

Report on Ukraine aid convoy – 4th May 2024



For most of our contingent the day started early driving from Northamptonshire to reach the Channel Tunnel on time. The team comprised Paul Parsons, our organiser, with Oleh Nayda, our wondrous Ukrainian fixer, Anthony White (finder of pickups and Paul's right-hand man) with Guy Fearon, Rob Mercer and Ed de Lisle, brothers Martin and Nick Taylor, Nick Hutchinson and Dick Hurwood, my co-driver Kate Ainslie-Williams plus Matthew Sample, Archie Hainsworth and Freddie Wooton each driving solo – 9 vehicles in all mainly Mitsubishi L200's and Isuzus loaded to the roof with the medical aid and supplies.

This was the sixth such trip to Ukraine and was the culmination of months of planning. We raised a fantastic £125,000 (bringing the total raised and spent to date to £475,000) so huge thanks to each and every one of our donors – it really is what you have given that has made it possible and it's all wonderfully direct: our contacts in Ukraine tell us what is most essentially needed – purchase is made in the UK and it is delivered into their hands without any deductions for overheads or travel/transport expenses.



The whole team meet at the Folkestone before a hitch-free pass through customs with the next stop Dortmund which we reached problem free that evening, 460 miles from Towcester. Day two was our longest drive – destination Gliwice in Southern Poland – 589 miles. Again, a trouble free drive passing on our way various convoys of heavy armour heading to Ukraine who greeted us as we passed with waves and horns.



Day 3 – we had broken the back of our journey and today we were set to cross into Ukraine at the Budomierz crossing. We leave the motorway for country roads and lanes with pretty and well-kept villages. As we drive through dense, tall pine forests, more or less on single track, we suddenly find ourselves halted by three-armed police border guards emerging from a track to our left. They ask to see our passports with which we outwardly cheerily oblige, and are eventually waved on. Emerging from the forest we arrive at the border crossing.

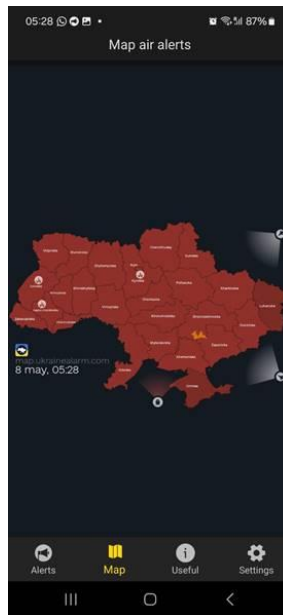


At the border on the Polish side, we encounter unsmiling officialdom but finally the barrier is lifted and we are in Ukraine. More showing of documents etc but this is speedier (the fastest crossing yet we are told) and relatively soon we're on our way.



A few hundred yards into Ukraine we are again stopped by a military checkpoint. Why? We're asked very nicely, "to please wait", whilst they're making a phone call. Ten minutes later a very emotional woman appears – tearful but smiling – presenting us with the traditional Easter cake that she's cut up for us and home-made sausages. Hugs all round This was our welcome into Ukraine - a truly beautiful moment. Our convoy of laden vehicles, along with ourselves, demonstrated they were not alone, had not been forgotten. We saw this over and over whilst in Ukraine – a profound gratitude, both warming and humbling. An hour or two later, after negotiating bumpy and quite pot-holed roads and on coming into Lviv a young man on a bicycle, as he passed, shouted through my open window as I drove "Thank you, thank you for everything".

At our hotel in Lviv we met an eye surgeon from the Military Hospital with whom we had been in contact. He told us that such was the workload he and his team worked seven days a week, three months of which near the frontline. He showed us on his phone photos of the faces of soldiers whose eyes and faces he had operated on. It was hard to see some of them but also a feat to be proud of in terms of what he'd been able to do. Many had lost an eye or in some cases even both. We then accompanied him to the Military Hospital where we handed over the Keeler portable hand-held slit lamp we had been asked for (at a cost of just over £5,000) This was a crucial piece of kit which could be taken to the front-line stabilisation points enabling assessment of and operation on soldiers with eye and face injuries (even if they were unconscious or whilst other surgery was being undertaken).



That night the air raid sirens sounded, a frequent occurrence even in Lviv in the west of Ukraine. Air alerts are also shown on Apps universally used. Some of the team met up in the hotel shelter and, in Nick Taylor's case, spent a trouble-free night.

Our first stop the following day was the Field of Mars. military cemetery. I find myself completely overwhelmed. Those of the team who have visited over the last year and a half note how it has mushroomed in size. We mostly walk around separately and in silence, examining each grave, festooned with flags, flowers, photos and mementoes, including fresh Easter cake on several. It will be stamped on my memory for ever. A while later we meet a woman by her husband's grave – with huge bunches of lily of the valley from her garden. In the photo her husband looks in his mid/late 50s. He is buried next to his best friend, she tells us – also killed. I wonder if that is any comfort – yes, in a way, I felt.



Each of these hundreds and hundreds of graves has a little fixed bench next to it. You think of all the people who have sat on them, relatives and friends. As we leave, a soldier in camouflage approaches, holding flowers in one hand and already holding back the tears. We look at each other and bow, and he says “Slava Ukraini” we offer the expected response “Heroyam Slava!”. From our vehicle I see him on one knee, in front of all the graves.

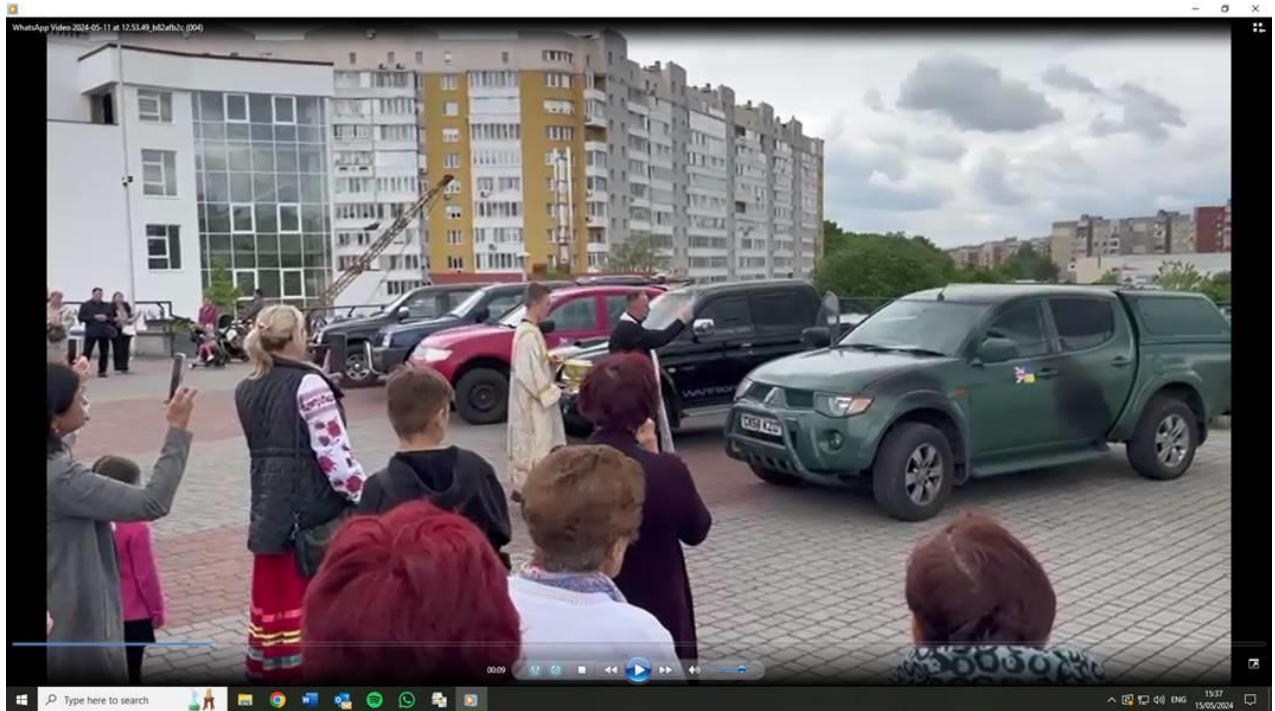


Our next stop, to meet some of our key contacts and to hand over vehicles and aid. Iryna, previously a journalist, has been a volunteer for ten years and raises funds to help provide for a number of brigades where she has contacts. On previous aid trips she has accompanied our deliveries to the front and she has been pivotal to our efforts. Tatiana and Toma who came in traditional Ukrainian dress have been involved since the start of the full-scale invasion. Each day they and their team send ten 35kg boxes of food to the front They emphasised the military are well-fed – what they provide is the necessary supplementary.



We then took all our vehicles to the parish church of Rizdva Presviatoyi Bohorodytsi where we were greeted by our old friends Fr Orest and Fr Vasil. We joined the beautiful and packed Mass which was in full-flow and were grouped into the centre of the church. Our presence (we gathered) was announced with prayers and thanks, and the whole congregation then turned to us and sang a traditional song wishing us well. We then proceeded outside where our pickups were lined up where they were blessed by one of the priests. It was truly moving. Many people came up to us afterwards, with tears in their eyes and hand on heart, to give personal thanks. We then had a stupendous lunch in the parish hall and left with a truly heart-warming farewell.





Next to a factory owned by Olena, who has entirely morphed her seven-year fashion business into making camouflage clothing for women soldiers (of which there are some 62,000 in the Ukrainian army). She employs about 50 women many who have escaped from the Donbas or Luhansk in the east. One of them told me her husband has stayed at home to protect their house despite being in a village that has no electricity or running water. Another had been in the military but now through injury has a titanium knee. Olena also

showed us the long fitted camouflage dress she has made, to be worn by her cousin, a model, at Cannes Festival this week



Our last stop was a workshop where vehicles are sprayed, (often by volunteer art teachers) the creation of a young Englishman Fynn Watt who gave up his studies at the outbreak of the full-scale invasion to help in the war effort.



The finished item and



at the paint shop



That evening the group heard from a number of Ukrainian volunteers. First the drone designers/makers who brought two of their drones to show us. These are constantly being developed and we were told that by the time we return in September a new version will be ready. They are fundamental to Ukraine's war effort. We then heard from Ihor, a seasoned soldier who has been fighting since the Russian invasion 2014 and who was to accompany our contingent down to Zaporizhyya

Finally, we met Yuliya and Olena, both psychologists and therapists, who talked to us about their work with soldiers and their families. The hardest thing they said was with the families of missing soldiers. Unable to grieve when not knowing if their loved one is dead or alive and/or captured.

It was an amazing and unforgettable trip - I would encourage anyone thinking of joining another one. If so, contact Paul at paul@southfieldshouse.co.uk The next trip is on the 7th of September and then again in February 2025. We cannot forget the Ukrainian people or leave them to fight this dreadful and illegal invasion on their own – they need all the help we can possibly give, of which ours is just a very small part. Nonetheless it is a privilege to be a part of that giving.

Ruth Nares

After two nights in Lviv we were waved off by the rest of the team to head east and deliver three pickups and supplies to brigades based out there. The team for this leg of the trip was our leader Paul, young Archie, Oleh our fixer and Ihor the hardened warrior.

Our first day consisted of a very long drive to a city called Kropyvnytskyi. It was straight forward driving just heading east on pretty much the same road all the way. As a farmer I was fascinated by the scale of the arable fields which seemed to go on for ever and were enormous in size. The land looked to be very productive but interestingly, despite the scale of the fields, the machinery and tractors

operating were small and quite outdated. It was also interesting to see the army pickup trucks (similar to those we were delivering) in the fields outside towns with large Browning machine guns mounted on the back ready to shoot down potential Russian drones.

We arrived at about 6.30 and went out for a meal. It was a good chance to talk and catch up with Ihor, a veteran soldier who has fought in the Ukrainian army since the invasion of Crimea in 2014, and more recently had been off active duties to a leg injury. Fundamentally Ihor was not optimistic about the war. He was frustrated with the segment of the population leading normal lives whilst circa 400,000 Ukrainian soldiers were both giving and risking their lives on the front line, unable to rotate enough and take leave due to the lack of other men volunteering. He had a deep disliking of President Zelensky who he felt had been elected on a promise to prevent a large-scale war with Russia and who had completely failed to be ready for what Ihor felt was the inevitable full-scale invasion in 2022, following on from the 2014 invasion of Crimea. He was also despondent about the lack of western support and the need for the west to decide whether they actually wanted Ukraine to win the war or just to give enough to prevent them from losing the war. This was a common theme and one we heard several times.

We left Kropyvnytskyi fairly early on the Thursday and headed to Zaporizhzhia a large city on the Dnipro River. We headed over the Dnipro and met with Archil and Irakli, two battle hardened Georgian soldiers, in their digs on the edge of the city. The first interesting key point was that these were Georgian soldiers fighting for Ukraine. Why were they fighting for Ukraine? Simply because the Russians invaded Georgia in 2008, (Russia still occupies 20% of Georgia - do you see a theme developing here??) and Ukrainian soldiers came and helped them, As such they felt it's now their duty to help Ukraine.



The Georgians were in charge of flying drones over enemy territory to identify targets and give coordinates for the artillery to then shell the targets. Typically, the targets would be command systems, anti-aircraft systems and tanks. The drones they used were part of a sophisticated weapon system and had a 3.5m wing span, could fly up to 50km away and costed about \$350k for a system which would typically include three drones. The Georgian soldiers currently didn't have a drone to send out as the last one had been shot down and they were waiting for a new one.

We had lunch with the Georgians and again it was great to hear their insight on the war. I was struck by the following:

- The Ukrainian army is fighting with a real mixed bag of equipment such as RPG's from the 70's, modern Mavic drones which anyone can buy and which are retrofitted with home-made bombs to attack nearby enemy positions and also act as eyes in the sky. Finally, it was also interesting how circa 40% of soldiers were fighting with rifles and/or ammunition they had bought themselves.
- The front line is actually made up of trenches which run along the majority of the eastern front. The Ukraine and Russian front line could be anywhere between 200m and 2km apart from each other. Gains are very marginal with it costing a huge loss of life. The Russians to date have some 500,000 killed, injured or missing soldiers and are incurring deaths at a rate of over 900 per day. We were told that in Russian battalions if their troops were sent forward and then turned back, then they would be shot by their own 'blocking' troops!!

Over lunch Archil and Irakli explained what was needed for Ukraine to win the war. We were told the West needed to decide if they actually want Ukraine to win. All the West is currently doing is ensuring that Ukraine doesn't lose. Ultimately this stance will lead to a very very long war which will cost a huge amount of money and lives. They feel that if the West fully got behind Ukraine and gave them the right tools which enabled them to gain control of the air and allowed them to launch missile attacks inside Russian territory and they had enough ammunition to push forward on the front line then they could prevail.

After lunch we headed to Dnipro a lovely city which straddles the Dnipro River. Here we delivered a further pick up to the 43rd Artillery Brigade. Both they and Ihor then left us for the front.



Dnipro and Zaporizhzhia were busy vibrant cities where superficially life was continuing pretty much as normal if you ignored the recent missile damage near the station. We headed onto the sleeper train from Dnipro back to Lviv and enjoyed one last night in Lviv before a long final day crossing the Polish border, getting a train from Przemysl to Katowice and flying back home. Przemysl was a lovely Polish town, tidy, smart buildings and very pleasant, much like the cities in Ukraine. One of my thoughts was that I'm not sure the UK is any more developed than some of the countries we still perceive to be as more developing, rather than developed countries.

All in all, the trip was a great success. Much needed pickups and supplies were successfully delivered and although only a drop in the ocean, our Ukrainian friends were hugely appreciative and the totality of Western voluntary aid will make a difference to what I believe is a vitally significant war which must see Ukraine prevail against a hostile state which does threaten the security of Europe.

Rob Mercer

Our next trips to Ukraine are on the 7th of September and then again in February 2025. If you are interested in joining us on one of these do please contact me on paul@southfieldshouse.co.uk - the Ukrainians continue to need our support.

Thank you. Paul Parsons

ukraineaidmission2024.com

