple in a month.

After I was injured, when I survived, I realized that I don't have much time. None of us does. You shouldn't waste it on a bad mood, negative emotions. You should smile, do good and be kind, and make the most of it. And you should treat your problems as something you can easily deal with. Most of the problems can be solved. You just have to do something, to act. With a smile, of course. People will smile back at you. They will help and support you. And people who have the same problem with legs, don't give up! If they have no support, give them my number, I will support them. They should come up with goals for themselves and do everything, being reasonable, of course, in order to achieve them. It's not the end of the world to have an injury or to have a leg amputated. I'm about to learn how to ice skate. This is my dream now. Someone will probably think it garbage, and I'm going to do it, no matter how hard will it be. I'll make my dream come true.



# Yana Chervona

THE 46TH ASSAULT BATTALION  
“DONBAS-UKRAINE” (THE 54TH  
MECHANIZED BRIGADE BEFORE THAT)

**W**hen the war broke down, in 2014, I became a volunteer. I used to load up the goods and take it to the frontlines, to “Aidar” battalion. I didn’t have just one reason to join the army. At one point I wasn’t interested in volunteering anymore. I spent two years and a half like that. There was this time we went to “Aidar” battalion once again, we were delivering packages and one of the soldiers said to me: “It’s pretty nice for you, volunteers. You come and go. A day here having a rest and then you go home. We’re here every day.” And I wanted to find out how hard was it. Impossible or maybe I could handle it?

At first, surely, I wanted to join my dear “Aidar” battalion. However, I wasn’t interested in the positions they offered me. They were too “feminine”. Maybe they wanted to protect me and that’s how they were taking care of me, maybe they didn’t see me as a fighter, I don’t know... My friend was joining the 54th brigade and I asked to go with her. I had an opportunity to choose a position I wanted and to learn how to do a job I wanted to do. That’s how I got into the 1st battalion of the 54th mechanized brigade. Life happened and later my comrades and I joined the 46th assault battalion “Donbas-Ukraine”.

Since I joined the army, I haven’t had any limitations to what I could do as a soldier based on my gender. No one forbade me anything. And I never said I couldn’t do something because I am a girl. Like I wouldn’t go when it’s freezing or I am not okay with performing my duties at night. Girls and I did everything boys did. I really wanted to learn the craft and to be a gunner who works with IFVs. Though, at first, I was assigned to work as a medic-shooter (the easiest job), but on one condition: at the same time, I will still be learning to be a gunner. A vehicle I was supposed to use for my learning was in repair, so I was waiting for it to be fixed. As it happened, I picked



up a machine gun and realized that I want to be a machine gunner. It just happened. A lot of things in my life happen that way. And usually it's pushing me towards achieving something I want to achieve. Only the types of machine guns change with time. You got to learn every day. Handling new types of weapon is fascinating and it will be useful, so I might go back to the idea of becoming a gunner who works with IFVs.

I started serving near Svitlodarsk. I got there in September 2016. I feel this deep connection to these places. I found friends there, comrades, I got my first military experience, I learned a whole lot. I met people who I would never meet in civilian life. It was a trench warfare, but we were shot at pretty heavily. They were using machine guns, mortars, artillery etc. Though, I happened to see more being a volunteer. And, obviously, they didn't get less dangerous with time.

I have many painful memories as well. I found friends there and I lost them. December 2016 was the worst for me. I looked in a mirror and I couldn't recognize myself. I aged a few years. One day took five of my comrades.

We had an assignment that day to take on "woods". At first, I was working with radios. After I finished my shift I stayed right there. We were on the radio day and night. We heard everything. I only regret one thing. I didn't record it. Everyone wanted to go there, but they also believed the plan wasn't good enough. Surely, nothing is perfect during the war, but these kinds of operations must be thoroughly planned. Nobody knew it would happen like that and we can't do anything about it now.

It was horrible to hear for the first time: "We have a 200." I received this information. Then the second one: "We have a 200." We didn't even know who died. The team split up and boys lost each



other. Then the next message like that. I sat there not knowing who's not alive anymore and who's back to a blindage. The only name we knew back then was "Shaitan" (Mykyta Yarovyi). He was a commander of our company. Other messages were scrappy with screams. You couldn't understand what was going on.

Andrii Baibuz (code name "Efa") died that day as well. He fought side by side with his wife Vika. I will never forget the moment we knew he died and Vika didn't. We tried to hide our faces. She was waiting for him to come back. We knew and we couldn't say a thing. And when someone finally told her, I don't remember who



it was, she started crying, but she kept on working. She was working with radios at the moment. We wanted to change her, but she refused and finished her shift.

There were three other dead besides “Efa” and “Shaitan”. “Sanych” (Dmytro Klymenko), “Simianyyn” (Andrii Shyrovkov) and “Hurza” (Roman Radyvyliv). There was no hysteria. I was crying my eyes out, but... peacefully. It pained me that they’re dead, for sure. Even now when memories hit me, everything inside me starts to ache. Despite that we were crying peacefully. And we were working non-stop. Grief was unbearable and belonged to all of us, but no one step out of work.

Maybe, it's some kind of a protective mechanism. If it happened in a civilian life, we might react differently. But here... when people from the other company come and talk to us, telling us something, laughing, we start smiling and even laughing. We distract ourselves. A few minutes later you pass a bed (or should I say just a place to kind of sleep in) where someone was sleeping, their things, their weapon, and you start crying again.

There was this time volunteers brought us three vests. I took one and "Simianyn" took one. Mine was usually just lying there. I rarely wore it. When "Simianyn" died, I was gathering his stuff. I picked up his vest and I couldn't get myself to put it where it belonged. I just couldn't. I was just sitting and holding it. My friend's vest. My friend is gone. It hurt so bad. Then I put it there and shipped it. I realized then and there that I won't be wearing mine. Ever. I couldn't even look at it.

We've had one more dead after these guys. Our fallen comrade "Kruk" was the youngest. His friend was screaming so hard... he wasn't even screaming; he was roaring like an animal. It was the first time I heard a man screaming like that. It was excruciating. Our fallen "Kruk" and his friend's pain...

My "Aidar" soldiers had a great tradition. When someone died, after morgue, after all of the examinations, they would take the body to the battalion, so everyone was able to say goodbye to a comrade. Surely, they couldn't go all at once, but still. And where I was serving, we were only able to say goodbye to "Kruk". And only because we were transporting his body to an ambulance. And the guys who died on December 18th... we not only didn't say goodbye, none of us were allowed to attend a funeral. This is not right. We should be able to say goodbye to a comrade lived and fought with. This was one of the many reasons I wanted to transfer out of this division.

Soldiers from our company who wanted to leave the 54th brigade were taken by “Donbas-Ukraine” battalion. When they got here, we went to the sector “M” (for Mariupol), but comrades won’t let me lie, I’ve always wanted to go back to the Svitlodarsk arc. I was drawn back there like a homesick. Now I’m fighting here. Not the exact same place, but still. I can see the positions where my friends have died. I can see the positions I have a deep connection with. At first, as a part of “Donbas”, we went to Chermalyk. It was the calmest sector I’ve ever been in. We had very little of heavy fire. It felt like we were standing there and guarding the fields. We spent nearly three months there. Then I got into the recently liberated village by the name of Travneve.

It’s difficult. Locals are not sure yet whether to trust us or not. Some of them are very happy that we’re here. They’re supporting us. Giving us baked goods. Most of the locals are retired. This village is pretty isolated. And they don’t have a school, a kindergarten, a store. It’s pretty grey and bleak. These people have never really seen anything good in their life. Before the army positioned here, locals went to invaded Horlivka in order to sell milk, eggs, chicken. They exchanged Russian rubles into hryvni. Now they can’t do that. Sometimes I think that they don’t really care where to live, Ukraine or Russia. On the other hand, it’s understandable. They’re getting to know the army folks; they’re getting to know us. Obviously, they aren’t very pleased with having trenches and the frontlines near the village.

By the way... I used to not care about Ukraine as well. I’ll be honest. I didn’t own a vyshyvanka\*, a flower crown, I didn’t know the words of our national anthem. Ukrainian language and literature were my favorite subject in school. I knew them very well. But I rarely

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\* Vyshyvanka is the embroidered shirt in Ukrainian national costumes.

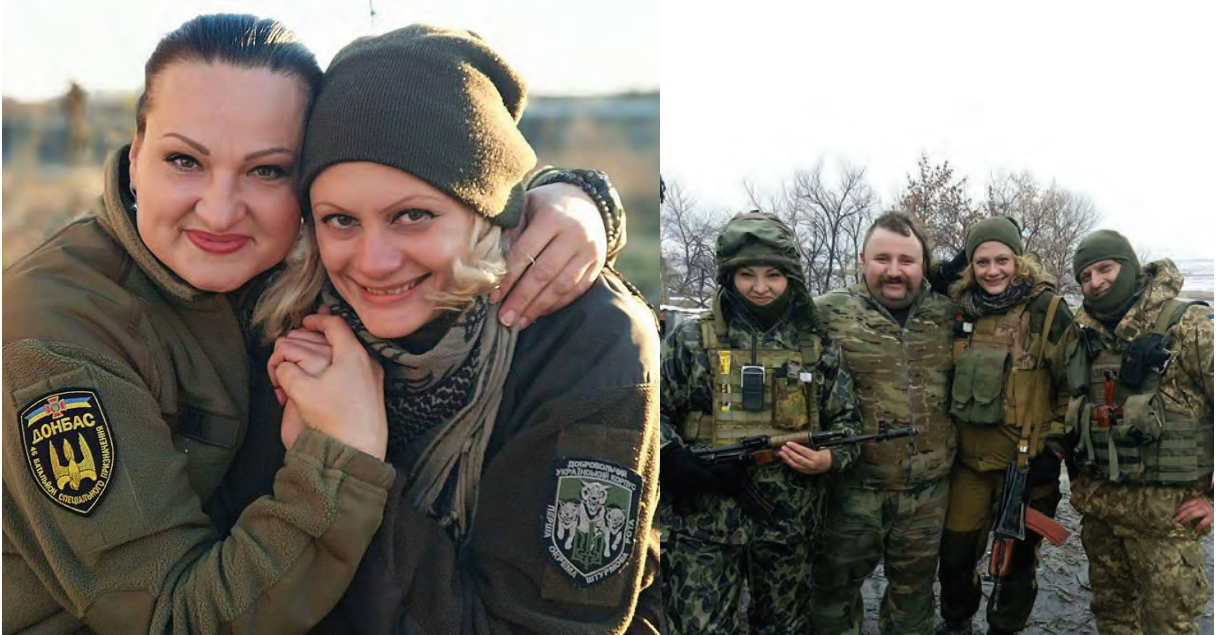
spoke Ukrainian. Now I try to speak Ukrainian with my kids, my friends, my comrades. It just happened. I got my first vyshyvanka, then the second one, then a linen dress, flower crowns, and then I started buying them for kids. This mindful love evoked in me during Maidan, surely. It has shaken me up a bit, made me think and realize how much I love my country.

Once, a woman told me that she was going to go to the referendum, but her husband stopped her. He told her to look closely to what was going on. Now she says that she has no regrets. She's totally supporting us, Ukraine. There are old women here who've never even gotten out of the village. They don't know what Ukraine is. None of them really had a job. Some of them worked with sewage treatment as they said. I feel sorry for them. Sincerely. They have nothing to choose from. They've never seen anything good.

Day-to-day things here don't really matter. Yes, it's no resort, but it's okay. You can always adapt and create desirable conditions for yourself. We had a shower and a potbelly stove, so we could use it in winter times as well. The problem was that the shower room was being shot at pretty heavily.

I don't understand these ideas that women need a separate blindage. Although, there were women who wanted it. I'm against it. We had a blindage for 25 people, two/three girls, and everything was fine. Nobody was bothered by it. Or maybe we should have an army for women and an army for men? And why should women join the army in such case? We won't get respect that way and we won't be treated as equals if we keep asking for something special like a separate living space, separate tents, separate conditions.

And it's not particularly easy to earn their respect. No matter what a woman does, no matter how good she is at something, few men



will say they are proud of her, that she did great. It's a bit better now, for sure. However, men still think of the army as of something that belongs to them, exclusively. They believe that we are aliens here. And if they are okay with us being in the army and on the frontlines, when a woman wants to be a commander, a machine gunner, or to work with IFVs, they still don't feel good about it. I remember saying I want to try using a machine gun. Everyone was laughing at me and saying: "Don't touch it, girl, you can break it". Our army still needs time. Men need time to come to terms with, understand and accept that from now on women are a part of the army.

Surely, girls can have different reasons for joining the army, but men can have different motivations as well. There are women who



really want to fight, who found themselves in the military. There are women who want to get on with their personal lives. I don't judge them, because men who are fighting here are the best. No matter where they came from, the Armed Forces of Ukraine or volunteer battalions. A lot of women would want these men to be their husbands.

Comrades treat us like sisters. I see men as kids here. Not as brothers, more like mentees. When I was a volunteer I called "Aidar" soldiers my children, even those who were over 50 years old. And they were laughing every time I came, saying: "Our mummy's here". No one tried to hit on me. They know I have a significant other. Sometimes I envy women who are fighting side by side with their men and demobilize together as happy couples. My love is a civilian and he's waiting for me. I hope he'll be lucky.

My closest people had different reactions to my decision. My mom was very negative about it. Now she's on Facebook and



she sees all of my posts from the frontlines and she's better. My kids, surely, miss me and I miss them. I calm myself down with the idea that I am a mother who will soon have something to say to her children, who's got experience worth sharing. One day I will tell them about brave men and women, a lot of whom are dead, and about important moments for our country. On the other hand, of course, it's bad that I don't see them and they don't see me for months. I'll try to catch up when I'm back. I would probably be a regular mom who drives her kids to school, who helps them with their homework and cooks for them, if not for this war. However, I don't regret joining the army, because it rewarded me with such an extraordinary experience.

I don't know what's going to happen next. My life can change in a blink of an eye. I enjoy watching how the army changes for the better from the inside. What I saw in 2014 in "Aidar" battalion and what I see now are two different things. I never knew who I want to be and what I want to do. I didn't go to college because I didn't know who I want to be. When I joined the army, I think I felt it for the first time, it was my place. This is a profession I like and want to learn more about. I want to aspire, to be great in doing what I love.



# Yuliia Paievskia

“Taira”

A VOLUNTEER-PARAMEDIC,  
THE 61ST MOBILE HOSPITAL,  
THE ARMED FORCES OF UKRAINE



I started with being a medic during Maidan. Then it gradually changed into teaching tactical medicine. In Kyiv. Training people who are going to the frontlines. Then I went there, because I decided that that's where I am needed more than in peaceful Kyiv. Then we started having wounded, I transported some of them and decided that I can do more as paramedic compared to an instructor. So,

I stayed. I've been here since then. Dealing with evacuation, emergency medicine, getting them to hospitals etc.

I was a teacher and the president of “Mutokukai-Ukraine” Aikido Federation, 5 dan\*. I used to be a designer as well.

I wasn't afraid. I am an adventurous one. Of course, I was scared during the first shootings. Well, you are scared until you know what exactly is going on. What, from where and where it's going, these sort of things. My first time under heavy fire was somewhere near Mariupol, I can't remember where exactly. I worked pretty much everywhere. Shchastia, near Donetsk, near Svitlodarsk... Mariupol, Shyrokyne, Pavlopil, Zolote... In certain places I stayed longer, in others I was out pretty soon.

2014 was totally different. Now we're working with battalion and brigade medics. They usually transport wounded with an armoured personnel carrier. We load them up into an ambulance with all of the necessary devices, a great driver, medicine, a couple of paramedics, so they could get to a hospital alive and fast. Our paramedics are well-trained. Very valuable. 2014 was nowhere near. Sometimes I picked up wounded on the go on a sidewalk. And sometimes some people were driving our guys and noticed a car with crosses. They would yell: “Medics!” – and gave them to us.

The worst time for me was near Svitlodarsk, I guess. December 2016. We were practically living in a car. It was freezing. It lasted for 8 days. At first, we were transporting wounded. In the end, people who had a post-concussion syndrome. The first three days were horrifying. Blood was dropping on the ice... It was awful. It wasn't as you would

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\* The dan ranking system is used by many Japanese, Okinawan, and Korean martial art organizations to indicate the level of a person's ability within a given system.



expect after medical college. Life and this war make certain changes. I actually compare paramedicine with art. Despite all of the records, sometimes all you need is to make the right decision. It is similar to a blessing. It's something like an artistic gift. You need to choose who to help first. I can't really explain it. It's all about the experience. This



experience is extremely valuable. And it's payable in blood and lives, literally.

A lot has happened in these years... We're here, because we understand that if we're not here, it's going to be worse. I learned to do my job very well. We are what we are doing. I transport wounded from the frontlines. When I was working in the field of design, I was a designer. When I was participating in sports, I was an athlete. Now I am a combat paramedic. It's easier to adapt for women. Our psyche is more mobile. It's easier for us to compartmentalize in harsh situations and conditions. There's no confusion or lack of understanding. You can get confused, when you're transporting a seriously wounded person, you get him to a hospital, knowing he's going to die and hoping for a miracle... I've seen one or two miracles. I believe in miracles. You have

to fight for each and every one of them. I've had cases when a hopelessly wounded guy would open his eyes and get out alive.

These guys usually call me on holidays. "Taira, have a good one! Do you remember me? Remember how we were running under heavy fire? Remember how you were transporting me?" It's very nice. I remember each and every one with whom I've shared a place for a while. And others... I remember every wound, but I forget faces and often can't recognize the guys I've helped.

I remember a lot of them. A whole lot. For example, Oleksandr D. He's from the 8th regiment, Special forces. He lost his eyes and a leg. He was in a pretty bad shape. While we were transporting him, he tried dying twice. I didn't let him. I remember a lot of guys. Post-concussion syndrome has its symptoms... One of the guys had a pretty weird one... I remember all of the 200s. All of them. I don't know whether I am that lucky or my car is lucky, but no one died in my car. Sometimes I arrived when it was too late. I couldn't do anything. I received a body that lost its soul moments ago... Or I could transport someone to a hospital and he died there. Though, there was no deaths in my car.

My team is full of amazing people. Patriots. Altruistic. Praise to each and every one of them. To all of "The angels of Taira". Everybody who works with us is a hero. They work for free. They are giving a part of their lives; they're risking their lives. And they are happy that they are needed.

The army, comparing to 2014 when we had close to nothing, is equipped pretty well at the moment. Surely, we can run out of things before the parcel arrives, but 2014 was catastrophic. Volunteers were saving us. We'd be done, if not for them. Knowing what can be replaced with what comes with experience. I'm talking medicine. There are still some things you can't substitute or replace.





My code name is “Taira”. I used to play a computer game where I was supposed to create a character and choose a name. I had a handful of options, one of them being “Taira”. Taira is a famous samurai clan in Japan. I picked it for my character. And I automatically chose “Taira” as my code name on the frontlines. I have a few more, but it’s a secret.

What will happen after the war? We’ll see. Maybe I’ll be a coach. Maybe I’ll be growing roses in a garden. Maybe I’ll find another war and go there to save people. Maybe I’ll be a designer... Don’t know yet.



# Olha Nikishyna

“Kholiera/Cholera”

THE 16TH MOTORIZED INFANTRY  
BATTALION “POLTAVA”, THE 58TH  
INDEPENDENT MOTORIZED INFANTRY  
BRIGADE

Like with many of us, it all started with Maidan. It was obvious after Crimea that something was up. First losses in Donbas. You're watching TV and crying, and crying, and crying. Then you pull yourself together and start to think: "What good will come from my tears? I have to do something!" We started gathering supplies. We didn't really have any volunteer organizations in Poltava, so we were doing it ourselves. Then we met with a branch of the "Right Sector" in Poltava and joined them. As a day job I was working for the city, and at nights I was concerned with volunteering and activism.

I felt I could do more. The fact that I was a woman and a bit older didn't bother me. I wanted to go to the frontlines. My friends didn't really understand my desire. My parents still don't, saying: "You are a woman of a certain age, you should sit at home with your grandchildren". I chose my division, because I've had friends in the 16th battalion. It used to be one of the territorial defense battalions. My people.

It wasn't easy to start serving. My documents were traveling between all kinds of agencies for roughly seven months. Like seven circles of hell. I wouldn't want to go through that again. It all started when I came to a military commissariat in Poltava. They said: "Thanks, but no thanks! You're over 40. Go home." I came for the second time and asked: "You seriously think that I can serve my country until I turn 40? Then what? I magically become incapable?" I bugged them so hard. Eventually they let me in. Being 43 years old, having no skills, no military experience, no nothing, I joined the military. In 7 months, I left for the battalion.

We only had a few women in the battalion. I was the only woman with a rank at the time. I came to the headquarters and I was told I'm going to share a separate room with a girl. I said: "Wait. How

can I perform my duties and work with military personnel if I'm here and my guys are there?" They said: "We don't let women to go to the frontlines. Only medics." I haven't spent a night there. I went straight to the guys. The company commander was looking at me confused as hell. Like what should I do with you? We came to a strongpoint and guys were looking at me funny as well. Like who is this woman? Why is she here? What is she going to do here? However, in a few days we were all fine.

I went straight to Avdiivka, "Lienta" strongpoint. After a while I went to the other strongpoint. My life at the frontlines began in 2016. We had a lot of mortar fire. In two days, the company commander visited us and said: "Olha Vasylivna, why didn't you undo your sleeping bag?" It just went dark, enemies started shooting and we had to run away and hide.

We've had this funny case, when we were ready to have dinner and enemies started shooting, enthusiastically. We got hit and jumped out. One of the guys was taking a shower at the moment. He came to us all dirty, his underwear was all wrong, swearing all the way, and said: "I got out of the shower, started running to the safe space and suddenly remembered we have a woman on the strongpoint, I had to put on an underwear. I'm doing it on the go. I didn't see it was all wrong. When I was putting it on, I fell...". So, yeah, he got to us all dirty and wet.

My first assignment was not to trouble anyone. How it usually happens? How do men treat women in the army? A separate room, a separate bathroom... I was okay on my own. If I needed a bucket of water, I would go and carry one. If I needed to drive a nail with a hammer, I would go and do it. A never asked anyone to help me carry a box or something.



I've been under heavy fire for the first time in Avdiivka, when I came with supplies. Mortars, 120mm, were doing their job. Guys screaming: "Take cover!" And I'm just standing there. I can't move. I know I have to run. I know I'm in danger. And it's like I have no legs. Guys took me and brought me into a blindage. I wasn't scared, I just froze. I was like an observer, like it wasn't happening to me.

I can't say how much time I needed to get used to being under heavy fire. A day or two, or four... maybe a week... I got used to it in a week. Not only to being under fire, but also to an idea that there's no schedule. There's no 8 hours of work. Today you can sleep for an hour, tomorrow you can sleep for five hours. Or you may have no sleep at all. The same thing with eating. You eat when you have time, even at night. I got used to an idea that I can't plan anything. However, how can you not be afraid? For example, I am afraid. I am afraid I can get injured or die. I'm afraid to do something wrong that will have consequences. It's natural. It's an instinct. Survival. Though, you can't be panicking here. You must be in control. Usually fear comes later. When everything is over. 40 minutes have passed and I begin to feel it... like a giraffe.

I spent 4 months in Avdiivka. Then I got to Krymske in Luhansk oblast. Avdiivka had certain advantages. 10 minutes and you're in town. You could buy a chocolate bar or cut your hair, while running errands. They have ATMs, stores, a relatively peaceful life. They have electricity. Krymske has electricity only due to generators that work on gas. You



have to be careful with spending. So, we only have some, like to charge a radio, a phone, batteries. We're in a field. There is a steppe and a blindage.

I'm not the only woman in our division anymore. We usually work with radios. We also carry loads of firewood and water. We cook. Yeah, usually girls cook, because we want to help guys as much as possible.

My code name is "Kholiera/Cholera. If I was choosing, I would choose something like "Kvitochka/Flower" or "Zirochka/Star". I was against it for a very long time, but I have it since my volunteering days, when I was delivering supplies to the guys in 2015. I was coming to them looking good: boots, jeans, a jacket with fur... and guys were saying: "Cholera! Who graced us with her presence?" That's how I got it.

We have lots of stories about code names. There was this guy who always said: "Kapiets". So, we started calling him that. He wasn't very happy. I said you gotta do something about it. So, testing grounds, we're training, and suddenly heard something over the radio: "Kapiets\*" – "Kepu/Cap". Command is frightened. Surely, we sorted it out. Told them that "Kep/Cap" is fine and that "Kapiets" is a code name. When we go to the zone, he became a commander and got himself a new code name "Palych".

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\* t's a slang. In this case it means someone is done.

We've had all kinds of locals. I've met good people, Ukrainians, volunteers in Avdiivka. I'm still talking to some of them. One of them recently sent me magnets to remember her by. I have only good memories of locals in Avdiivka. I don't see much of locals in Krymske, because we're positioned far away from the village. Also, not too many people here. Mostly, old people. Their school is up and running, but there aren't a lot of kids. They treat me nice when we meet at a store or a town hall.

The worst thing is when medics are being called to work over the radio. It doesn't matter what kind of weapon or for how long. The worst thing to do is to prepare documents on a fallen soldier. Roma Netesa was the first for us. He died July 6th, 2016. A week after I got there. He was 19 years old! That was scary. What should we do? How can I tell his parents? There was a person. I saw him half an hour ago. And now he's gone. How did I get through? I didn't. You can't. They say, time heals all wounds. Nope. I see them in my dreams. They come to me and tell me stuff... We shouldn't forget them. Neither dead, nor alive. They're doing their job! Not for themselves, not for their families. I talk to relatives of the fallen. They send me card on holidays. When I'm in Poltava, we would see each other. How can I forget any of them? They're ours.

I got married after I joined the military. I've known my future husband for a very long time. He's from Poltava as well. I called him once with a work question and he told me that he was in ATO zone. Then, when I was packing to leave, I called him to ask what should I bring and what should I buy for work. He gave me advices, supported me, gave me tips. We talked, and talked... and one time he put a ring on my finger.

We're serving in different divisions. They were positioned near Avdiivka, when we were fighting there. We met once a month at the





Nova Poshta\* office, where we'd go to receive packages. That was our honeymoon phase. 10-15 minutes at a time. Now we see each other once a year, when we get 30-day vacations. We're trying to divide 30 days into smaller chunks, so we could see each more often.

Surely, he told me he didn't want me to go to the frontlines. "You're still going to do whatever you set your mind to, so I can only support you. I'm not going to talk you off, you're a grown-up." – he told me. I'm grateful. He's not jealous. We trust each other.

It was difficult to reach a point where people would come up to you to talk, when they know you can help. Being on the frontlines and staying a woman. Now guys are treating me as a sister. Some of them as a mother.

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\* Nova Poshta is a private Ukrainian postal and courier company that provides express delivery of documents, freight and parcels for individuals and businesses.



I used to look fantastic. Now... I'm having a break; I came home and I see grey hair I'd need to color... I've been wanting to go to a beauty parlor for a few days now. I used to easily spend a whole day in a place like that. Manicures, pedicures, whatever. And I liked it. Now I don't want to waste my time. I want to live it up. For example, I'd like to learn something fully and completely. Recently I asked guys to teach me to drive a ZIL truck...

My phone book is thinner now. We've got different beliefs with a lot of people. I don't want to waste my time. I don't want to talk about a broken nail, fake lashes or canned food... I found people here that I can talk to. They understand me. And I understand them. We can share thoughts and feelings. The war made me more patient and less emotional. I used to want results here and now. I learned how to wait and realized that you always have to work for something for a long time and put a lot of efforts in order to get a result. The main thing I got from the war is people. Extraordinary people. I don't think I would ever meet them, if not for this. They teach me, support me and make me a better person.

# Maryna Valytska

“Ksena/Xena”

“RIGHT SECTOR”, THE 54TH  
MECHANIZED BRIGADE, THE 46TH  
ASSAULT BATTALION “DONBAS-  
UKRAINE”



**M**y story began in the Maidan. I was married, and we had a family business. Elections were ahead, and I participated in election campaigns. I thought I would make myself more useful in politics because I did not understand anything in military affairs and did not see how I could be of help there. I was engaged in volunteering. No changes had taken place after the elections. In October-November 2014, I decided to do some training because no one knew what to expect. At any moment, a full-scale invasion could begin, and we had to be ready for that. I needed to know how to use weapons so that I could protect my family and myself. Although, I am from Central Ukraine, and there were no signs that hostilities could start there any time soon. I signed up for training and was offered to go to the “Right Sector” as a volunteer – to help and study at the same time. I came to the base, began to master new skills, and at the same time helped – first to sort out the supplies provided by volunteers, then to deal with papers at the headquarters. I stayed there.

In 2016, the 54th brigade offered us to sign contracts so that our “Right Sector” unit could join the Armed Forces as a separate company. Therefore, we began to receive salaries and had a legal opportunity to fight. Since as long as the unit was not official, we could be treated as an organized criminal group. The unit had to remain intact, everyone in one company, which was important for us. Under those circumstances, we were accepted into the brigade. I agreed and signed the contract.

There were many people who wanted to join us: those from “Right Sector”, battalion of “Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists”, “Azov” battalion, “Aidar” battalion, etc. We started to fill the ranks of our unit. Then the sixth wave of mobilization had started, and there were many vacancies. We had big plans. We were fighting, performed combat missions. We were good. Just imagine, before that, we were

fighting without any salaries, privileges, or statuses. So, at first, we had a feeling of euphoria. Then, however, our relations with the command worsened. We were sent to different places. You see, it was legal – the commander has the right not to let you go somewhere, to prohibit something, to transfer you to another unit. For us, the main thing was to continue to fight together, just like in the beginning. So, in the summer of 2017, a small part of our unit joined the “Donbas” battalion. It was tough. At first, they just wanted to split us into different brigades. I was supposed to be transferred. There were orders for my fellow soldiers and me. According to the order, I had to go to the 92nd brigade. Then we went on a hunger strike at the firing range in protest. It received considerable publicity, and we were transferred to the “Donbas” battalion. Several of my fellow soldiers and I joined the first assault company.

In the army, women were perceived differently. My fellow soldiers had known me for years. They knew what we could and couldn't do. The guys in the new company first were wary of us. Within two weeks after the transfer to the “Donbas” battalion, our unit – both women and men – was checked by the instructors. Our level of training was highly praised. I wanted to serve in a combat position. Now I'm an assistant grenade launcher. My main weapons are an assault rifle and a machine gun. In the “Donbas” battalion, I learned to fire an automatic grenade launcher. If necessary, I can fire a portable anti-tank rocket-propelled grenade launcher.

Now we do not assault the enemy lines. Our main task is to impede the advance of troops and not let them move any further. We stand in position, watching the enemy, detecting their firing points. We can fire back if the commander orders to do so. We fortify our



positions and solve everyday issues. Now we perform the same combat missions as men on equal terms. I do not feel any discrimination.

When I first got to the position, I couldn't believe my eyes – they were really shooting, there were real enemies, real war. I came to the unit a day after the assault of “Murashnyk” (the height at the Svitlodarsk Arc, now controlled by the militants – author's note). I adapted to military conditions in just a matter of hours. I remember I was very tired when I arrived, so I went to bed right away. I got acquainted with those I didn't know. They showed me the positions and told me what was going on. The shelling at the Svitlodarsk Arc never ceased. I had stayed there for ten months. At first, we stayed in an advanced position, but the last month I spent in a more remote and safe place. Our position had long been well targeted by militants. They often fired from heavy machine guns: a DShK (a heavy machine gun with a V-shaped “butterfly” trigger), a NSV (a 12.7 mm caliber heavy machine gun). I don't count small arms attacks at all. They often used infantry fighting vehicles. Well, 82-millimeter mines also arrived regularly. There was not a single day when it was quiet. We got used to it so quickly that it didn't throw





anyone off balance. There were also days when the shelling hit our positions or vehicles.

In December 2016, when there was a battle for the “woods” – a forest belt at the Svitlodarsk Arc, which was controlled by the militants – we had many dead and wounded. Of course, I will never forget that day. I lost five fellow soldiers. I was at the command post of the battalion, involved as an assistant to the morale officer. In general, this position should be occupied by an officer, but there were quite a few trained people, so in our unit, I took up that work – dealt with a lot of papers, reports. I helped the morale officer of the battalion. I answered calls – there were many of them – and performed various tasks. I heard we had a dead soldier. Our commander, code name “Shaitan”, was the first to be killed. Then I didn’t know at what stage the battle was. It was reported from time to time who was wounded, who was missing and who was killed. That information was provided by a girl with a code name “Perlynka” – she reported on our losses.

Our deceased commander, “Shaitan” (Mykyta Yarovyi), was not from the “Right Sector”. At first, we didn’t know who he was – we had



our own commanders, with whom we came to the brigade. He, having received a company consisting of the “Right Sector” members, did not really know what to do with us. We didn’t make friends right away. At first, we didn’t communicate much. In everyday life, we were quite independent, used to doing everything ourselves: we provided for our everyday life and equipped ourselves.

Mykyta was quite young, a handsome guy, really handsome. He had an eastern appearance, with hazel eyes and dark skin. He was smart, open-hearted, sociable, and always lent his ear... We could talk to him about whatever came to mind. He had a great sense of humor. I helped him with documents, staff, registries, worked as his assistant... We did not have strict military discipline. “Right Sector” lived by somewhat different rules, but “Shaitan” was all about rules and

discipline. However, despite certain things, we became close friends and loved him very much. He was wise beyond his years; still, sometimes he was childish. He was about to have a wedding and kept asking me which wine glasses to buy, showing me pictures all the time. I told him, “Take these.” He replied: “No, I won’t take these; they are expensive.” But he died just a few weeks before his wedding. His fiancée was pregnant. His son was born after his death.

I can’t say that I was immediately perceived as a fighter. At first, I was asked to deal with documents, pick up parcels, solve organizational problems and everyday issues. For example, “Simianyn”, my fellow soldier who’s gone now, taught me how to fire an RPG-18 Mukha. I knew how to fire another type of grenade launcher, an RPG-7, but an RPG-18 Mukha – nope. He said, “That’s not right. We need everyone to be able to use all kinds of weapons.” Sometimes they joked about me. I never cooked. When I joined the “Donbas” battalion, I was just a regular fighter. We had training and practice. Now I carry out my duties like everyone else. Despite all the gender equality, I’m still physically weaker. Well, I can’t carry a bag of clay, neither can I pick it up off the ground. Our men do it quite easily. However, I can carry bags with the help of my fellow soldiers.

The most difficult thing here is to lose your fellow soldiers. When my comrades die or get injured. We’re all really close. Earlier, every Ukrainian soldier who was killed was a personal tragedy for me, as for many Ukrainians. When this is a person you sleep next to, share your meal, stand side by side, and then they are killed – it’s really scary; it’s not easy to go through and it’s impossible to forget. The weather conditions – cold, rain – or everyday life, lack of food do not matter. At the Svitlodarsk Arc, we all lived together in one large dugout. We slept on bunks – double beds made of planks. It is clear that this



is a war – no one sleeps here naked or in their pajamas. Changing clothes or washing is not a problem at all. You can always find a time when there is no one in the dugout, or they are asleep. If you need to wash – take a basin, shield yourself and take a shower. No one will be spying on you. I'm satisfied with the conditions. I would not like to live with a female team, as sometimes suggested by the command.

If you live with men, it's easier to do chores together – chop wood, bring water. Men are not talkative. I feel comfortable with them. At first, the battalion commander wanted us to live separately – according to the rules, but the girls and I were against it. Now there are four of us living in the dugout – two boys and two girls – and we get along well. I remember there was a cook who wanted to live separately. Well, it's up to her.

After the Svitlodarsk Arc, I went to Mariinka but didn't stay there for long. 11 days. We were brought in and taken out right away. My endpoint was the village of Zaitsevo, near Horlivka. We stayed there from January to June 2018. I like it in the army; I have a great team here. They are my true friends, and I know I can rely on them. It means a lot.



# **Yuliia Tolopa**

## **“Valkiriia/Valkyrie”**

**“AIDAR” BATTALION / THE 46TH  
ASSAULT BATTALION “DONBAS-  
UKRAINE” / THE 58TH INDEPENDENT  
MOTORIZED INFANTRY BRIGADE**

I come from Russia. On April 2nd, 2014, I came to Ukraine to prove to myself that the media in Russia were lying about the Maidan, about what was happening in the country. I wanted to see it with my own eyes. So, I went to the Maidan. Of course, it had been over at the time, but there were people in the tents, and I wanted to help them. According to the law, as a Russian citizen, I could stay in Ukraine for three months. I cooked food. People who met me in Kyiv (we got acquainted via the Internet) offered me to live in an apartment, but I came for the revolution, so I wanted to live in a tent.

I was supposed to go back in early June, but it was when active fighting in Sloviansk had begun. At that time, the first volunteer battalions were formed, and the first buses from the “Ukrainian House” departed. I tried to get on one of the first three buses – I really wanted to go to there. I didn’t know what was going on. Okay, you deceive your own people there, in Russia, but how could you come to a foreign country with machine guns and start a war?! I said that not all Russians were like that. I wanted to prove it by example. I’ve always been fighting for the truth, so it was important for me to go. I got on the fourth bus. On June 14-15th, we arrived at the battalion in Polovynkyne, and two days later, I was at the frontlines. That’s how it all started for me.

I have been familiar with weapons since I was 12 years old. I went to all sorts of patriotic clubs because I was interested in warfare. We were taught how to shoot. I was the champion of Russia in hand-to-hand combat, did combat sambo (I have the 3rd category). That was how I spent my childhood. Yet, shooting in a firing range is nothing like shooting here, but I wasn’t afraid. I was ready for it.

The first place I got to was Metalist near Luhansk. The first time I had stayed on the front lines without leaving, even to take a shower or eat normal food, was for a week. They were short on people. When





a person joins a battalion, the command checks on them, look at how they behave in different situations and decide where they will be the most useful. I was needed on the front lines.

My first fight was actually really funny. We were lying in ambush. Sometimes the guys would start shooting at bunnies and hedgehogs. So, during the first shooting, I didn't understand what was going on – the guys were shooting, but there was no one there... Why were they doing that? At the time, not everyone was experienced, so even the slightest rustling made my fellow soldiers shoot.

After a while, I transferred to another platoon. I don't even remember the first fierce battle... I remember the first shelling pretty well. It was July 6th, 2014. We were leaving the hiding place when the shelling of our positions with a BM-21 "Grad" began. One of the shells exploded nearby. I got a concussion. One of my fellow soldiers sustained a shrapnel wound, and the other was thrown back by the blast wave. There was no panic. We just knew that we needed to get out of there as soon as possible because if we had stayed, we would have been dead.

I never feared for my life during the service. Honestly, I wasn't afraid. I feared for my fellow soldiers, but not for myself. No one ever insulted me. Only in the first days in the battalion, from time to time, I heard phrases like "Why are you doing this? You're a girl."



or hints like “Let’s hook up.” That happened once or twice, and then I made it very clear that they’d better not mess with me. They hadn’t seen me in a battle. Yet. It never happened again.

I arrived here at the very beginning of the war – offensives, assaults. It was an active phase. Now everyone is talking more about the battles of Donetsk Airport, the Ilovaik tragedy, and there is not enough information about all of the other battles, as if there was no war there. I remember the battles of Heorhiivka, Lutuhyne, Novosvitlivka, Khriashchuvate, Luhansk Airport. That is, if you look at the map of Luhansk region, it is a line from Metalist to Khriashchuvate.

One of the tough moments was the explosion in Zhovte. Our car was blown up by a land mine. Back then, our task was to hold the height. There were 60-100 of us. The commander took two soldiers

and me – we had to defend the intersection. We got in the car... and just 15 minutes later I was lying with my eyes wide open and couldn't understand what had happened. We hit a land mine, and there was an explosion. The commander and driver were torn to pieces because the front of the car had been blown up. I was thrown out. It was a close call. I only got a concussion and broken ribs. That was the worst thing that happened to me during the war. It was July 12, 2014.

During the capture of Lutuhyne, a lot of our people died – about 40 soldiers. Tough times, but I was as calm as ever until I saw that my friend was wounded. I was an infantry fighting vehicle commander at that time. I got out of the car and started yelling at him. It was kind of a strange reaction.

Then was the capture of Heorhiivka; terrible battles there. I don't remember very well what happened there. After a concussion in 2017 (I had 7 of them), I can only remember some events in pieces, fragments. I remember Novosvitlivka pretty well...

We returned from Verhunka when we were told that we had to go to Novosvitlivka. Three groups, which at that time were free, totaling 30 people, went to reinforce our soldiers, who were sent from the base to the front lines for the first time. We were driving four cars; one of them was an ATV, to which an automatic grenade launcher was welded, and two guys were driving it. "Crazy and brave!"

The village was destroyed. It was shelled by both BM-21 "Grads" and BM-27 "Uragans", which fires huge rockets and has a certain range of fire... We arrived at the community center – it seemed to be one of the few buildings, which was not ruined. The local church had already been destroyed. Later, the militants posted across social networks that the Ukrainian side "shot the elderly in the church." In fact, they were the ones shelling the church.

There were, as I said, thirty of us to replace a hundred. While I went to my friends to find out what was going on, there was no one there anymore. They had gathered in 5 minutes. The commander first ordered us to go outside and dig trenches to defend our positions. There, even the dogs did not go outside because the shelling started immediately. In the end, we decided that we couldn't hold the village. The soldiers from the Armed Forces standing nearby were also ordered to retreat. We would not have been able to hold that settlement only with machine guns and the RPG-18 Mukha anti-tank rocket launchers. We left those positions because we didn't have the strength to hold them.

There were also battles for Khriashchuvate. I was not there – I was sent to Kyiv at the time. Then there were many wounded and dead. We had a fighter, code name “Sorokovyi”. He was brilliant. He went out alone against a tank. He wanted to stop it with an RPG-18. He fired at the tank, but then the tank fired back. He was gone.

I thought that I would never think about the dead. I thought I was insensitive but I was wrong. Now, four years later, here come the anniversaries of the first victims, funerals – it's really hard for me. I often think, “Why the hell have I survived?” Apart from the gloomy thoughts, I have many health issues – I forget things all the time, I'm kind of disorientated... I realize that I start to turn into a zombie after four years... A year ago, I wasn't like that. I have nervous breakdowns all the time. I don't want to live. I wake up and think, “Why did I wake up? What do I do next?” The last two months were the most difficult...

The worst thing is that I had made friends there. Many of them are gone now. When I first left the Anti-Terrorist Operation Zone in 2015 – I was leaving because I was six months pregnant – my fellow soldiers told me that they would be there for me. I keep in touch only with five people I served with in 2014. The others are gone. After each new death,

I told myself that I would never come to the funeral again, that I had had enough, but I went anyway.

We've had a terrible loss on September 5, when the Minsk agreements had been concluded. We were then at the checkpoint in Shchastia. I was looking at how much equipment was withdrawn after the order, and I couldn't understand what had happened. We were deployed and ordered to take an infantry fighting vehicle and rush to reinforce our guys. Our infantry fighting vehicle did not start, so we were told to go to Metalist and take the vehicle from the Armed Forces. We went there. Metalist was on fire. We arrived in Vesela Hora and asked them to give us a vehicle. While the soldiers from the Armed Forces tried to figure out what to do, our guys were defeated. That was the last time when I was in Metalist and Vesela Hora. Now they are controlled by the militants. Those were our huge losses – about 40 of our guys died back then. I couldn't understand then: how could we leave our positions and retreat – just leave and lose so many people on the last day?

However, my biggest loss that just broke me, was on January 31, 2015. We were near Shchastia at that time. I had a friend, code name "DJ". He really wanted to fight, was very eager to go to ATO, so I took him under my wing. He later told his mother, "Mom, I've found a sister here. Let's take her in; she doesn't have anyone here." He often jokingly told her, "Don't worry, Yulia will take me home if something happens." And I did... On January 31, as a result of a "Grad" shelling, "DJ", another of our fighters and a guy from the 80th brigade died. It was the last straw for me, the worst funeral ever...

You shouldn't bond with people here or it would hurt bad when they're gone... It hurts even more than when your family betrays you. My mother betrayed me, my uncle betrayed me, but it wasn't as painful

as losing a guy I'd only known for a few months... That day I talked to his mother and said we would come on vacation together for a few days... When he died, I had to call his mother... I dialed, and she asked, "Are you coming?" I didn't know how to tell her or what to say... but it turns out that I did fulfill his promise and brought him home.

We keep in touch, but this is a very painful issue for me. I can't talk to her. I can't look her in the eye – I'm ashamed, I believe it's my fault that I didn't save him. She is offended that I do not visit her because everyone knows that her son and I were close friends. Many people thought that we were in a relationship, but this is not true – we were just close friends.

I found out about my pregnancy at his funeral. I got really sick that day. I was hysterical. In addition to that, I suddenly felt sick. I had kidney pain and had to go to the hospital at 2 am. I was screened for kidney disease... and found out I was pregnant.

There is another reason why it is difficult for me to communicate with "DJ's" mother: her son died, we were friends, and when she found out that I was pregnant, she thought that it was his child. It was very difficult for me to explain to her that the father of my daughter was another man. Now she understands this, but it was very difficult for her to accept it because she really wanted to have something to remind her of her son. When I found out that I was expecting a baby, I was shocked: how?! What should I do now? How do I live on? But my daughter was my savior. She showed me that there was life beyond war. However, life is a big word. I'm a stranger here; I don't really have anyone around. I'm just trying to survive.

All my relatives are in Russia. My uncle is a security service officer – it's not a secret. I don't speak to my grandfather, my uncle and my aunt. They treat me like an enemy. I talk to my mother from time

to time. Not often. She didn't support my decision. She doesn't share my views, and we never talk about politics. "Hi! How are you?" – that's all.

After "DJ's" death, my friends took care of me. They said, "Yulia, you're done here. You're going to have a child." I left the war for exactly eighteen months. Then I came back. It was difficult, but friends and volunteers helped me with money. They help a lot. Since the age of 23, I have absolutely nothing. I don't know how to live. I don't have a place to live with my little kid. I have a job, but it's difficult to live on my salary.

The first 11 months I spent here were off the record. I don't have a single document about my service at the "Aidar" battalion. Since I was a foreigner, I could not be officially enlisted. I needed a military ID card to sign the contract. When I decided to return, the law that allowed foreign volunteers to fight was adopted.

First, I served in the "Donbas" battalion. However, I didn't stay long there, only for two months. Then I joined the 58th brigade because, by that time, I started traveling together with Mariia Berlinska and doing aerial reconnaissance, and when I arrived in Avdiivka, I met the brigade commander Zabolotnyi. I remembered him since the battles in Luhansk region. I asked him if I could join his brigade. He joked that I could have done it if I quit smoking.

However, when I decided to transfer, the brigade commander had changed. Still, I was offered a position in that brigade, so I joined the 16th battalion. My rotation in that brigade was in Luhansk region – we replaced the 93rd brigade. I served with them for six months (I had a six-month contract). I was engaged in aerial reconnaissance. I operated a drone and looked at where the enemy was, where their equipment was.

We heard something, we tried to figure out where it's coming from, that sort of thing.

An interesting story happened near Novoluhanske. I almost finished my work. The weather was awful – I couldn't see anything. This fog... I went lower at my own risk, and there they were: laying mines around our positions... Well, of course, we didn't let them finish their work. I reported back to our commander, showed him on the map where it was. They died right there and then.

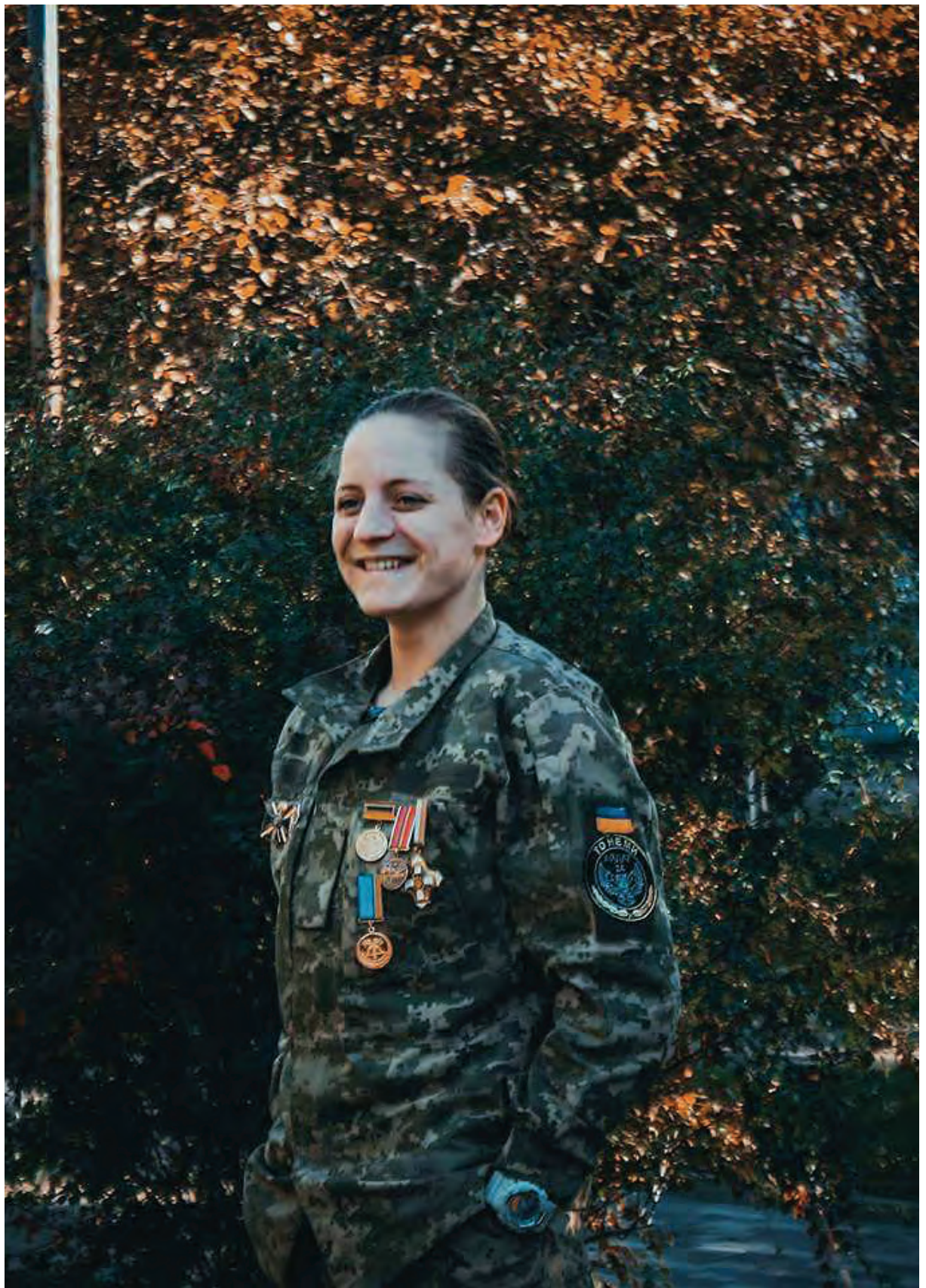
Before leaving the Armed Forces of Ukraine, I had been promoted. Then I decided to take a break. At the time, I thought that would be my last contract. But now I know I'll be back soon. I plan to move to Sievierodonetsk with my daughter and serve in the "Luhansk-1" battalion. Myroslava will be in kindergarten and I'll be working.

I almost mastered my Ukrainian. The funny thing is that I have a lot of Ukrainian friends – from Zaporizhzhia, Rivne – but I don't usually hear them speak Ukrainian. I ask them, "Why? You were born here!" They say that it's easier for them to speak Russian and they got used to it. I read Zhadan's poems and even learned a couple by heart. I need to learn the language. Zhadan inspired me. I learned the language myself, so it's still in progress. My friend from Crimea says that I'd better not speak Ukrainian. I usually ask people to correct my mistakes.

I don't have a citizenship. Yet. It's a long story. My friends tried to help. In 2016, Russia filed a request for my "extradition", because they want to arrest me for "mercenary activity". Ukraine refused. I needed citizenship certificates, so we got them. Then, I needed a certificate of no criminal record. I also had to get a Russian passport for traveling abroad, but I hadn't obtained it because they could detain me at the







consulate. Nothing could stop them if they wanted to. So, it went on and on. And it's still going.

I know that Russians are fighting on the other side. Sometimes I'm thinking, "What if I meet someone I know? Well, I could have met someone I grew up with." Then I'm thinking that if I see someone with a machine gun, I will shoot... I think I'm a Ukrainian now. My home is here. Home is not where you were born, but where you feel at home.





# Iryna Tsvila

“Linza”

THE SICH BATTALION/ THE 4TH  
COMPANY “SICH” OF THE KYIV  
REGIMENT

**L**ike for many people, for me it all started with Maidan. When the war broke down, there was no question I would not stay away. The question was in what exactly will I be doing. I was unfamiliar with military. I had no experience in handling weapons. I didn't see myself as a fighter.

My ex-husband suggested I join a volunteer battalion. I wasn't sure about it: "What am I going to do there? It's going to be ridiculous. No use." I'm used to do everything right. Quality and responsibility. I didn't see myself there. I did have experience in activism, working with people. We shared the same ideas, nationalistic for one. They were all joining this battalion, "Sich". I knew them from Maidan and what came before that, protests and rallies, when we were fighting for our rights together. It wasn't that scary, because I had people who understand and support me. I changed professions a few times in my life and I knew that if I'm doing something with integrity, responsibility, with love, if I'm motivated, I'll be able to learn and get better at anything. So, I decided: if I have a desire, everything is possible.

Of course, I wasn't 100% certain. When we had our first trainings in the Mezhyhirya Residence, I was 50/50. Sometimes I trained and sometimes I watched boys training. We've had tactical trainings, great instructors. Then I started being present more. I started running, exercising, I didn't want to be worse than others. I was ashamed and embarrassed about how I handled weapons, so I was learning privately with instructors. Holding a weapon without shaking. The first times were so stressful. I had to do an exercise at a shooting range and recharge... I was shaking, I was awful and I was embarrassed. Then I got angry with myself and I started working really hard.

I went to Sloviansk in the summer of 2014. Commanders asked us to put on all of the gear, load it up and get the safety on. They said



we're getting closer to the battle and it's dangerous. To tell you the truth, it wasn't particularly dangerous at the time, because Sloviansk was free. They probably said it, so we'd be careful and concentrate. We were quiet as a mouse on the bus. Before that we were talking, joking, singing, giggling, and then we went quiet.

When we got to Sloviansk and I saw my first ruined houses, broken walls, I've got chills. We were there by nightfall. We were stationed at an aviation college. Everything was broken there. Windows



shattered, casings everywhere. Everything was smashed. Pretty depressing and gruesome. I was very scared my first night in ATO zone. I was scared until I saw the first light of the day. Through all of these newspapers on the windows. When the sun got to me, I felt warm and a bit optimistic. Then I realized it wasn't that scary. We patrolled the town. Our first rotation was light, if you could say so, so we could get used to the war, so we adapt. Like a limbo between our peaceful lives and the war.

It was my first rotation. When I got back home, I knew I had to grow, I needed to know and be able to do more. I've already had this feeling how serious it was. It's not a picture, not a movie, this is war. It's real. I saw this road that was full of casings. Echoes of recent fights. I saw burnt pines, fragments of BM-21 "Grads", huge trees fallen due to all of the shelling. They looked like ruined matches. My first experience... When we got closer to Svitlodarsk, I heard shootings, fighting nearby, I heard the war. However, I didn't see it in my first rotation.





My second rotation was in Pisky. We had a base in Kurakhove. I was asking to go there for the longest time. Every time they'd find a way to say no. Now I know they were just trying to protect me. They were caring. Eventually, I got what I wanted. My first time in Pisky... We got to the "Respublika mist" checkpoint, the last border between peaceful life and war. There were a lot of cars with volunteers. We would stop there to put on full gear as we needed to go really fast for 800 meters in order to get to the village. This was a highway to Donetsk. Separatists knew it pretty well. They were trying to shoot us dead. The road was deadly in different ways. It was broken, full of trees, silver poplars. We needed to be very careful as not to drive into them speeding like maniacs. And we were kind of blind, as it was nighttime.

So, we got to "Respublika mist" for the first time and stopped, because we got there in the middle of the fight and the road to Pisky was closed. We heard shots, we saw black smoke, something was burning and tanks were on their way. We've been waiting under the bridge for five hours. I got through a range of emotions

during that time. Fear, uncertainty and a bit of work on my nerves as not to show that I'm scared so much. I didn't want to go back. I wasn't the only girl then and there. Liera Burlakova and Ksiusha Bykova, a volunteer, were also there. They filled me with confidence and I calmed down. I've heard multiple times from fighters of other battalions: "Where are you going, girl? This is war. Get back. Why are you doing this?"

We got to the headquarters, they showed me what's what. Of course, I didn't get to the frontlines right away. At first, no one wanted to take on responsibility, but eventually a brave man was found. He showed me Pisky, showed me everything. It was winter, it was slippery. I remember how I ran through the crossroads under fire for the first time. "Tekhas/Texas", a soldier who was with me, told me: "Irynko\*, you need to run as fast as you can here. They're shooting at us from every angle". He's tall, his steps are big. And I was running behind him like Piglet. It was slippery, scary and difficult to run. They started shooting at us, using something heavy like SPG. I was always afraid to let guys down, to hurt them.

The village was in ruins. Empty, broken, plundered. Street animals everywhere. It was excruciating. Seeing animals like that. They were so thin and miserable. They used to be pets, loved and cared for. Now they're abandoned, hungry, ill and weak... Often our guys would give them food. We even did raids of sorts – feeding animals. We got a lot of them out of Pisky.

There was this beautiful story. We rescued a dog and called her Alisa. She came to our position. She had a word "durak\*" written in paint on her body. She liked getting in a car. Like asking us to take her with. Usually we weren't able to do it, but one time we did. We washed her, we gave her food and we got rid of that paint on her body. We were

walking her and playing with her. I posted about her on Facebook and we found her family from Pisky who came and took her home.

My first twenty days on the frontlines. This was a period before the airport. Pisky was the epicenter of the war. I traded light, warmth and civilization for darkness, cold and a harsh survival mode... I'm going to tell you right away that I was perfectly happy at the time with our guys, helping in any way I could. I was loading up and cleaning weapons, working night shifts on the radio, so people who came back from positions could rest; I was sewing, cleaning and asking volunteers to bring whatever was necessary and was acting as a military reporter. The last one was all me. I wanted to do it. I made videos and pictures, so people would be able to see what was happening from the inside. While cooking borscht under fire, courtesy of BM-21 "Grads", I was mainly worried about a good meal that may be ruined by the blast. Guys who were about to come back from their shift needed it so much.

Everyone's painted in their own colors at war. When you're sleeping, exhausted, walls come crushing on you, mice lurking around, and you're not trying to run away... When you're done with all of your fears, so your comrades don't see them as they worry about you. You don't want to fill their heads with your uncertainty. When you're tired, exhausted, and you're still asking for something to do, so someone else would rest. Someone who's been to places, where death is near the corner... A tiny screw that is a part of a huge mechanism, which brings us closer to the victory. I was happy. I felt needed, equal and relevant.

Talking day-to-day... War is not only about crying. There's plenty of things that would make you laugh. Especially the day-to-day business. I often joke that here you fall asleep with one guy and you wake up with another one. Civilians are confused. And then I'm explaining that I had

a tiny room where only three sleeping bags fit. You fall asleep, soldiers changed shifts, and you wake up with someone else by your side.

Generally, everything was okay. When there was an opportunity for me to have a separate room, boys tried to station me there. Toilet... If there's no doors, you ask someone to guard you. When we were on positions and I had to do my things, I was worried, I didn't want to die with my pants down. Not a heroic death, right? Surely, I'm joking... Yes, a woman has her difficulties at war, but they're manageable.

Wipes are a God's gift! As a person who's used to taking a shower two times a day, oh, I missed it. Sometimes I went eight days without water at all. We only had water for food and occasional tea or coffee. You can even think of such a luxury like washing dishes, your hair or yourself. The price is too high! A beanie would cover my hair (it was pretty bad, I couldn't even take it off when I was alone), and everything else... Wipes were a substitute for a shower. We washed dishes with toilet paper. It was really good. I also had an antiseptic in my pocket. I had lots of things in my pockets.

It's hard to believe how much I loved comfort before the war. I got used to sleeping on camping mats and pile-ups of clothes. I even got friendly with mice. Once a mouse was on me and I was so tired, so in my mind I was asking her not to do something bad and just go. It's okay. When I'm performing my duties, guarding... It's very difficult to just stand for many hours in a bulletproof vest. Everything goes numb... I invented a kind of "bulletproof fitness": I was observing and exercising at the same time. Sometimes I had to use a box of some sort to get to a loophole, because I was too short.

I don't remember my first shot. Apparently, it wasn't memorable enough. In time I get to love weapons. It was nice taking a shot. I hope I did good. There is an enemy on our land. We don't try to take

what's not ours, we stand our ground, we protect what's ours, so I had no doubts. We do great things. We protect our country and our people. No kidding.

I also served with volunteer soldiers in Avdiivka. In the Kyiv Regiment. I've had moments of exhaustion. Psychological and sometimes physical. I chose this path and I had a purpose. I had no intention of letting go. I can go as I please. I'm not in the Armed Forces of Ukraine. I can go whenever I want. It's harder for me in Kyiv, than here.

What was the hardest thing to do? I'm not going to be original. Losing people. You can't get used to this. No matter how long it's been. I guess it's something you can't get used to. Ever. As I said earlier, I take a lot of pictures. For example, I'm taking pictures of someone who can't be photographed. He's from Donetsk. His parents are on the other side. He's against it and I'm saying that these pictures would be a treasure for his parents when we win. They are waiting for his return. They can't see him. That his photographs could be in our history books. I only want to photograph the real ones. I want to be among the real ones. They believe me and I won't betray them. I will be sitting on these pictures until the right time comes.

Some cases make my soul scream in agony. I have photographs, but there's no him. You're sitting here, peeling potatoes and talking, laughing and singing rebel songs. In a while you realize it was the last time you've seen each other, and now you can only see him on the picture in a coffin.

To tell you the truth, this war is the brightest light in my life. It's tragic and bright at the same time. It's tragic as it's full of pain, blood and loss. It's also a fundamental moment for our nation. We can't go on without it. I'm doing this for my daughter. I want



my grandchildren to be born in Ukraine. My daughter supported me, when I joined the battalion. She was worried, but she didn't try to talk me out of it. My mother didn't know. When I was in Pisky, the connection was bad and I told my mom I'm going skiing. Acquaintances told her that they saw me "there", but she didn't believe them. Then I decided to tell her the truth. I was ashamed of lying to her. She accepted it. She didn't exactly support me, but she wasn't angry with me, she was understanding.

I've been thinking about my garden a lot. While I've been here, the cold ruined it as there was no one to look after it. 25 degrees Celsius.

I realize that my roses are dying out... There was a time when I was very passionate about roses. I had a unique collection. England, France, Serbia and other countries. I was determined to get the rarest specimens. It cost a lot of money. I put up a website. I wanted to create the first source about roses in Ukrainian. I can't do this right now. I still have records and pictures. I wanted to create a catalogue with full descriptions of how they like it here. How they grow, get sick, smell and bloom. I might get to that after the war ends...

# **Marharyta Tairian- Tymchenko**

**“Dyka/Wild”**

**THE 46TH ASSAULT BATTALION  
“DONBAS-UKRAINE”**





I picked up a weapon in the summer of 2016. Before that, since 2014, I've been trying to get into some of the volunteer battalions, but when I got injured during a training, I had to postpone joining.

Before the war broke down, I begin my studies. Ivan Franko National University of Lviv, political science. I was a part of Euromaidan since day one. When Russian tanks entered Crimea, I became a reservist. I couldn't wait to get mobilized, when many people would try to hide. Many of my friends were fighting in volunteer battalions. Soldiers of the battalion of "Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists" offered me to go through a training with them. As soon as I was 18 years old, like the next day, I left Lviv for Nizhyn.

I told my mother I was studying. Everything was alright. Until she found out somehow. I think that my landlady got suspicious when she stopped seeing me in the apartment I was renting. She could have called my mom. Mom called me and said: "Tell me the truth. Where are you and what are you planning to do next.". I told her the truth. She should've understood that I just can't do something else. I raised myself to be a patriot. As a high schooler, I was very interested in and inspired by our history of liberation, especially the Ukrainian Insurgent Army struggles and victories. Long before the events in the East I promised myself to fight and be able to die for my country, as did the Ukrainian Insurgent Army fighters. Even against all odds... My mom came to Nizhyn and she wasn't easy on my comrades. That's how my first training ended. On a high note.

In a few months I got back. Once I hurt my knee while running. I still tried to perfect my physical shape. As much as I could. Then I joined the second reserve of UVB "Right sector". Soon someone suggested me to join the first assault company under the command

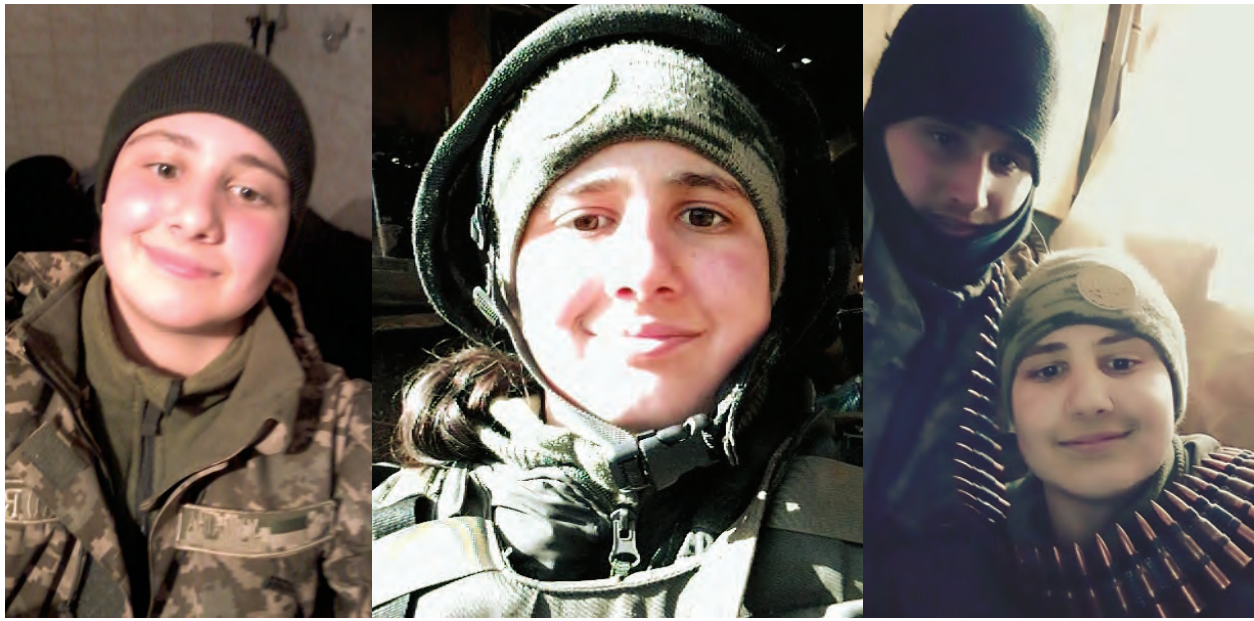
of Oleksandr Karas, “Podolianyn”. I got in touch with him and he told me to come to Bakhmut.

I didn’t have much money, but I was able to come to Bakhmut. I hopped on a train to Kharkiv. I tried to get a ticket to Bakhmut from there, but they had none. I bought one to Sloviansk. I thought I would be able to go from there. I’m pretty familiar with hitchhiking. When I got to Sloviansk, I got into a fight with two local separatists, they were saying that Russia helps them. And I asked them why is it all quiet and calm right now and not when their “helpers” were here? Our soldiers gave me a lift. People were waiting for me on the bus station. I got to the frontlines the next day. I was beyond happy. That’s how I joined the first assault company. Some of the soldiers would sign contracts with the 54th brigade later on.

I got to the position called “Buton”. The atmosphere was incredible. Brotherly, warm. Now, it’s different. You can feel the difference between people who came here to earn some money and people who are mindful of what’s going on, patriotic. I was a medical orderly in the brigade. I tried to be in the trenches most of the time. It wasn’t easy, but I was ready.

When I had already started serving, my friend, my best friend blew up. It was the hardest thing I had to get over. We tried to save him with our other friend, we did what we were supposed to in terms of emergency medicine and he got to a hospital pretty fast. In the morning I was told that he’s gone... Surely, it’ll stay with me forever. You think about that period of time once in a while. You think of something good and regret that there’s nothing you can do to go back...

Fear? I try to compartmentalize. Biology and the instinct of self-preservation, for one. I’m working on it. I’m thinking about the people behind my back in the worst moments. I realize that if something



happens and everyone would turn against me, I won't be alone. The closest people will be here. Ukrainians. And I won't betray them and our land. My mom got used to the fact that I'm here. My comrades witnessed our heated discussion, when my friend "Buhai" had me tell her the truth, that I'm going to sign a contract. Now she's proud of me.

This war is a necessary form of defense for Ukraine. If someone is trying to get to you, you will try to do everything you can in order to fight back. The guilty one is the one who started the whole thing. And there's nothing wrong with defending yourself. It goes for countries as well.

We've had conflicts with the command of the 54th brigade, which ended in us going on a hunger strike in a training area in Bashkyrivka. Then I joined the 46th assault battalion "Donbas-Ukraine". I'm a shooter here. An equal. We live together with guys. Talking day-to-day... I try to change when no one's around or when they're sleeping. Or I could just ask someone to turn around. Personal hygiene is manageable as well. These issues can be easily solved.

I believe that everyone has a place in the army, when it comes to protecting your homeland. If a person, no matter the gender, is willing



to fight an enemy, he or she should be encouraged. It's worse when there's no willingness, no desire. I continue with my studies. I'm passing exams and I'm working on my thesis. My university is more than okay with my service. The faculty and the dean support me. I'm very grateful to them.



A photograph of a snowy forest with bare trees and a blue text overlay. The text is centered in a dark blue rectangle. The background shows a winter scene with snow on the ground and trees, some with bare branches and some with dark trunks.

# Anastasiia Tsebrynska

“Fenix/Phoenix”

“ZOLOTI VOROTA” BATTALION

**W** Why did I decide to go and fight? I knew I wanted to help in any way I could. I was born here. I got a degree here. I saw it as my duty to go and fight for my homeland. To do everything I can. This was the beginning, 2014. It was pretty difficult to get anywhere at that point. I was determined. I was applying to every available division. Finally, I got in. I came across a videoclip about “Zoloti vorota” battalion and I filled in an application. I haven’t heard from them for a while, and then they called me and said: “Come it, we’re waiting for you”. I told my parents right away. I just told them I’m going. Dad was alright. Surely, he was worried, but he didn’t try to persuade me not to go. Mom was crying. She was worried sick; she was against it as I was her daughter. And it was pretty gruesome at the time at the East. Show me a mom who wants her child to go there.

I am a commodity expert by trade, but I wasn’t working at the time. When I joined the battalion, no one told a thing, but they looked at me funny. I don’t know what they were thinking. Maybe they thought I was careless or that I came here to find a boyfriend. Maybe many of them didn’t take me seriously as they didn’t know what to expect. Maybe they thought I won’t be able to handle it. However, they accepted me pretty quickly. We got to know each other and we were on good terms, we were friends.

It was problematic for me to find clothes. Everything was too big. I had my uniform from Maidan. It was kind of my size. Then people started helping. Volunteers. They found me something. Still it wasn’t really my size, but it was okay. My bulletproof vest was made in Zbarazh by Volodymyr Holodnyuk, the father of one of the Heaven’s Hundred Heroes Ustym Holodnyuk. He helped me a lot. And not just me. It was easier with shoes. My size is average, 38. Sometimes I had to wear bigger boots, tighten them up, wear another pair of socks





and I was ready to go. It got easier. To tell you the truth, most of the time I wasn't wearing a vest. I was always reminded to do it, but I was only doing it at the beginning. Then I wasn't, except for the days of heading out.

When we were on our way to Donbas, I was smiling all of the time on the bus. I wasn't scared. I was happy that I'm going there and that I'm going to be useful. I didn't think about the bad stuff. When I got to Shchastia, I realized it wasn't as bad as I thought it would

be. It's a nice name. I liked it there. We were living near the woods. I prepared myself for worse. I thought I'm going to see lots of deaths. Thank God, it was okay, and I didn't lose any of my friends.

I had a room on the base. Guys helped me to clean it up, sealed the windows, just to be safe, and I lived there alone. I started serving. Sometimes I didn't get to go on missions. I was upset, to say the least. I always wanted to go. I always asked to go and when I wasn't allowed, I was pretty upset and angry. I wasn't quiet about it. There was a discrimination, for sure. I realized they wanted to protect me, but I wanted to be an equal to them.

I always liked weapons. Since I was a kid. I was interested in it. I observed. Often, I would think, and my late commander would ask me, if I would kill a man. Of course, I said yes. To be frank, I still have no answer. It depends... if it was a self-defense... I don't know... Luckily, I didn't have to shoot straight at anyone.

We've been under heavy fire. A rifle wouldn't do any good. You try to hide as fast as you can. Shchastia was a flashpoint. Mortars, BM-21 "Grads", tanks, you name it. Ruined buildings. Luckily, we were safe somehow. We were scared, though. Sometimes you're lying and resting, and here it is, bang, bang, bang... And you don't know where it's going to hit. You can hear that it's close, and then it's a bit further. It was terrifying.

Once I came to a checkpoint to change someone. And here we go, super heavy mortar fire. I'm thinking: "Where should I run?" I have like 100 meters to run, so I could hide in a blindage. I squatted near my car and sat there, praying to God: "Oh Lord, save me! Let it go without harming anyone." I was horrified back then. I was worried sick. Soon, I think, I got used to it. And then, when I got back to Kyiv, there was a case, I don't know how much time had passed, I was walking



down the street and suddenly I heard an airplane. At first, I wasn't able to determine where the sound came from and I jumped on the ground immediately.

Shchastia was empty in 2014 and in the beginning of 2015. Locals were hard to find. A couple here and there. You'd rather see a soldier in a shop. People just left. Houses and apartments were ruined.

The hardest thing for me was almost not sleeping at all. It was also hard having a lot of tasks. We were short on people and there was

a lot things to do. Morally and physically draining. A couple days and you're good to go, you get used to it.

How did the guys treat me? Like friends. Yes, sure, sometimes someone would hit on me nicely. Sometimes guys from other divisions would pay attention to me, smile at me. But that's not why I came here. Not for love and not for money. I had a different reason – defending my country. Though, it did happen, I met my husband. We've actually met before our rotation, in Kyiv. We didn't really talk much at the time. We got to talking in Shchastia. We didn't really go on dates. Once we went for a walk in the town. Everyone was worried about me, wanted to go and look for me, even though I said I'm going for a walk. Then he was treating me to yogurt, fruit and such. That's how he was trying to woo me. Or we were just sitting somewhere and talking. He always made sure I ate. Sometimes he was performing duties instead of me, saying: "You're tired, go and have a rest". I was waiting for a proposal here, in ATO zone, but he did it when we got back from Shchastia. We got married and had a daughter. We're happy. We share a lot of memories.

My mom called me a lot. I could tell her anything. My husband was very supportive. I couldn't do it without him. My comrades helped me a lot, they cared for me. They're great people. Fellow-villagers reacted differently. Some said: "Why would you do something like that? Why'd you go there? What for?". Others supported me, were proud of me. There were two of us from our village who joined the battalion. My friend and I. He's dead now, unfortunately. He found out I was going and decided to go as well. We went together. Then he served in Sievierodonetsk and I was stationed in Shchastia. He came back home and had an intracerebral hemorrhage. It's a huge loss for me. He was



a good young man. He wasn't afraid. He decided to go to the frontlines and he did. And then...

I miss my friends from the battalion. I think about those times all of the time. I'm drawn back there. I would go, but I have a little one to take care of. I can't leave my baby. I am more of a brave and reasonable person now. Mom says I've changed a lot, since I got back from the East. Now I see things differently. I love my country even more. I've seen how boys were ready to die for it.

# Diana Vynohradova

“Dana”

“RIGHT SECTOR”



**W**ar doesn't care whether you're a man or a woman. I had the same ammunition as everyone else. I've been here as a part of the 1st assault company of the 5th battalion of the UVB "Right Sector". We were volunteers, and we went to the frontlines immediately after the Russian invasion of our territory. That was our moral standing. Our land. We are going to defend it, guided by the article of the Constitution, which makes every citizen of Ukraine responsible for the integrity of the territory of the state. We went in our own car: my husband, our close friend and I – kind of a family team.

How did that make us feel? Honestly, hateful and angry... I would say, even furious. I wanted to tear everything apart. It was unheard of – how could they come and invade my land? My country, my Ukraine, my motherland... They just attacked us, and Donbas was on fire... I just couldn't accept that.

My husband supported me, and we went together. He knew I wouldn't let him go alone; neither would he let me go alone. I am an athlete. We are both nationalists. Let's just say we're not homebodies. It was clear from the start that we would not sit around and discuss the situation in Ukraine drinking a cup of tea in the evening.

Of course, we weren't really prepared for that. As the war progressed, we were trained during the battles. Thank God that among us were professionally trained members of the "Right Sector" who had previously served in various special branches of the Armed Forces and were willing to share their combat skills. They, in fact, taught us.

In the "Right Sector" no one was sent to the front unprepared. There was a base where we went through certain trainings. Before that, back in school, I went through a basic military training. Both shooting and tactical trainings were at a decent level there, so it wasn't the first time I'd seen and done all that. We were equipped with small arms.



Our task was not only to provide covering fire, but also to conduct mop-up operations. Let's just say those were quite difficult tasks that require endurance. We had to travel a long distance fully equipped...

The war turned out to be less traumatic for us than the Maidan. "Right Sector" was not sponsored by the state. In the beginning, we had no food, no weapons, no bases, no ammunition – nothing. However, we had the experience of the Maidan, insanity and courage, which was the key to our success. When the first battles for Karlivka took place, it seems, in early June, we were equipped only with knives and rubber bullet guns. Now it seems completely absurd, but then that was how we were going to fight. Maybe even not to fight but to act as a form of psychological pressure on the enemy because the separatists on the other side had been ill-trained before the Russian invasion. They had only Moscow supervisors, but for the most part, those militants we encountered had criminal records. It was in their past, future and present. That is, most of them finally got the opportunity to take up arms, rob and kill unpunished and, probably, be rewarded in the end... However, the separatists were ill-trained because the criminal experience would not help them, and they were filled with fear...

We went four or five times to Karlivka. Our task was not to liberate the settlement, but to take weapons from the separatists – we did not have enough weapons, and the military campaigns in Karlivka were rewarding in that regard. That is, several cars of the "Right Sector" with huge red and black flags, the size of a house, entered the settlement. After that, we started shooting chaotically. Of course, the ill-trained separatists dropped their weapons and ran away. We cleaned up, collected our weapons, got in the car and drove away. We did it again and again. Of course, each time new weapons arrived: those who first went with knives returned with small guns, then, the next time, with big

guns. Eventually, we got equipped. That is what gave rise to the legend of the “Right Sector” – that we are fearless and brave. The separatists did not understand what was going on in our heads, why we were running with knives against bullets – it seemed as if we were cyborgs or robots.

It was hard to realize that my husband was out there. He was close and at the same time so far away. I couldn’t control it and couldn’t protect him. At that time, my brother was also fighting (I was near Donetsk, and he was near Luhansk), so it was really tough for me. I couldn’t sleep thinking of only one thing: how those dummies were doing. I couldn’t reach them and didn’t know if they were fine, so I was worried sick. That was probably the most difficult part. I think that gave me more than a dozen gray hairs, not the separatists or mortars. Thank God, they both are fine.

We defended Pisky, the rear of the airport. We stayed there in the summer and the autumn of 2014. The separatists started the assault in July, and I stayed there until November 19th. In fact, those were the best moments of my life. It’s addictive. Once you tried it, it’s almost impossible to stop – you always want more adrenaline, emotions. Probably the most valuable impression I, as an artist, get from the war is how you feel life.

The feeling that you are alive is so strong... Like in the moments when you realize that you are going to die. There were many moments when we thought that was the end... That’s when you start to appreciate simple things: the beautiful sun, the incredible sky, no matter it’s raining or not; you admire ants on the ground; you admire everything because you’re going to say goodbye to the world, and it becomes so wonderful, so bright... You’re feeling every minute as your last and you’re trying to do everything you want to do. You put aside your problems and insecurities. You don’t put things off for later, for tomorrow, because



tomorrow may never come. If you want to say something, you just say it. In fact, it was great. It was tough. I can't say that it was easy, but for me, as an artist, it was a time full of inspiration and life. That can only happen when death is near. I think a lot of people, coming back home, can feel depressed because their feelings are not running high in peaceful life. Things seem to be ordinary, mundane, not epic at all.

I graduated from school, where I studied to be an instructor. Then I got a degree in design. I wrote a lot of poems and songs for a band called “Sokyra Peruna”. Many songs were created in the Anti-Terrorist Operation Zone. I typed the poems on my phone while I was in the position. I also drew sketches. I did sketches for 24 paintings. I finished them outside the war zone, and that exhibition – called “Restless Ukraine” (“Буремна Україна”, if you want to look for it) – traveled around the country. I’m still working on some of the sketches from that time.

Upon my return, I have published a collection of poems called “The Voice of Blood. Frontline poems”. They were written during the war. There is a funny one called “War Through Woman’s Eyes”. In fact, my biggest personal fear is... I think I talked about it in one of the interviews... My worst fear was that I was killed, brought to the morgue, and my hair wasn’t dyed, my nails were unattended, legs were unshaven, and the pathologist said, “Ugh, damn, she’s from the “Right Sector” on top of that... Look at that scum.” That fear made me look neat because I could be killed at any moment. The second fear was going to the toilet. I was concerned about the aesthetics... what if a shell hit the toilet when I was there... Please, don’t. As for hygiene... I cut my hair short, so it’s easier for me. Sometimes, I could do with 1.5 liters of water to “take a shower” and wash my hair. We made holes in a bottle and used it as a shower. Women’s hygiene was just like that. In my team, there were only boys, so everyone tried to help me.

It was physically hard for me, because the autumn was very cold. In Pisky, the humidity was over the charts. We didn’t have a heating system. Our blindages weren’t fully equipped at the time, and it was very cold. My lips were chapped and my kidneys were freezing here. Yes, that’s right, it was that cold. So, when I got to the hospital, the first thing

that made me happy was that it was warm there. I was shell-shocked – it happened on November 19th, 2014. A 120-millimeter mine hit. I was on a mission. And I was lucky. A wall took a big hit and all of the fragments. I still feel the effects of the injury. For me, exercising is the best rehabilitation.

I want to tell you a terrible story about Vadyk. It traumatized me so much that I actually developed a post-traumatic stress disorder, not because the war affected me so much, but because of what happened with Vadyk, my husband, code name “Zirvanyi”. It was the summer of 2014, mid-July. Vadyk was near Ilovaisk (the first battles for Ilovaisk), and I was in Pisky. We tried not to cross paths with him in combat because it is really tough emotionally: instead of destroying the enemies, you worry about your loved one. Two months before, we arranged with the members of “Azov” battalion that I would read my poems at their concert. They were going to hold a charity concert, “The Black Sun” (“Чорне Сонце”, if you want to look for it), in Kyiv. I didn’t know then that in two months, I’d be at the frontlines. I promised to do it, so I decided to go. The trip was planned only for a day. We left Pisky and headed for the base. We were going to grab some things, go to Kyiv, stay there for a day and then come back.

Well, that didn’t go as planned. There was a full bus of those who also needed to go to Kyiv. By the way, a big advantage of serving as a member of the “Right Sector” is that all our rotations are voluntary, meaning that everyone can fight and leave to spend time with their family whenever they like. I’m exaggerating a bit, of course. That is, any of us can say: “Sorry, guys, I’ve had enough. Two weeks of battles are alright. I’m tired and I need some rest.” Then we can go home, have a barbecue, lie on the couch, relax, then realize that we need to go back,



pack up our things and, full of energy, rush to the front. That is, we can replace each other... So, we don't burn out, don't get tired.

Everyone has their own reserve of energy. Someone burns like a firecracker, that is, brightly, loudly, but goes out quickly, and someone is like a candle – burns slowly. People are different, and everyone knows when it's better for them to go somewhere to relax and forget, to travel far away in order to forget everything that happened yesterday. They will come back full of enthusiasm, and everything will be fine. So, we were there on the bus: someone was taking a vacation, someone had things to do...

We had passed Dnipro and were heading in the direction of Pyriatyn when my phone rang. Our chaplain, Father Petro, called and said: "I am very sorry that I have to tell you this, but Vadym "Zirvani" has not returned from the battle near Ilovaisk." Of course, there were unpleasant words addressed to him, and I hung up. When I found out that this information was not accurate, that there was no body, I said: "There is no body, so there is nothing to talk about." But my blood ran cold. At that moment, I really had a shock. I don't really remember what was happening next. It was blurry.

When I was on the phone, the guys turned off the music, and everyone fell silent because it could have been the command calling to tell something important. So, they were quiet and heard almost everything. The bus stopped, and we got out, smoked for a long time. They tried to support me but... These kinds of situations are quite uncomfortable. When someone dies, you don't know what to say: "Don't worry" or "Take it easy", or "Everything will be fine." Nothing works at the moment.

At the time, I was planning my revenge. I didn't shed a tear. I was so shocked that all my thoughts were about what I had

to do to make my revenge bright and memorable. I was planning on doing terrible things. I called our sapper and asked him to make me a suicide bomber's belt because he once joked that he would do it for me if I needed one. So, I told him: "I'll come to pick it up tomorrow." He later said: "I was in shock, tears rolling down my cheeks. I was in the process of it all because it was for you, and I knew if I refused, you'd ask someone else... and they could only make it worse."

I was thinking of buying a used bike and some sort of workout clothes (velvet or velour, with rhinestones, because it was fashionable in Donbas; everyone had one) upon returning to Kyiv. Then I would go to Donetsk, to the motel where their equipment was located. I thought that if they had stopped me at a checkpoint, then, of course, the whole checkpoint would have blown up, but if I was lucky enough to pass further, then the motel would have exploded, and there would be even more victims and more equipment destroyed. Those were the thoughts that had been racing through my mind for two and a half hours. I couldn't think about anything else. I tried not to think about Vadyk at all. The only thing that was going through my head was that I would take the lives of hundreds, thousands to avenge my husband.

Two and a half hours later, the phone rang. My beloved was calling. I thought the separatists were about to torture me. At the time, it was their thing. Some of them did it for fun, while others wanted to sell a body; they have different scenarios. I thought: "I'll answer the call." I picked up the phone and heard him: "Sweetheart, I'm alive. We retreated. We were moving discreetly." It turns out that they were going around; their truck and a tank were blown up. This is quite a story for me...

The most dangerous thing here is when you get used to it, when you get used to the danger. Of course, people can adapt, and it's good.



But when you stop being afraid... When I started to feel something like that, I took Vadym, when I knew he felt the same way, and we went to Odesa, to our friends, to the sea, or we'd take a vacation to the Carpathians. We just stopped by at home to pick up some things and hopped on a train, on a bus, on a plane, it doesn't matter. I just knew that we needed to stop and get away from it all. Under no conditions should you stay at the frontlines. Pretty much everyone I knew from the UVB who ignored it, had died.

I don't even know how to explain it. You lose vigilance and a sense of fear and you think of yourself as an immortal. You don't hide, you stop taking care of yourself, you think you're invincible. As a rule, from that moment on, it's just a matter of time. It's very unfortunate, and it killed many of our talented fighters, which is a great loss for the Ukrainian nation.

I'm not talking about genes, I'm talking about the activities these people engaged in, their charisma, intelligence and loyalty to Ukraine. If they had been alive, I think they would have done a lot of great things. Unfortunately, they're gone. Orest Koziubchuk, Semen, Sieva and many other have died because of that... Although, one of the guys, code name "Sievier" knew all along that he would not return from the war. He wrote poems about it. "Sievier" was a clever young man. He was eighteen or nineteen when he died.

I hadn't returned from the front all at once. Like a drug addict in rehab, I, at first, started driving home from time to time. The first reason was my wedding. My husband and I had been together for eight years, but weren't married. The war made adjustments, so we decided to get married for practical reasons. When you're not married, you won't be able to take the body of your loved one if something happens,

or you won't be allowed to visit them in a hospital. This is a bureaucratic thing and we decided to deal with it.

On November 19th, 2014, I was wounded. As I said before, I was shell-shocked. And on the 22nd, we were going to get married. I slept at the base for a couple of days, and on the 21st I left for my wedding. We got married and had a small celebration with our friends. It was our first vacation, just for a few days.

I don't have any award. I don't think I deserve them. I didn't do anything heroic to be rewarded for, I think.

Some people are bitter when they talk about ATO veterans. To be honest, many unpleasant things are happening now. There are a lot of "myths" about ATO veterans, like we're lunatics. They say that people who went through terrible things got used to killing... But I am grateful that I made friends with so many people, who are brave and kind, and with whom I probably would not have met outside the war zone.



## Подруга «Дана» / Your friend Dana

**ПРИСВЯТА ГРУПІ «БАРСА» ДУК ПС /  
DEDICATED TO «BARSA» TEAM, UVB «RIGHT SECTOR»\***

Холодні черги автоматні стрекотали,  
Сухий їх голос наполохав ніч,  
І крок за кроком тихо підступали  
Солдати України пліч-о-пліч.

Село порожнє пусткою зустріло  
І зграєю худих безхозних псів.  
Аж раптом небо лунко засвистіло  
І ніч наповнилася сотнями вогнів.

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\* It is best read as a sequence of connected lyric moments depicting experiences of soldiers from A to Z (figuratively speaking), ending with hope and love. It starts with soldiers coming into a village, being shot at with heavy weapons, feeling helpless and brave at the same time; everything's on fire, a soldier's trying to get through, feeling tired, exhausted, he keeps doing his job, getting injured, getting shot, thinking about having a rest, but no, he's saved by a comrade, smelling medicine and seeing his beautiful fiancée. You're not alone. You're loved. The message is clear.

Додолу впав, і зрадницька «зеленка» не рятує.  
Затиснув серце у лещата тихий жах.  
Полями смерть у соняхах крокує  
І залиша розтяжки у житах.

Ні з чим не сплутаєш той грім в нічному небі,  
Коли на землю впав палючий град.  
Усі разом і кожен сам за себе.  
Регоче десь ворожий автомат.

Пекельний жар у гумових годинах бою,  
Горить повітря і розорана рілля,  
Палає техніка, ти борешся з собою,  
Щоб кинутись у бій крізь полум'я.

Котрась доба, непевні сни в окопах,  
І крає тишу твій суворий кулемет.  
Болить спина, печуть від втоми стопи...  
Ти вперто заряджаєш кілька лент.

Смердять огидно трупи, снайпер валить,  
А ти стріляєш, аж в руках гуде.  
Вогонь із мінометів небо смалить,  
А ти сі дивиш, де воно впаде.

Пилюка і гранат уламки ріжуть тіло,  
Впинаються у плоть, немов голки.  
Воронки мінометні, мов могили,  
Роззявили свої криві роти.

Заклинив кулемет, панічно смикаєш за ленту,  
За кришку і затвор, але вже ні –  
Шалена куля снайперським презентом  
Нежданно опинилась у тобі.

Упав солдат, у мороці безвітрянім втопився.  
Він воював за себе і за нас.

О боги праві, як же він втомився!  
Але спочити не прийшов ще його час.

Як пахне бинт! Як пахнуть йод і ліки!  
Білизна чиста та хрустка і біле світло...  
Він не «двохсотий» і, на щастя, не каліка.  
Кохана дівчина всміхається привітно.

Тебе на плечах виніс побратим,  
І наречена біля коєчки чекає.  
Запам'ятай, солдат: ти не один,  
Тебе діждуться і тебе кохають.

## ТУМАН / FOG\*

у білім мороці туману, в клубках тягучих, як кисіль,  
повзуть нечутно в клаптях рваних полки ворожі звідусіль.  
в густих зрадливих білих плямах, в примарних абрисах руїн  
крадеться зло до нас полями, і чути їх крізь тиші дзвін.

земля здригнулась, застогнала, повітря різане свистить.  
і сяє каламутний спалах, додолу, адже є лиш мить!  
вдивляються в напрузі очі у тебе біле молоко  
але не можуть, чи не хочуть, прозріти крізь вологе тло.

розкати грому артилерій затіяли свій бадмінтон  
а бляклі вогники їх серій нагадують жахливий сон.  
а раптом кроки їх і звуки, ну ось і лізуть вороги,  
та звичний рух здійснюють руки, ідуть у бій штурмовики.

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\* This poem will get you through intensity, uncertainty, resilience and all of the other "perks" of war. It's graphic and poetic, for lack of a better word. The poet doesn't shy away from saying what's intended and is doing it in a sublime way, using rhythm and rhyme as perfect partners. It's beautiful, eerie and masterfully written.

весь зір на слух перетворився, затвор і черга в біле тло  
москалю, ти вже помолився? Сьогодні здохнеш все одно.  
а черга чергу заміняє, невтомно лупиш у імлу.  
ворожі крики, хтось конає, то ворог падає в труну.

навколо бійня не вщухає, тут ти когось або тебе  
не бачиш, але точно знаєш, з якого боку зло іде.  
в кривавім киселі повітря солоний присмак ворогів –  
так пахне перемоги вітер, або невдалий їх прорив.

у білім мороці туману, в клубах тягучих, як кисіль,  
лежать нечутно в клаптях рваних полки ворожі звідусіль.  
в густих зрадливих білих плямах, в примарних абрисах руїн  
здихає ворог в тяжких ранах, а тиша знов бринить, мов дзвін.

## ВІЙНА ЖІНОЧИМИ ОЧИМА / WAR THROUGH WOMEN'S EYES\*

Головне – не забути постригтися і забацати манікюр,  
Депіляцію чи поголитися, одягнути білизну «ажур».

Щоб не терли незручні стринги й не висіли великі труси,  
Щоб не пріли тендітні ноги і не тиснули пояси.

Щоб пом'якшить обвітрені губи, не забуду помадку взяти.  
Покладу у підсумок пластир – заліпити натерті п'яти.

Іще купу дрібничок різних по кишнях собі розпихаю,  
Хай гранатам живеться тісно, та дрібнички з собою маю.

.....

\* The poem celebrates womanhood. It's honest. A woman is always a woman. Whatever the circumstances. And it's okay. It's okay to look good and feel good, and swear and fight. Each and every one of us, people, is not just this one thing. We've got so much. We are versatile. We're different. We're strong and kind. We're protectors and teachers. We're medics and cooks. We're whoever we want to be. Women and men.

Щоб до форми все гарно личило і одягнена була зі смаком.  
Чи поранена, чи покалічена, бруд під нігтями сховаю за лаком.

Непритомна я буду й поранена, у крові я, роздягнена й боса я,  
Але ноги ж бо будуть поголені, і не соромно їхати в госпіталь.

Позбирають розірване тіло, якщо я раптом буду «двухсота»,  
А воно буде чисте й надухане, і не тхне із мертвого рота.

Привезуть труп солдата-дівчини в гарній формі й білизні ажурній –  
Санітари всміхнуться ввічливо й паталогоанатом діжурний.

І подумають: «Що за дівчинка! Що за милеє личко й фігурочка!»  
І лежатиму там героїчна я, акуратна, вродлива і дурочка.

Хоч солдат я, та статі жіночої, і жіноча у мене врода,  
На війні бути гарною хочу я, у боях, за любої погоди.

Не хизуюсь я і не зваблюю, я воюю, я лаюся матом,  
Та завжди залишаюсь бабою, навіть в формі й із автоматом.



# Halyna Yevko

**THE 13TH BATTALION OF THE 58TH  
INDEPENDENT MOTORIZED INFANTRY  
BRIGADE**



I've dreamt of joining the military since the 9th grade. Despite my dreams I became a train attendant and I've been working the line "Lviv-Simferopol" for 4 years. This dream of mine came true when I got married. My husband is in the military. 20 years and counting. My father was a military man as well.

I had two reasons for joining the army. First, I wanted to help, I wanted to do something for our victory. Second, I wanted to be close to my husband. At the beginning he wasn't exactly supportive of my decision. At all. He tried his best to persuade me not to go. We couldn't come to an agreement, we fought hard, I asked him to take me with him, I cried all of the time. I missed him a lot. And he was worried sick about me, he was afraid I won't be able to do it. Then he yielded and became brave in a different kind of way. Now it's totally different. He supports me and he is proud of me.

At first, I was offered a position of communications liaison. I went to study in Poltava. I didn't know what an automatic rifle was and how to use it, how it was made and how could I make friends with it. I studied hard and I was successful in my studies. I started serving. Soon I realized it's not what I wanted to do. I wanted to fight, so I started asking about transferring.

I got to the frontlines as a shooter. Now I'm a division commander. I had to study, for sure. At the 169th training centre, this time. I became a junior sergeant. Now I work with an anti-aircraft vehicle. I tried it at first. I was good at it. I liked it. That's how I found my place here.

I learned a lot from my husband. He had three rotations here before me. Everyone in the division was good to me. It was a warm welcome. We didn't have men and women here. We've had soldiers.



Yea, they didn't want me to carry anything heavy, but when I needed to go on a mission, no questions.

When I got to a blindage for the first time in the summer of 2017, it was a bit scary, I didn't know back then what's what. I was pretty afraid my first day. The next day I had to pull myself together and I did. At first, I lived near my husband, later he had other positioning, but we were able to meet from time to time. It was near Novotyshkivske village, Luhansk oblast. We spent there 10 months.

My first experience of being shot at was with guns and grenade launchers. We spent some time in the trenches, we waited and we hit them back. I can't say they were hitting us bad, but sometimes, yeah. We observed and we saw an enemy or they started shooting, we'd report back. If we had an order, we would hit them back. Later, when I joined the other division, it was worse. 82-millimetre calibre mortars were doing their magic. Also, guns and rifles, of course. They didn't have a system,



they were shooting at us at random, when they felt like it. Even at night. They were provoking us constantly.

My first fight happened when we were guarding our post at night. I saw the light. I was looking through a night-vision device and I saw something's walking. And it was too high for an animal. We told our commander and we had an order to shoot. And I started shooting with a light machine gun. I don't know whether I hit the target or not. Emotions... adrenalin, probably. It was unusual. And when I first used an anti-aircraft vehicle, we had a pretty bad day. So, yeah, when I was working our enemies I was laughing. A bit hysterically. Then I was out a bit... When I was working, I was calm and concentrated. I did what I was taught to do.

As for me, when you go down that road, you have to believe in your commander, his or her decisions, orders, you need to be confident about him or her. Then it will be alright. If you don't,



you better change divisions. Our battalion is like a family. We know a lot about each other, seems like everything, who's best at what, who can and can't do certain things. It's imperative for someone to be around. At the post and during the fight. You trust them. You know they won't freeze if something happens. They won't let you down.

Our division came back for rotations with no losses. It was the hardest for me to stay away from home for 10 months. Certain day-to-day things. I just don't pay attention. I knew where I was going and why. To protect my country and to be with my husband. I knew it wasn't going to be a hotel. Food was alright. Water was alright. We had a nice blindage, boys were alright, made a shower. As for everything

else, it was as it was supposed to be. You could have a rest and read, for example, when you tended to your weapon.

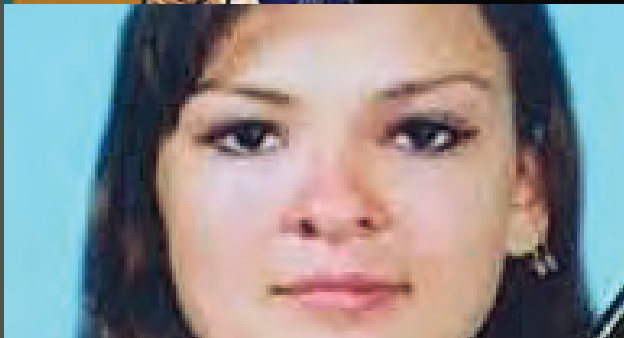
We didn't speak with locals too much in Novotyshkivske. In a shop, when we needed to buy something, maybe. I'm from Lviv region, I speak Ukrainian. At first, they weren't particularly good to me. Then they were okay. They got used to the fact, probably, I don't know. No aggression, no support. I only heard once that one woman said that her son-in-law is fighting for the other side and shooting at us. The village wasn't too damaged. When we were there for the first time, it was kind of quiet. They have a kindergarten, a school, shops, a post office. They're alright.

When I joined the army, I realized that I have no girlfriends. Some women were envious of me because of my pay. My family is ambiguous about me serving. Mom cries and worries all of the time. At first, she didn't know where I was. I told her I was serving far away and then I accidentally told her the truth. We had a big fight. We didn't talk for a while. I had to say that I've been to the frontlines and now I'm back to the rear and I can't even hear the shots. My uncles just can't understand: "Why? Why would you do that?" I see myself and my future in the army. I like this job and my husband is still serving as well.

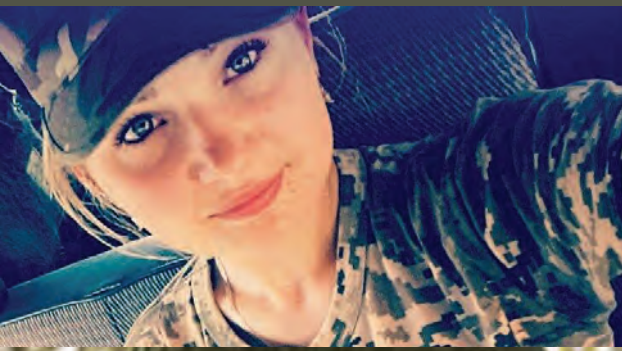
**Heroes  
don't die...**

**S**ince the beginning of hostilities in eastern Ukraine, three women have been killed. The same number of victims is attributed to non-combat losses among female military personnel.

On August 16th, 2015, Kateryna Noskova (code name “Ket”), a servicewoman of the 17th motorized infantry battalion of the 57th motorized brigade of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, was killed in Donetsk region. She served as a communications liaison. Before the war, Kateryna worked at the post office, though she dreamed of joining the army since she was a kid. The woman was eager to go to the frontlines since the beginning. Her 4-year-old son Tymofii, her mother and her beloved were what was stopping her. After Kateryna’s fiancĭ , Liubomyr, was mobilized, she knew it was time. She wanted to serve with him, but ended up in another unit, the 57th brigade of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. Kateryna Noskova came to the Anti-Terrorist Operation Zone in February 2015 and served in the village of Zaitseve, near occupied Horlivka. Her fellow soldiers say that she didn’t want to serve in the headquarters, in the rear, and always asked to go to the frontlines. She was disciplined and was planning to further her studies and continue serving in the army. During a vacation, Kateryna and her fiancĭ got married. On the eve of the tragedy, she asked to go to the frontlines. During the shelling, trying to save a wounded man, she ran out of hiding, and at the very moment, a mine exploded in front of her. She was buried in a closed casket. She was only 26 years old. Posthumously, Kateryna Noskova was







awarded the State Order for Courage and the Non-State Order of the People's Hero of Ukraine. Both were given to her son Tymofii.

Another woman who gave her life for Ukraine during the war was a medic, Nataliia Khoruzha. She was killed at the Svitlodarsk Arc, not far from the village of Luhanske. As a nurse, in the summer of 2016, she volunteered, joined the army and served as a medical instructor in the company of the 54th mechanized brigade of the Ukrainian Ground Forces. On February 2nd, 2017, during another escalation of the situation at the Svitlodarsk Arc, Nataliia was rescuing our wounded and an anti-tank guided missile of the militants hit her medical vehicle. She was buried in Dnipropetrovsk region, in the village of Prosiana, where she lived with her husband and their daughter. Nataliia Khoruzha was posthumously awarded the Order for Courage.

On February 20th, 2018, the whole country was shocked by the death of Sabina Halytska, a nurse of the 10th mountain assault brigade. She died the same way Nataliia Khoruzha did. An armored reconnaissance vehicle was hit by an anti-tank guided missile when Sabina and her colleagues were heading for the village of Katerynivka (Luhansk region). Two soldiers were shell-shocked, one soldier was seriously injured, and Sabina died instantly. On that day, she was delivering medicine to the residents of liberated Katerynivka and was planning on helping the elderly.

Sabina Halytska graduated from Novohrad-Volynskyi Medical College. After graduation, she worked at a children's hospital. She joined the army in 2016. Her first rotation was in Mariinka, near occupied Donetsk. Nataliia Nohaichuk, another medic in the brigade, recalls that Sabina was eager to help and was upset when she didn't go to the frontlines. She didn't have a code name, but her fellow soldiers called her "beauty". Her murder didn't go unseen. U.S. State Department

spokesperson Heather Nauert condemned Russia's actions, saying: "This incident reminds us that the conflict in eastern Ukraine continues. Civilians and medics are facing grave danger every day." Posthumously, Sabina Halytska was awarded the Order for Courage.

Anastasiia Horbachova (code name "Lisa/Fox"), a soldier of UVB "Right sector", should be mentioned here. Despite her congenital heart disease, Anastasiia was an athlete. When the Russian aggression began, she went to the East as a paramedic and a shooter. Her fellow soldiers recall her as fearless. She was able to go on long trips in full gear and was good at avoiding mines and tripwires during reconnaissance. Olena Bilozerska, a sniper and a friend of the deceased, remembering her friend:

"She wore a fox tail on the back of her helmet. Once that tail saved lives. Our reconnaissance team was coming back to the base, and the soldiers of the Armed Forces had to pick them up. Apart from that, two members of the "Right Sector" one of whom was Lisa, got in a car, a BMW. The BMW driver messed up bad. They were close to dying due to the friendly fire. A team leader almost blew up the BMW with a grenade launcher. In a split second before the shot, he saw that one of the fighters was wearing a red tail on the helmet... "Lisa/Fox" was shell-shocked twice. The first time was in Vodiane, in autumn, when we were shelled by BM-21 "Grads" and the second time was near the Donetsk airport, in winter, during an attack on our base. I was thrown out by the explosion. Torn ligaments. "Lisa/Fox" had broken ribs and was shell-shocked.

Anastasiia didn't have a particularly happy childhood. Her father died when she was just a kid. They lived in poverty. The kids were sent away. Their mother only took them home on weekends. Anastasiia worked as an orderly and as a retail clerk. Later on, she also cared for

her very ill mother. Shortly before the war, her mother died. Anastasiia was devastated. If it wasn't for that, she said, she wouldn't have gone to war, probably."

On the front lines, Anastasiia found love and was expecting. The first months of her pregnancy "Lisa/Fox" she spent doing reconnaissance. On August 6th, 2015 "Lisa/Fox", seven months pregnant, died under suspicious circumstances in Mariupol (Donetsk region) from a gunshot wound. She was buried in a special place in the central cemetery in Chernivtsi. Posthumously, she was awarded the medal "For the Glory of Chernivtsi".



# **A woman of war**

**W**omen were in the war zone since the very beginning. As communications liaisons, medics, volunteers, journalists and soldiers. However, despite their motivation and willingness, the path to the front lines was extremely difficult for most of the women who decided to become warriors. During 2014-2015, almost all of them had to fight for their right to fight equally with men and to prove that women can be full-fledged soldiers. Volunteer battalions, including “Donbas”, “Aidar”, “The Ukrainian Volunteer Army”, “Right Sector”, “Zoloti Vorota” and “Sich” were a bit better. Women could hold combat positions or perform several duties at the same time (women from volunteer battalions mentioned that they often had to deal with paperwork and go into battles). A large number of women joined the medical battalion “Hospitaliers” (July 6, 2014, is the official day of battalion creation), founded by 18-year-old (at that time) Yana Zinkevych.

The situation in the Armed Forces of Ukraine was much more complicated. From the military commissariats, where women were rejected, (except for the rear positions and medics) to the official registration. As of 2014, positions in the divisions were distributed in accordance with the order No. 337. Women had the right to serve as artists, archivists, postal workers, hairdressers, paramedics, clerks, pest control specialists, radio and telephone operators, codebreakers, cooks, seamstresses, etc. Thus, formally, the role of women in the army was limited to the service personnel. In the first years of this war, not only combat positions were unavailable to women, but some



of the “peaceful” ones as well. A woman couldn’t be a photographer, a translator or a head of supplies. Discrimination at its best. Most women who were de facto grenade launchers, snipers, intelligence agents, had to apply for “permitted” positions like seamstresses, archivists or telephone operators. No career, no benefits, no nothing.

Mariia Berlinska, an activist, a volunteer and an air intelligence officer, have brought about important changes in the legal system for women in the Ukrainian army with her Invisible Battalion, which is a Ukrainian advocacy campaign, a sociological research group, and a civil rights project for gender equality in the Armed Forces of Ukraine. They did a sociological study that comprehensively covered the real situation in the Ukrainian army (T. Martseniuk, A. Kvit, M. Berlinska and H. Hrytsenko are the authors and researchers). It addressed the rights of women in the military, living conditions, security problems,





stereotypes and harassment that women face during their service. Then there were round tables, negotiations, meetings, a huge campaign aimed at officials and society at the same time.

On January 21st, 2016, women marched from the main train station in Kyiv to the Ministry of Defense of Ukraine. They were wearing aprons and carrying pots, colanders and other kitchen utensils. This march was a response to the order of Lieutenant-General S. Naiev, dated December 5, 2015, on the temporary stop to recruiting women for service (it was later revoked). This action was supported by Lviv activists, who, on February 5th, 2016, came to Lviv Regional State Administration with a demand to ensure gender quality in the army.

In 2016, changes to the legislation were made. It allowed women to officially serve as shooters, snipers, tankers, mortar gunners etc. However, it wasn't a complete elimination of gender discrimination in the

army. After all, only women under the age of 40 (and men under the age of 60) had the right to serve. A number of degrees remained unavailable to women. In particular, they weren't allowed to study at the military academies.

Another positive step towards equality was the adoption of the Law No. 6109 by the Verkhovna Rada on September 6th, 2018, which significantly expanded the rights of women in the army. In particular, from now on men and women have the same age limit, the restrictions for women reservists were lifted, the principles of assigning duties were unified and gender equality was adapted into military training.

As of October 2015, the Ministry of Defense reported 938 women participating in the Anti-Terrorist Operation (while actually there were 14.5 thousand female military personnel among the ranks in the Armed Forces of Ukraine). As of 2016, more than 49 thousand women served in the Armed Forces of Ukraine and roughly 2 thousand of them participated in the ATO. According to the Ministry of Defense, as of December 1st, 2017, 55 thousand women served in the Ukrainian army (22% of the personnel of the Armed Forces of Ukraine), 3,100 officers, 15,300 soldiers and 31,000 civilian personnel; 10,009 women participated in the ATO. However, some female veterans still don't have IDs. We're talking about women from volunteer battalions. "Right Sector", for example.

By now, The Ukrainian Women Veterans' Movement was founded in Ukraine. On July 28-29th, 2018, the first gathering of female veterans took place in Irpin, Kyiv region. The same year, a project called "Mandry veteranok" (eng. Female veterans traveling around the world), which was created for rehabilitation purposes and for our girls to see a bit of the world, was launched. L. Vasylenko, the editor of "Mandry" magazine, A. Susak and M. Berlinska, veterans, are responsible for it. A number

of stories and projects were created to acknowledge women of war, like “W in W (women in war)”, “Invisible Battalion” and “No visible signs” (directed by Alina Horlova), talking about rehabilitation, healing and going back to life as a civilian of Oksana Yakubova.

## NOTES

**BM-21 “GRAD”** is a Soviet truck-mounted 122 mm multiple rocket launcher. Operational range is 5–40 kms.

**“RAPIRA”** look for MT-12.

**THE BM-27 URAGAN** is a self-propelled 220 mm multiple rocket launcher system. Operational range is 8–35,8 kms.

**THE NSV ALSO KNOWN AS THE “UTYOS”** is a 12.7mm caliber heavy machine gun of Soviet origin. The NSV has an effective range from 1,500 m to 2,000 m.

**THE 9K111 FAGOT** is a second-generation tube-launched SACLOS wire-guided anti-tank missile system for use from ground or vehicle mounts. Operational range is 2 kms.

**THE M1943 MORTAR** is a Soviet 120-millimeter caliber smoothbore mortar first introduced in 1943 as a modified version of the M1938 mortar. Operational range is up to 5.7 kms.

**CARGO 200** is a military code word referring to the transportation of fallen soldiers. It came into use in the mid-1980s during the Soviet–Afghan War.

**CARGO 300** is a military code word referring to the transportation of injured soldiers. It came into use in the mid-1980s during the Soviet–Afghan War.

**AVTOMAT KALASHNIKOVA** is a gas-operated, 7.62×39mm assault rifle developed in the Soviet Union by Mikhail Kalashnikov in 1949. AK-47 (7.62 mm) and AK-74 (5.45 mm) are the most popular ones.

**THE AGS-17 PLAMYA** is a Soviet-designed automatic grenade launcher in service worldwide. It's been here since 1971. Operational range is 1.7 kms.

**AK-74M** is a modern version of an assault rifle (5.45 mm). It's been used in Russia since 1993.

**THE WAR IN DONBASS** is an armed conflict in the Donbass region of Ukraine, part of the Ukrainian crisis and the broader Russo-Ukrainian War. From the beginning of March 2014, in the aftermath of the 2014 Ukrainian revolution and the Euromaidan movement, protests by Russia-backed anti-government separatist groups took place in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine, collectively called the "Donbas". Ukraine launched a military counter-offensive against pro-Russian forces in April 2014, called the "Anti-Terrorist Operation" (ATO) from 2014 until 2018, when it was renamed the "Joint Forces Operation" (JFO).

**A BATTALION** is a military unit. Typically, a battalion consists of up to 800 soldiers and is divided into a number of companies.

**AN UNMANNED AERIAL VEHICLE (UAV)** is an aircraft without a human pilot on board and a type of unmanned vehicle.

**AMMO** is the material fired, scattered, dropped or detonated from any weapon.

**A BLINDAGE** is a large deep dugout often with bunks and other fittings and a screen made of timber and earth, used to protect soldiers in a trench or covered way.

**SECURITY CHECKPOINTS** are distinguishable from border or frontier checkpoints in that they are erected and enforced within contiguous areas under military or paramilitary control.

**BMP-1** is a Soviet amphibious tracked infantry fighting vehicle. BMP-1 and BMP-2 were and are widely used during ATO and JFO, respectively.

**THE BRDM-2** is an amphibious armored patrol car.

**AN ARMoured PERSONNEL CARRIER (APC)** is a broad type of armored, military vehicles designed to transport personnel and equipment in combat zones.

**A HOWITZER** is a type of artillery piece characterized by a short barrel and the use of small propellant charges to propel projectiles over high trajectories, with a steep angle of descent.

**THE DSHK 1938** is a Soviet heavy machine gun with a V-shaped “butterfly” trigger, firing the 12.7×108mm cartridge. Operational range is up to 3,8 kms.

**A MORTAR** is usually a simple, lightweight, man-portable, muzzle-loaded weapon.

**MT-12 (“RAPIRA”, 2A29)** is a Soviet 122 mm anti-tank gun. It’s been here since 1970. Operational range is 8,2 kms.

**THE MON-50** is a claymore shaped (rectangular, slightly concave), plastic bodied, directional type of anti-personnel mine. It is designed to wound or kill by explosive fragmentation. The mine is similar to the American M18 Claymore with a few differences. MON-50, MON-90 and MON-100 are widely used in Donbas. They don’t have elements of self-destruction.

**ZERO** is the apparent line to divide territories protected by the Armed Forces of Ukraine. It’s the line of defense.

**THE PK** is a 7.62×54mmR general-purpose machine gun designed in the Soviet Union in 1962. Operational range is 3,8 kms.

**A REGIMENT** is a military unit that consists of 800 to 1500 soldiers.

**A MILITARY BASE** is a facility directly owned and operated by or for the military or one of its branches that shelters military equipment and personnel, and facilitates training and operations.

**AN ANTI-TANK GUIDED MISSILE (ATGM)** is a guided missile primarily designed to hit and destroy heavily armored military vehicles.

**THE RPG-7** is a portable, reusable, unguided, shoulder-launched, anti-tank rocket-propelled grenade launcher. Operational range is 550 m.

**THE RPK** is a 7.62×39mm light machine gun of Soviet design. Operational range is 3 kms.

**A SELF-PROPELLED GUN (SPG)** is a form of self-propelled artillery, and in modern times is most commonly used to refer to artillery pieces such as howitzers. 122 mm and 152 mm are widely used in Donbas.

**THE DRAGUNOV SNIPER RIFLE** is a semi-automatic designated marksman rifle chambered in 7.62i 54mmR. Operational range is up to 1,2 kms.

**“GREY ZONE”** a snaking line of territory (a patchwork of towns, villages, and farms along the contact line) between government-controlled and occupied lands in the east of Ukraine.

**SEKRET/SECRET** is a guarding unit for a specific time period and within a specific distance from the stronghold in order to detect enemies beforehand.

**THE T-72** is a family of Soviet main battle tanks that first entered production in 1971. Widely used in Russia.

**A THERMOGRAPHIC CAMERA** is a device that creates an image using infrared radiation.

**“WOODS” / “THE BATTLE OF WOODS”** is the battle that took place on December 18th, 2016, near Svitlodarsk, when the 54th brigade soldiers were able to move ahead and took over the enemy positions and a part of windbreaks near Luhanske village. Six soldiers of the Armed Forces of Ukraine were killed. Mykyta Yarovy, a company commander and a hero of Ukraine (posthumously) was among them. Many soldiers were seriously injured. Ukrainian intelligence stated that the other side's losses were fatally worse.



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**Viktor Zalevskyi**  
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**Dmytro Karabiniovskyi**  
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**Serhii Starostenko**  
**Stanislav Stas**  
**Roman Turovets**  
**Ivar Heinmaa**  
**Sanro Madalena**  
**WM Blood**

and some of them came from  
our heroine's social media pages

A journalistic text  
Yevgeniya Podobna  
Girls cutting their locks

Developmental editing by *Tetiana Kovtunovych*  
Literary editing by *Tetiana Nebesna*  
Page layout design by *Andrii Honcharuk*  
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Luta Sprava Publishing  
(Andrii Honcharuk, publisher)

National Register of Publishers, Manufacturers and Distributors  
of Publications, DK, No. 4958, August 18th, 2015

[info@lutasprava.com](mailto:info@lutasprava.com)  
[www.lutasprava.com](http://www.lutasprava.com)  
[books.lutasprava.com](http://books.lutasprava.com)  
[fb.com/lutasprava](https://fb.com/lutasprava)



Signed on November 23rd, 2020  
Set in 70x100/16. Nom. No. of print. p.: 28.6  
Offset printing, Bandera Text, ZionTrain  
Print run of 800. Order No. 1262  
Printed and bound in First Polygraphic Center, 82-A Mezhyhirska street, Kyiv  
National Register of Manufacturers, DK, No. 2328



Printed in Ukraine