

Humanitarian Aid delivery to Ukraine November 2023

This was the fourth such trip taking vehicles and aid to the Ukraine; our leader, Paul Parsons, and our Ukrainian fixer, Oleh Nayda, who is now living in Towcester, having made all four visits. Anthony White was making his third trip, William Francklin his second and the rest of the team of newbies being Tim Day, Christopher Coleridge-Cole, Simon Johnson, Morris Jones, Simon Burn, and just to bring the average age a little closer to 65, Tom Buckle and Archie Hainsworth, two youngsters from Suffolk. £80,000 had been raised and spent procuring medical aid and vehicles. A Land Rover Freelander was kindly donated by Simon Johnson and the Suffolk Boys had provided another Mitsubishi Ute. Uliana Telsya had sourced all the humanitarian aid, ably supported by Tisha Sykes in charge of the budget. In addition, we brought with us otherwise redundant supplies donated by local NHS hospitals and surgeries, for use by civilian hospitals in Ukraine. Six vehicles in all and eleven drivers making the humanitarian journey.

It was barely light as we left South Northants around 06:30 on Saturday 4th to drive to the Channel Tunnel, and very soon tipping it down with the remnants of Storm Ciarán. Unfortunately, Ciarán pretty much tracked us right across northern Europe for the next three days and we drove through some appalling weather. Crossing the channel as freight was a new “no-frills” experience but carrying medical aid as freight gained us free passage (courtesy of the generosity of Eurotunnel and with the help of the Northamptonshire Community Foundation). Having parked up the trucks on open trains, we were driven to a passenger style train carriage to sit and anxiously watch a screen to see whether we would be singled out for “special” French customs inspections or would be free to get going. Of course, all six vehicles failed to get a green light, requiring further inspection of paperwork, but finally three hours after reaching Folkestone we were released to start the north European leg.

We were spared the drab view of the countryside through Picardy, Belgium, the Netherlands and into northern Germany, by the wall of road spray and the glare of the car lights. Nearly thirteen hours after leaving home we pulled into Dortmund for the night. A real slog! Our outlook brightened in the morning, but not the weather. Driving through Thuringia and Saxony the autumn leaves were beautiful and we could make out flocks of White Stork and Greylag Geese migrating south in the grey gloom. There were even a few Common Crane resting and grazing in the fields on their trip south as we approached the Polish border. The countryside changed as we continued on north of Czechia through Poland; miles of very wet mixed open forest, coal mining towns, and in the fields piles of sugar beet waiting to be transported to the processing factories. We stopped for a second night in Gliwice, Poland, another nine hours closer to our destination.

Monday morning’s first fuel stop was just east of Rzeszów. From there we wound our way in convoy through pretty little villages beside gardens lined with topiary hedges. Tin roofed houses all adorned with solar panels were interspersed with quaint old wooden cottages. The neat fields were all planted with winter wheat and every other telegraph pole or chimney seemed to sport a stork’s nest. We finally arrived at the Budomierz – Hruszów border checkpoint at 12:30, about 20km north of the main road, but without lorries or the queues. More laborious paperwork ensued, which included the Ukrainian customs ringing ahead to ensure the aid we were carrying was expected. Thank goodness we had Oleh to interpret for us. Just over two and half hours later we were through and making our last 80km to the cobbled streets of Lviv. Unbeknown to us at the time, as we navigated our way through the Monday evening rush hour, the air raid sirens were sounding and urging residents into the bunkers. A Russian MIG had overflowed the city. We were blissfully unaware, not that many of the locals seemed to act either. A few of us did however check out the hotel’s air raid shelter on arrival. Best to be sure, and it made a change from checking where the stairs were in case of fire alarms in “normal” hotels.

On Monday evening it very quickly became “real”. We met Timor, a 30-year-old Paramedic who had travelled to see us from Kremmina, Luhansk Oblast, 1,250 km to the east. He was taking a consignment of aid back that evening to be put to work assisting the wounded on the front line. You cannot help being in awe of people like Timor risking his life to save others every day. Our vehicles, including one of which delivered from a previous trip, and Timor’s team are still using, are not painted up like ambulances when in service and Timor was in full battle fatigues. Russian snipers find it much easier to hit vehicles or paramedics with a big red cross on their side or on their chest. Normal rules of war do not apply with the Russians. The meeting gave Timor the chance to describe what he and his fellow paramedics are up against and perhaps more importantly describe their needs. Mitsubishi L200s are great workhorses, able to move injured out from difficult forest terrain with their 4WD and spacious carrying capacity. But what Timor really needs to save even more lives are ATVs (All Terrain vehicles, or Quad bikes to you and me). Adapted with a fitted metal frame on the back, they can strap a stretcher to the rear and quickly extract the injured back to a defensive line where they can get emergency aid. The group pledged to try to come back with a 1 litre engine ATV, able to carry two paramedics and a stretcher, presumably also requiring a trailer to carry it on all the way from England.

Supper couldn’t have come quick enough after three days on the road, plus we had to be back at the hotel for curfew at 21.40. A short walk from the Leopold Hotel, Anthony knocked three times on a heavy oak door, the security guard asked for a password and we were lead down the stone steps into a vaulted cellar for traditional Lviv fayre, local beer and wine surround by a museum like décor. Much to the delight of Archie and Tom, the cellars also included a shooting range with Putin’s face as the target. Despite the threat of further air raids, we slept well for our first night in Lviv.

Tuesday 7th was a big day, emotionally draining but also amazingly inspiring at the courage and fortitude of some of the people we met. We all discussed at dinner that evening, what had been the most moving part of the day and each came up with something different; but on multiple occasions both us and our Ukrainian hosts had been moved to tears. Oleh “dropped a pin” for a secret location of a warehouse in the city where we were to take the trucks and all the aid for unloading. Each in turn drove our vehicles into the warehouse and we formed chains unloading crutches, generators, medical gauze, stretchers, tourniquets, food pouches, vented chest seals and all manner of vital lifesaving aid. Already in the warehouse, there were ranks of bicycles donated by the Danish Police and boxes filled with essential medical items from other recent missions.



1Morris and Tim unload the aid boxes.

As we emptied the L200s we were joined by some amazing women, who knew Paul and Anthony from previous visits and we were able to talk with them through an interpreter, Uliana, and to understand their Herculean war efforts.

Iryna Volk, who would be travelling with Paul and Oleh out north, east and then south with some of the aid on Wednesday, is from Luhansk Oblast in the far east. She was a journalist but started volunteering in 2014, the year Ukraine mark as the start of the war. The “Big War” started on February 24th, 2022. When she lived in the Luhansk Oblast, Russians would kill Ukrainians just because they didn’t speak Russian or because they didn’t like the look of them. She said she couldn’t just stand aside

and let these people take their homes. She moved to Kharkiv for her own safety, and in the early days it was all about supplying boots and trousers to the troops. They simply had what they stood up in. Now they are well clothed and aid focuses on kit and supplies. She believes what the volunteers do cannot ever stop as every bit of assistance is critical for the defence of their country from the Russian aggressors. She is a brave girl, who doesn't see her husband and father of her six-year-old for months on end. He is with the special forces in the south near Kherson.

Tanya and Tonya, two ladies from Kyiv, had also found their way to the warehouse and were just delighted to see us. Both ladies work in a chocolate factory by day, but I don't believe they ever sleep. They bake 300 loaves of bread a day for the troops or for those in need. On top of that, 750kg of cakes and biscuits for the soldiers. The half hundred weight of flap jacks we had carried out from the UK to add to their stocks, perhaps afforded them some respite. Dressed for our benefit in the beautiful traditional flower head dresses of Ukraine, they described how, when Kyiv was under siege in February and March last year, there had been a state of disbelief. It was so scary with lots of frightening stories being circulated. It was difficult to know what the truth was; whether to run and if so where to run. But they also described some funny stories of how ill prepared Russian soldiers were. A Russian tank had driven into (their words) a dodgy suburb of Kyiv and got lost. Having been told they were liberating Ukraine they asked for directions (!!!) only for the local youth to turn on them with bricks and the soldiers ran away, abandoning their tank. Similarly, a Kyiv farmer had blocked a tank with his tractor and threatened the soldiers within, to see them run away too. We drank our tea and coffee in the warehouse out of paper cups with a tractor towing a tank printed on the side.



2. Morris, Tonya, Anthony and Tanya

For me, one of the most moving moments was just how grateful they were for everything we were trying to do for them. They gave each of us a Ukrainian flag on which they had written a personal thanks to each of us and signed it. A very moving memento.

Finally, we met (another) Uliana, a clinical psychologist from Lviv working with convalescing soldiers back from the front line. Medical help has evolved very fast supporting the emerging issues on the front line. She is not only supporting soldiers but also families of civilians, bereaved in the fighting and teaching students doing their masters degrees and training to become psychologists. She does

all of this for free, either online or face to face. Three to four times a month, she hosts patients in the Carpathian mountains for four days at a time in a group nature therapy session to deal with combat stress, families having to deal with relatives missing (in action), and grief. Very importantly in Ukrainian culture this includes spiritual support from a relevant priest. Ornate Gothic churches found throughout Lviv seemed to be operating rolling services throughout the day. Over the past year Uliana has managed to create a network of families that can provide peer-to-peer support, building self-supporting communities to cope with the awful realities of war.

Warmed by tea, coffee, in the very cold warehouse, and of course some of Tanya and Tonya's delicious cakes, Oleh dropped us another pin. We wound our way around slippery cobbled streets set with tram tracks between beautiful, if a little faded, Baroque and Rococo buildings, to a set of sheds where volunteers had already started work on Oleh's Isuzu pick up. Two volunteer art teachers had sprayed

the red vehicle a camouflaged green, and snow and mud tyres had replaced the road tyres that had driven from England. Painted like this, the paramedics have a much better chance of getting in and out of dangerous battle zones without being struck by Russian sniper fire. They also favour our right-hand drive vehicles as the snipers intuitively target the passenger seat, thinking they are taking out the driver. Job done, our volunteers were then off to school to teach classes of 8-12 year olds.



3 Resprayed and fitted with mud tyres ready for active medical service

Our next pin took us to the Rizdva Presviatoyi Bohorodytsi Church built in 2008 for the visit of Pope John-Paul II. This brilliant white orthodox church under the Catholic umbrella with its golden domes, sits to the SE of Lviv at the edge of a park and the forests beyond. On the day of the Pope's visit 500,000 youths crowded in and around the church. The following day there were 1.3 million people in the park for mass. Inside the church is filled with towering modern religious murals. They were incomplete as the iconographer, Sviatoslav Vladyka had dropped his brushes to fight on the front, but we were lucky enough to meet him over lunch. You can find out more about Sviatoslav at <https://modernmyrrhbearers.com/sviatoslav-vladyka/>. Today the large congregations are looked after by Father Orest Frednya, ably assisted by Father Vasyl Bilash, a giant of a man who towered over all of us, together with eight other priests. Whilst Father Vasyl was delivering a service, Father Orest started up a chant, walking around the cars sprinkling holy water on them to bless them ready for their trip out east. It was quite a strange but moving ceremony, made all the more so as the congregation of mostly elderly ladies filed out of the church and spontaneously broke into a traditional song wishing us



4. Rizdva Presviatoyi Bohorodytsi Church. Back: Anthony, Father Vasyl, Morris, Father Orest, Tim, Anthony, Paul, Chris, Sviatoslav. Front: Simon B, Simon J, Archie, Iryna, Tom and Oleh.



5. Father Orest blesses MT11.

long life to thank us for our help. They ended with a round of applause which reduced most of us and them to tears. One of our now blessed pickups was then collected by a unit the church supports.

Our last pin of the day was just heart wrenching. It was to the Field of Mars, a new military cemetery sited on the edge of the older (18th Century) Lychakiv Cemetery. Paul and Anthony had visited the plot just three months previously and were shocked at just how quickly the site had grown. We counted 23 new graves from October alone with one as recent as a week old. Every town in Ukraine will have a similar story. Wives, mothers, children and brothers were tending the graves, sobbing or just in silent disbelief. Teeming with flowers and Ukrainian flags, some of the graves were for boys as young as 19. There were many young girls in their

twenties also buried, probably mostly paramedics shot by Russian snipers, whilst they tried to save others. One lady was sitting next to her son's grave; a father of five children. Simon J sat down next to her and gave her a hug. She spoke no English and Simon no Ukrainian but they sat there and sobbed together. We left the cemetery in low spirits, back to the warehouse where we finally said goodbye to the last of our vehicles, handed over the keys and then walked back to the centre of town and our hotel.

Our last appointment of the day before supper was to meet a handful of soldiers, mostly rehabilitating in Lviv from wounds. Amazingly brave men, all of them. The first soldier we met, and I don't have their names which is probably for the best as they are still currently serving soldiers, was supplying aid to his brother's paratrooper brigade. He signed up to fight in Summer 2022 when his brother was invalided and fought in



6. The very sad but strangely beautiful Field of Mars.

Kharkiv trying to push the Russian aggressors back to Donetsk. He received a shrapnel wound in December and after recovering back in Lviv now serves as a paramedic. Previously he was a lecturer in Bio-Art and Philosophy at Kyiv University. A second soldier had been a professional for ten years from the age of 17. He volunteered in 2014 and works with General Budanov in the intelligence force. He works for ten days on special missions and then he rotates out to train for the next objective. No detail here but you will know some of the well documented stories of heroics from our own news. He told us Bahkmut was the worst and he still doesn't know how he got out alive. Our third soldier was an artist and a sculptor and he joined as he wanted to be proactive in defending his wife and young kids. He signed up on 24th February 2022 and after 15 days of training he joined a new division near Donetsk. He was wounded in May but rejoined earlier this year working for air intelligence flying drones in Bahkmut. Injured again this May he has been rehabilitating since. Out of twenty-four of those he

signed up with in February 2022, he is the only one left alive. Our last chat was not with a soldier but a member of the border guard who had been working on the Polish border controlling the flow of people out of Ukraine at the start of the Big War. Border queues were more than 40 kms long. He was dealing with mothers passing babies over the barbed wire to Polish women in the hope their children would survive, and many older people struggling to survive with the stress and cold, many having travelled all the way from the east. Lviv, a city of 400,000, doubled in population with the influx from the east and through much of 2022, rents became the most expensive of anywhere in Europe.

I have spared you some of the harrowing detail from the front, suffice to say the Ukrainian paramedic teams do everything in their power to save the lives of their soldiers and civilians caught up in the fighting. Stories beyond heroism. We did ask if they treat Russian soldiers the same as Ukrainians to which the response was given; "I have never seen a live Russian soldier." Somewhat telling about the humanity of who they are dealing with.

On Wednesday morning, Paul said his goodbyes as he, Oleh and Iryna took three vehicles filled with aid out east another 1,300 kms direct to the front-line paramedics. The remaining nine of us (yes, 9 Anthony, not the eight-seater taxi you booked), headed off to the Polish border crossing at Medyka. As we reached the border our phone apps had us all jump out of our skins as another air raid warning went off back in Lviv. A sober reminder of what we were leaving behind. Passing a queue of 20,000 lorries on the Polish side waiting to cross, we caught trains from the beautifully ornate train station at Przemyśl, variously making our way back to Blighty over the next five days.

It had been an emotionally draining and humbling mission, shared with new friends we bonded with over the drive. We and our Ukrainian friends are eternally grateful for the generosity of all our donors. It means so much to them, not just the material help, but to know that we are thinking of them and supporting them as they struggle to keep our European border safe. The fund-raising campaign continues and a new aid mission is planned for January 2024. Thereafter we will keep going for as long as there is a need and we are



7. Paul hands over aid in Klishchiivka, near Bakmut, Donetsk Oblast

able to raise funds. If you or anyone you know may be interested in fund-raising and driving aid on future trips to Lviv, then please get in touch with Paul at paul@southfieldshouse.co.uk

Huge thanks from all of us for your interest and your generosity. Slava Ukraini!

Simon Burn
November 2023