

Aid delivery to Ukraine August 2023

We left our leader Paul Parsons' house at Southfields in four vehicles at 6.30 am on Saturday 5th August (one car left two hours late as the two ex-army officers driving it had inadvertently locked the keys in their car). The journey was largely uneventful, driving continuously for three days through mostly uninspiring countryside with prolonged bouts of rain. Outside Krakow we picked up our Ukrainian interpreter and fixer Oleh, who now lives in Towcester (as he has three young children, he is exempt from military duty), and proceeded to approach the Ukrainian border on by-roads in a le Carre-like manner, driving through thick woods, the occasional villages characterised by wooden churches and an abundance of storks' nests.

After the usual delay, we entered Ukraine and drove through largely uninhabited, wooded countryside, much of it fallow, the only sign of war being the poignant boards in the villages displaying photographs of the numerous dead soldiers from the locality. We arrived in Lviv in a torrential downpour.



Paul had arranged a series of meetings for us, the first of which was held that evening in the Leopold hotel with Anastasia, a paramedic with the 67th brigade. She had just returned from the front line, a journey that took 18 hours but, before going home to her family for one day only she wanted to express her gratitude, in particular for the tourniquets we brought, which are so vital and far superior to their Chinese equivalents. Anastasia tends the wounded in ambulances just behind the front line, after which they are transferred to hospitals throughout the country. This is dangerous work, and only recently the chief paramedic of the 67th brigade was killed when he was blown up by a mine.

The team with Anastasia (centre left) with van loaded with aid prior to departure to front)



Tuesday was the key day. Lviv, with so many buildings dating from the era when it was part of the Austro-Hungarian province of Galicia, is a beautiful city and the sight of commuters setting off for work, many of them crammed into rickety, yellow trams, gives a false sense of normality. Visiting the main churches, however, tells a very different story. The Garrison church (originally the Jesuit church), near our hotel, is a building which would not look out of place in Baroque Rome. The richly decorated interior, however, has a very sombre atmosphere, the aisles decorated with flags of regiments of the Ukrainian army and the walls covered in photographs of hundreds of dead soldiers.



We entered the Latin cathedral nearby during mass which was celebrated with great solemnity, the whole congregation praying fervently for their loved ones fighting at the front.



We then left for the dilapidated warehouse where we unloaded our medical supplies.

We gave Tatiana, who is head of the volunteers who man the trains that deliver the wounded soldiers from the front line to hospitals across Ukraine, a load of medical supplies.

We then met several wounded soldiers who described their experiences in combat as well as their prewar lives. The most remarkable was Andre, serving in the airborne division, who was badly wounded in Donetsk, and regarded it as a miracle that he had escaped the surrounding Russians. He now has a prosthetic leg and has become a champion archer, winning a gold medal in Australia at the Invictus Games. Like so many other people we met in Lviv, he regards 2014 as the date when the war started, and stressed the fact that the Ukrainians are fighting to defend the free world and that we should be grateful to them for everything they are doing for us just as they are grateful for our help.



Veteran and recuperating marine with military psychologist and volunteers Iryna and Ulia

We now drove to a newer part of the city, passing the Military Academy, which was bombed by the Russians last month. A large congregation was leaving the church of the Nativity of the Virgin. Once they had departed, a series of priests began to sing an Orthodox chant while Father Vassily, a giant of a man, walked round the cars, dowsing them with holy water, a quite extraordinary event.





Inside the church, covered in murals, we were blessed by Father Oreste, and embraced by a soldier who drove off in one of the cars to Kherson where it was urgently needed. The cars we brought are particularly highly prized for their right-hand drive. This means that a dummy is placed in the passenger seat, which is where the Russian snipers shoot, thinking it is the driver.

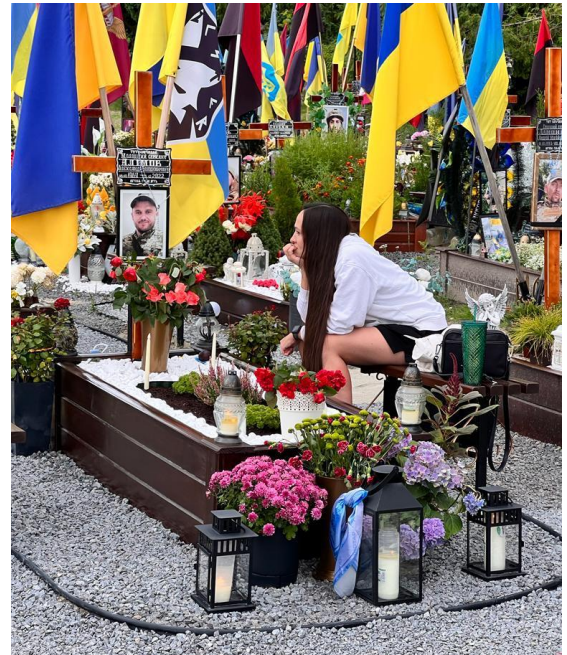
We left the church for a late lunch. I sat next to Iryna, our main contact in Ukraine and a journalist who has written nine books about the war, and spends most of her time delivering aid to the front (her husband programmes drones). Her stories about what is happening on the battlefield were absolutely horrific. The Russians do not bother to recover their dead, so they are left lying in the field, and the stench is so bad that many Ukrainian soldiers are now unable to eat meat. Even worse, many Russian soldiers have Aids and are infecting the Ukrainian girls, many of them under-age, who they rape. After lunch we returned to our remaining vehicles, walking past the workmanlike but appreciated portacabins provided by the UK for refugees from eastern Ukraine who are living in Lviv.



We then drove to a building where the top floor is devoted to making hand-made camouflage netting which is much more difficult to detect from drones than the machine-made equivalent and so good is it that one sniper was able to hide behind it 20 metres from the Russian lines without being detected.



The last stop was very emotional. The Military Cemetery contains the graves of soldiers from Lviv who have been recently killed (apparently one of three cemeteries of a similar size in the city), which is a third fuller than on Paul's recent trip in April, a terrible indication of the high casualty rate in this war of attrition. The graves were covered in Ukrainian flags and poignant items of everyday life such as sweets and bottles of fizzy drinks. It was painful to see a number of women sitting on benches beside the graves, talking to their loved ones. While we were there a siren went off but, judging from the reaction of the locals, nobody seemed too concerned (Ukrainians can all see, from texts on their mobile phones, the level of danger).



There seemed a certain irony in being killed by a Russian bomb in a military cemetery and, although the danger this time was not severe, just one week later, Lviv was hit by a series of cruise missiles, the most serious attack since February 2022.

Before leaving Lviv the next morning, we visited a small factory entirely manned by volunteers making webbing and backpacks for drones and snipers, two key components in this war. These are beautifully made (our strong military and naval contingent definitely gave them the thumbs up).



We then bade farewell to Oleh and drove north in a minibus, the trains from Lviv being full with Ukrainians returning to their temporary homes across Europe. The overall feeling from the trip was the wonderful reception we had received in Lviv, the gratitude of the Ukrainians we met, and the knowledge that the medical and humanitarian supplies, and the pickups we bought, with the substantial sum of £120,000 that we raised, will play its small part in the war effort. It was a humbling experience, and the overall message is that it is vital that the free world continues to support the Ukrainian cause.

Charles FitzRoy
August 2023

Paul has added these final two photographs illustrating the widespread and fervent Ukrainian hope that their friends will not forget them as the war drags on coupled with their determination to survive and win.

