

Humanitarian Aid trip to Ukraine January 2024

Paul Parsons and I turn off the main road and are faced with what seems to be a no entry or restricted access road sign. Do we proceed or not? We are leading eight other vehicles and ahead is five km of snowy tracks through the snow deadened Polish forests. We are close to the Ukraine border, having passed a heavily camouflaged military field radar site. 'Engage four wheel drive'; the Hilux grins, this is more like it after too long on the German & Polish motorways! We gently trundle through the birch forest, ever fearful of finding a locked barrier. All is well and we emerge out of the forest and past small farms with tin roofs and fences demarking their boundaries. Thirty minutes later, we are trying to find the Hilux's chassis number (for those interested, on back seat door frame) at the border crossing point into Ukraine without which the Poles would not allow us to cross the border.

Two groups totalling 16 and nine vehicles respectively left the UK; the groups had come from Northamptonshire and Northumberland. I was part of Paul Parsons' and Anthony White's Northamptonshire team, who were both on their fifth and fourth trips respectively. Joining Paul, Anthony & I were Oleh Nayda, Chris Whitamore, Richard Tice, Tam Leeming, David Williams, Charles Moubray and Chris Blackham. Oleh, a Ukraine national who temporarily lives in Towcester, was on his fifth trip and was one of the linchpins for the whole expedition. The Northumberland group was led by John and Ralf Creswell, and they were joined by Max Wakefield, Johnny Miller, Tim Smalley and Simon Cherniavsky. John and Simon had both worked in Ukraine before the 2014 invasion and Simon is a fluent Ukrainian speaker. Max had commanded a Challenger II tank in the First Gulf war so was hoping to spot one of the 14 given to the Ukraine Army - he didn't.

Paul and Anthony's group had raised around £95,000 for the trip approximately half spent on aid and half on vehicles. As always, it's the planning and logistics which are the key factors as to whether the trip will be a success or not. Anthony was largely responsible for procuring the vehicles, a mix of Mitsubishi L200s, Toyota Hilux and a Ford Ranger. In addition, an All-Terrain Vehicle (ATV) and a Range Rover were dispatched by freight and arrived in country a few days after us. Each vehicle was full of medical and logistic supplies procured by the ever-resourceful Uliana, Oleh's wife. In the background, our treasurer Tisha Sykes has been marshalling the money for many months. It was only when we reached the Budomierz-Hrushov border on the Polish Ukraine border did I fully appreciated all the work that Oleh & Uliana had put in to ensure all the drivers, vehicles and kit had the necessary documents: insurance papers, V5s, custom declaration forms, purchased invoices etc. At times, it almost felt that EU and Ukraine bureaucracy were Russia's fifth columnists!



When we arrived in Ukraine, it became so clear how vital these donated vehicles are. The medical services and the army are dependent on private vehicles and 4 x 4s to move people, casualties, and logistics. When we reached the 67th Mechanised Brigade there were virtually no army logistic vehicles. Of note, the Mitsubishi L200 is the vehicle of choice: robust, relatively simple and in large numbers so reducing the spares pool. At the brigade, we also learnt that when vehicles break down or a new Starlink satellite receiver is needed, it's the soldiers rather than the military G4 logistic chain who dip into their pockets. It's a far cry from a standard NATO set up; in essence, a civilian army gradually morphing into a conventional one. The appreciation of donations was demonstrated in a bar in Poltava where a local man in his mid-30s was virtually in tears when expressing his gratitude to the UK's private and governmental support. I say this to just emphasise how crucial these vehicles, and the supplies they carry, are to the Ukrainian people.

The first day of the road trip was largely uneventful. The Eurotunnel crossing was relatively smooth although Max, driving himself, was quizzed if he was going to Gaza, a journey which would have made our undertaking look quite feeble! A couple of hours into the continent and Anthony and Richard's Mitsubishi L200 lost power prompting an amusing photo on



WhatsApp of the leader of the Reform Party peering into the bonnet – another mess to sort out he might have been musing. Oleh & Max to the rescue and on they went. Our first evening was spent in a Dortmund and we all had a jolly dinner together, the first opportunity for us all to meet up. Next day we proceeded east, skirting to the south of Berlin and onto the largely empty Polish motorways. I was impressed with the numerous wildlife bridges spanning the motorways and the countryside became more interesting. The

pretty Upper Silesian city of Gliwice was our next evening spot. It sounds silly but negotiating the part bureaucratic and part bloody mindedness of the parking attendant proved a challenge but once all the vehicles were safety tucked up for the night we proceeded to Boska, a slick and friendly restaurant offering scores of local dishes.

Four hours after departing Gliwice, we were at the entrance to the forest where this narrative began and so to the border crossing point. Oleh & Paul have clearly mastered the border bureaucracy and within a couple of hours we are through, a record I am told. After a quick photo opportunity under the Ukraine border sign, we found ourselves in hectic traffic in the beautiful city of Lviv. Once the war is concluded, I am sure the city will be added to the 'off the beaten track but highly recommended European city break' destination list. After a speedy check-in at the comfortable Leopold Hotel, it was off to a delicious but somewhat expensive dinner at Mon Pius.

I awoke to find a lady in my room - that was my first, puzzled thought at 06.02am. As my thoughts cleared, I also heard an air raid siren in the distance and her voice telling me to go to the hotel's bomb shelter. By the time my telephone buzzed with a WhatsApp message from Tam asking what we should do - my mind was already made up; go back to sleep. I regret not giving this possibly irresponsible advice to Tam who went down to the bomb shelter. She did have Richard for company, who a few hours later, was able to use the morning events to flavour an interview with Eammon Holmes on Sky News.



Chris Blackham, David Williams, John Cresswell, Simon Cherniavsky, Johnny Miller, Ralf Cresswell, Charlie McGrath, Tam Leeming, Max Wakefield, Anthony White, Paul Parsons, Richard Tice, Chris Whitamore, Tim Smalley and Charles Moubray

The first destination for our group was an old shed for the first hand over of aid, while John's group spent the day sorting out logistics for arrival of the ATV and quads. It was snowing heavily when we reached the sheds and shortly afterwards Iryna Volk and her assistants Tonya and Tanya arrived. Paul and Anthony have been supporting Iryna's volunteer organisation for over a year: it's clearly a much-appreciated partnership. Iryna, who hails from the Lukhsk Oblast moved to Kharkiv after the war started in 2014 giving up journalism for volunteering. Tonya and Tanya work in a chocolate factory and I'm happy to say they came bearing gifts! In the icy cold shed, we unloaded scores of boxes containing medical supplies (stretchers, tourniquets, trauma bandages), food, generators, and Ecoflows (think mega power bank). In addition, we left a load of medical equipment specifically requested by Mykolaiv hospital which will have by now already have been delivered to them in the south of Ukraine. We also said goodbye to two of the 4 x 4s and our first departures, but they have work to do! Iryna spent some time explaining how the volunteer network functioned; she and her team are a living embodiment of the spirit of most of the Ukraine people to resist the invader.

We then go to the paint shop where work soon starts on turning the red L200 Mitsubishi grey. This is another classic example of the Ukraine people's army helping out. A team of artists have for years done this important work - today wasn't helped by the slight damp atmosphere and the temperature hovering at about 1c. At the paint shop we meet an English couple, the Parrys, who had also driven a vehicle out. In January 2022, their son Chris, aged 28, had been captured and executed by the Russians whilst volunteering as a stretcher bearer.



Tonya, Anthony & Tanya : Tam sprays the L200 : The vehicles are blessed : David and Chris hand over the Ford keys to a soldier from 80th Brigade.

Time for the vehicles to be blessed – so onto the Rizdva Presviatoyi Bohorodytsi Church where we meet Father Orest Frednya and Father Vasyl Bilash, the latter a giant of a man who towered over all of us, together with four other priests. After a short introduction, the priests broke into song, and we were all ushered outside for the vehicle blessing with much holy water. A soldier from the 80th Brigade, back from the front and resting having been wounded, will shortly drive away Chris and David's Ford. The Range Rover arrived the following day



and after some work to it was also due to be taken off to the 80th Brigade. The day ended on a very sober note, a visit to a military cemetery. Rows and rows of graves, all beautifully decorated by flowers and the blue and yellow Ukraine flags, and the black and red resistance flags, stretch into the distance. Each grave has a photograph of the deceased soldier mounted on the cross along with the date of death. The most recent reads 19.1.24, the day before we set off on our journey. In the biting wind, a group of four soldiers are

chatting casually around the grave of a fallen comrade, occasionally bursting into laughter, perhaps remembering the joy he had brought to them all. Four rows away, wrapped up against the cold, a mother gently sobs as she brushes away the snow. That evening, prior to dinner we met a group of soldiers and psychologists who give a thoughtful insight to the challenges they face. The drone discussion, to be reinforced a few days later with the 67th Brigade, was fascinating. Drones are what they want, and this group of volunteers were manufacturing their own, seeming somewhat sceptical of their government's promise to manufacture 1 million drones within a year. As before, they were all heartily thankful for the supplies and the vehicles we have brought.

On day four, we said goodbye to others who returned home via Poland whilst Paul, Chris Whitamore, Oleh and I headed east to Poltava. It was a long drive, maybe 12 or 13 hours but the weather was fine and on we sped. Paul and I were entertained by a range of podcasts and a Mick Herron 'Slow horses' audio book. Along the way, we were stopped by the police for a defective head light which my limited engineering skills sorted out and we were also flashed by a speed camera - over to you Paul!

On the outskirts of Kyiv, we met the highly impressive Dr Oleksandr Yatsyna who runs the Health and Mercy Foundation. I was introduced to Oleksandr by Daily Mail journalists Richard Pendlebury & Jamie Wiseman, who I have been back-watching on their various hostile environment deployments over a number of years. With the assistance of Dr Sara McNeillis of UCLH, and a significant donation from the Daily Mail group, we hand over two



ventilators with more high specification equipment to follow. Oleksandr supports 35 hospitals and to date has organised for over 100 ambulances to be brought into the country. He explained the work of his networks and the equipment on his wish-list, including small, refrigerated trucks to remove bodies from the front line - the sad logistics of war. We hope to be able to support the Health and Mercy Foundation in their great work on future trips. Around 11:00 the next day, having spent the night in a rather splendid hotel in the centre of Poltava, our 2 vehicles arrived in a very poor-looking rural village which Timur, our paramedic contact in the 67th Brigade, had given us a google

pin for. It seemed deserted but after a quick call to Timur, Peter, Margaretta and Harrison arrived in yet another camouflaged 4 x 4. Peter is a South African medical volunteer and Harrison is a 22 year old from Baldock in Cambridgeshire who arrived a year ago, studied combat medicine in Kyiv and has been with the brigade for many months. He, with Margaretta and Peter, are the lead volunteers in the casualty treatment and evacuation bunkers some 800m behind the frontline. The first boxes of supplies were unloaded, the soldiers gleefully opened the boxes of ear defenders and Ecoflows. Within minutes, squatted beside his Barratt sniper rifle, a wizened-looking soldier fired up one of the small gas cookers and gave me a big thumbs up - we had brought a little joy. The brigade was resting after months on the frontline but still we were asked to ensure our mobiles were on flight mode. Two days ago, an Iranian Shahed drone flew past, so we needed to be careful with our electronic footprint. Typically, the Hilux then would not start and despite trying to jump-start it we had to be towed, never easy in thick snow, to the company headquarters some 2 km away. Happily, the next day, it was up and running - a bit of TLC on alternator. We lunched in the school, now a battalion HQ and in the afternoon, we made a short trip around

the local villages dropping off supplies and then were delighted to meet up unexpectedly with Anastasia, a front line paramedic we had first encountered in Lviv in April 2023, together with the Mitsubishi we had delivered to her then which by now had survived nearly a year of war which is not always the case.



Paul and Oleh reunited with Anastasia & a vehicle donated to the front-line paramedics in 2023.



Timur directs the unloading of supplies



On our final morning, we climbed into a local-made beast of an armoured personnel carrier and saw some of the infantry we had met the day before doing local level drills in the forest. We noted Margaretta handing out our Cat tourniquets and taking away the cheap Chinese ones which would probably break at the critical moment. A few hours later, Peter took us in his previously bright red but now green painted British post office van to the local railway station and on the smart, relatively new train we met the Northumberland team and exchanged reflections. They too were struck by hand to mouth existence of the Ukraine military, by their effective flat command and control structure and their ability to improvise. In Kyiv, I said goodbye to Paul, Oleh and Chris, and went to my next destination - the railway station and a sleeper train to Catherine the Great's city of Odessa and then home via Moldova & Romania - buses permitting!

I can only thank all those friends who supported me in the fundraising effort & to Paul and Anthony for giving me this opportunity to help. I hope that others will follow. If you are interested in joining in a future trip to Ukraine do please contact Paul on paul@southfieldshouse.co.uk - the Ukrainians continue to need our support.

Charlie McGrath

ukraineaidmission2024.com