THE DONBASS COWBOY

A WAR JOURNAL BY RUSSELL "TEXAS" BENTLEY
DONBASS
COWBOY
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by
Russell “Texas” Bentley

Memoirs of a Un-Civil War
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Towards the end of 2013 I witnessed a country begin to tear itself apart. Just another war, with all the usual trademarks. However, this conflict had a twist which drew my attention. At the centre of the burgeoning Ukrainian violence, were openly fascist nationalistic groups who viewed Stepan Bandera, the Nazi collaborator responsible for the Volhynia Massacre, (among many others) as their hero. It seemed the scourge of neo-Nazism was again rising in Europe.

At first Western media covered events with their usual bias. Articles in the Washington Post, New York Times, Die Welt, the Guardian and countless media outlets, scrutinized the riots from various angles, some alleged overly forceful crackdowns by security services, while a few others criticized radical elements among the protesters. Finally, the Euromaidan demonstrations reached their peak with the ousting of President Yanukovych. With the help of neo-Nazis in the uprising.

And then, as counter-protests began in Crimea and southeast Ukraine, the paradigm shifted.

Changes were subtle at first. What may have once been written with some degree of integrity about the dangers of a reactionary uprising, increasingly slanted towards supporting an interim government which went far beyond its predecessor in terms of banning political parties, corruption to the point of outright looting, and worst of all, the use of force against its own people.
I watched with increasing disbelief the alteration of language used by journalists, at least those reporters permitted to remain in the country or who had not been murdered. Ethnic Russians became “Moscals”. Anti-coup protesters became “terrorists”. Reintegration became ‘annexation’. It was a deliberately slow, inimical manipulation, straight from the pages of Orwell’s 1984.

Yet this embryonic civil war had another important distinction. It was one of the first where almost everyone involved had a mobile device able to take images and movies of what occurred, and post them as it was happening.

In an attempt to retain a neutral perspective on events I subscribed to foreign news sites, started trawling through Ukrainian and Russian YouTube and VKontakte channels. What I witnessed was shocking. It wasn’t the scenes of neo-Nazi thugs beating up the managers of TV stations, or Ukrainian politicians being assaulted and thrown into dumpsters. Not the footage of civilians having body parts blown off, their last moment of life fading as passers-by tried to help... nor even the horrors of the burned and raped corpses from the Odessa Trade Union massacre. Sadly I have seen such abhorrent things before.

No. What really appalled me was that Western mainstream media was not showing both sides of events. Initially there would be a footnote or final paragraph at the bottom of a page, relating that such a thing might have happened – but it was lost amid increasing diatribes against Russia. It was no longer the battle of outraged citizens struggling to retain their language or protecting themselves against pillaging Bandera fanatics. It was blatant one sided reporting, towing the official line of the new Ukrainian government.

At one time, it was the role of journalists to challenge power. Now I was witnessing not just lies by omission. It was barefaced propaganda. Intentional and outright lies.

I first noted Russell Bentley in 2015 when he started giving interviews. I thought nothing much about him other than some wry humor that he was an American fighting for the Separatists’ side whilst another American had been filmed fighting for the Ukrainian neo-Nazi groups. Russell however, was ‘luckier’. Despite his age he survived front line posting and attempts to undermine his dissenting opinions.

As time passed I viewed the man as a typical Texan. At times abrasively outspoken, but steadfast and passionate about his convictions. He earned respect by traveling to the war zone and challenging mainstream media in a way many others dared not. When the BBC eventually lowered itself to write a hit piece against Russell in July 2017, it became apparent that things had gone too far. Even rebels have the right to voice an opinion.

This book lacks the sensationalism which afflicts other war memoirs. Instead it is a blunt account showing the Ukrainian Civil War from the perspective of an overseas volunteer who could barely communicate with those he was fighting for, but still forged friendship with his fellow soldiers. Russell ‘Texas’ Bentley makes no bones about his experiences, and as such, this account is a valuable insight into the Donbass resistance during its first year of conflict.

P. Nash
On the morning of the 20th November 2013, a brave man stepped up to the podium of the Ukrainian Rada during the plenary meeting of parliament. As he spoke a chant began amongst radical ministers in the back benches, in an attempt to deter the speaker – Oleh Tsariov, MP for the Party of Regions.

Tsariov claimed that the United States Embassy in Kiev was in violation of the UN Declaration on the ‘Inadmissibility of Intervention and Interference in the Internal Affairs of States’. He requested a police investigation concerning information that the Americans were training Ukrainian extremist elements in régime change techniques, which included information warfare and mass protest methods used previously in Libya, Egypt and Syria. According to his sources, over three hundred Ukrainian citizens had passed through ‘TechCamp’ training, the last session having been held at the US Embassy the previous week.

Drowned out by the unceasing chant of his political opponents, Tsariov failed to raise any concern among his fellow Ukrainian ministers.

The very next day on November 21st 2013, civil protests erupted when President Yanukovych announced he would not sign an economic integration deal with the EU. Soon after and into December, organized groups of protesters occupied Kiev City Hall and Independence Square, the so-called “Maidan”.

Such unrest would, at first glance, seem normal in a country so riven by corruption that it qualified as a kleptocracy... if not for an editorial written by Carl Gershman, the President for the National Endowment for Democracy, printed in the Washington Post on September 26th two months earlier. In it he asserted that “Ukraine is the
“biggest prize” and “opportunities are considerable, and there are important ways Washington could help”. Ominous words in an article which was squarely aimed at Russian foreign policy, openly encouraging Russians to oust Putin at the next election.

Caught between either joining the ostensibly dynamic European Union, albeit as a subordinate partner – or facing the imposition of tariffs on all trade with the member countries of the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) Free Trade Zone Agreement, President Yanukovych vacillated. Ukraine could ill afford to pay increased duties on goods it exported to its largest market, yet the Ukrainian people wanted the chance for economic migration EU citizenship offered, as it had for Poland, the Baltic States and others.

The Euromaidan protests continued to grow, mostly common folk showing solidarity against corruption in the ruling government. However several highly organized militant groups soon emerged, notable for their nationalistic ideology and WWII Nazi related iconography. The same gangs who would later form the Azov, Aidar, Right Sector and Tornado guard battalions, and others.

More worrisome were the visits of US Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland on the 11th of December, who notoriously passed out sandwiches to both protesters and police in the Maidan; soon followed by US Senator John McCain four days later, himself mounting a stage and stating that Ukraine’s destiny lay with Europe – while standing next to opposition leaders including the head of the neo-nazi Svoboda party.

The message of United States support could not have been clearer.

Far from defusing the situation, civil disorder continued into 2014. Escalating assaults by protesters against the Berkut (Ukrainian riot police) forced the Rada to pass a new law on the 16th January restricting the right to publicly demonstrate. This raised tensions still further.

With the eyes of international media now firmly focused on the protests, Yanukovych was chastised by the very European governments he had initially negotiated an association agreement with. Led by one of the militant groups called ‘Right Sector’ the situation exploded – with stones, fireworks and Molotov cocktails being thrown at the unarmed Berkut police, who vainly attempted to contain the rising violence.

To pacify the rioters, Yanukovych offered senior political posts to his political opposition. In response his own Prime Minister and cabinet resigned, followed by parliament annulling the new anti-protest laws and offering amnesty to previously arrested protesters, under the condition that occupied government buildings were returned. Thus the Ukrainian President’s attempt to defuse the situation only weakened his position still further.

Alarmed at what they saw as foreign meddling in their neighboring country, the Russians reacted with the release of an intercepted private phone call on February 4th between Victoria Nuland and Geoffrey Pyatt (the US Ambassador to Ukraine). The call, later admitted as genuine by the State Department, revealed an ugly truth regarding US support of regime change; with both participants caught openly planning
Prelude to War

the structure of a new government. Worse still was Nuland’s dismissal of European attempts to resolve the situation diplomatically with her now infamous “Fuck the EU” comment.

At this point violence spiraled out of control across central and western regions of Ukraine. In Kiev the ultra-nationalist groups were now armed with clubs, knives, chains and even firearms – pistols, assault rifles and sniper rifles. Worse still, indiscriminate use of Molotov cocktails Maidan militants were threatening both Berkut officers and innocent bystanders. On the 18th of February clashes resulted in the deaths of 11 pro-testers and 7 police (with another 241 injured, including 79 Berkut and 5 journalists). Over the subsequent two days another 88 people died, both protesters and police, most of whom were killed by sniper fire.

(Subsequently, it was proven by physical evidence, eyewitness accounts, and voluntary confessions, that the sniper fire came from US-backed Georgian mercenaries firing at both protesters and police.)

In desperation President Yanukovych signed a settlement with opposition parties on February 21st to end the crisis. Backed by the EU he agreed to a Constitutional reform limiting his presidential powers, early elections, a third amnesty for rioters, and to further refrain from violence.

Despite signing the document, Yanukovych immediately fled Ukraine, abandoning his country at a critical moment. His act precipitated a counter-uprising by ethnic Russian supporters in the south and east of the country, viewing the violent Euromaidan riots as a coup d’etat against their legitimate and democratically elected president.

Stunned outrage in these regions rapidly turned to fear when just two days later, the provisional interim government declared an intent to repeal the law protecting use of the Russian Language. This, combined with ugly anti-Russian sentiments now being openly expressed by ultra-nationalists, was enough to push Crimea towards yet another independence referendum, its third since the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991 and subsequent Constitutional struggles under Ukrainian rule.

The Russian military, legitimately present in leased bases they’d held in Crimea since 1783, deployed across the peninsular to maintain civic order (as several deaths had already occurred) as well as ensure Ukrainian troops couldn’t interfere. Despite claims to the contrary, international observers reported that the March 16th vote was peaceful and showed overwhelming Crimean support to reunify with Russia. A fact later proven by subsequent polling by Gallup and the German GfK.

As the rest of Ukraine continued to polarize, victorious Euromaidan activists transmuted from protests against corruption to a disturbing censure of ethnic Russians who did not support the coup. This blossomed into outright racism. Videos of nationalists jumping up and down to cries of “Moskals on a gibbet”, “Moskals on knives”, “One language, one Ukraine, Hail to the Heroes!” began to spread via TV stations and social media... 'Moskal' being a pejorative term for ethnic Russians, which soon began to be used at schools, sports games and every social gathering. Yet more hostility followed, with assaults on journalists who criticized the new government’s policies.

Inspired by Crimea, pro-Russian demonstrations began in the southern and eastern oblasts of Odessa, Mykolaiv, Kherson, Dnipropetrovsk, Kharkiv, Luhansk and Donetsk. Protesters began occupying Regional State Administration buildings. However resistance in
most areas collapsed when SBU officers started to crack down. Violent confrontations continued throughout March into April, causing the creation of self-defence militias by anti-coup ethnic Russian Ukrainian citizens.

Despite the tense situation, a political settlement was salvageable at this point. Anti-Russian sentiment was still largely contained within extreme ultra-nationalist groups, now labeled as ‘Banderites’ for their lionization of the infamous WWII Ukrainian Nazi. Pro-Russian separatism had majority, but not universal acceptance among locals, who did not want any trouble from the authorities.

Few noted the visit CIA Director John Brennan made to Kiev on April 12th. Within 24 hours of his secret meeting with acting Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk and subsequent covert departure, the Verkhovna Rada sent in the military to crush resistance, thereby crossing its own Rubicon.

Two days later the government followed up by declaring the start of the ATO (Anti Terrorist Operation) against pro-Russian separatists, thereby launching a civil war which continues to this day.
Chapter 1

From Dallas to Donetsk

When I was in junior high school in Houston, Texas, back in the 1970’s, our social studies class watched D.W. Griffith’s Birth of a Nation. Our teacher, Miss Crawford, went on and on about what a masterpiece it was, but I was not impressed. Forty years later, I am in the Donetsk People’s Republic, watching the birth of a nation, for real, and it is mighty impressive indeed. We have fought the Ukrainian Army to a standstill. Our new Republic is strong – militarily, politically, economically and philosophically. And continues to get stronger every day.

Since I arrived here, I have fought as a DPR soldier with the Essence of Time combat unit at the Donetsk Airport and at Spartak, and Avdeevka, and also as an Information Warrior, fighting against the genuinely Fascist regimes in Kiev, Brussels, London and Washington D.C. As a soldier on the front lines, I carried an AK-74, with an effective range of about 400 meters, and an RPG, with a range of about 900 meters. As an Information Warrior, my words are my bullets, and they can reach around the world. I will be making regular reports about the birth and growth of my new country, and will be doing everything I can to keep it safe and to make sure that it fulfills all the great potential that a brand new nation in the 21st Century implies.

I invite you to follow this story, and contribute if you can. This is one of Fascism’s major setback, like the US withdrawal from Vietnam or its stagnation in Afghanistan, and what we have done here can possibly change the world. As the shooting war seems to be winding down, the Information War will be even more important, and the reconstruction and recovery begins. There are many ways to help. Join us. Here’s how I did it.
I came to Donetsk in December 2014, after following closely the events in Kiev, Odessa and Southeast Ukraine (Donbass). I was outraged by what I saw, and also felt a personal responsibility as a US citizen, because there can be no doubt that the phony Maidan coup would never have happened without US backing and direction. Already sickened and enraged by the US crimes against Yugoslavia, Iraq, Libya, I followed closely events in Ukraine.

On May 2nd, 2014, mass murder of anti-nazi protesters in Odessa. Scores, perhaps hundreds (the exact figure is still unknown) burned alive in an intentional act of terrorism. One month later, June 2nd, 2014, an airstrike on Lugansk City Hall, another terror attack by the Ukrainian government against civilians. One of the many victims was a woman named Inna Kukuruza, who lost both legs in the attack and died a few minutes later. In those last minutes of her life, someone made a video from which a picture was produced. She looked into the camera as if to ask, “What will you do about this?” When I saw that photo, I knew I was coming to Donbass, to defend people like Inna, to avenge her murder, and to punish those who had killed her.

Once my decision to come here was made, I told my friends and family about my plans. Most did not believe I would really do it, but I have been known to do some audacious things in my life, and they should have known better. I sold most of my possessions to finance the trip, including my beloved motorcycle, and gave away the rest. I had a final Thanksgiving dinner with my family and a few close friends, and left Dallas on December 1st, with a one-way ticket to Rostov on Don. It was like diving off a seaside cliff with my eyes closed. The movie “Stalingrad” was playing on the plane as we flew across the Atlantic, and I found it quite inspiring.
I landed at Vnukovo Airport in Moscow after midnight. As the saying goes, “I spent a week in Moscow one night.” After passing through customs and airport security, I went to the only kiosk open and asked for a cup of coffee in my very limited Russian. I then reached in my back pocket for my money, and it was not there. Neither was my passport.

Few Americans ever experience what this might feel like, alone in a foreign country halfway around the world, with a different language, no money and no passport. I had determined to come to Donbass to be a soldier, fight fascism and try to change the world. When my family suggested I might be biting off more than I could chew, I told them I was smart and tough enough to do it. I had been on foreign soil for less than an hour, and it seemed I was already totally screwed. Naturally, I sat down and had a good laugh.

I took a few moments to gather my thoughts. The last place I remember having my passport was at airport security, so it must be there. So, dragging my huge duffle bag and two suitcases, I made my way back to the checkpoint thinking that, if I had left my money there (about $3,000) the cops would have to have a lot of integrity to give it back. I knew the Russian word for money, “dinghe,” and, feeling like a fool, walked up to these cops and asked. They said “nyet”. Now I was starting to get a little nervous. I started patting down all my pockets, and – lo and behold – in the side pocket of my cargo pants was my passport and all my money.

I dragged my baggage back to the lobby of the airport, sat down and had another good laugh. I went back to the coffee kiosk and triumphantly ordered another cup of coffee, anticipating what I thought would be the most enjoyable and memorable cup of coffee in my life. The barista set the coffee on the counter, and I handed her a five-dollar bill. She shook her head and said, “rubles”... of which of course I had none. So, after getting a drink of Moscow tap-water from the bathroom sink, I sat down to ponder my future and await the opening of the money exchange and my flight to Rostov. It was a long night.

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The next morning, after exchanging a thousand dollars for rubles, I finally got that cup of coffee and caught the plane to Rostov. We landed in a blizzard; under all that snow, the Rostov airport looked like a Mexican airport from the 1960s. So, I wasn’t just in Russia, I was in the Russian boondocks, and going even further into the wild, wild East, to be on the small side of a big war, on the Russian steppes, in winter, at the age of 54. But I was game, and moved ahead. I made my way to the guesthouse where I had reserved a room online before I left Texas.

After communication via online translator with my host, I made my way to a nearby store, bought a bottle of vodka and a microwave pizza and went back and had myself some rest. The next day I got up and took a stroll around town, managed to buy a cheap cellphone and read my first Russian word in Russia – “Банк”, “Bank”. Not too big of a stretch, obviously, but I felt like a real genius.

Back around the time I was watching Griffith’s “masterpiece” in junior high, I saw a photograph of the monument to the heroes of Stalingrad at Mamayev Kurgan. It was beautiful and inspiring, and I had wanted to see it ever since, but never expected to, never imagined that it would ever be even remotely possible. But when I made
my decision to come to Donetsk via Rostov, and saw that Volgograd and Mamayev Kurgan were only about 500km away, I decided to make a side trip before crossing the border into the DPR. So, after a couple of days in Rostov, I caught a bus to Volgograd, to Stalingrad. As we drove across the vast and empty Russian Steppes... through another blizzard, of course... at one point the bus engine stalled. It took about 15 minutes to get going, and during that time I realized that as lightly dressed as I was, if the engine did not start, I would probably freeze before help arrived. The chill I felt was not entirely due to the sub-zero temperatures. Thanks to good luck and Russian ingenuity, we made it.

I got a room in an upscale but very reasonably priced hotel, and checked the map to see how to get to the monument I had wanted to see for over 40 years. I got up at 4 a.m. and dressed in warmer clothes decided I would walk the 10km from my hotel to the monument. It was still dark when I started out, but I knew the direction and had the mighty Volga river to guide me. On the way, I passed a great statue of Lenin and the famous sculpture of the children dancing around the chained crocodile.

I arrived at Mamayev Kurgan a little after dawn, and found myself alone... just me and the ghosts of a million heroes, and I must admit, the experience moved me to tears. I spent several hours there, and truly felt as if the spirits of those heroes appreciated my coming to pay my respects. Later, I caught the trolley back to the hotel and spent the evening in the hotel bar trying to seduce the beautiful bartender, Sveta, to no avail. The next morning, with a bit of a hangover, I made the trip back to Rostov with a guardian angel on my shoulder. Though I did not “get lucky” with Sveta that night, I have been very, very lucky many times since.

Back in Rostov I made a trip to the army surplus store where I bought three sets of camouflage: green, white and brown. Two days later I again rose before dawn, this time to catch the bus to Donetsk. As I stood on the platform, smoking a
cigarette, two Russian policemen approached me and pointed to the No Smoking sign right behind me. They asked in rudimentary English where I was going and for my passport. Reading my name, one smiled and said, “Ah, Russell, like Russell Crowe.” I smiled back and said, “Da, ya gladiator.”

Though it is only about 200km from Rostov to Donetsk, the trip took most of the day. When we arrived at the border crossing, everyone was instructed to exit the bus and bring all their baggage in to the Customs station to be checked. The Russian official asked the purpose of my trip to Donetsk and I replied “To visit friends.” In reply to his question about my camouflage uniforms, it took me a few minutes to find the words “Christmas presents” in my Russian phrase book. He smiled and let me pass.

On the DPR side of the border, the Customs shed had bullet and shrapnel holes from recent battles, and as we waited for our passports to be checked, I realized I was now in a different world. A very different world indeed.

The trip from the border was uneventful, but along the way we passed several bombed out and deserted villages, as well as abandoned blockposts and trenches. After passing through the military checkpoint at the Donetsk city limits, the bus made a stop so people could exchange rubles for grivnas with a guy standing on the street who had a briefcase full of money and two friends with Kalashnikovs. At that time there were no working banks in the DPR, but essential services like money exchange were still provided one way or another. We arrived at the bus station as the sun was setting. It was the evening of December 7th, 2014.
Less than five minutes after I got off the bus I heard artillery firing and impacting just a few kilometers away. It was heavy ordnance, and plenty of it, but everyone at the bus station just went about their business as normal, so I did the same. I caught a cab, at only double the normal rate, to the Red Cat hostel, where I met for the first time Christian Malaparte, a writer who had been living and working in Donetsk since May. We had corresponded on Facebook prior to my arrival, and I was very, very glad to meet someone who spoke English and some Russian, and was willing to help. So, that’s how I got to Donetsk, and getting here was the easy part.
Chapter 2

The Red Cat, the Dragon and the SBU

The Red Cat was a nice, clean place, and cost me about $3 a night. Though it hosted 15 beds, there were just three of us staying there: yours truly, Christian Malaparte and a strange but cool young German guy who called himself Billy Six.

As we sat drinking vodka, Christian gave me the rundown on the situation in Donetsk, and I gave him my first interview. Though we were in a safe place (the Red Cat hostel is on the ground floor surrounded by other tall buildings, impossible to hit with artillery) the steady fire, like distant thunder, was a constant reminder I was ‘not in Kansas anymore’. I had an address that was purported to be the place to volunteer for the Novorossiyan Army, and Christian offered to take me there the next day... early, early in the morning..

Even though Christian had been in Donetsk for more than half a year, it took us a while to find the address – a garage with a steel door guarded by two partisans with mismatched camouflage and Kalashnikovs. When Christian asked (in his passable Russian) if this was the place for volunteers, the guards knocked on the door, an officer appeared and after a short consultation said, “Nyet.”

They gave us another address, where we got identical treatment — another “Nyet” and another address, this time back to the former SBU (Ukrainian FBI) headquarters complex, which by fortunate coincidence was only a few hundred meters from the Red Cat. As we had spent most of the day running around from address to address, we decided we would talk to the guys at the SBU building the following day, so we took a short stroll around the neighborhood, then went back to the Cat and drank vodka...

1 Christian Malaparte’s interview - https://cbmalaparte.wordpress.com/2014/12/22/dont-mess-with-texas-ukrop/
The SBU office on Prospect Mira is an interesting and imposing place, and pretty much exactly like what you would expect the secret police headquarters of a former Soviet city to look like. A complex of several tall buildings, surrounded by a stone wall topped with razor wire, and only one small gate for entry or exit, guarded by soldiers with AKs and PKM machine guns. There were bullet and rocket holes on the exterior and interior of the building, remnants of the battle when the locals had wrested control of the complex from the cops who had thrown in with the new fascist regime in Kiev. There was a yellow and blue Ukrainian flag, used as a doormat at the entrance to the main building.

We approached the guards. Christian explained I was there to volunteer. They checked my passport and said “Da”... but Christian wasn't a volunteer. He was not allowed to enter. I was on my own. Stepping across that threshold I realized I was embarking on a new chapter in my life, something that would change me forever, for better or for worse. In the not so distant distance, artillery continued to thunder.

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The SBU complex was a perfect introduction to Novorossiyan military life. I was taken to a crowded room full of other volunteers, given a blanket and place to sleep on the floor, told that lunch would be at 2 p.m. and to wait. And so I waited. The lunch was very basic fare – soup and kasha, a buckwheat dish with just a hint of meat for flavoring. Then, back to the room to wait.

Mid-afternoon, all volunteers were taken to another room for a lecture from a grizzled sergeant. As I sat there, among about 25 other volunteers, listening but not understanding a single word, I wondered to myself how the hell I was actually going to pull this off.

When the sergeant finished the lecture, I heard a guy in the back say, “Javier, I will translate what the sergeant said into English for you in a minute.” I was in luck! I approached and said I would like a translation as well. The young English speaker, Orion, looked at me and said, “You’re not Russian?” I replied that I was from the States. “What state?” he asked. “Texas.” “Me too!” “What city?” “Austin.” “ME TOO!” We then embraced, to the applause of all volunteers.

Orion was born in Moscow, but moved with his family to Texas when he was 10. He spent most of the next 20 years just a few miles down the road from where I lived in Austin. But in spite of our previous proximity in Texas, we had to come to the secret police headquarters in the hinterlands of the former Soviet Union to actually meet.

Javier was an older guy, a romantic idealist from Spain, not so much a Communist but a genuine antifascist who was willing to give his life for what he believed in. He soon adopted the callsign “Toro”, presumably due to legends about Spaniards and their bull fighting. As evening approached I explained that the Red Cat was only a few minutes away, and nice accommodations were available for only a couple bucks. So, rather than sleep on the barracks floor, we retired to The Cat to drink vodka, eat pelmeni and get up early, early in the morning...

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2 An AK (Avtomat Kalashnikova) is a Kalashnikov rifle. A PKM (Pulemyot Kalashnikova Modyernizirovannyiy) is a Soviet designed 7.62 mm general-purpose machine gun first introduced in 1969. It remains in use as a front-line infantry and vehicle mounted weapon with militaries worldwide.
The Red Cut, the Dragon and the SBU

Boarded up bookstore in downtown Donetsk, December 2014
I used to be a weed smuggler. One of the many useful things I learned from that vocation was patience. I would call my connections in South Texas, tell them I was coming with money from Minnesota, 2,000 miles away, and to have a load ready for me when I got there. Invariably, when I arrived, the load was not there. I was always told, “They will cross the river tonight at midnight, so be ready,”

“early, early in the morning.” Sometimes this would go on for weeks. Though I don’t think there were any Mexicans in charge of the Donetsk SBU, they had perfected the same technique. We would get up... yes... early, early in the morning, present ourselves at the SBU HQ and be told to wait. The officer we needed to talk to would arrive before lunch. At lunch we were told he would be there right after lunch, and then, right after dinner. Every night, around 8 p.m., we were told the officer would not be coming today, but to be ready tomorrow. Early, early in the morning.

On the third day Orion, Toro and I were told we would be going for a special interview at the Military Intelligence office. We were interviewed for hours by three MGB agents – two clean cut super fit soldiers, Sergei and Ivan, and a third guy who did not introduce himself nor did he speak. On his black shirt, in English, was emblazoned his name: “The Dragon”.

From left to right “Toro”, Igor, “Texas” and Christian
The questioning went on for most of the day. It seemed they were mostly asking questions of me, with Orion interpreting. At one point Sergei drew his Makarov pistol, unloaded it and passed it to me to see if I knew how to disassemble it. In the moment between when he drew his gun and my understanding why, I had a very lonely feeling of being in a very strange place, a long way from home. I disassembled and reassembled the Makarov, then did the same with an AK.

After many hours it looked like we were going to pass the interrogation. The Dragon got up, walked across the room and started making some tea. Then for the first time he spoke. In English, he asked “Do you believe the U.S. Government was involved in the attacks on 9/11?” I answered in the affirmative, saying only a fool could think otherwise. The Dragon did not smile, but he nodded. It was time for tea for all of us. I passed around my American Marlboros and then we were taken back to the SBU building, where we were told we had passed the questioning and an officer would be by to meet us... early, early in the morning.

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And this continued for a week. The delay seemed to stem from the fact that the SBU office was headquarters of Motorola’s Sparta Brigade, a top unit in the Novorossiya Army, but without a component for foreign volunteers. Finally, on Sunday, Dec. 14, with the help of Christian, we made our way to the headquarters of Battalion VOSTOK. After a short interview with commanders, we were asked if we wanted to join tonight or... yes, you guessed it... early in the morning. We still had our baggage at the Red Cat, had already paid for the night, and wanted to have one last good meal before we officially became soldiers. We went to an excellent restaurant in Lenin Square, a place called “Tyrol” with a German motif. We ordered a meter of sausage, liters of beer, and toasted our induction into the Novorossiyan armed forces. We had come here to be soldiers and fight Nazis, and that is what we were going to do. The next day, we would begin our Basic Training, this time for real. I had been in Donetsk for exactly one week, and I would be in the Army tomorrow.
Chapter 3

There is no Water in Yasynuvata

Orion, Toro and I arrived at Base 4, on the outskirts of Donetsk, to be tested before traveling to Yasynuvata, (pronounced “Iznava”) a small town about 20 kilometers north of Donetsk where the basic training center for Battalion Vostok was located.

After we filled out some paperwork, a very strong and serious young soldier checked our weapons handling skills, made sure we knew how to field strip the AK and the SKS, and had us do 40 push-ups. Toro had a bit of a struggle, but we all passed. We then went to another room to get our dog-tags and IDs.

Everybody in the Novorossiyan Armed Forces (NAF) has a callsign, a code name to be used at all times instead of your real name. I had given some thought to what mine would be, and had chosen the name “Witco” in honor of one of my personal heroes, Crazy Horse. His name in the Lakota language is “Tashunka Witko”. In Lakota, the word “Witko” means “Crazy”. A perfect name for a soldier, or so I thought.

When I said that was what I wanted for my callsign, the soldier filling out the paperwork hesitated and looked confused. Orion, who was doing the interpreting, told me the name would probably be hard for Russians to pronounce, maybe I should choose another one. I thought for a moment and said, “OK, how about ‘Texas’?” It worked. It is pronounced in the Russian fashion, which is very similar to the way the Indians and Mexicans pronounced it “Tay-HASS”.

1 Many commanders and soldiers in the NAF have code names that are geographical places or features – Volga, Baikal, Altai. So “Texas” was a good choice, and as someone pointed out, Texas is one of the few states in the U.S. that every Russian has heard of. Good thing I wasn’t born in New Hampshire. It probably wouldn’t have been the same...
Having passed muster at Base 4, we loaded ourselves and all our gear into a van for the trip to Yasynuvata. As we drove, we passed through several checkpoints and saw signs of recent battles, including a blown-up bridge. When we turned off the main road, our driver pointed to the north and casually mentioned we were now in a combat zone and the Ukrainian Army were in positions less than 2km away – well within range of tank and BMP guns. It was looking like the training we were going to get would be “OTJ”, “on-the-job” training. And it was.

When we pulled into town we came up to another checkpoint, manned by new recruits from Vostok boot camp. Three guys with AK-74’s and one with a PKM machine gun stopped all traffic going in or out of town. Checking papers, opening trunks and generally looking for Ukrop2 “diversants” (recon/sabotage units). With the Ukrop positions so close, it was serious business. Passing through the checkpoint we shortly came to the Vostok training camp – an old train repair facility surrounded by a stone wall topped with razor wire, with armed guards at the gate. The first thing we saw when we got out of the van was an artillery hole from an 82 mm mortar in the roof of the dining hall. We were shown the cellar / bomb shelter, then taken to the barracks.

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Army barracks are not generally known for their opulence, and boot camp is supposed to be tough. Vostok boot camp was no exception. In fact, it was the hardest thing I had ever done in my life up to that point. It wasn’t the training that was hard, it was the conditions. We were crammed into a medium sized conference room that had about 40 ancient Russian Army cots with about 14 inches of space between each one. Being December, it was freezing cold outside, so the windows stayed closed. The smell of 40 soldiers who bathed once a week took some getting used to. But we did.

The food could only be described as horrible, the same exact thing, every meal, every day: a vegetable (and by “vegetable” I mean mostly potato) soup and Kasha, a buckwheat dish with only a hint of meat. Tea was the constant drink, strong and very sweet. We washed our bowls and cups in dishwater a regular person would not wash their work boots in.

The toilet was an outhouse without that had seen its better days; literally an opening in the floor that led to a pit encrusted in shit. The stench was overwhelming. The ambiance left much to be desired. But it did teach me a lesson that would soon serve me in good stead at the Front – eat less, so you have to shit less.

The bathing facilities were opened once a week – a Russian “Banya” with a steam room and birch branches for flagellating yourself clean. The Ukrops had bombed the water pumping station, and every time we fixed it, they would bomb it again, so the whole town had no running water. We got ours from nearby wells in the yards of abandoned homes... the kind of wells you see in fairy tales, with the little roof, the bucket on a chain and a crank. We filled multiple twenty liter milk cans from those wells every day, enough water for about 200 people, and carried it back to our base.

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2 In Russian, the word “Ukrop” means “dill”, a spice commonly used in Ukrainian cuisine. It is a pejorative term, like “Moskal” is for Russians.
Most of the new recruits were flat broke, and every time I went outside for a smoke I would smoke one and give five away. For a while I thought my new name in Russian was “Dait cigarette”, “Give me a cigarette.” It got old fast, but how could I refuse? These were my new comrades, some of whom I would soon be in battle with, and besides, why not pass them out? I am a communist. I had about $3,000, and I did not expect to live to see the spring.

I had spent three years in the U.S. Army, in the early 80s; three months of which was basic training. Basic training in the Novorossiyan Army was just two weeks. I fired a total of 12 bullets through an AK-74, (of which 10 hit the head-sized target from 100 meters.) We did PT every morning, and the first day I puked four times, but I did not quit. I was 54 years old, fat and out of shape, running around with badass Novorossiyan partisans less than half my age. But I did not quit. And this was noted, and it did impress them.

Of the two hundred soldiers stationed at the base, half were new recruits, half veterans who rotated between tours at the airport and training the new guys. December 2014 and January 2015 were the times of the hardest fighting at Donetsk Airport. And that was our area of operations. The guys who came back from the airport always had that haunted look. It was the grinder to which all of us were going, but from which not all of us would return.

Our second week of basic training consisted of two six-hour shifts per day, (noon to 6 p.m./midnight to 6 a.m.) manning checkpoints and guard positions. It was serious business. Just a few weeks earlier, two guards at a checkpoint less than a mile from ours were found with their weapons gone and their throats cut. We had a three-man team – Orion, who spoke Russian and English, and Toro and I who spoke English and Spanish. I carried a PKM, kept it loaded and close.
Donbass Cowboy

We spent Christmas Eve, from midnight to 6 a.m. at our checkpoint, the same one we had passed through less than two weeks earlier. It was getting cold, but we stayed on our toes. The local civilians really appreciated what we were doing, and would bring us tea, pastries, sometimes even a shot of vodka.

One night, a car with four guys in it pulled up kind of late. Orion asked the driver for his papers and then said to me in English, “They’re state cops.” “Cool,” I said, “Let’s have them get out and open the trunk.” And they did, because the guy with the PKM said so. And it was legit, because not all the cops in Donetsk Oblast were loyal to the people of the DNR. But I could not help thinking about how back in my old home state of Texas, the goddamned state police, called the “Department of Public Safety,” often do roadside cavity searches, looking for small amounts of drugs. That shit don’t fly in the DNR. Take a lesson from it. Here, the People’s Army searches the cops. And so we did. It was a most satisfying experience.

During my training I earned a reputation as a good soldier. I was approached by a couple of snipers from Суть Времени, (СВ) pronounced “Soot Vremeny”, which
in Russian means “Essence of Time”. Both snipers spoke Spanish. So did I. Alfonzo was from Colombia, Mars was a Russian volunteer. Both combat veterans, Mars was considered to be one of the deadliest snipers in the Novorussian Army. Over a clandestine bottle of wine in the officer’s dining hall we discussed political philosophy and military experience. Yes, I was a Communist, yes, I had military training from the U.S. Army, and yes, I had some combat experience from a couple of incidents in Mexico. Would I like to join Суть Времени? Of course. But it would be a package deal, with Orion and Toro coming too.

When I told Orion that a couple of snipers from an elite unit of Vostok Battalion had invited us to join, he was enthusiastic. I actually mispronounced the name, saying “Sud Vremeny” instead of “Sut Vremeny”. “Sud Vremeny” in Russian means “Judgement Day”, which sounded like a cool name. We were all in. I did not know much about the unit when I joined, only that they were highly regarded as warriors and communists, and at least a couple of them spoke Spanish, so I could communicate with them. That was enough for me.

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During my two weeks at Yasynuvata, I contracted a bad respiratory infection, a hacking cough with the neon mucous that has that hideous sweet taste when you spit it out. I was given some medicine by the medic, but it had little effect, so I just worked through it. Orion caught the same cold, bad enough to be taken to the hospital back in Donetsk. Mine was just as bad, but I declined the hospital trip. Which meant I was going to the airport within the next 48 hours. I traded in my PKM for an AK-74 and five 30-round magazines. I was asked if I wanted a helmet and bulletproof vest. Well… Hell, yeah I did! I still had no idea what I would be facing at the airport, but I knew I was going to be getting shot at. I was given a marginal helmet with a broken chin strap and an excellent Class 5 steel vest, and told to be ready to leave at any time.

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On the night of Dec. 30 I was told to be ready to go at 4 a.m. the following morning. Orion, my only interpreter, was in the hospital. Toro would remain in Yasynuvata for further training. Alfonzo and Mars would not be returning to the airport for several days. I was on my own. I would be going to spend New Year’s Eve 2014 at the Donetsk Airport with a machine gun in my hands.

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3 Some people in this world are born to be warriors, hunters; natural apex predators who are experts at hunting and killing and butchering. Some are good guys, some are bad guys, but I am not one of them. But I can do it if I have to. There are things worth dying for, so there are things worth killing for. And there are things worse than death. And when someone comes to do something worse than death to you and yours, you have a right to kill them. An obligation. Before I came to Donbass, I had several experiences in Mexico. Some guys were coming to kill me, or they were coming to kill me and my friends. They died trying. Self-defense. No apologies, end of story.
THE ESSENCE OF TIME MOVEMENT

Суть Времени, Essence of Time, is a Russian movement founded and led by political scientist, philosopher and theater director Sergei Kurginyan. Its ideology is a mixture of communism with Russian patriotic elements. The movement’s manifesto declares that the dissolution of the Soviet Union was a great tragedy with the objective to restitute the USSR in a better and more capable form. Ascertainment of what was responsible for the USSR’s fall is considered a key step in this process.

According to Kurginyan, capitalism is inherently incompatible with Russian historical and cultural heritage. Since the fall of the USSR in 1991 “capitalism in Russia has not built anything, and destroyed everything”, but, fortunately, after 20 years, Russia is slowly starting to “wake up”. The dissolution of the USSR was just a part of a game, played by postmodern entities against “Soviet history and humanity”. Kurginyan considers his manifesto to be a new Communist manifesto, focused on analysis of the new bourgeoisie, whose nature has evolved since Marx’s time.

The movement is grounded in modern philosophy and incorporates the ideas of Karl Marx, Max Weber, Erich Fromm, Antonio Gramsci, Alexander Bogdanov, Viktor Frankl, and others. One of the main principles of the movement’s ideology is the ascription of great importance to the human spirit as a philosophical category, which is considered to be linked directly to the question of the ascent of humanity. It subscribes to conception of uber-modernity, not to be confused with post-modernity, and on this principle hopes to build a new historical path for Russia. The movement conceives a great role for Russia in moving the world out of the global crisis of capitalism, based on the country’s previous experience of alternatives.

Essence of Time seeks to unite people with socialist and communist political views as well as those with patriotic belief and Orthodox Christian values, hoping to create a spiritual synthesis.

One of the primary aims of the organization is a revival of the Soviet Union based upon new principles, taking into account the mistakes of the past. It envisions a new red union state - one of equal nations where the Russian nation adopts the role of the state’s core.

The ultimate goal of the movement is the bringing to life the best of communism’s ideas; namely a state of being in society which provides for the awakening and development of the higher creative abilities of every human being.
At 4 o’clock in the morning on New Year’s Eve 2014, I left Yasynuvata in the back of a dark blue minibus. With me were two backpacks full of clothes and gear. I had a good Kevlar helmet with a defective chin strap, and the best type of body armor that I have ever seen anybody wear in the Novorussian Armed Forces – Class 5 steel in a slim black vest. Heavy, about ten kilos, but worth it. In Russian, body armor is called “Bronik-gilette”, or just “Bronik”. Your bronik is your friend.

I also had an AK-74 “Avtomat” and five loaded magazines – one in the gun and four in the web gear I had bought in Rostov. My sleeping bag, also bought in Rostov, was a 3XL bag rated for the Arctic. It was reasonably priced and turned out to be one of the best investments I have ever made in my life. I learned to love that sleeping bag like a beautiful sweetheart. My Avtomat too, was like a girlfriend, even if it wasn’t always faithful. Everybody at the front has a name for their rifle. Mine was named “Софи”, “Sophie”, after my youngest niece.

The van had ultra-dark tinted windows, but it didn’t really matter because they were thickly frosted inside and out. As the saying goes, “you couldn’t see shit.” I was crammed in with half a dozen other soldiers, along with so much stuff – food, water, soup, ammo, clothes, blankets and weapons – that we barely had room to breathe. The mood was somber, serious. It reminded me of the U.S. Marshal vans I had ridden in, on my way to prison, in a former life.

I was heading into the unknown, where the only thing known was that it was not going to be pleasant. Before I left, I was told I would be at the airport only a day or two. Good thing I packed. You remember my earlier quote saying how “I spent a week in Moscow one night”? Well, I spent half my life at Troishka in a couple of weeks.
Donbass Cowboy

Church at Iverskey Monastery

Military map of the control tower at Donetsk airport December 2014
It took us almost an hour to get to the airport, some 25km from Yasinuvata to Donetsk, then another 6km or so to the airport. My Russian language skills were so poor, I couldn’t really say anything; the few comments the other guys made were totally incomprehensible. Without Orion as an interpreter, I was cut out of the stilted conversation.

Finally, the van came to a stop and the side door slid open. It was dawn, still dark and very cold. The driver motioned for me to get out, and I did. I thought we all would, but it was only me and the driver.

We were standing in front of what was left of an Eastern Orthodox church that had been heavily bombed, its roof ruined from the shelling. Every square meter of the exterior bore several dozen bullet holes or shrapnel scars. Some 500 meters directly behind the church was the New Terminal, occupied by the “Cyborgs” of the Ukrainian Army. Everything between the church and New Terminal was just an open field, or so I thought, until I looked a little closer and realized it was in fact a cemetery. A big one with a couple thousand graves. It reminded me of the final scene in the movie “The Good, The Bad and The Ugly”.

I was standing in front of a bombed out church in the middle of a graveyard, going to war in a strange foreign country that I had been in for less than a month. I realized I could get killed today, any second, starting right now. It felt like I was standing outside of time, but I knew I didn’t really have time to stand outside of time right then. I was “all in” as we say in Texas Hold ‘Em poker, and now I had to play the hand that I had dealt myself.

As the driver and I unloaded supplies in front of the church, four soldiers approached from the nearby convent building, where the combat position “Troishka” was located. (“Troishka” because the structure had three stories — or used to have three stories.) They were regular looking guys, except for the fact they all carried machine guns, wore helmets and bulletproof vests, with ammo clips and grenades festooned all over their torsos, and were very serious. Fortunately, our first conversation was easy. The word for “sniper” in Russian is pronounced almost the same as in English, kind of like “shnaypair”. When they pointed toward the New Terminal and control tower and said that word, I knew exactly what they were talking about. I understood.

It took us a few trips to hump all the gear the 100 meters or so from the drop-off point in front of the church to the ground floor of Troishka. The ammo first, then the food and water, and finally my personal gear. We ran across the hundred meters between the front of the church and the door of the Monastery. Every move we made outside was under Ukrop observation and fire, therefore potentially fatal. So we moved quickly.

Once completed, we ventured inside the door of the three story Monastery, turned right and went up the stairs, passing a switchback landing with a guard post and

1 Part of the Saint Iversky Monastery

2 All “Invincible Cyborgs” were killed, surrendered, or ran away from the New Terminal on the night of January 15th, 2015. They have not been back since.
an AGS-17 grenade launcher. The door to the second floor was sealed by a sheet of plastic and a heavy rug, almost completely airtight. I stepped inside, into almost total darkness and a thick haze of smoke from the wood burning stoves that were the only source of heat for our quarters and for cooking. Even though the sun had begun to rise outside, the darkness inside was pervasive... all the windows had been sealed with sandbags against the frequent artillery. Only small firing ports were open to the outside. You literally needed a flashlight, even during the day, just to move around. Good thing I had brought three. I was going to need them.

The Monastery was a rectangular building with a north - south axis. Directly to our north was the airport control tower, about 400 meters away, behind a tree line and small radar station only about 150 meters away. The New Terminal, or what was left of it, was about 500 meters to our east. Both the control tower and New Terminal were held by Ukrop Army “Cyborgs”, along with Pravy Sektor Nazis and US and EU mercenaries.

Within less than a kilometer, the enemy forces arrayed against us outnumbered us 10 or 20 to 1. Our forces at Troishka never numbered more than 20, usually closer to a dozen, facing at least 200 Nazis and Ukrop soldiers. Long odds, but somewhat better than the odds at The Alamo or Thermopylae. Still, there were plenty of chances for all of us to die like heroes here, and some of us did.

Our main positions were on the second floor. The building was originally three stories, but the roof had been completely bombed and burned off, so the floor of the third floor was now the roof. Needless to say, it leaked. The layout of the second floor was a long narrow hallway with six rooms on each side. The rooms on the right were our food storage room and firing positions facing toward the New Terminal. The rooms on the left where we actually lived, were, from back to front, the commander’s room, an eight-man room, the

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3 The AGS-17 (Avtomaticheskiy Granatomyot Stankovyi) is an automatic 30mm grenade launcher first produced by the Soviet Union and in service in several dozen countries since 1971.
kitchen, two more eight-man rooms and the ammo room, which was located just behind the forward firing points facing the control tower.

The main firing point was at the end of the hall and was for the “Uchos”, a 12.7 mm heavy machine gun, comparable to the US M2 .50 caliber. To the left of the Uchos was a window for observation and for the PKM, when there was something to shoot at. To the right was a small room that had firing ports cut through the walls to the north and east. This small room was destined to become my office, and I would do a lot of work there.

After a quick tour of the position, I was taken to the room where I would be sleeping. I bunked with four other guys: Latayshik, a sniper who never said much; Bielka (“Squirrel”), a local veteran of more than six months of fighting; and two Italian volunteers, “Spartak” and “Archangel”. I was placed with the Italians, because I speak rudimentary and imperfect Spanish, and it was considered that Italian was similar enough to Spanish that I could communicate with them. Well, almost. At that time my Russian was so limited as to be of virtually no use at all; my Italian skills were hardly better. I was going to be operating with sign language and on the basis of “vibes”. Good luck and pass the ammo...

Three other soldiers – Mos, Vetter and Krugly – who were in my basic training class at Yasynuvata, had arrived the day before. I liked them, they liked me. They were good soldiers, and they had smoked many of my cigarettes. I met for the first time Mongoose, an administrative commander, and Reem and Mir, two best friends who were the combat commanders of the position and were the main gunners on the Uchos heavy machine gun. Eleven of us total, though other soldiers would arrive and depart on a daily basis.

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4 NSV-12.7 (Nikitina-Sokolova-Volkova) a belt fed, Soviet era heavy machine gun. Also known as an “Utes”.
But on Dec. 30, 2014, it was just the 11 of us. About 500 meters to our west, we had a two-man LP/OP; called “Ushi” at the Buratino (“Pinocchio”) Nursery School. 500 meters to the south and behind us was the Milnitsia (“Windmill”) position, a radio hub and communication center, usually manned by between six and ten comrades.

As dawn turned into day, the dull light of grey snow clouds filtered through the few small openings, but the temperature remained below zero. It was bone-chilling cold. Each room had a small metal wood burning stove for warmth; candles provided the light, along with the ever present flashlights that most wore on their heads or around their necks at all times. After weapon and body armor, a flashlight was one of the most vital items for work and survival. The stoves were very important too, but two problems arose with them: lack of firewood, and smoke. All the stoves were on the same side of the building, facing south; a southern wind, strong and cold, blew most of the time... So the smoke went right back down the chimneys. It was 10 times smokier than the smokiest smoke-filled barroom you have ever been in. It would drive you crazy, make you want to cry, but you kept the fire going because it was either that or freeze. All day, every day, 24/7. Of all the things I remember about Troishka, the smoke is what first comes to mind. I had already left Yasynuvata with a bad cough, and this smoke situation did not help.

Speaking of smoke, I had only brought a few packs of cigarettes, having erroneously been told by Orion before he left to the hospital that I would be at the airport for only a day or two. Upon arrival I was told the rotation would last for at least two weeks, probably a month. And there was no going to the store from there. But Vostok Battalion understood how important cigarettes are for soldiers in a combat zone – and they really are – so we had a big pile of cigarette packs sitting on a corner of the kitchen table... take all you want. They were called “Prima”, in a red cardboard pack, filter-less and strong, along the lines of French Gauloises or Mexican Delicados, both of which I had smoked before. But the interesting thing I noticed about these Primas was written on the top of each pack – “CCCP”. I wasn’t too good at reading Russian then, but I knew that “CCCP” meant the Soviet Union. Those cigarettes had been waiting for at least 25 years to be smoked. And now, we smoked them.

Lunch was pig liver paté (“pashtet”) on hard dry crackers, served cold but at least not frozen. The tea was boiling hot, strong and sweet. Protein, carbs, caffeine and sugar – a soldier’s diet. Dinner was soup and fresh bread. For Novorossiyan soldiers, bread is a delicacy; add mayonnaise or ketchup and it’s a gourmet delicacy. They were right. It went well with the soup, which was twice as good (or half as horrible) as the soup in Yasynuvata.

That day it was vegetable soup, long on the potatoes and short on everything else. It also had some “Tashunka”, canned beef that reminded me of the pieces of cow divided up among the Partisans in the movie “Come and See”.

5 Listening Post / Observation Post, a forward position where soldiers watch and listen for enemy activity in an assigned area to provide security and intelligence for the platoon.

6 ‘Come and See’ (Idi i Smotri) is a 1985 Soviet film by Elim Klimov, about the Nazi German occupation of Belorussia. It centers upon a young boy who joins the Belorussian resistance and experiences first hand the atrocities of war.
Front-line soldiers are either always first, or always last in line when it comes to supplies; it depends on the commander. We had a good one, “Volga”, but there wasn’t a lot to go around. Everybody had to get something, so we didn’t get much, even at the front of the line. The food was sometimes quite meager, and always very basic, but we had a fairly stable supply of tea and, sometimes, instant coffee. Oh, and plenty of bullets... plenty more arrived every day.

As the day progressed, the rumble of (not too) distant cannon and gunfire was constant, but was not directed at us. But we knew it was directed at somebody. On a battlefront, unless you have unlimited ammo, you generally don't shoot unless you see something; if you see something, you shoot to kill. A lot of shooting was going on around us... shooting to kill. As the short and overcast day began to fade into night, I was told that for the Ukrops to go a whole day without attacking or at least firing on our position was quite unusual. That was OK by me. I figured I could use at least a couple of hours to get acclimated, before I started shooting and getting shot at.
When night fell, what had been the gloom of the day became the absolute total darkness of the night, where not a single photon touches the optic nerve. Darkness within darkness... winter nights with low, dark clouds and an almost complete absence of light from the ground. We had no electricity, and to show any light from flashlight or fire was to invite bullets, many and big, and that right quickly. So, darkness was the name of the game. Walking down the hallway, you could not see the soldier walking a single meter ahead of you. No outline, not any visual indication at all. Only what you could hear and smell and sense and feel. It was like walking down the hall with my eyes closed, and sometimes I did just that... and could navigate better that way.

Our main armament, the Uchos 12.7 mm heavy machine gun at the end of the hall, sat by the window, which was sealed with sandbags except for a small firing port that was usually covered by plywood for light discipline, and only opened when a target had been acquired. About 10 feet to the left was our observation post, equipped with a PKM general purpose 7.62 mm machine gun. The PKM was Bielka’s weapon, and not to be fired by anyone else except in emergencies. But it was always there if we needed it.

Both the Uchos and PKM firing/observation points faced north looking directly at the airport control tower. Ukrops would launch attacks from a small radar building and long tree-line about 150 meters away. At least two soldiers were always on guard duty – one at the PKM window, another on the landing with the AGS guarding the entrance to the Monastery. The shifts were four hours; we each pulled two shifts a day. We had a night vision scope for the Uchos, and a handheld thermal imager that was quite effective at detecting advancing enemy troops.

Thermal imagers are among the most important weapons in modern combat. The one we had didn’t always work. Thanks to the “non-lethal aid” from their masters in the USA, the Ukrainian Army had plenty of them. Every time I stood at the window on guard duty I wondered if my thermal signature was in the crosshairs of a Nazi sniper’s thermal scope, made in the good ol’ USA. I would bob and weave at the window, hoping to move enough between the time the trigger was pulled and the time the bullet arrived. The veterans would just stand there, perfectly still, facing death fearlessly.

I learned to emulate what the veterans did. They would communicate what I needed to know, but mostly say nothing and see how long it took me to figure things out for myself. It wasn’t that they didn’t care, it was simply that they were soldiers in a combat zone and they had other things to do besides babysit me. I had volunteered to be a soldier, so I was expected to look after myself. It was a steep learning curve, but I did my best, and that was good enough. Good enough to keep me alive.

The control tower was the prominent terrain feature and the focus of our attention. To me, the tower, which had sustained hundreds of impacts from all types of weapons, looked like a snake ready to strike, with a crown on its head.
The Serpent and the Crown

The Serpent of Fascism had raised its ugly head in Novorossiya, and we were there to prevent it from advancing any further. And to cut it off if we could. Or die trying. I was ready... as we say in Russian, “Gatov”.

At midnight on New Year’s Eve, several commanders from Milnitsa arrived with champagne. We all gathered in the kitchen and toasted to victory. Afterwards, the commanders, Mongoose, Caluchi and Chogar, invited me to the commanders room, where we shared a bottle of vodka. Not enough to get drunk, but enough to take the chill off and mark the occasion. None the less, I was glad not to be on the guard roster that night.

I made my way back through the pitch dark to my room, where Bielka and the two Italians were already snoring away in the choking haze of smoke. I hung my rifle on a nail, removed my bronik and boots, climbed up onto my bunk, and slid fully clothed into my beloved sleeping bag. After a few minutes of hacking, wracking coughs, I began to fall asleep. Tomorrow would bring the start of a new year and a busy day.

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The two weeks I spent at Troishka from January 1st to the 15th were the hardest days of my life. And I have had my share of hard days. Everything had a dreamlike quality, and my memory of it is like a single long night, a “fortnight”, every minute filled with smoke, cold, darkness and danger. Waking up from the few hours of sleep I managed to catch between guard shifts and gunfights, I felt like I was waking up into another dream.

New year’s Day was dark and cold, and the daylight hours passed with only a few stray shots being fired. At dinner, I was closely questioned by Mir, the second in command, as Reem, the position commander sat and listened. Mir was rather aggressively interrogating me on my motivation for coming and my knowledge of Russian history and culture.

I knew the Anthem of the Soviet Union, in English (thanks to Paul Robeson), the tune to the song “The Sacred War”, several Russian movies, and a few other nuggets
of Russian art and history. Enough, apparently, to satisfy Reem, who invited me to his quarters after dinner to smoke and continue our conversation.

I sat on the bunk, in a freezing cold monk’s cell, illuminated only by the wood burning stove and a single candle, listening to Reem’s deep, quiet voice, calm but ominous, speaking in a language I really didn’t understand. Outside, artillery thundered in the distance. After a few minutes of discussions with the other soldiers, Reem looked at me and through a combination of hand signs and words like “bronik” and “avtomat” made me understand it was time to prepare for battle. I made my way to my room, lit a candle and paused a minute to pray that I would stay safe, but even more so that I would do a good job. I donned my gear, checked my weapon and mags and reported back to Reem.

Just as I returned, the small arms fire outside began to intensify. The Ukrops were coming, and it was time for us to shoot back. Reem and Mir took up a position at the Uchos, Latayshik with his SVD sniper rifle and I with my AK-74 headed up to a window position on the burned out third floor. There were thirty or forty Ukrops attacking us from three different positions in the woodline about 150 meters away.

Reem opened up with the Uchos, firing one or two round bursts, with a few seconds in between each burst. This firing technique kept the barrel from overheating, keeping the gun in action for an extended period of time, and allowed two assistant loaders to keep a steady supply of ammo ready when a belt ran out. Reem would also choose a different target for each burst, so the Ukrops never knew when the power of the Uchos would be turned on their position. The other weapons timed their fire in rhythm with the Uchos so when it was firing, we were down, and when the Uchos was silent, we were firing, keeping up a steady stream of fire all along the Ukrop line.

Latayshik and I would take turns firing from the window. Latayshik firing semi-auto with his SVD, me letting off 3 to 5 round bursts with my AK. I should have been firing semi-auto as well, but it was a real battle, I had a machine gun, so I figured why
not blaze away. Actually it was a waste of ammo, and something only a novice would do, but I was doing alright for my first major battle. At one point, when Latayshik and I were fortunately down, a green tracer shot through the window right between us, just a few feet from our heads. We both laughed and kept on shooting.

The assault lasted several hours, then around 3:00AM the attackers withdrew from the woodline back to their base at the control tower complex. I was exhilarated but exhausted, and was scheduled for guard duty at 7:00 AM. I reloaded my magazines, stripped off my armor, and still wearing my uniform, slipped into my sleeping bag and fell instantly asleep. It seemed only a moment later when Archangel woke me for my guard shift.

Days and nights blended together. The nights were a little bit darker, with a bit more shooting, but it was always dark and dangerous, smoky and cold. I learned quickly, pulled my weight, made friends and earned their respect. On the third or fourth night, halfway through the evening firefight, the bolt on my Kalashnikov jammed halfway and rendered the weapon inoperable. I thought at first it had been hit by an incoming round or perhaps a bad round had exploded in the chamber. Mongoose gave me an extra RPK light machine gun, and I continued the fight. The next day, after stripping my AK, I saw the return spring guide rod base had chipped and the rod got twisted so the weapon wouldn’t cycle.

Kalashnikov rifles are famed for their reliability, but they do wear out. I had been firing several hundred rounds every night and day, and no telling how many thousands or tens of thousands of rounds were fired in it before I got it. The part was easily replaced and the weapon was soon back in action.

It was a strange mix of routine – daily artillery barrages, nightly infantry assaults and heavy gunfights, engagements in which thousands of rounds were fired by each side. Our intelligence was excellent. Apparently, we had spies in the upper echelons of the Ukrainian Army who could radio or telephone us in advance of major action. The commander would get the word, and call Mas into the office for a briefing. Mas would usually stop in the kitchen for a small snack before he passed on the warning order to the rest of the troops. One of the small pleasures we were afforded was sweet condensed milk for our tea or coffee, but which also makes a tasty confection served on bread or crackers. When we saw Mas in the kitchen making something sweet, we knew we’d soon be in battle or on the receiving end of an artillery barrage. The more milk Mas would spread on the bread, the tougher the situation would be.

After a week or so, I had learned the ropes and adapted to the hardships of the situation, but was operating under constant exhaustion. We all were. Eight hours of guard duty, plus four to six hours of battle every night and heavy artillery attacks during the day, freezing cold temperatures and smoke filled rooms made rest difficult even when you had time to sleep. We were all constantly tired, and Spartak the Italian, who was scheduled to relieve me on guard every night, began showing up later and later for his shift every night.

Finally, one night around 4:30, half an hour after my shift should have ended and Spartak should have replaced me, I went to the room to see what the delay was and found him still asleep in bed. I loudly woke him up and told him to get his ass on guard, and he replied something along the lines that he’d go when he felt like it. I set down my rifle and pulled him out of bed. He then grabbed a bayonet and held it to my
Donbass Cowboy

face, threatening to cut me. I didn’t think he’d really draw blood, and I knew he was scared to fight me hand to hand. He yelled in my face waved the knife around... and started getting dressed for guard duty. It didn’t really bother me, but it was another unexpected complication. I did not want to have to worry about having to watch my back from guys on my own side. I was in dangerous place a long way from home, and suddenly wasn’t sure who I could trust, even among my comrades.

The artillery and GRAD attacks were a constant occurrence. The walls of the monastery were stone and half a meter thick, but the roof had already been blown off and the floor of the 3rd floor was now our roof. It was not enough to withstand anything over an 82 mm mortar, and we were being shelled with 120 mm, 152 mm and GRAD rockets, any of which were certain death for anyone beneath a direct hit on the roof. And the Ukrop artillerists were aiming for the upper floor scores of times day and night.

Miraculously, we never sustained a direct hit while I was there. But they landed plenty close. When a heavy artillery barrage was working on us, we’d all get our body armor and helmets on and sit in the hall down on the first floor. Sometimes, the attacks would be hot and heavy then suddenly stop. Ten minutes later, a fresh salvo would come sailing in, trying to catch us off guard. As deadly as the artillery was, it didn’t really panic me. It wasn’t that I did not respect and understand its destructive power, I just had a fatalistic approach. It was really pure chance where the rounds landed, in spite of the fact that the Ukrops were trying their best to tear the monastery down, but 5 meters or 3 seconds could mean the difference between instant death and not getting a scratch.

Besides, I was too tired to be scared.

One night during a barrage, Orion was on the radio, reporting on the attack to our battalion HQ. He got into a bit too much detail over the open radio channel, telling HQ the rounds were coming from the Ukrop positions at Pesky and landing about 300 meters to our left. Mars was enraged, as Orion was inadvertently adjusting the Ukrop fire. It was a dumb mistake, but we survived.

I was given the 3:00 AM to 7:00 AM sentry shift on the stairway by the door, guarding against Ukrop hit squads sneaking up from our rear. The Front was still very fluid, and the danger was real. We had a good jury-rigged system to secure the door, and a wire strung with pebble-filled cans that would rattle if anyone tried the door without first calling out the password. The Vostok Battalion password in the airport area of operations was “Alla hu Akbar!” and the counter sign was “Vaistiny Akbar!” A few minutes before seven, when my shift was to end, I dozed off in the chair. A moment later, I opened my eyes to see Mars standing at the top of the stairs preparing his phone to take a photo of me with my eyes closed. I rousted myself and stood up before he could snap the pic, but he was convinced I’d been fast asleep all night. So, Orion and I were both on the shit list.

Our “punishment” was to be sent to the Gavin position to clean out a basement that was to be used as a bomb shelter for the soldiers there. It was a dangerous run from the monastery to the woodline, chased by bullets and mortar shells, but we made it. It was actually a very pleasant break to be outside in the sunshine and fresh air. The weeks of smoke-filled darkness in the cold, cramped quarters had made me almost forget about the natural world outside. Though we were still vulnerable to artillery, we were deep enough into the village that we could not be targeted by snipers, and the
We returned to Troishka late that afternoon, to find that in our absence Somali Battalion tanks and cannons had cut the control tower down. It was a major loss for the Ukrops. They had been deprived of their best observation point, and it had most certainly cost them some lives when it came down. The tower, which had once seemed like a crowned serpent, was now a stump, which now appeared to me to be the face of a demon looking back over his right shoulder at us.

The Demon of Donetsk Airport

The snake had been beheaded, and it seemed the demon was on the run. The tower was down, but the tower complex was still teeming with Ukrop nazis. It was January 14th, 2015.

That night, we were informed that Motorola and Sparta Battalion would be storming the new terminal at the airport from their positions at Cachigarka, halfway between the monastery and the terminal. The terminal was held by Ukrop “Cyborgs” who claimed they would never surrender or retreat. That night, those who survived changed their minds.

We were told the attack would begin at midnight, and that we would provide covering fire for Sparta’s assault. They would have to move across 200 meters of open ground, then fight their way into the terminal from the east entrance and clear the huge building from east to west. At midnight all hell broke loose, hundreds of guns and cannons tearing into the terminal. After Sparta had breached the perimeter and entered the building, we were instructed to shift our fire westward as Sparta troops
advanced inside the terminal. By around 4:00 AM, firing had died down and then we saw someone on the roof at the west end of the terminal fire a magazine full of tracer rounds straight up into the air like a fiery green fountain. It was the signal that the objective had been achieved. The new terminal was ours.

Next day the clouds had rolled back in and the snow and biting winds returned with a vengeance. My cough was almost overpowering at times, and though I was still able to fulfill my duties, the Vostok Battalion chief doctor came out to check all the guys at our position, and was very strongly urging me to return with him to the base hospital. I declined and told him I would ask to be relieved if I needed to be.

The doctor was a cool guy, a chain-smoker who was always laughing and energetic, in his late 50’s with a beard that made him look like Alexander Solzenitsyn. He kept telling me he was a doctor in Russian and in English – “I doctor”, he would say, then the same in Russian, “Ya vrach”. My Russian was not good, and neither was my hearing after 2 weeks of constant battles, and I replied, “Da, te vreeach”. In Russian, “vrach” is “doctor”, and “vreeach” is “liar”. In the end, it was understood I would stay, at least for the time being. But later that night, Reem got a radio call from HQ – I was to be packed and ready to evacuate to HQ when the morning supply truck arrived at dawn.
Chapter 5

The Battle of Troishka

It is hard for me to look back on the Battle of Troishka without thinking about fate, destiny, and what might have been. Had the Vostok Battalion not ordered me to the rear because of my lung infection, I’d have been right in the middle of one of the most intense and bloody battles of the war. The odds were greater than 20 to 1 against us; nine of our guys versus the Ukrops with around 200 men, supported by more than a dozen tanks and infantry fighting vehicles (IFVs), armor against which we had no defense nor ability to attack.

Had I been there that day, I often wonder, would I have been killed? Would I have been a coward? Or would I have fought bravely and effectively and survived? Though I have earned a reputation as a brave and skilled soldier, there is no way of knowing what would have happened or how I would have acted that day. I was still a green recruit, with about two weeks of combat experience at that point. My nerve might have broken, or I might have been foolishly brave and paid the price.

I have paid my dues and shown my worth in plenty of heavy battles since, but the Battle of Troishka on January 17th, 2015 was the biggest battle that Sut Vremeny ever faced, and was one of the hardest battles that the Armed Forces of Novorussia ever fought. My friends were there, and if I’d had my choice, I’d have been there with them.

The night of January 15th, 2015, I received an order via radio to be ready at dawn the next morning, when the supply van arrived, to be transported back to the Vostok base hospital in Donetsk. The New Terminal was now held by Sparta assault troops and all the Ukrop “invincible Cyborgs” were either killed or captured. The control tower had been cut down to a
stump, and though the Ukrops still held the ground floor of the tower complex, it was no longer considered a serious threat. It seemed like the heavy fighting was over, and that we had won. I had been at Troishka for 16 days, and at Yasyynuvata boot camp for two weeks before that, without a day off. I was really sick, and exhausted. Though I wanted to stay, and would have, if not ordered to evacuate, I was looking forward to some rest.

I considered whether or not to leave the bulk of my personal equipment at Troishka, since I expected to return in a few days at the most, but finally decided to take everything with me. At dawn on the 16th, I carried my gear to the van and took the early morning ride back to Donetsk city center and Vostok Base 4.

It was a good thing I did.

I checked into the infirmary on the base, heartily greeted by the somewhat crazy doctor who had evaluated me at Troishka a few days before. As always, he was very friendly and in his broken English told me he was glad I was there. The idea was that I would spend a few days in the infirmary. I needed rest, warmth, good food, and clean air. Gazetchik came from the Info Center to explain all this to me. I told him the most important thing I needed was rest, and I could get that much better at Christian’s apartment, where I had friends who would care for me and, above all, who spoke English. After some resistance, Gazetchik agreed. It was with great joy that I called Christian and told him I’d be arriving shortly.

I took a cab to Christian’s new apartment, and was greeted warmly by him and his new girlfriend, Maria, a Siberian beauty who was also a photographer for RT. The first thing I did was take a bath. Or actually, several baths in a row. My bathing regimen in the previous month had consisted of a fortnightly Russian ‘banya,’ a steam bath, in Yasyynuvata, and the occasional washing of face and hands during more than two weeks at Troishka. In spite of the freezing cold temperatures at Troishka, during the daily and nightly battles, the sweat flowed freely from both exertion and the heavy body armor and winter uniforms, combined too perhaps with the stress of being in such close proximity to death. So, I was filthy and crusty, and it took several cycles of filling the tub with steaming water, hard scrubbing, rinse and repeat. But finally, I was clean enough to be considered a normal human being again.

During the couple of hours that I was bathing, Christian and Maria had made the couch into a bed, and prepared borscht, brandy, and a smorgasbord of exotic food. Hot, tasty, and high in calories, it was as much medicine as it was sustenance. The thin gruel at Yasyynuvata and the hardly better fare of pashtet and tashunka at Troishka had almost made me forget what real food was. But Maria’s generous and loving dishes soon reminded and revived me. At least, revived me at enough to crawl beneath the blankets on the couch and fall unconscious for a dozen hours. I do not remember if I dreamed as I slept away the day and night of January 16th, but as I slept, the Ukrops were busy preparing their counterattack, and my comrades at Troishka were busy preparing to repel it.

Back at Troishka, Reem was in command, with his right-hand man, Mir, on the Uchos heavy machine gun. Spartak and Archangel, Shuka and Marskoy, Alfonzo, Orion, Piasnitsa and Bulgarin made up the rest of the squad defending the position against the unknown number of Ukrops still in the control tower complex. The Ukrops also had heavy reinforcements available at Pisky and the RLS radar station, less than a
The Battle of Troishka

kilometer away. On January 16th, shortly after I had left and the sun was up, intermittent fire from the control tower, accompanied by the occasional artillery barrage, began to rain down on Troishka. Reem and Mir replied to the small arms fire from the tower with the mighty Uchors, which produced slow, steady fire that was highly accurate and devastating. Soon, the tower fell silent, and it seemed there would be a respite.

That’s when the first Ukrop tank appeared. Rolling out laterally to the left from behind what remained of the tower complex, it came into view and, within seconds, it sent the first round into the wall right above the Utes. Four hundred meters is a short shot for a T-72, and the shot was highly accurate and effective. The explosion blew a hole big enough to crawl through in the solid stone wall, which was half a meter thick. Our machine gun was knocked off its foundation and temporarily disabled. Reem and Mir, who had been manning the Utes, were wounded by the explosion and evacuated later that evening.

The tank continued to fire at its leisure, without facing any return fire from us. We had an RPG-71 and a few rockets, but the guys did not use them. Four hundred meters is a fairly long shot with the primitive RPG, and we needed to save the rockets in case a tank came closer and made a better target. In the meantime, the tank continued to fire, disappear, then re-appear and fire again. Finally, the tank retired behind the tower complex, and did not re-appear, but of course could return to fire at the Monastery at any time.

The night of January 16th, at around 10pm, a ceasefire was proposed by the Ukrops for the morning of the 17th in order to exchange the dead and wounded. Most of the casualties were theirs. Sut Vremeny, Vostok and Sparta agreed to the ceasefire for the following day in good faith, but it was only a ruse. That night, with Reem and Mir evacuated, command fell to Pyatnitsa, with Shooka and Marskoy as his most experienced and capable troops. Fletcher had arrived as a replacement for Reem and Mir, and joined Alfonzo, Orion, Bulgariin and the Italians Spartak and Archangel, to complete the squad. Nine men from the Sut Vremeny held the Troishka position as the dawn broke on January 17th.

There was at least one tank at the control tower, along with an unknown number of Ukrop army and Pravy Sektor infantry. As dawn turned into morning, the artillery began to fall. Light at first, like the usual harassment/provocation fire, with nothing to be done about it except to pray a direct hit was not coming your way. But soon the artillery increased and the barrage became the most intense ever experienced at the Troishka position. The entire area was saturated – 120 mm mortars, 152 mm heavy artillery, tanks and Grads were all coming in at once. It seemed as if every heavy Ukrop gun between Yasynuvata and Pesky was turned against the position. And so it was.

Standard military doctrine dictates that artillery is used to “soften up” an area before an assault – it destroys fortifications, disorients, wounds and kills defenders, and cuts communication lines. The guys knew by the unprecedented intensity of the barrage that something big was coming. It was going to be a very long day. For some, it would be their last.

The barrage continued until around noon, and whilst the artillery fire endured, heavy Ukrop armor, and lots of it, began to move up to the control tower. Hidden

1 RPG-7. Soviet man-portable anti-tank weapon, which fires single-shot, unguided Rocket Propelled Grenades.
by a rise in the terrain, their noise partially obscured by the sound of explosions, it could not be discerned whether it was 4 or 14 vehicles approaching, only that it was certainly more than one. As the shelling ceased the armor began to move forward out of cover from behind the tower. One tank engaged the Garage position, about 500 meters to the left, while the second moved up and opened fire on the New Terminal, 400 meters to the right of Troishka. After several salvos, the main group consisting of five more tanks advanced - three attacking New Terminal, one advancing on Troishka, the other engaging Garage.

The tank attacking Troishka broke through the foliage and began firing at almost point blank range, from about 150 meters away. Meanwhile, eight more IFVs approached, each with a 30mm cannon or heavy machine gun and eight to ten infantry inside. Two IFVs (Infantry Fighting Vehicles – BMP-1 and BMP-2) attacked Troishka directly, moving to within 50 meters to dismount Ukrainian Army and Pravy Sektor infantry along the Monastery’s concrete boundary wall.

The fire was intense. Not only were the tanks shelling the building from beside the tower, but the guys also faced 30mm cannon and heavy machine gun fire from the IFVs, along with a constant small arms fusillade from the Ukrop infantry within spitting distance from their position.

Not long after the main attack began, at around 2pm, the Uchos was destroyed by a direct hit from a tank round. Piatnitsa was seriously wounded in the leg. Shooka and Marskoy provided first aid and moved Piatnitsa further back into the building. Moments – or perhaps seconds – later, the AGS, manned by Bulgarin, took a direct hit from a tank on the other side of the tower and was also destroyed, with Bulgarin also being gravely wounded. Despite his serious injury, Piatnitsa was still conscious and calling for reinforcements on the radio.
The Battle of Troishka

Within the hour, the first reinforcements arrived from Milnitsa, 500 meters to the rear. Just a few men led by Bielka, with Iris in command, but Bielka setting the pace. They were coming diagonally from the back left, through the tree line, but were soon detected by the Ukrops and pinned down by mortar and machine gun fire. Bielka led the group further towards the Monastery, finally reaching the Vicarage house only 100 meters from Troishka’s door. With Ukrop infantry and IFVs laying down withering fire from less than 100 meters away, Bielka stood up to his full height, and strode calmly and purposefully to the door, with scores, if not hundreds, of bullets passing within inches of him as he went.

And he made it, unscathed. Unscathed.

Moments after reaching the safety of the Monastery’s interior, Bielka returned to the door to open fire from his PKM machine gun. But his miraculous luck had run out. As he poked his head and PKM out the door, return fire from multiple rifles hit him several times in his body armor, to little effect, but one round caught him in the head. He died instantly and painlessly, like a hero, with his machine gun blazing in his hands.

Meanwhile, the other soldiers from Milnitsa began opening flanking fire from the trees on Ukrop troops stationed behind the wall. This enfilade took a toll on the dismounted Ukrop infantry. Pover later told me about his work that day: “I saw one Ukrop firing an avtomat. I hit him in the head. Another showed soon after - oh, a machine gun! I killed him too.”

As the counterattack continued, Iris was beginning to direct AGS fire from his vantage point in the tree line. Contrabass was in radio contact with Iris and was firing the other Sut Vremeny AGS from a kilometer away. Contrabass could not see the impact of his rounds, or even any part of the battlefield, but adjusted his bombardment according to Iris’ instructions over the radio.

The first few AGS rounds actually hit Troishka; it could not be helped. Fortunately, none of our guys were hurt. But soon thereafter, our fire was adjusted with deadly accuracy, and the first wave of Ukrop infantry behind the wall were annihilated. The VOG rounds from the AGS, each more powerful than an F-1 hand grenade, were boxing the Ukrop infantry in as each 5 meter section behind the wall got four VOGs each. In that space, one VOG was considered lethal. As Iris said, the AGS “brushed the wall”, killing or wounding virtually every Ukrop soldier not in an armored vehicle. This caused a lull in the attack, but the tank cannons from the tower kept up steady fire.

More reinforcements were promised within the hour, but time has a different meaning in Donbass. “Five minutes” can mean an hour; “an hour” can mean four or five hours; and “maybe tomorrow” usually means never. And so it was with the promised reinforcements. After the first hour passed, at the time they should have been arriving in the area near Troishka, the reply to radio queries from the battlefield was that the promised reinforcements would be leaving their base “soon.” Another hour later, base replied that “there had been a delay.” And so it went on.

During the interminable hours of waiting, the Ukrops continued the attack. There were only seven fighters still operating inside Troishka, along with half a dozen from Milnitsa, working in the woodline. Heavy bombardment from tanks and IFVs main-
tained a constant thunder, and though the enemy infantry had been wiped from the wall, the main attack was yet to come.

At around 3pm, five tanks moved forwards. Two began to work on Garage, two on New Terminal and Cachigarka, and one again on Troishka. Then, a further seven IFVs approached, with two making their way back to the wall and five remaining near the control tower working their 30mm cannons and heavy machine guns. Ukrop infantry moved up to the wall and joined the tank and two IFVs within 50 meters of Troishka.

The vehicles were firing point-blank, slowly, as if enjoying it.

Inside Troishka, with Piatnitsa and Bulgarin already wounded and Bielka killed, the defense of the Novorossiyan position at Donetsk airport was left to the seven survivors. Shooka and Marskoy held the front of the building, with the Italians, Spartak and Archangel, backing them up. Fletcher was suffering from a concussion and was barely able to fight. Orion and Alfonzo guarded the door in the rear of the building, expecting a mass infantry assault at any time. The reinforcements from Milnitsa kept up a flanking fire from the woodline, but had to go back and forth frequently for more ammo.

Around 6pm, the first real help finally arrived, comprising of Sut Vremeny reinforcements from Donetsk and Yasynuvata, Zakharchenko’s personal guards, and volunteers from Vostok; commander Volga led roughly 70 soldiers and three IFVs. They rallied at the demolished Kia auto center, 800 meters behind Troishka. Their first assault using unmounted infantry along the road to the church was driven back by heavy artillery fire from the Ukrops, who had spotted them on their approach. They retreated, and made another attempt though the cemetery, crossing a semi-frozen waist-deep creek in the process. Soaked, exhausted and under constant artillery and machine gun fire, they advanced to the church and began returning fire with small arms and RPGs.

More armor from Zakharchenko and more from Motorola’s Spartak Battalion arrived and moved up to challenge the Ukrop armor. Only now, after five hours of heavy combat, were the odds beginning to even out. And with that, the battle quickly turned. As Contrabass’ AGS began again to punish the Ukrop infantry behind the wall, our RPGs and tanks started making it dangerous for the Ukrop armor. The tank closest to Troishka was hit and burned. The two IFVs fell back to the tower, followed by any Ukrop infantry that could still move. The tanks and IFVs made less frequent forays from behind the tower, and our tanks and IFVs moved up.

By the time the reinforcements arrived, Bulgarin and Piatnitsa were still alive, but barely conscious. They were loaded into an IFV and rushed to the hospital in Donetsk. Though the distance was less than 10km, it was a transition from one world to another for Bulgarin and Piatnitsa.

They both died en route to the hospital. They had held their position against immense odds, and gave their lives for the new Republic they had sworn to protect. Along with Bielka’s body, they were moved to the Army morgue for funeral preparations.

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2 Alexander Zakharchenko took control as the military commander of Donetsk by mid-2014 and was elected prime minister of the Donetsk People’s Republic in November that year.
Back at Troishka, the combined might of the reinforcements had broken the Ukrop attack and seized the initiative. Now, the Ukrops were in retreat, abandoning their dead and wounded, as well as their position at the tower. They fell back to the radar station almost a kilometer to the rear of the tower and took up defensive positions against the expected counter-attack. The New Terminal, Troishka and Garage were all still in our hands, and the tower was now deserted. What the Ukrops had thought would be an easy victory through overwhelming advantages in numbers of men and firepower, under the cover of a false ceasefire, had instead become a costly and ignoble defeat. They lost scores of men, a main battle tank and ran like dogs as soon as the odds were evened. For every soldier of ours they killed, we paid them back twenty-fold.

The Ukrop “Punishers” had been severely punished, in a battle that those few who lived through it would never forget.
Chapter 6

The Chapter of the Windmills

Antoine Comte de Guiche: As for you sir, have you read “Don Quixote”?

Cyrano de Bergerac: I have, and found myself the hero.

Antoine Comte de Guiche: Be so good as to read once more the chapter of the windmills...

Cyrano de Bergerac: Chapter thirteen!

Antoine Comte de Guiche: Windmills, remember, if you fight with them... may swing round their huge arms and cast you down into the mire!

Cyrano de Bergerac: Or up, among the stars!

On the 18th of January, 2015, around noon, I was resting at Christian’s apartment when I got a call from Gazetchik. He said, “I have bad news. There was a big attack at Troishka yesterday, three of our guys were killed.” I didn’t even take time to think, I just said “I’ll be back at Base 4 in an hour.” I hung up the phone, told Christian and Maria what happened, and started packing. They seemed much more stunned by the grim news than I felt. I was not stunned, I was pissed, and only wanted to return to Base and get back into the fight as soon as possible. On the taxi ride, I reflected on the fact that I’d have been at Troishka myself, if not for my cough. As with so many times in my life, Death came knocking, but the hand of fate intervened, at least for me.
Within the hour, I arrived back to where I had enlisted in the Novorussian Army less than three weeks before. My Comrades from Troishka were in the Infirmary there - Reem, Mir, Krugly, Orion, Mas, Alfonzo, and Mars. It was a somber meeting. I got the story from the guys, then left them a canteen full of vodka (which was subsequently discovered by a nurse and poured down the sink right in front of them).

Soon I was back at Yasynuvata Base awaiting orders. Gazetchik arrived there, and I told him my cough was fine and I was ready to return to the airport immediately. I could tell from Gazetchik’s expression that this was not the response he had expected from me. He nodded somberly and told me to find a room to sleep in and to be ready to move early, early in the morning.

By 6AM, I reached Vesoloye village, less than a kilometer from the airport and Troishka. This time approaching from a different direction, through a residential area. I hauled all my equipment a few hundred meters through the frozen pre-dawn darkness to “Dacha”, the position of Iris, Sut Vremeny’s second in command under Volga. “Dacha” was in the garage and basement of a large, almost hotel-sized three story house that looked somewhat like a castle. Also there were Viktor, Kalena and Iris’s aide de camp, Max. Iris was a lifelong soldier, a crazy hard core badass who took no shit and cut no slack. Max was a sinister dark haired devilishly handsome young man, who I instinctively knew could cut a throat as easily as regular people swat a mosquito - to. War attracts guys like Max. They do serve a purpose, they are necessary, and can be found on both sides. Kalena, a German Communist, had been on the same bus with me from Rostov to Donetsk back in December, and we were both surprised to see each other there. Viktor spoke a little English, and we hit it off right away.

We had a luxurious meal (by airport standards) then Viktor and I went out front to clean the RPG-7 that Sut Vremeny had recently been issued. It was in filthy and rather decrepit condition. Attempting to clean it, we jammed a cleaning rag into the RPG, and it got stuck. Hard. As we were trying to un-jam the tube, with hammers and broomsticks and cinder blocks, we suddenly became aware of the sound of a heavy armored vehicle moving within a few hundred meters of us, rolling through the village. We reported this to Iris, who immediately suited up in full combat gear and headed out into the neighborhood, alone, with three RPG-22 anti-tank rockets slung over his shoulder. As he left, he looked at us and said something along the lines of “get that RPG ready to fire, or it’s your ass.” After some frenzied effort, we did, unblocking it and loading it up to get ready for combat. We peered over the wall of the Dacha, in anticipation of who knows what. We waited... A full hour later, Iris returned, without having found anything worth shooting. Neither had we.

That afternoon, Iris presented me with an RGO hand grenade, a high powered state of the art hand-held bomb with an impact fuse. An impact fuse. Guaranteed to prevent capture, which generally was a fate worse than death. By pulling the pin and letting it drop to the ground, you could not be captured, because death was instantaneous, for you and everyone else within a 5 meter radius. I was now “capture-proof” if need be. Later, Shooka and Mongoose showed up to guide me through the winding and deserted village streets to Milnitsa, which would be my new position. Iris told me to consider Mozilla and Shooka as sergeants and to do what they said, and then we headed out into the darkness.

Milnitsa (which is Russian for “Windmill”) was a radio communication center for all Sut Vremeny positions along the Front. After the battle at Troishka, Sut Vremeny
The Chapter of the Windmills

had been relieved there by 40 soldiers from Oplot Battalion, Zaharchenko’s personal Praetorian Guard. What we had held with a squad, Oplot now held with a platoon. Sut Vremeny continued to hold positions at Ushi, Garage, Gavin, Milnitsa and Dacha.

At Milnitsa, along with myself, Mongoose and Shooka, there was Vetter, Chokar, Mozilla, Los, Archangel the Italian, Engineer, and Pover (“Cook”). The food and the heating arrangements (wood stoves, of course) were far superior to Troishka, though the sleeping situation was much worse, six small single beds with old horse blankets that had been slept on every night since the very first days of the war, and never washed once. Eight or ten soldiers slept there in shifts, a situation which left much to be desired. But I did not fret, since I had my beloved arctic sleeping bag.

That first night, I did the 1 to 3 AM shift with Shooka and Mozilla at Ushi, our frontline position. Ushi was a small house-sized nursery school called “Buratino”, the Russian name for “Pinnochio”. The school sat at the very end of Sadova Road, where it dead-ended at an open field about 400 meters from a wall that ran parallel to the airport runway, and behind which Ukrainian snipers and artillery spotters lurked. The control tower was 45 degrees off to our right, with a belt of trees running from the airport wall to the edge of the village, right next to our position. Troishka was directly to our right, in Oplot’s hands, but Ukrops still operated from the tower complex, though the tower had been cut down by our artillery and tanks. Milnitsa was 800 meters behind us, twice as far away from us as the Ukrops were.

Ukrop artillery had the schoolhouse pretty well dialed in, continually firing on us from the North and West. In a three hour shift at Ushi, you could expect between half a dozen and several dozen bombs to be shot directly at the position. Fortunately, there were tall trees surrounding the school, and those trees intercepted many shells that might have otherwise done us in. The first shift with Shooka and Mozilla went quietly, not too many shells, but enough, and close enough, for them to see I could handle it.

Sadova Road on the way to Ushi
When our relief arrived, at 15:30, we returned to Milnitsa for a quick cup of tea and then to sleep. I rolled up in the luxury of my sleeping bag, little knowing it would be the last time I’d get a full night’s sleep for a while.

The next afternoon, I was again pulling guard at Ushi, this time with Pover. His English was decent, and we had a lot in common. He was a Belorussian Anarchist, in his mid 20’s, a fearless warrior who loved rock n roll. We would get to know each other quite well at Ushi, listening to the bombs fall down around us, knowing a direct hit could come at anytime, and would likely be instantly and absolutely fatal.

Pover once said, as we listened to the hot steel rain down around us, “If we get hit, one minute later we will open our eyes and be in a beautiful garden.” I could relate to that. The thing about artillery is that you can hear the ones flying by that don’t land especially close. You don’t hear the ones that are coming straight at you until they hit and explode right beside you. We had a lot like that. You never even hear or feel the one that hits you at all.

Four o’clock the next morning, I was back at Ushi, pulling the 4 to 7 shift with Shooka. I sat on the cot against the wall while Shooka had the chair in the doorway. It was quiet, and extremely cold. The shift passed uneventfully, a few 82’s just to let us know they hadn’t forgotten us, but generally, a light shelling and a peaceful night. Then, at 06:55, just before our relief was scheduled to arrive, a huge 152 mm artillery round exploded without warning about 25 meters from where we sat in the small vestibule of the school. The explosion was deafening. The crater it left in the backyard of the house next door was about 2 meters deep and about 5 meters wide. Easily big enough to park a full sized car in. The Ukrops knew when we changed shifts, and always made an extra effort to hit us when four guys were there instead of just two. Their other favorite trick was to send a volley of a dozen or so shells and then stop, wait for about 5 or 10 minutes, time enough for us to go out to check damage or help wounded, and then they would start firing again, even heavier.
Fortunately, the relief shifts were usually late, and so it was just the regular level of ever present danger and the luck of the draw. That afternoon, I was with Pover on the 1 to 4 PM shift, when at 15:45 it started raining steel again, this time even closer and harder. All you can do is sit and listen when the bombs are raining down, knowing that only luck and Fate will decide if you get hit, while the Ukrops are doing their best to put one right down on top of you. After half an hour or so of heavy bombardment, Engineer and Mongoose showed up to relieve us. That’s when the Ukrop RPGs and snipers opened up.

Bullets were kicking up dust and slapping the wall within a meter of me as we dashed for cover. An RPG round exploded so close that I could feel the shock of it in my guts. After a short firefight, Pover and I made our way back to the relative safety of Milnitsa while Engineer and Mongoose took up their positions.

That night Pover and I returned to Ushi for the 1 to 4 AM shift. As we approached, we could see one of our new recruits, standing in the middle of the road, smoking a cigarette like he was in his own backyard at home. Pover commented, “I guess he’s never seen dead people before. He might be one soon.” We gave the recruit a good dressing down, explained the proximity and danger of snipers, and sent him and his partner on their way back to Milnitsa. We took up our positions, and I removed my web gear to hang on the coat rack as I usually did. It was then that I realized I had left my “bronik”, my body armor, back at Milnitsa. It was the first time I’d been out without it, and it was actually pretty scary. When I told him, Pover was amazed by my potentially deadly and incredibly stupid mistake, but didn’t give me a hard time about it. He even made most of the trips outside that night to scan the area with the thermal imager. It was a long but relatively quiet night, and forgetting my bronik was a mistake I never made again. That night, it cost me nothing but sweat.

Saturday the 24th of January. I’d been five days back at the Front, a week since the battle at Troishka and I was starting to finally get used to getting shot at every day again. Pover and I were back at Ushi for the 1 to 4 PM shift. The weather was clear and cold, but the wind wasn’t too bad. It was “Shit Day”.

At the Front, that is a special day. You don’t take a shit every day at the Front. You usually don’t eat enough to need to, and the act itself, performed outside in freezing temps, entails removing layers of clothing and other elaborate rituals. In a combat zone, you generally want to spend as little time as possible with your pants down. But every few days, it is a necessity. And today was one of those days. I took mine, then Pover went to take his, while I manned the post alone. About 5 minutes later, a Toyota sedan pulled up next to the schoolhouse and a guy in military uniform got out. He had a pistol on his belt, but did not see me till I stepped out with my AK in hand, safety off.

“Parol!” I shouted, “Password!” He yelled something back to me in Russian, which I did not understand, but it did not include the passphrase. I pointed my rifle at his balls and kept asking for the password. The passphrase at the airport for Vostok Battalion and Sut Vremeny was “Allahu Akbar”, “God is great”, and the countersign was “Vaistiney Akbar”, “Truly great”. But this guy didn’t know it, and I didn’t trust him. I yelled for Pover, who took his sweet time finishing his business and approached wary under cover from the house across the street. A long moment later, all was straight-ened out. The stranger was “Anti-Arrow” a Somali Battalion officer who was checking
the route for mines. Somali armor was scheduled to make an assault within the next few hours, and would advance along the treeline to our right.

We knew for sure there were mines there, because Piatnitsa had laid them himself, but hadn't made a map of exactly where. When he died at Troishka, he was the only one who knew where they were. So the BMP’s from Somali Battalion were going to have to drive across the area and hope they didn’t find them the hard way. They’d be rolling the dice against Death, but it couldn’t be helped, and it was just part of the job. Anti-Arrow left, and about 5 minutes later artillery started working on us heavily. Ukrop spotters had seen his car.

A few minutes before the end of our shift, three Somali BMP’s roared by, and all hell broke loose. The Ukrops started shooting RPG’s at the BMP’s, which missed the armor, but hit our schoolhouse. The BMP’s were firing back with their cannons and heavy machine gun, whilst AK fire was going in both directions, hot and heavy. I ran through all ten of my rifle grenades, and most of my bullets (4 out of 5 mags) before things settled down. It was then that we noticed that there was no back-up ammo at Ushi.

We couldn’t radio for more ammo, because the Ukrops were listening to our radio freq’s, and if they heard us request ammo, they would certainly make an immediate assault. And they were a lot closer to us than the guys with the bullets back at Milnitsa were. It was a tense half hour or so before our relief arrived.

We returned to Milnitsa and told Chogar about the ammo problem. His solution was for Pover and I to immediately return to Ushi, humping a couple of crates of 5.45 ammo to leave there for emergencies such as the one we had just been through an hour before. It was a raw deal for us, but we made the best of it by loading ourselves up with grenades, rifle grenades, and extra personal ammo while we were in the arms room.

The next day four more guys arrived, including Orion, who was sent to Garage within the hour. One of the new guys, “Poet”, had a guitar, an old beat up acoustic with rusty strings, but it had all six of them, and worked well enough to compose my first Russian song on. The Ballad of Sut Vremeni. It was an instant smash hit, at least at Milnitsa. That night some vodka and green tea appeared, and for a couple of hours a good time was had by all. Orion re-appeared, having been sent back from Garage to Milnitsa. And he was to be my new partner on guard at Ushi. I wasn’t happy about it, I liked working with Pover, and trusted Pover’s instincts and guts. I could not always say the same about Orion. But that was how it was going to be.

My first shift with Orion that night at Ushi went pretty easy, few long range artillery and sniper shot fired at us, but nothing for us to shoot back at. On the way back to Milnitsa, my knife came unsheathed while I was re-adjusting the rifle grenade carrier on my shoulder. I dropped the knife without noticing as we walked in the dark. The knife was an antique Afghan fighting knife that had belonged to my Grandfather. I had brought it with me from the States, and did not realize it was gone until I got back to Milnitsa and was taking off my gear. It was somewhere on the trail between Milnitsa and Ushi, but I couldn’t exactly go out and start looking for it with a flashlight. The next morning, shortly after dawn, I found it on my way back to Ushi for the 7 to 10 AM shift.
That shift was unremarkable, usual amount of bombs and bullets. Orion kept up a steady stream of conversation, but I didn’t have much to say. A little after 10 AM, we made it back to Milnitsa. After a cup of tea to warm up, I decided to get some much needed sleep. The bed was empty, and I got to sleep in my own sleeping bag for the first time in a while. It was the warmest bag there, and I’d usually find someone else sleeping in it when I got back from a guard shift. This morning it was all mine. I took off my boots and bronik and went to sleep. Around noon I woke to the sound of Ukrop bombs landing right outside the house, within 25 meters. It was a significant bombardment, 82mm, 2 or 3 rounds a minute, hitting close. All of a sudden, Milnitsa was as hot as Ushi.

I considered getting up and gearing up, but decided there probably wouldn’t be anything to shoot at, and if there was, the guys in the front room would let me know. Besides, I was warm and cozy in a corner of the basement, as safe as any other place to ride out the attack. I remember saying “Fuck it” as I rolled back over to try to sleep through the noise of the bombs, and that’s when a direct hit came right through the wall in the next room. The explosion was deafening, the air instantly filled with an impenetrable fog of white concrete dust and the stench of burned high explosives.

I grabbed my boots in one hand and my AK in the other, and felt my way blindly to the front door. I stepped outside and just breathed. Mongoose made his way out and asked if I was OK. Miraculously, yes, and even more miraculously, Los and Mozilla, who had both been in the front room when the bomb blew through the wall, were too. Engineer had caught a piece of shrapnel and had a serious but non-life threatening cut on his side.

The bomb came through the wall right above the kitchen table where we prepared our coffee and tea, and if I had gotten up, that is exactly where I would have been standing, without my helmet or body armor. It was a perfect shot by the Ukrop mortar squad – landing above ground level but below the first floor which also served as the basement’s roof, about 3 feet above the ground. We were very lucky.
Although not visibly wounded, Los and Mozilla evacuated, with the seriously wounded Engineer back to Yasynuvata. Los and Mozilla were diagnosed as malingering and put on toilet cleaning duty for a week. The toilets at Yasynuvata were the stuff of nightmares, and cleaning them would make anyone miss the Front...

Which is where those of us who remained at Milnitsa were left, to deal with the situation. We had to move, our position had been identified and was dialed in. The Ukrops could hit us with the same mortar any time they wanted. We had to move, and fast. Another volley could come at any second. Orion and I were sent back to Ushi to stand guard while the other guys moved all the gear to New Milnitsa. We were at Ushi under intermittent tank fire for about six hours before we were finally relieved. We found our way to the new position, a nice three story house, empty and abandoned by the obviously wealthy owners, who were probably now in Kiev. It was about 500 meters south of Old Milnitsa. Our first question upon arriving there was “Where’s our gear?” Nobody knew. After a quick look around, it was clear that our stuff was still back at Old Milnitsa. Good lookin’ out, Comrades... We were told by Chogar we could go get our stuff, and so we did, with Ukrop artillery falling down all around us as we went.

Once we got back to Old Milnitsa, it took us about an hour to find our stuff in the darkness and chaos of the abandoned post, but my beloved sleeping bag wasn’t there. We gathered up what we could find and made it back to the new post. When we got back everybody who wasn’t on post was already sleeping in a dog pile - ten guys on six beds pushed all together, with, lo and behold, my nice warm sleeping bag covering several of them. I pointed out to Chogar that Orion and I could not possibly squeeze in and sleep next to the guys already supine, we could only lie down on top of them if we were to sleep on the same bed. Chogar suggested we sleep sitting on chairs in the radio room. He understood when I said in English, “Fuck that”. Not caring whether Chogar liked it or not, I pulled my sleeping bag out of the pile and went to sleep upstairs on the first floor, and Orion chose to do the same.

It was no more dangerous than the basement, and sleep was essential. It was very cold away from the stove but more comfortable and less smoky than the dog pile would have been. My sleeping bag was warm, and a godsend. At 4 AM, Mongoose woke me for guard duty, and told me I was not allowed to sleep on the 1st floor. When we returned from Ushi a bit after 7 AM, everyone was awake. I had Orion translate a message to all, including sergeants and commanders – Anyone found in my sleeping bag henceforth would be wakened by a boot to the face. I meant it, and they knew it.

Shrapnel from 82mm mortar that hit Old Milnitsa and cut through my sleeping bag. While I was in it...
I had made my bones, and faced as much death and danger as anyone there, and other than the major handicap of not speaking Russian, I was as good a soldier as any of them, and better than some. I was tired of being taken advantage of and treated like a tourist or some new recruit. And I was ready to kick some ass or get my ass kicked the next time somebody tried it. Which didn’t take long.

Later the same morning, one of the new Russian guys came up to where I was heating water for tea and simply helped himself to a cup of my hot water, without even asking or giving me a second look. He went downstairs, made some instant coffee and sat down and began sipping the steaming brew. I told Orion to tell the guy in Russian that I had just finished washing my ass and balls with the hot water the Russian had made coffee from and was now drinking. Hilarity ensued, but the coffee drinking Russian did not see the humor as the rest of us howled with laughter. He spat out the coffee, smashed the cup on the floor and jumped up into my face. I did not flinch, and I was ready to kill him with hands or knife if he touched me. He could tell it by looking at me, and decided to let it pass. I went back upstairs, made some tea and came back down with the steaming cup, by which everyone, including the Russian, understood he had not really been drinking coffee made from ass-wash. We all had another good laugh, and that was the moment that my days of getting fucked with came to an end.

I celebrated my newfound autonomy by disobeying the order to sleep on the dog-pile, and set up camp in the living room of the 1st floor – “Club Tejas”. It was a nice room with Eastward facing windows that I reinforced with sandbags to make it as safe as any other place in the house, including the basement. The basement wall faced west, and 82’s had already landed within 5 ft. of it in the front yard. The wall was also reinforced with steel gates, wood and sandbags, piled up inside and outside, but if a 120 or 152 hit, it would be instant death for the whole squad. My chances were about the same on the 1st floor, and it was much more comfortable. Club Tejas also boasted its own actual fireplace, and was a rather cozy and stylish abode.
The next evening, I collected some firewood and built a nice fire in the fireplace. Less than half an hour later, the bombs started dropping hot and heavy all around the house. The Ukrops already knew where we were, but apparently could see the heat signature out the top of the chimney with their thermal imagers. There were two other stoves downstairs, but their shorter smokestacks meant the heat dissipated before it hit the skyline. The fireplace chimney was one of the highest terrain features in the village, and visible to the nazi artillery spotters a couple of kilometers away. I threw water on the fire, but later re-built it, keeping it very small. I didn’t mention the fire being the probable reason for the artillery attack.

The next night, Orion and I were at Ushi for the 1 to 4 AM shift. It was cold, and it was quiet. We’d been there about hour, and Orion was dozing off, which was okay by me. He really had the gift of gab, and if he wasn’t asleep, he was keeping up a constant stream of banter. Every 15 minutes or so, I’d go out and scan the field with the thermal imager (TI). I was just starting to consider catching a little shut eye myself when I heard few shots from the Oplot guys at Troishka. I decided to go out and look around, and didn’t even bother to wake Orion up.

The last few weeks had been almost all artillery, hardly anything to shoot at with our AK’s or VOGs, so I wasn’t expecting to see anything. Just checking, because you never know... I walked to the usual corner of the house, pausing a moment to warm up the TI, which took a minute or two to become operational. You couldn’t leave it on all the time, there wasn’t enough battery, especially when it was freezing cold. So, 15 minutes off, 5 minutes on. And 2 minutes to warm it up before you could use it.

Once it was working, I stepped to the corner and started scanning the airport wall 400 meters away. I expected I might see a little white (hot) spot peeking through the holes in the wall, but no, it was “cheesy”, “clean”, nothing there. So I started to scan the “zelonka”, the treeline back from the airport wall toward the end of the road right next to our position.

Our thermal imager was far from state of the art, but it was very effective. You could see a mouse, and tell it was a mouse, at 50 meters. At 100 meters, you could tell a dog was a dog, and almost what breed it was. I was scanning down the zelonka, nothing, nothing, nothing... then, about 50 meters away, I spot a dude doing the low crawl on his belly, through the underbrush. 50 meters away. Fuck! I popped off half a magazine in his general direction, and crouched down at the corner of the house.

Orion, awakened by the gunfire, called to me from inside the school, “Texas, what’s going on?” “Get your ass out here”, I replied as I put a few more rounds in the general direction of the nazi interloper.

Orion came out, and I explained the serious situation – “Ukrop sniper 50 meters over there, down behind the big tree.” Of course, Orion couldn’t see shit. It was pitch black dark, the kind of dark when the cloud cover and lack of ambient light on the ground makes it impossible to see much past the end of your rifle barrel. I told him to pop off a few rounds to cover me while I ran to the two story house directly behind Ushi. I entered the burned out house and made my way up the blasted staircase. From a window on the second floor, I could see the sniper peeking from around the base of a big tree, looking in my direction. I could tell by the way he was looking at me that he had thermal goggles, or at least night vision, too.
I popped off a few more rounds, loaded a fresh magazine, and yelled down to Orion in English, “Tell him in Russian to come out without his weapon and with his hands up. Tell him we can see him, and we won’t hurt him if he does, but we’ll kill him if he doesn’t.” Orion relayed the message, but got no reaction. I could still see the fucker peeking around the tree trunk, first from one side, then from the other. And I could tell he could see me. I yelled down to Orion again, “Tell him he has one minute to come out, then we cut loose and no mercy.” Orion translated, and when he got to the part about “one minute”, the sniper jumped up and started running at Olympic speed back towards the airport and the Ukrop positions.

I started firing, and Orion did too, but to be honest, we were both firing blind. Orion was shooting at noises, and I was shooting with the thermal imager held to my right eye with my right hand, and my Kalash in my left. The night vision was nil in my right eye, from looking into the white screen of the thermal imager, I was firing one-handed, with my left hand and left eye. We both missed the sniper as he ran, and to be honest, I’m not sure I was trying as hard as I could to kill him. But I know that nazi ran as fast as he could, all the way back to his kubrik, where I’m sure he told his buddies “The Separs (Separatists) have an American instructor!” There was never another Ukrop that advanced through the zelonka alongside Ushi. Not one.

I learned many life-saving lessons that night. The first was, don’t ever even think about catching a nap on guard duty. I wanted to kick Orion’s ass for nodding off, and I should have. If that sniper had had two more minutes, he would have been set up in a position where even the thermal probably couldn’t have seen him. At the next shift change, standing and talking behind Ushi, like we always did, he could have killed all four of us before we even knew what happened. It was my guardian angel (and hearing the gunfire from Troishka) that made me go out to look around when I did. If I hadn’t gone out right then, at that precise moment, everybody at Ushi would have been sitting ducks, and would have been shot to death that night.

So, I didn’t kill the nazi sniper, but saved four lives that night, one of which was my own. And I’m pretty sure we made that nazi shit his pants on his hasty way back to the Ukrop lines. As he ran out of range, and kept on running, I yelled after him, “Pravy Sektor Pederast!”

I also realized a bit about using a thermal imager or any night vision - first, it only goes on the left eye. The right eye is for shooting. The imager was a handheld monocular, but I could have set it alongside or on top of my rifle and been a lot more accurate than looking through the TI for a few seconds, then firing off a few rounds with my other eye and hand.

We also had a couple of hand grenades and even a couple of Mukha RPG-22 anti-tank rockets that we could have used if we’d thought of it, or if we’d really been intent on killing him. We didn’t, and we weren’t. Those were both mistakes too. That sniper was coming to kill us. He’s probably killed some good guys since. I learned my lessons from that night, and did not make those mistakes again.

When our relief arrived at dawn, we warned them to stay sharp, though chances were slim the sniper would try another visit. After we made a report to Chogar his first reaction was to berate us, saying we had shot at one of our own guys, probably returning from a recon patrol, and if we had hit him, we’d have gotten 15 years in prison. It was a stupid reaction, and absolutely incorrect. I wrote a report about the whole
incident, and told Chogar to contact Troishka and ask what they’d been shooting at
around 2 AM, and then we could go to Battalion Command to discuss it further.
Chogar then decided it probably had been a Ukrop sniper, and magnanimously
decided not to punish me for saving at least four of our soldier’s lives. I did not mind
getting shot at every day, nor the atrocious conditions, the food, the cold, the sleeping
arrangements. But to be threatened with punishment for saving myself and my
comrades (even if the sniper got away) really pissed me off.

The weeks passed slowly. There were heavy artillery attacks near Ushi during the
day, not as usual, targeting our position, but dozens of big rounds landing in the
open field between Ushi and the airport wall. This caused much talk and I
suspected there would be a major Ukrop attack the following day. And I expected it
to come at Ushi the next morning. The open field between the airport wall and Ushi
was being bombed heavily by 120 and 152mm artillery. These were not “misses”.

Before the bombardment of the field, a Ukrop infantry attack from the airport
wall to Ushi would have had to cross 400 meters of open ground before reaching
Ushi, in the open the whole way. Now, they had 50 or 60 pre-dug foxholes about 2
meters deep and 5 meters wide across the field of fire, and heavy artillery barrages
also tend to disrupt tripwires and mines.

What would have been a suicide mission, running over open ground, was now a
pretty good pathway for a couple of squads (16 to 20 nazis) to assault Ushi, which
was held by only two soldiers, an attack which would have had an almost 100%
guarantee of success for the nazis and fatality for anyone at Ushi who didn’t run.

We had three “Mukha” anti-tank rockets, a dozen or so VOG rifle grenades, and
two AK’s with around a dozen loaded magazines. If Ushi fell, the Ukrops could push
forwards 800 meters, almost a kilometer, before they’d meet another NAF soldier.
An easy advance that would give them 100 houses in the village to hide in. From
there they could then attack Troishka and Garage from the flanks and rear.

To the North, 400 meters away, was Troishka, with 40 or 50 soldiers. To the South,
Garage, with 15 to 20, very well armed. In between was Ushi, with two lightly armed
soldiers, and now with perfect cover for an infantry advance blasted right in front of
them. The next NAF position behind Ushi was New Milnitsa, 800 meters to the East.
The odds of Ushi being wiped out by a Ukrop attack before reinforcements could
arrive were almost certain. After being shot at every day for a month, I was getting
the feeling my number was about to come up.

On the night of January 29th, after an exceptionally good dinner, a bottle of cognac
appeared, and everyone, including commanders, had a couple of shots. I pulled out
my harmonica and the Milnitsa guitar and played every song I knew, wondering if
this was to be my last waltz. Orion had already told me he would run if there was a
serious attack, but I had made up my mind to stay and fight, even if I had to do it
alone. I washed up extra well and shaved my ragged beard. It felt good. I thought
about my Grandfather who had fought nazis in WWII, I thought about William
Barrett Travis, who commanded the Alamo, I thought about my life, and when I
crawled into my sleeping bag that night, I said my prayers.

When I was awakened at 04:30 the next morning, my first words were not my usual
“Dobry fuckin’ Ootra”, but “Hoka Hey”, the Lakota war cry which literally means
“Today is a good day to die.” Although technically, it was still night. I had the 5 to 8 AM shift, the pre-dawn hours, traditional time for a surprise attack. I really expected to expire that morning, but was ready to take my turn and take my chances. I was ready to go. And I went.

The 30th was a Friday and Muslims say the world will end on a Friday. I was wondering if this was the Friday on which my world would end, but the morning shift was actually quiet, and besides only a few mortar rounds, nothing happened. I spent the shift scanning the airport wall with the thermal imager every few minutes, but the big attack did not materialize. So, I figured I was safe when I headed back to New Milnitsa.

Iris came by and ordered us to reinforce the West wall, so Orion and I got sandbag detail while most of the rest of the squad slept, cooked or just lounged around. The sand was in a pile in front of a house about 100 meters from New Milnitsa, and frozen solid, so solid we had to chop it with an ax in order to get it into the sand bags. In three hours we filled 12 bags. I filled eight, Orion filled four, and as usual, took off for about an hour “to take a shit”. Shortly after he returned we were targeted by 82 mm mortars, with one landing within 2 meters, but on the other side of the frozen sand pile. We were incredibly lucky, again.

At the sand pile, I re-learned the same lesson I had so recently learned at Old Milnitsa – 800 meters back from the frontline is still well within range of Ukrop guns, and Death can come when you least expect it. The Ukrops were using drones to target us. They were hard to see and virtually impossible to hit with rifles. Dacha was hit by artillery that day, but the basement was beneath several solid floors, and nothing got through. I was told by Iris I would get three days leave starting on the 2nd of February, if I lived till then. The odds seemed to be about 50–50, in my opinion.

That night, Orion and I were walking up the road to Ushi a little before 1 AM. About halfway there, we suddenly realized there was a group of a dozen soldiers standing in the front yard of one of the houses. We were only 15 meters from them when we saw them and at the same time, they saw us. Orion did the talking, asking first, of course, for the password, which these guys didn’t know either. But they weren’t Ukrops, they were a recon unit from Sparta. If they had been Ukrops, we’d have been killed, or even worse, captured. There was no chance to escape or even to pull my RGO grenade. It was another stupid and potentially deadly situation, not knowing troops from another battalion would be working in our area of operation.

Next day we got a new volunteer, “Tractorman”, from Irkuts, a friendly but tough old peasant. He was sent to the Front without helmet or bronik, and with only 1 magazine for his rifle. He was OK with this, but he didn’t yet know exactly how dangerous it truly was. He would learn soon enough. It was for me another indication of careless commanders. We had one and a half crates of ammo for our AK’s, enough to last an hour at most in a heavy firefight, but we had 5 crates of 7.62x54 in the garage, though we had no weapons at New Milnitsa that used those rounds. I was really starting to think that the greatest danger I faced was not the nazi killers based a kilometer away, but the incompetence of our commanders. It was really starting to wear on me.

Orion felt it too, and had begun talking about leaving and going to Crimea to teach English. The lack of training and lack of information about the combat situation was another point that I felt really endangered us for no reason. We had five RPG-22
anti-tank rockets, but I had no idea how to use them, and knew most of the other soldiers didn’t either.

I got the word that Mozilla had gone AWOL from Yasynuvata toilet cleaning duty. Before he left, I had given him $100 to bring back cigs, coffee and maybe some vodka. When I heard the news, I figured I’d never see that money or Mozilla again. I told Pover, who asked incredulously, “You gave Mozilla $100?!” He looked at me for a moment, then said, “I did too. I figured I might die the next day, so fuck it.” I really liked Pover – he was a great soldier and a great friend.

The next day, Iris came by and was talking about sending soldiers a few at a time to Yasynuvata for training on machine guns and RPG’s. It was good news, but I had learned by then not to believe anything until it happened. Yet Pover actually left that day to train with the RPG, and I was told I’d be going to sapper school in a few days to learn about Russian mines and booby traps.

Sunday, February 1st 2015 was the last day before my vacation, so naturally, very heavy shelling at Ushi. I pulled the 5 to 8 PM shift with Orion. Around 6 PM, three 120 mm shells landed simultaneously within 50 meters of our position, and 5 minutes later, 3 more. Orion ran and hid in the basement of the house behind our position, and I spent the rest of the shift alone in the schoolhouse.

We returned to New Milnitsa after our shift, and as I was having some swine soup, Mongoose told me I needed to be at Dacha at 6 AM to catch a ride to Yasynuvata. I’d be making the 500 meter journey on foot alone, to Dacha with all my baggage in the pre-dawn darkness, and wasn’t even sure where Dacha was. It would be easy to get lost in the winding streets of the deserted village, and if I was late, the van would leave without me. But I was ready to go - Reem, Mir and Pover were all in Yasynuvata, and I wanted to pour down some vodka and blaze up some green tea with them to wash away the stress of a full month at the Front.
The Chapter of the Windmills

As usual, the planned departure did not take place at the appointed time, so I spent four more days at Milnitsa before finally being allowed to leave. I made it to Dacha and caught a ride to Yasynuvata. I spent a day on guard duty there, then headed to Donetsk for two days with Christian and Maria. They told me they will be leaving to Moscow at the end of the month, probably not coming back. I was sorry to hear that. Christian was a great friend and really helped me out. Finally, on the morning of February 9th, I packed my gear and caught the van to Yaz and then a bus to Donetsk.

After several days of rest, good food, vodka and laundry in Donetsk, I returned to Yasynuvata. Pover and Shooka were still there, and I was subjected to a more extensive basic training course which I passed.

There were new photos of Bielka, Piatnitsa and Bulgarin, the three guys killed at Troishka, on the wall in the entrance lobby of the Yasynuvata base. A oil lamp was kept burning in front of their pictures 24/7. Pulling guard duty at the desk by the entrance, I had plenty of time to ponder their photos and my own mortality, and hope my photo didn’t end up on the wall beside them.
I have lived what a lot of people might consider a pretty hard life. I’ve been in two different armies, spent five years in prison, been a bandit and a bouncer. I’ve been in countless street fights over my life, probably hundreds, and without the benefit of referees or the Marquis of Queensbury rules. I have won the vast majority of them, but some have ended with me being the one on the ground at the end. Those generally involved me getting crossways with guys way bigger than me, or taking on 3 or 4 or 5 guys at a time, which will certainly reduce your win/loss ratio over the years. And here’s a little advice based on my experience – If you’re ever in a heated argument with a steroid-enhanced giant bodybuilder, don’t call him “Hercules” and then laugh. At least while you’re within his reach...

I learned another useful lesson along those lines when I went on my first official 3 day pass from the 19th – 22nd of February. With the exception of the few days at Christian’s, I had spent 8 weeks at the Front, plus the two tough weeks in Yasnynvata Basic Training, and now finally, I was going back to Donetsk with 72 hours of liberty. I had three days to decompress from 2 months of hard, hard duty, so I was going to turbo-charge it.

Alfonzo had leave at the same time, and we headed to the Red Cat together. I took the only private (single) room, and Alfonzo got a bunk in one of the four man rooms. There was an American journalist named Katy staying there, along with her boyfriend, a French adventurer who was a soldier on leave from a Lugansk unit. It was nice to be back at the good ol’ Rezzy Kot.

Lunch that day was not the usual airport fare of pashtet, kasha and tashunka, (pate, buckwheat porridge, and canned meat) it was Cafe Cuba, one of the finest
restaurants in Donetsk, which also had a giant portrait of Che Guevara on the wall. I don’t remember what Alfonzo had, but I had the salmon with a nice chardonnay, and 200ml of vodka to wash it down with. Then we returned to the Red Cat, where I had a hot date with a sweet little honey named Eva. She was a cute girl in her early 20’s, who had made at least one major mistake in life – she had decided to pluck her eyebrows and have eyebrows tattoo’ed in their place. But since we spent most of the afternoon naked in my room I did not spend much time looking at her eyebrow tattoos. A few hours and a bottle of Armenian cognac later, I got the brilliant idea to go out on the town, to Club Banana.

Club Banana is one of the top clubs in Donetsk, city center, right off Artem Blvd, right across from the Donbass Palace Hotel. Since the beginning of the war, it was the soldier bar. 90% of the clients were soldiers, and 90% of the soldiers were Sparta Battalion. I had been there once before with Christian and Maria, during my sick leave, and liked the first class bar, excellent food and the portrait of Che that was prominently displayed, just like at the Cuba restaurant. Alfonzo, Eva and I got a table and enjoyed some more drinks, but that’s where things start getting a bit fuzzy.

In fact, the only idea I have about what happened next is based on where I woke up the next day and some fragments related by Eva and Alfonzo. Club Banana was the bar of Sparta Battalion, led by the legendary Motorola, the battalion whose HQ was the old SBU, where I had applied to enlist, and been shined on, back in December.

Our unit, Sut Vremeny, was a serious frontline unit, real combat troops, and Alfonzo and I had been shot at many times every day for the last two months. But Sparta were assault troops, the guys who six weeks before had attacked and taken the New Terminal from the Ukrop “Cyborgs” and killed all the ones who didn’t run away. We were tough, but they were tougher, and Club Banana was their bar. And, somehow, something happened.

I don’t know if it was because Alfonzo was Black, or if the Texan recruit was acting a bit too ‘Austintatiously’, but somehow five Sparta soldiers confronted us and I didn’t like it. Things got serious.

Back then, I did not carry a pistol or grenade for protection but I did carry a Ker-shaw Whirlwind assisted opening knife which opened as fast as a switchblade and came from the factory as sharp as a scalpel, and I do mean sharp. Not razor sharp, laser sharp, guaranteed to cut anything that so much as touched the cutting edge. And when I pulled it and flipped it open, prepared to operate on one of the Sparta soldiers, Eva stepped in between us, and somehow touched the blade. Instantly, her blood flowed.

I do not remember that part, or what came after. Apparently, we went outside and I got what some might say was a well deserved ass-whoopin’. Well deserved or not, an ass-whoopin’ was what I got. I was wakened some time later in Lenin Plaza by two military policemen. I was beaten, but not too badly, and my Kershaw blade and camouflage cowboy hat were gone. To the credit of Sparta Battalion and the DNR in general, I still had my wallet and all my money, despite having been knocked unconscious and laying on the street for some time. Even the cops were merciful. I managed to mumble the address of the Red Cat, and they gave me a ride. I don’t remember crawling into bed, but Eva was gone and Alfonzo gave me a lecture which included his smashing the empty cognac bottle on the floor of my room.
At some point the next morning, I remember opening my eyes and seeing Lyudmila, the proprietor of the Red Cat, peeking in the door at me. I opened my one unblackened eye and raised my head from the blood-encrusted pillow and managed a smile. She, like an Angel, returned the smile, and quietly shut the door and left me to sleep it off, which I did for 4 or 5 hours more.

When I finally awoke and went to get some coffee, Alfonzo lit into me like a hive of angry bees. In his opinion, the shit from the previous night was all my fault. This I could not dispute, having no memory of the events, but I did know he had not participated in the fight, and had left me there, laying on the street, while he returned to the Red Cat with Eva. So, I was in no mood to be lectured by him. I told him to shut the fuck up or there would be another fight, and went to sweep up the broken glass from the cognac bottle he had smashed in my room.

Later that day, we were interviewed and photographed by the US journalist. My hangover lasted the rest of my vacation, and actually, I was still feeling pretty bad when I returned to Yasynuvata to report back for duty. I was lucky to be in working condition – several fights at the Banana had ended in fatalities. I was also lucky to not have seen the inside of a Novorussian jail. It seemed my guardian angel was with me in the city as well as at the Front. My liberty had been as dangerous and as hard as days at the Front. I would need to take it a little easier next time, but now was time for some training and then back to work.

After this painful vacation, I was assigned to RPG school in Yasynuvata under Caluchi, a local miner with great teaching and leadership skills. As Iris said, “I do not need riflemen - I need machine gunners, RPG men and sappers.” I had told him I was a US Army trained sapper (“Combat Engineer”) but my knowledge did not extend to Russian mines and explosives. I am good at improvised explosive devices and booby traps, but my lack of Russian language and lack of experience with Russian devices would be a real handicap. With explosives, you only get to make one mistake...
So, I was chosen for RPG school. The RPG is an old, simple, and deadly device, with a range of 900 meters, but an effective range of about 1/3 that. It is highly effective against armor and vehicles, and also against bunkers, and to some degree, depending on the ammo, against troops in trenches or out in the open. There are several different rockets that can be used with the RPG-7. A couple of different sizes of anti-armor rockets called “Markovkas” (“Carrots”), an anti-personnel fragmentation rocket equal to about five F-1 grenades called the “Carandash” (“Pencil”), and the awe-inspiring thermobaric bomb known as the “Parasonak” (“Piglet”).

The RPG is a very basic weapon, with a mechanism like a single action pistol. The rocket is loaded, the hammer cocked, safety clicked off, and it is ready to fire. After instruction and practice, I was able to hit a 55 gallon drum from 300 meters in a fairly brisk crosswind, good enough shooting to qualify as an RPG man at the Front.

Pover also qualified on the RPG, and I hoped we would be able to work together as a team. We had about the same level of skill, courage and commitment, and we were good friends. We would look out for each other, trusted each other and where ever one of us went, we knew we didn’t have to wonder if the other would be there too.

February 23rd was Day of the Defenders, a Russian national holiday also observed in the DPR. Most of the troops from Yasynuvata base went to Donetsk to participate in the parade, but Alfonzo and I were required to remain at the base. There were still Ukrop diversant patrols probing Yasynuvata, and commanders wanted some combat experienced soldiers to stay behind and guard the base. Or at least that’s what they told us.

I became friends with an Anarchist volunteer from Omsk who was code named “ Ramirez”, after The Ramones, the punk rock band from the USA. He spoke fair English and was a suave and good looking guy, a qualified medical doctor, and ran the sick bay at the base. He had a private room and a penchant for vodka, which we made the most of. A great guy to talk about music with over a few shots, but I was a little unsure of how well he could treat wounded or otherwise handle himself in a combat situation.

The news came in about two more Sut Vremeny soldiers being killed near Troishka. “Alice” and “Sitch” had been going from Cachigarka to Milnitsa through the graveyard behind Troishka when they were attacked. The original version of the story was that they had been hit by an 82 mm mortar, but as things became clearer after an investigation of the scene, another story emerged.

Alice was indeed killed, but the impact crater and shrapnel indicated a VOG rifle grenade rather than an 82. And Sitch, instead of being dead, was missing. There were bloody drag marks which indicated the more likely scenario of a Ukrop patrol hitting them with a rifle grenade, killing Alice and wounding Sitch and taking him prisoner, a fate worse than death. This was not good news for any of us. Since the Battle of Troishka and the subsequent destruction of the control tower and our occupation of the tower complex, the area around Troishka had been considered cleared of enemy and relatively safe. Apparently this was not the case.

Russians do not tarry when it comes to having funerals, and the funeral for Alice was held the third day after he died at Vostok Base Four in Donetsk. It was a somber occasion, and a reminder of how close Death was to us all. The base where I had signed up to defend Novorussia three months earlier now looked totally different.
Improvements were ongoing, but it was also a matter of my own perspective. I felt like a part of what we were doing there, a member, not an outsider looking in. I had taken my chances, just like Alice and Sitch, and it was only Fate that had decided it would be them instead of me. The guys in Vostok knew Sut Vremeny, knew what we had done and where we had been, and they respected our work.

Alice was buried in a simple wooden coffin. He did not have family, other than the twenty or so Vostok and Sut Vremeny soldiers there to say goodbye. I did not know him well, but I knew well enough that it could have been me just as easily as him. And I knew also that by then Sitch had most likely been tortured to death and dumped into a ditch or shell crater. Which also just as easily could have been me. It was a cold and lonely feeling. We had the traditional three shots of vodka, then back to Yasynuvata to collect the gear and prepare to return to the airport early the next morning.

Alice was added to the wall, Sitch was listed as Missing In Action, but was never found.
At the airport, I was assigned to a new position called Gavin, in the basement of a deserted upscale house about 300 meters behind New Milnitsa. Reem was in charge, along with with his ever-present sidekick Mir. Engineer was there, having recovered from the wound he got from the mortar shell at Old Milnitsa. Alfonzo and I rounded out the squad. Our guard post was called “Fishka”, a garage filled with weapons, rockets and ammo alongside a small lake near the Ukrop occupied village of Pesky. It was a relatively quiet post. This was in the early days of the first Minsk Agreement, and the Front was the quietest it had been since I had arrived in Donbass. Both sides of the line were taking a breather, and an almost party-like atmosphere prevailed.

For the first time, I saw vodka openly consumed in frontline positions, and a lot of soldiers, even on guard duty, were flat-out drunk. Not just the Sut Vremeny soldiers, but virtually every soldier, on both sides, including myself. Imagine a cold, dark and deserted village in the middle of the Russian steppes, populated only by heavily armed drunken rebels and just a few hundred meters away, equally drunken nazis, during the first lull in heavy fighting since the war began six months earlier. It was surreal.

The second night back, I was pulling guard duty with Alfonzo at the Fishka position, we were both drunk, and I was still pissed off about his leaving me on the street after the fight at Club Banana. Harsh words and insults were exchanged, and we ended up dropping our rifles and going at it with fists. Both of us were quite intoxicated, and wearing at least 50 lbs of gear - body armor, ammo belts, grenades and helmets. So we soon ended up on the ground, not from getting knocked down, but from falling over. Realizing what a stupid situation it was, we began laughing at ourselves and each other. From that moment, our friendship was revived, and remains to this day.

The next night, we were sitting at Gavin, and Engineer started talking shit about Alfonzo and Black people. Mir and Reem just sat back and watched. Alfonzo was a bit nervous, and looked to me to see if our friendship was real. Of course it was. I told Engineer to shut the fuck up and that anyone who wanted trouble with Alfonzo would have trouble with me too. Again, Reem and Mir were silent, and Engineer was quite surprised. Engineer liked me, more than I liked him, and wanted to keep things cool between us, so he shut up.
I thought that was the end of it, but it wasn’t. Every time Engineer was around Alfonzo and I wasn’t there, he’d start again with talk about “niggers” in general and Alfonzo in particular. Engineer was a huge guy, strong as an ox, a hardened soldier and a dangerous man. Though he was pretty well educated, he was what I would call naturally dumb. He was not someone anyone would want to get physical with. Not only because of his imposing size and strength, but because he was the kind of guy who might just beat you to death without a second thought. Alfonzo got a transfer back to New Milnitsa, and I got stuck pulling guard duty with Engineer. He was pretty crazy when he was sober, but when he was drunk, he was dangerously insane.

Our first night on guard at Fishka, he proposed opening up on nothing in particular with the PKM medium machine gun. I was absolutely against it. Since the ceasefire, a few civilians had begun to return to the village, and indiscriminate shooting would be a real danger for them. Not to mention the fact that it could cause return fire from the Ukrop positions, which could lead to a firefight we were not prepared for, and even possibly a breakdown of the ceasefire. So, I was adamantly against it. He said “OK”.

A few minutes later, he calls HQ on the radio to say he sees two Ukrops walking a few hundred meters away and asks permission to open fire. Though my Russian was quite limited, I caught the gist and started yelling “Nyet, nyet!” while Engineer had the transmit button pressed. HQ figured out what I meant and refused permission. Now Engineer was pissed at me.

After we were relieved an hour or so later, we returned to Gavin and our basement barracks. I was rather dismayed to find that Reem and Mir were gone, and I’d be spending the night with Engineer alone. I was pretty drunk, he was slobbering drunk, and still surly about not getting to play with the machine gun. He was sitting on the bed, and I was sitting next to the stove about six feet in front of him, and three feet to his left. The room was small, maybe 8 by 10, dark and cramped. I was making tea when all of a sudden Engineer lets out an inarticulate bellow and opens up with his AK on full auto, putting half a dozen rounds through the door. Not because he thought we were being attacked, but because he was pissed off at me and was trying to scare me. I was unimpressed, and continued to make my tea. I was acting nonchalant, but inside was really quite concerned to be in the same unit with someone so crazy dumb and dangerous. I told him to quit fucking around and to go to sleep. He did.

When Reem and Mir returned the next day, they asked me about the bullet holes in the door. I told them to ask Engineer. I don’t know what he told them, but it was never mentioned again.
After the madness of Gavin, there was a shake-up in the positions, and Reem and Mir were transferred to the Blesna position in Spartak. Though the airport was relatively quiet, it was still very hot in Spartak. At that point Blesna was the hottest place that Sut Vremeny was holding on the Front. Besides the Monastery, it was the hottest we ever held.

On the 9th of March, Engineer and I were ordered to pack up our gear and anything useful from Gavin, as we would be moving that afternoon. After several hours of packing, we were ready and told to wait. Afternoon gave way to evening, evening in to night, and night turned to midnight. We finally received the word to move. Engineer was going to Garage, and I’d be going to Cachigarka, between the Monastery and the New Terminal, about 2km away. It would be another midnight move, and I’d be going solo.

I walked alone from Gavin through the Russian graveyard behind Troishka. The sky was blotted out by low, black clouds, while I was pelted with chilling rain and a strong, steady breeze. Even with the whistling of the wind, and the rumble of distant artillery in the background, the squeaking of the wheels on the garden cart I was hauling my gear in seemed inordinately loud. The few lights reflecting off the clouds from Donetsk 5km away reminded me that I was in a very precarious world.

Every soldier, outlaw, sailor, every high-stakes gambler of any kind, is at least a little bit superstitious. It’s because they all know how much simple chance and dumb luck can influence events and determine the outcome when all the chips are on the table. I felt a foreboding chill as I walked alone. I had always been very, very lucky, and I knew it. But I also knew that, sooner or later, everybody’s luck runs out. I’d always
figured that when mine did, it would run out all at once. I wondered if tonight would be the night it did.

Alice and Sitch had been killed on the very same trail, walking between the same two positions, less than a month before. They were killed by a Ukrop patrol who was working behind our lines, in what was supposedly a secure area. It wasn’t. Bielka, Bulgarin and Piyatnitsa had all been killed at the Monastery, along with about 100 Ukrop Nazis, a month before that. It was not just a graveyard; it was a graveyard that had been a major battlefield. Valkyries had flown here, not in some prehistoric battle, but only a few weeks before.

It was a long, lonely, and thoughtful stroll. If there was a Ukrop patrol waiting in ambush, I would never even see them until they made their move. I was alone, without even a walkie talkie. Stealth was not an option – the cart and all my gear weighed me down and noisily announced my presence with every step. My rifle was slung over my shoulder, with no way for fast deployment, due to the cart and my heavy backpack. I just had to walk on through and see what happened.

As I finally approached Cachigarka from the rear, I was relieved to be again in the vicinity of comrades. I knew the location of Cachigarka, but not where the guard posts were. I turned on my headlamp and made a little extra noise as I approached. There was still the danger of being mistaken for a Ukrop and shot by one of my own guys. It happens. From about 20 meters away, I called out the password - “Allah hu Akbar!” The reply from the rooftop came instantly: “Vaiesteny Akbar!” A moment later, a heavy steel basement door was unlocked and opened, and I was welcomed into the world of Cachigarka.

It was by far the most luxurious position I had ever seen, much less ever been in! A spacious industrial basement stretched away for many meters in the light of the small electric bulbs that lit the room. A large, wood-burning stove glowed warmly near a table and benches that could accommodate 20 men. A dozen or so soldiers were sleeping in sturdy wooden bunks spaced throughout the room. Each soldier slept on the bottom bunk, with his gear stowed on the top one. In frontline positions, space is a luxury, and this place had space in abundance – not just one full-sized, personal bunk, but two for every soldier!

The place was also rock solid. Two floors above us, built with steel reinforced concrete, Cachigarka had been the electric generating plant for the airport. In the basement, we’d be safe from anything but a Tochka-U. Even Grads or tanks could not touch us. As I was looking for an empty bunk, from which I had several to choose, I also noted an impressive arsenal stacked on shelves along the wall. Dozens of anti-tank rockets, grenades, ammo for every kind of weapon, including two RPG-7s. Cachigarka also had an Uchos heavy machine gun. At my previous position, we had hardly enough ammo for our AKs. The apprehension I had

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1 OTR-21 Tochka-U (Dot). A mobile ballistic missile launch system, known in the West as the SS-21 Scarab. Ukrainian variants have a range of up to 120km and are usually armed with a half ton high explosive warhead. The UAF preformed multiple strikes using Tochka-U missiles during the heaviest fighting from 2014 to 2015.

2 BM-21 Grad (Hail). A multiple rocket launch system comprising of a small six-by-six wheeled truck with a swiveling bank of forty launch tubes mounted on its rear. Each tube holds a 122mm rocket with a minimum max-range of 20km, and can be fired individually or as part of a staggered volley.
felt in the graveyard quickly evaporated like the steam from the hot cup of chai I was handed. This was the best, most secure, cleanest, and most organized position I had ever been in. I was thinking I would like it here.

And so I did. Tourist, a tough but friendly volunteer from St. Petersburg, was our position commander. A former Russian soldier with some unspecified experience in the secret services, he was an outgoing and friendly, but very serious guy. Poet, Shooka, Marskoy, Garcon, Ganz, Tarras, Shen, George, Montazhnik and Sarge were also there. I didn’t know Tarras, George or Shen, but the others were guys I had experience with, knew, liked, and trusted. Three soldiers on 4-hour guard shifts, split between the twelve of us, meant that there was plenty of time to rest and take care of business between shifts.

Two or three of us went to the store in town every day, which was a long walk, but worth it. The daily store runs brought back a steady stream of good food, coffee, sausage, cheese, milk, and fresh bread, along with the occasional and discreet bottle of vodka or packet of green tea. Compared to my previous positions, Cachigarka was like a vacation. Good positions always had a guitar, and Cachigarka had two. It had some good guitar players, too. Tourist, Garcon, Poet and I could all pick a tune, and we did so frequently, sitting around the stove in our subterranean fortress.

Even the weather had started to improve. One warm and sunny afternoon, a week or so after I got there, Poet and I took the guitars and sat in the cemetery between the bullet-riddled headstones and serenaded the thousands of graves and ghosts around us. It was warm enough to take my shirt off and bask in the spring sun. The wind still had a chill, but the sun warmed my bones in a way I hadn’t felt since before I left Texas. The Russian Winter had passed, and I had survived.

Our days were spent relaxing, cleaning and repairing weapons and uniforms, and scavenging for metal to sell to supplement our meager 5,000 ruble a month income.
The usual deal on pay, for a month at the Front, was to sign for 16,000, but get paid 5,000 in actual rubles by an army guy with a big box of money and a few hard friends with AKs watching his back. The reason they kept records at all was not to make sure every soldier was getting all of his pay, but to make sure that every 11,000 rubles skimmed off of every frontline soldier was accounted for before going into some com-mander’s pocket.

But none of us frontline troopers were there for the money.

Our nights were spent rotating guard shifts at the “Glaz” (“Eyes”) position on the roof and upper floor of Cachigarka. Most nights were quiet, with an occasional VOG grenade or sniper bullet sent our way from the Ukpom position at the RLS radar station, about 800 meters away. Sparta held what was left of the New Terminal, and Oplot held what was left of the control tower complex. We had three strong positions, each manned by a good number of well-armed combat vets. But there was plenty of space between our positions for Ukrop diversants (sabotage/recon patrols) to slip through. And so the war continued.

We were resupplied every day or two with food and water from the Army, and we supplement -ed our rations with store runs on a frequent basis. A couple of soldiers would be sent to the store 4km away, with money and shopping lists from all who stayed behind. We had all the pashtet, tashunka and kartofels we could eat, supplied by the army. But the store runs added the spice of life, and it was a pleasure to be selected to go.

One day, George (the Armenian from Samara), Shooka, and I were selected. We left at around noon. Shooka, the senior soldier in our group, was already quite drunk. He’d probably been up all night, no telling if he had been drinking since 8pm or 8am, but he was well into his cups. We walked towards town, past the airport. We all had rifles, and Shooka and I were wearing our bronics under our coats (George never wore one). I had an extra magazine and a grenade in my pocket. We were traveling light, but ready for business.
After a couple of kilometers, strolling down the middle of the road, we saw Iris’ car approaching. He stopped to talk and immediately saw how drunk Shooka was. Iris put him in the back seat and took him back to Cachigarka to let him sleep it off. George and I continued the mission. We started seeing more and more civilians. We passed a small neighborhood store and finally found ourselves behind the railroad station. On this side, it was ‘the airport,’ a war zone; on the other side of the tracks was Donetsk, and a semi-normal life.

We crossed the dozen or so sets of rails, and entered the supermarket next to the station. It was another world, and a very strange sensation to be pushing a shopping cart down the aisles of a grocery store with a machine gun strapped across my back. Not only that, but George and I were both foreigners from a long way away. It was strange, but cool. Everybody there knew where we’d come from, and whose side we were on. George had me take his photo with the shopping cart and avtomat. I didn’t take one of myself, but I wish I had.

As we made our way to the liquor section, I noted with surprised delight that they sold Corona beer from Mexico. Me and Corona go way back, and to see it here seemed like destiny. One thing was for sure, a six pack of Corona had come all the way from Mexico to Donetsk, and it was going to be drunk by a Texan and his Armenian friend at the Donetsk airport. It was expensive, but it was worth the price.

We walked almost all the way back, but stopped at the Monastery, just a few hundred meters from Cachigarka. It was about 3pm. George knew the story of the legendary battle and had passed by the Monastery many times, but had never been inside. The Monastery had been abandoned, was no longer a military position, and was deserted. I gave George the tour. We cracked open the first pair of beers at the end of the hall on the second floor, where the Uchos had been. The beers were delicious. It was good to be alive. We finished off the six pack and headed on back as the sun was setting.
When we returned to Cachigarka, we learned that Tourist had caught some shit from Iris about Shooka, but we were in the clear. The night ended with dinner, drinks, guitars, and guard post from 2 to 6 AM.

That night, I pulled guard with Tourist. A quiet night, we cleaned the Utes heavy machine gun to pass the time. There was a clear sky and a half moon, which reflect-ed off the polished granite headstones in the cemetery and looked like little fires or lights. After our shift, we climbed on the roof and stayed up to watch the sunrise. It was beautiful.

The serenity of those days was not to last. Over the next few nights, the Ukrops started upping the action, sending recon patrols, snipers or a few bullets or rockets at New Terminal, the Tower and Cachigarka just to see what we would do. Though things were the quietest they had been since I arrived more than three months before, we still had to stay on our toes. I was designated as the RPG gunner for the position, and during our first alert, things did not go well. A Ukrop sniper was located in the tree line behind the Tower, about 700 meters from our position. Tourist told me to take the RPG-7 up to the roof and shut the sniper down. I grabbed the RPG and a couple of rockets, but could not find the night optic for the launcher. Heading up to the roof, I loaded the rocket, disengaged the safety, and, aiming at the trees from which sniper fire was coming, I pulled the trigger.

Nothing.

I re-seated the rocket, tried again.

Again, nothing.

The RPG-7 is a very simple weapon to operate. It functions basically like a sin-gle-shot, single-action pistol. Once the rocket is loaded, the hammer must be manually cocked, the safety disengaged, and then it can be fired. In the heat of the moment, my first time to fire the RPG in combat, I had forgotten to cock the hammer. It took a couple of minutes for this to dawn on me, all the while sniper bullets cracked around my head. Finally, I fired. I do not know if I hit the sniper, but my aim was close enough that all sniper fire stopped. Once you learn to fire the RPG in combat, you never forget about the hammer again. The next morning, the optic for the RPG was located and attached to the RPG, where it was not to be removed again.

After a couple of weeks, enough metal was collected for a trip to the recycling shop. I was ambivalent about ‘recycling.’ On the one hand, it was appropriating infrastructure that belonged to the DPR and its people. On the other hand, we were here on the frontline, defending, while most citizens of the DPR went about their daily lives in relative safety and normality, behind us. The airport was ruined. It would have to be torn down and rebuilt from the ground up, and somebody was going to get paid for the metal sooner or later, so we figured we deserved it as much as anyone. As long as we were there, we might as well collect it and get paid for it. It would all be gone in a month or two, and if the money didn’t go into our pockets, it would go into somebody else’s. It was the usual devil’s excuse.

After the metal was collected and sold, Tourist came back with the dividends. A dozen of us sat around the table as Tourist passed out about 1,200 hryvnas (about $45) to each soldier. Except me. As I realized the payments were over and I did not
get a share, I sat in stunned silence wondering what the fuck was going on. I did not exactly need the money, as I still had some money coming from home, but I felt quite insulted, especially since it was by Tourist, who I liked and respected, and who I had thought felt the same about me. It was Garcon who spoke up.

“Where is the share for Texas?” he asked.

Tourist responded, “He is an American. He has money.”

“Fuck you,” I replied, “I am a soldier here on this position. I earned a share the same as anyone here.”

Most of the other soldiers spoke up in my support, and Tourist relented, saying, “OK, but each will have to give a portion from their cut.”

They all did. Once I got my cut, I announced I would spend it all on supplies for the whole position. I did, in fact, have a lot more money than any of the other soldiers there and so I did not mind sharing in the least. But I did expect to be treated equally to any other soldier there. I certainly did the same work and took the same risks. And although the position was relatively secure, the dangers were very real. The assholes or idiots from Oplot Battalion would occasionally fire above our heads from their position at the tower complex as we walked through the graveyard behind them. The shots were not aimed directly at us, but a couple of meters over our heads, in front or behind us. Still, it was enough to raise our pulses and make us run, but we were forbidden to return fire without permission from a Commander. It was aggravating.

A few days later, Poet left for a three day respite. I gave him 1,000 rubles because he was already broke. I had about $300 in cash on hand, and $600 waiting to be picked up at Western Union in Rostov from my old job as an arborist in Texas. When I had left, my boss asked if he could continue to use my credentials as a certified tree doctor in his company’s advertisements. I agreed, for the price of $200 a month. It was a good deal for both of us. I just hoped the money would get picked up and given to me before the cash I had ran out.

Along with manning the guard post at Cachigarka, we began doing patrols of the village. Residents were beginning to return, but there were still frequent forays into the liberated zone by Ukrop recon and sabotage groups. For every house in the village occupied by legitimate civilians, half a dozen remained abandoned, and half a dozen more were just piles of rubble.

Part of our patrols included checking the abandoned houses for hidden Ukrops. It was a strange and scary business. A grandmother’s knitting sitting next to her easy chair in what had been a cozy room before artillery had blown down half the walls. A child’s bedroom with hand-drawn pictures on the wall, riddled by shrapnel. A bottle of wine in a kitchen cupboard still intact after a mortar round had smashed through the wall. But the owners were long gone, having fled to some other place to sleep that wasn’t in a free fire zone. Maybe Russia. Maybe Kiev. Maybe just down the street to a neighbor’s house that hadn’t been blown up... yet.

One evening, as the sun was going down, we were returning from patrol to Cachigarka, and the wind began to pick up. On the Russian steppes, it is not always windy, but when it is, the wind blows hard. And that night it was howling. And then the white
phosphorus began to fall. The Ukrop artillery had hit us a few times before with ‘Willy Pete,’ and I had watched a two story house next door to New Milnitsa reduced to ashes in half an hour after being hit by a single round of WP. This night, they fired at least twenty rounds. Homes were ablaze all across the village, and the wind was spreading the flames from house to house. For each one that caught fire, the wind spread it to, and burned down, two more.

About twenty per cent of the buildings in the village were destroyed completely in that one night, along with all the possessions they contained. It was plenty scary for us, but terrifying for the villagers who had recently returned. A genuine war crime and act of terror by the Ukrop Nazis. The following day, most of the civilians left again. The war continued.

After about a month at Cachigarka, I was due for a few days off. For most soldiers, days off were spent in Yasynuvata, at the basic training school. Airport veterans had a special section separate from the new recruits. And now I was one of the grizzled vets with muddy boots and clanking weapons gazed at in awe. I was very pleased to learn that my $600 had arrived from Rostov, and I was once again probably the richest guy in the unit. I had been just about broke before I got the latest cash infusion.

By this time, the water was finally working in Yasynuvata, but there were no showers at our base, just a large Russian banya (steam bath). Steam baths are OK, and great for taking off the chill, but I wanted a real bath, so I spent the first night of my three day pass at the Yasynuvata base, but had Donetsk and the Red Cat on the itinerary for the next morning.

That night, I met up with Ramone, the handsome and charming young Anarchist doctor. He spoke pretty good English and was a big fan of US rock and punk music. I joined him in his office for a bottle of vodka. Ramone had a few days off, too, so we decided to join forces and head to Donetsk together. He had a little money, but it was clear he’d be riding on my dime, though I didn’t mind. He’d be a help navigating our way to Donetsk, and I liked him.

The next morning, we set off together in civilian clothes. The bus station was a couple of kilometers away, and we walked. He knew where the station was, and even paying for both our tickets on the bus, I saved 500 rubles from the price of a taxi. The bus trip took a little over an hour, on rough back roads, but we eventually ended up in Donetsk, at the same bus station I had arrived at four months earlier. We got a couple of bunks at the Red Cat and went to Cafe Cuba for a real steak dinner.

I had been there before and I generally tried to dine there every time I had days off. My father had told me some 30 years before, when I was shipping off to Germany as a soldier in the US Army, to indulge in a good meal every month or so to remember how to feel human. I had found that to be good advice over the years and in both armies. A good meal after a month at the Front was the first step in unwinding after combat duty.

After that, Ramone suggested we buy a bottle of cognac and drink it “like Anarchists” down by the Kalmius River. We sat on a bench on the riverside, toasting each other and everything else we could think of, and within a couple of hours, the cognac was gone and we were quite relaxed. Ramone had drank a good bit more than me and was a bit wobbly as we made our way back to the Red Cat.
That night, Alfonzo and Shaktar, another soldier from our unit, showed up to bunk at the Cat. We shared dinner before they headed out into the city and didn’t return until 8 o’clock the next morning.

Ramone had to return to Yasynuvata, and I spent the subsequent day and night at the Cat catching up on emails and relaxing. Alfonzo had prevailed on me to lend 5,000 rubles (almost $100) to Shaktar, saying he’d pay me back if for any reason Shaktar didn’t. As was often the case, I had more than I really needed, and my fellow soldier was in need, so I parted with money I was by no means certain I’d ever see again.

Upon my return to Yasynuvata base the following evening, I was told to be ready to re-deploy to the airport with the supply van before dawn the next day. When I turned up in the morning, instead of returning to Cachigarka, I was again stationed at New Milnitsa. We continued to patrol the village and fortify our position. During my absence, the rule about sleeping in the basement of New Milnitsa had been relaxed, and several soldiers now slept on the first floor, in what had formerly been ‘Club Texac.’

So, I joined them there again, in the old home.

Things were pretty quiet, and the weather continued to improve daily. A new recruit code named Rio (after the Rio Grande) showed up. He was a volunteer from Moscow who spoke excellent English and Spanish and we immediately hit it off.

The morning he arrived, I was washing all the dirty dishes from the position. There was a truck full. We had a roster for domestic duties, but it was seldom adhered to, and the dishes tended to pile up. After a certain point, the piled up dishes irritated me enough that I volunteered to do them all, by myself. It was a multi-hour job, building the fire outside in the back yard, heating up a 20-gallon tub of hot water and rounding up dirty dishes. A lot of dirty dishes. Half a week’s worth for a dozen soldiers.

I was about halfway through the job when Rio arrived. After watching me for awhile, he asked why I had volunteered to wash all the dishes when it wasn’t even my turn.

“Needs to be done,” I replied.

We hit it off right away. Rio was a real ‘New Soviet Man,’ exactly what Che Guevara and the early Soviets were talking about when they coined the term. Rio was a dedicated young Communist, in his mid 20s, smart, strong, handsome and healthy. And serious.

He even offered to help me do the dishes. But I had it covered. It’s a strange but true fact: I like doing dishes. There’s a real feeling of tranquility while doing them, and a sense of satisfaction when they’re all done.

Rio pulled a few shifts at Ushi with me, since we both spoke English. We worked with Fyodot, the young Siberian who was doing push-ups to ward off the freezing cold when we were there less than two months before. It was really spring now, and though the war continued, “Hope springs eternal.”

Ushi was quiet. Two months before, you could expect a couple dozen Ukrop mortar and artillery rounds in a three- or four-hour shift. But now, even sniper bullets or rifle grenades were few and far between. It was nice.
Rio, Fyodot and I found an old Ukrop army parade hat from somewhere in the rubble, a strange and incongruous thing in that neighborhood. We pulled a child’s stuffed animal, a Dalmatian dog, from the rubble of the kindergarten, and set it up at the end of the road on a concrete barrier, with the Ukrop hat upside down beneath the dog’s butt – like the dog was taking a dump in the hat. It made a funny picture, and more than a year later, the dog was still sitting there, guarding the street when I returned for a visit. The hat, though, was gone.

Back at New Milnitsa, life was peaceful - we barbequed in the backyard, slipped off to the store in town when we could, and the war seemed almost over.

Almost.

Reports from Spartak were harrowing, though. Two more of our guys, Alpinist and Suhar, had been killed there, patrolling No Man’s Land between our position and the Ukrops’ a few hundred meters away.

The next day, Iris came to New Milnitsa, looking for a couple of volunteers to replace the guys who had been killed. I did not hesitate. Reem and Mir were there, so was Garcon. I was ready to start earning my pay again, so volunteered immediately. Iris told me to pack my bags. I told him they were already packed and I was ready to go. He told me to get in the truck. At least this time, I wouldn’t have to walk.
Chapter 9

The Bait at Blesna

The Sut Vremeny position in the village of Spartak was called “Blesna”, which means “fish hook”. This was based on the fact that our position extended out into the Ukrop lines and was in fact surrounded on three sides. As usual for Sut Vremeny positions, it was one of the hottest places on the entire Front with major battles fought daily and nightly.

To the west stood a tree line 150 meters away, across several sets of railroad tracks. As usual, the Ukrops would use the setting sun behind them to illuminate our positions and obscure their own, and begin their assaults around sunset pretty much every evening. To the north, 500 meters away, was a major Ukrop army base with several hundred soldiers, and at least a dozen armored vehicles – tanks and BMP’s. A blown up highway bridge about 1,200 meters away to the northeast was a Ukrop fortified AGS grenade launcher position, while the woods to the east were a no man’s land, but this did not prevent Ukrop snipers from frequent forays into the trees from which they’d try to pick off our guys from the rear.

Though we were, as usual, severely outnumbered, we held our position and made the Ukrops pay for every attack. Blesna was the fish hook, and we were the bait. But of course, we all know what happens to the fish that takes the bait on a hook – it gets fried.

We spanked the Ukrops hard there, but we also lost Alpinist and Suhar. Good men, they had been on a recon mission in the No Man’s Land to the West and hit a trip

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1 BMP (Boevaya Mashina Pehoty), a Soviet production series of amphibious, tracked infantry fighting vehicles usually armed with a small smoothbore gun (capable of firing shells or Anti-Tank Guided Missiles), a 30mm auto-cannon and a secondary heavy PKT machine gun. A BMP usually carries up to 8 infantry in addition to its crew.
wire. Both were wounded and immobilized. The Ukrops sent out a patrol from their base a few hundred meters away, who finished them both off with grenades before our guys could get to them. We got what was left of their bodies back from the Ukrops a few days later, after protracted negotiations involving the OSCE and the Red Cross.

I rode in the open back of a Kamaz truck from New Milnitsa to Blesna, along with a squad of Sut Vremeny soldiers. The weather was finally warming up, still cold, but not bitterly so. I was dropped off at Blesna while the rest of the soldiers headed on to the “Depot” position, our second line HQ about 2km to the south of Blesna. We had about 15 to 20 soldiers at Depot and about the same at Blesna.

Reem and Mir were there at Blesna, so was Poet and Fyodot, Marskoy and Shooka, Montazhnik and Ramon, Garcon and Buriyat. Ganz, a soldier I had not met before, but a solid comrade, was also there. Biko, another comrade I did not know, was a veteran of the South Ossetia war in Georgia, and a real soldier.

Iris was the position commander, but he was there maybe 2 nights a week. Irbis was top dog when Iris was gone, and when Irbis was gone, Reem was in charge. Reem was in charge a bit more than half the time. Other soldiers from our group would rotate in and out from Depot for a few days at a time – Shem, Student, Shmel, Burzhoy, Alfonzo.

Blesna, or “Bliz” as we called it, is an old train repair facility in the industrial zone of Spartak. Spartak itself was a small village of a few hundred homes between Yasynuvata and Donetsk, north of Makeevka. Our barracks was a large two story industrial building with a big repair garage attached.

Next door, 50 meters behind us, was “Palby” an old 4 story tall cement factory that produced cement exclusively for the use of the railroad, not commercially. We had two guard posts – a machine gun nest on the second floor of Bliz, near the western
tree line, and an observation post on the fourth floor of Palby. The machine gun post in Bliz was usually quiet, but Palby was the constant target of Ukrop snipers, tanks and RPG’s. It was the hottest and scariest place I have ever been.

After I got dropped off outside Bliz, I walked in the door and Mir was the first person I saw. I was very glad to see him. He and Reem were two of the soldiers I liked, trusted and respected the most out of all the Sut Vremeny guys I knew. We shook hands and embraced in the traditional soldier’s greeting, and I asked him how it was going. “Ploha”, he replied, “Bad.” When I asked why, he replied with another one word answer – “Vayna”, “War”. Indeed. At least I would be fighting alongside my friends.

That night, I was offered the chance to wait until the next day to pull my first guard shift, but volunteered to go with Ramone to Palby for a 4 hour shift that night from 10 PM till 2 AM. Ramone spoke pretty good English, so it was a logical choice. As it turned out, he had a pretty low reputation among the other soldiers and nobody else wanted to go on post with him. So I got stuck with Ramone.

Later, I would learn why.

Generally, the first time you go to a new post is during the day. This allows you to get your bearings and a feel for the place. It is standard operating procedure in all armies. Because to go to a frontline combat position for the very first time in the dark is quite disorienting, and being disoriented is not what you want to be in a combat situation. And yet, I went. To use a flashlight, even for just a few seconds was to draw fire, from snipers at minimum, maybe grenade launchers, mortars or even tanks.

So, pitch dark was the order of the day, or rather, of the night, as usual. Ramone knew the way, so I followed close behind.
The cement factory was very tall. Rocks would be dumped from a crane into the big steel funnel on the 4th floor, and out of the three story processor would come fresh cement on the ground floor. The funnel took up most of the space on the top floor, which was our look-out position, and the steel helped protect us from ricocheting sniper bullets, RPG’s and tank rounds that were all too frequent visitors in the small confined space.

At Palby, we had an antiquated night vision device that barely functioned. It sort-of worked, but the result was a green-tinted view that was hardly better than the naked eye. We had one good thermal imager at Bliz, but that was reserved for the machine gun nest. As we settled in for our shift, Ramone confided to me that he was very scared. I was immediately filled with aggravation and disgust. “Of what?” I asked. “Getting killed or wounded” was his reply. I was scared too, of course, but it went with the territory, and there was no use in talking about it. “It is part of the job”, I muttered, and that was the last of the conversation for the next few hours.

A few minutes later, the first sniper bullet came cracking through the broken window, bouncing off the concrete ceiling within inches of our heads, and bouncing around the room before coming to rest on the floor near our feet. The bullet arrives before the sound of the gunshot itself, so you’re busy ducking when the report of the shot reaches you, which makes it almost impossible to determine where the shot came from.

I didn’t really know where the sniper was, a few hundred meters away, down there somewhere, but replied with half a magazine of full auto, just to even up the score. It was extremely doubtful that my shots came anywhere near the sniper, but the rest of our shift was quiet and uneventful, so perhaps they served their purpose. The radio crackled with a query about the shooting, Ramone explained it was in response to sniper fire. At 2 AM, Vino arrived to relieve us. Ramone and I returned to the kubrik for chai and sleep.

The kubrik at Bliz was not bad. The stove worked well, warmed the room without too much choking smoke, the beds were hard but roomy, and there was a fair amount of space, which is a true frontline luxury. We would cook our food over a campfire in the big garage, and dine in the kubrik at a spacious table set next to the bunk beds that lined the entirety of one wall. There was ample room for every soldier, 20 bunks for the 12 to 15 of us, and space for our gear.

We even had car batteries that would light the interior LED lights for several days before needing recharging. The daily supply trucks would bring fresh batteries every few days. There was no running water of course, but 20 gallons or so were brought every day with the food and ammo supplies. It was not enough to swim in, but pretty much all we needed for cooking and for tea when we wanted. Bathing was another matter.

I spent the first week or so pulling guard with Ramone at Palby for two shifts a day. Rather, four hours in the day and four hours at night. The Ukrops would usually open up on us every hour or so – AK, machine gun, RPG or sniper. Much more at night, but they did not sleep during the day, either.

I did my first interview with foreign correspondents a few days later. Three Italians made the perilous trip to Bliz to interview me. It was a good interview, in English,
with gunfire in the background. I did not come to Donbass to be interviewed or to be an “internet star”, in fact, it never occurred to me, but I did understand the import-ance of the info war, so I did my best to explain the Republic’s position and my own reasons for coming.

The snow was melting. The Novorossiya-n Spring brought rain and very strong winds. The wind was very, very good from our point of view – it made RPG’s and snipers pretty much ineffectual. On the days of 40 or 50 KPH winds, the snipers did not even leave their barracks. A few RPG’s were fired at us, but in such heavy winds, would usually miss the building completely. We could usually see where the RPG was fired from, and would reply with a few magazines of hot lead that were much more effective than the Ukrop rocket. Heavy winds were a Godsend for us. So was the rain.

There were no baths, banyas or showers at Bliz – there was barely enough water to wash your hands once a day with a shot glass or so worth of water. Between cooking, and washing utensils, plus a daily liter or so per man for drinking, there was precious little left for personal hygiene. The nearest store was 5km away, and there were Ukrop patrols creeping behind our lines on a regular basis. It wasn’t like Cachigarka. There were no store runs. That’s where the blessed, blessed rain came in.

Whenever it rained, we’d take empty ammo cans and set them out under the downspouts or holes in the roof to collect as much water as we could. Two ammo cans of water, heated on the campfire were enough to wash your body, (one to wash, one to rinse) and you could wash a pairs of socks and underwear, while you were at it, enough for another week or so. Our outer clothing was worn day and night for weeks on end. We slept in our uniforms, needing to be ready to respond to an attack instant-ly and at any time. Some nights we slept with our boots and body armor on too. It was not a place for neatness freaks or comfortable slumbers.

There were usually snipers working in the woods to our east and west, not all the time, but often enough that they could be there anytime and we had to act accord-ingly. Battles were pretty much daily and nightly. The usual Ukrop technique was to creep up to the tree line to our west, start shooting as soon as the sun was behind their backs and shining into our firing ports. They’d continue on into the night as long as their ammo lasted, return the next day, and start again. We stayed pretty busy fending off scores of Ukrop Nazis who came every day to try to kill us all and take our position.

Pover and I had taken it upon ourselves to create “Club Chorny Dembel” on the second floor in a large room that was not used or occupied because it was very vulner-able to fire from anything bigger than a PKM machine gun. Half a dozen large picture windows facing east and west seemed to beckon for AGS or RPG rounds, and the walls were really not thick enough to withstand RPG’s or tanks. There was already a large hole blown in the roof from a 120 mm mortar, and where one had landed, another could come at any time. It was considered a suicide position, but Pover and I made it our own. We added sandbags to the windows, reinforced he walls in strategic places, and even brought chairs and a table from other buildings. The “club” had excellent views to the east and west, and when we weren’t on guard, we could often be found there. It was spacious and comfortable, and we liked it.

We found some paint, and painted in Russian “WELCOME TO CLUB CHORNEY DEMBEL” on the wall in the foyer. “Chorney Dembel” in Russian means “Black demo-bilization” or “black discharge papers”. Black papers mean a dishonorable discharge
from the army, and “Chorney Dembel” was a joke among Russian bandits. In the actual room itself, we had painted “V.I.P. SECTION FOR GRANATAMETCHIKI ONLY”, Pover and I being the official and only granatametchiks (RPG grenadiers).

The club was also one of the few rooms big enough to safely use the RPG from inside of. We did not fire from here every battle, but it was of the many positions we would use in rotation. We liked it.

One day, we decided to raise a red Victory Flag through the hole in the roof of the club. The one made by a Ukrop 120 mm mortar. Pover, Poet, Ramone and I found a long metal rod and figured out a way to attach the pole to the roof. Raising the flag required my standing in front of a window for about half a minute, and any Ukrop snipers or observers who were working would be immediately alerted by the raising of the red flag. Yes, it was risky, but a morale builder as well as giving a giant finger to the Ukrops. We were able to raise the flag without incident and were very proud of our accomplishment.

The commanders were not too fond of the club – it was our own personal area, our exclusive privacy ensured by the heightened danger of the unreinforced walls. Generally, commanders did not want to risk their lives to come up to the club just to see what we were doing. Iris saw our flag from the street, and told Irbis to come up and tell us to take it down. He said it made a good target for the Ukrop AGS and mortars. This was true, but since the flag was flying through a hole previously made by a Ukrop mortar, it was irrelevant. What has already been hit once can be hit again with very little effort, and the flag would make no difference either way.

We flat out told Irbis “No.” We weren’t taking it down, and it would be dangerous for anyone, Ukrop or otherwise to try to do so. Irbis was a tough guy and a good commander, and he wisely chose to let it slide. Pover and I both had earned reputations as crazy fearless soldiers, and the position really needed us as the RPG team. Irbis might
have been able to handle one of us, but he knew there was no way he could handle us both, and Pover and I always fought together. The flag stayed.

Poet and Fyodot were the youngest guys there, and we tried to protect and look out for them as much as we could. But they had to take their turns on position just like the rest of us. One night, around midnight, I was in the kubrik when the MG went off at the nest on the second floor. Poet was on the position, alone, and Shooka went to investigate. He returned shortly, and said a sniper was working against Poet in the MG nest, and we needed to reinforce the position. Shooka, Garcon and I headed up.

I went into the nest, while Shooka and Garcon took up positions on firing ports on either side. Poet, the slender and sensitive 17 year old from Makeevka, was lighting a cigarette as I came rushing in. The PKM was already smoking on the window sill.

“Where’s the sniper?” I asked, reaching for the thermal imager on the table. Poet exhaled that first most delicious puff of smoke and said, “I already killed him.” We looked at each other in the darkness. I said, “You sure?” He said “Da”. He took the thermal imager from my hand and looked out the window about half way between us and the Ukrop base. After a moment, he handed back the optic and said “Look, there by the third telephone pole”.

Looking through the device I could see the sniper’s body sprawled out, his arms hanging over the embankment. His blood, splashed about from multiple hits from the PKM, was still warm enough to glow in the thermal imager. He was dead, alright. I set down the thermal imager and looked at Poet in the murky darkness. He took a deep drag off his cigarette, and I didn’t say anything. I lit a cigarette of my own, and called Shooka and Garcon into the position. Poet explained the situation, and they both scanned with the thermal to confirm it. A confirmed kill of an enemy sniper was a huge honor, and the youngest guy, just a kid, had earned it. And he acted like it was no big deal, just part of the job. At least half a dozen rounds had been fired by the sniper, each hitting within inches of Poet’s head as he had replied with the PKM. The man had tried to change positions, and that’s when Poet caught him. It was the sniper’s last mistake.

Fyodot went on a 3 day pass a few days later, back to Yasynuvata for some R&R after a month or so at the Front. Pover and I continued our work as the official RPG team for the position. We actually had two RPG launchers (one in reserve) and lots of various ammo. We had dozens of anti-tank rounds, both the large and small “Markovka” as well as a dozen or so “Carandash” antipersonnel rounds. Also a couple of “Parasonak” thermobaric bombs, the most powerful rocket an RPG can fire, capable of dealing burning death to any living creature within 10 meters of its detonation.

Pover and I being both graduates of the RPG school in Yasynuvata, taught the Ukrop tanks to stay at least 1km away, out of RPG range. They knew we had RPG’s and plenty of ammo, as well as an SPG recoilless cannon and an ancient PTRD anti-tank rifle from World War 2, which we called our “Pistolet”, whose 14.5 mm projectile was still effective against all but the strongest modern armor, and was also highly effective against bunkers and snipers.

With the Ukrop tanks keeping out of range, Pover and I used the RPG against Ukrop troop concentrations along the western wood line during major attacks. The Ukrops hid behind a berm of earth in the trees which protected them from most direct
fire rifles and machine guns, as long as they kept their heads down. So when an RPG rocket exploded right above their heads, the blast wave and shrapnel were an unpleasant and deadly surprise that would usually cause the swift withdrawal of those who survived. The RPG was actually the most effective weapon we had against Ukrop troops entrenched in the woods, and we made many of them bleed.

Of course, being such an effective weapon against the Ukrops meant they were always on the look-out for us and we were a priority target. So we had to find new places to fire from pretty much every battle.

We would pop up through the holes in the roof made by Ukrop artillery, fire from the limited number of windows in rooms big enough to handle the backblast from the RPG rockets, and sometimes we would sneak outside during the battles and fire from around the corners of the buildings. This was especially dangerous, because not only would the Ukrops immediately return direct fire, they would often radio to the grenade launcher by the blown up bridge and we would have a storm of flying grenades raining down on us literally within seconds.

One afternoon during a particularly intense attack, Pover and I were ordered outside to shoot three rockets at the Ukrops in the tree line. The attack was heavy
and we needed to break the assault. We carried the RPG and Markovka rockets to the back door. In the kubrik, next to the door, Ramone was pacing back and forth, totally useless from fear. “HEY!”, I yelled, “Ramone, what the fuck are you doing?”

“I’m monitoring the radio” was his reply. Total bullshit. Every other soldier was on the firing line fighting for their lives. “Come on!” I shouted, “Grab your rifle and guard the door. We are going out to fire the RPG. We will be back in 3 minutes. Don’t let any Ukrops in, and DO NOT LOCK THE DOOR, and make sure nobody else locks it either.” He nodded his head, and we headed out. I had a bad feeling about trusting him, but we had no choice, and I figured it was not possible he could be so cowardly as to lock us both out into almost certain death.

Once we fired the first rocket, the Ukrops in the trees would know we were outside and exactly where we were. Since it would take us at least two more minutes to launch the other two rockets, there was plenty of time for the AGS team to zero in on us with a few dozen grenades, each of which had a five meter radius kill zone.

We headed out the back door, down the street 50 meters or so, into a small out-building that had once been a toilet and shower area. We crawled through a hole we had cut in the wall, and made our way to the far right side corner of the next building over. We had loaded the first rocket into the RPG before we had headed out. Pover had the RPG, I was carrying the two extras rockets and my AK. As Pover approached the corner, I could see Ukrop infantry running across the tracks 200 meters off to our right.

Great. Now we would have to worry about enemy soldiers sneaking up from behind us, as well as the AGS when we made our way back. I got off a few shots at the running Ukrops before they disappeared into the rubble. Pover saw them too, and knew we were in a really dangerous position. He spun around the corner and fired the first rocket, which exploded in the trees above the Ukrop trench line. It was completely unexpected, and the Ukrop firing decreased immediately. They had casualties. We could tell by the screams.

We reloaded as quickly as possible. I can admit my hands were shaking heavily, which slowed the reload. Pover saw my hands, and looked at my face. He was scared too. Whilst reloading, we figured the AGS was already estimating our position, and those Ukrops behind us would be moving up fast.

Pover launched the second rocket, which exploded a few meters from the impact of the first. We had one more rocket to fire. As we loaded I told Pover I’d fire it and for him to make it back to the latrine where he could cover me from the sneaking Ukrops who would be sneaking up on us very soon. The AGS grenades would start falling any second now too.

Pover looked at me with great surprise. “You’d do that for me?” he asked. I took the loaded RPG from his hands and said “Davai.” He didn’t have to be told twice. I knew he’d keep me safe from the sneaking Ukrops, as he had a good field of fire covering their approach from his position in the latrine.

I decided to fire the third rocket from the left side of the building, closest to my line of retreat, but almost directly in front of the Ukrop position we had been firing on. I fired. The rocket went low, hitting the front of the berm instead of exploding in the
trees above the trench. It was a bad shot, caused no casualties, but it did have the fortunate effect of raising a cloud of dust and smoke that covered my retreat, though that was not my intention. In war, sometimes you miss. This was not a movie.

I hauled ass back to the hole in the latrine wall, where Pover was covering me with his rifle. No Ukrops were seen, though we knew they were close by, behind our lines. For some reason, the AGS grenades had not yet started to fall. All we were focused on now was getting back inside our position as fast as we could. We headed out the door of the latrine and sprinted down the 50 meters of open road to the door of our base. As we ran, Ukrop bullets started to crack over our heads. The Ukrops had spotted us and opened fire. We made it to the door, which was closed, and grabbed the handle.

It was locked.

We dove behind the concrete stairs in front of the door and started to return fire towards the Ukrops, while screaming for Ramone to open the fucking door. We could not really pinpoint where in the rubble the Ukrops were firing from, so we were firing blindly. Fortunately for us, we were close enough to the wall that the Ukrops could not get a good shot at us either, their bullets kicking up dust a meter or so away from us in the street. After a moment that seemed to take forever, the door was unlocked and flung open. We dove inside, only to see Ramone standing there, unarmed and terrified. Pover and I both lit into him before shoving him back into the kubrik. The battle was still on, but the rockets had done their job and the Ukrop fire was waning.

We still had a squad of Ukrops behind our lines, which was a real danger, but the Ukrops along the trench were being withdrawn. The AGS fire never materialized, probably because they were worried about hitting their own guys behind our lines. Half an hour later, all was quiet. Cigarettes were lit, canteens were passed around, and magazines were reloaded. Ramone was already marked for cowardice because he had hid in the kubrik for the whole battle. I didn’t mention anything about him locking the door on us, but I am sure Pover did. Nobody had anything to say to the spineless man, just looked at him with contempt or ignored him. The next day, he was rotated back to Yasynuvata.

When the car returned from Yaz, Fyodot came back with it. He was unarmed, had two black eyes, a broken nose and bloody lips.

He had gotten drunk with a couple of the village girls while on his 3 day pass, perhaps gotten a bit too forward, gotten slapped and then returned to the barracks to sleep. An hour or so later, one of the girls came to the base and accused him of sexual assault, if not outright rape. In a wartime militia, justice is not formal, but it is swift and harsh. Fyodot was woken with fists and boots, handcuffed and taken to the garage where he was beaten by half a dozen staff officers for hours.

The next day, he was returned to the Front, not as a soldier, but as a “Robot”, an unarmed slave, where he was told he would await further punishment, which for the crime of rape, could include summary execution. I, like all the other soldiers at Bliz who had served with Fyodot, liked and respected him, and were very surprised to hear the charges. Still, he was from Siberia, of Eskimo blood, and alcohol affected Siberians differently. So it was possible the charges, while totally uncharacteristic, could be true. Most of us took it easy on him, allowing him to rest and recover from the severe beating he had undergone in Yaz.
About two days later, word came from Yaz that the girl had retracted her story. Fyodot had maybe tried to kiss her, but nothing serious or forceful had taken place. I was glad to hear the news, as was Fyodot.

The guys who had been the hardest on him now looked and felt like assholes. Of course discipline is hard to enforce in a volunteer militia, and of course, serious crimes committed by soldiers must be dealt with harshly, but justly. The main thing is to be sure that there really was a crime, and you got the right suspect. But that’s not always easy. Fyodot was a good kid and a good soldier. I had always liked him, and was glad to see him exonerated. He was given back his weapon and soldier status, and served honorably until his next leave. Then he returned to Yaz, packed his few belongings and left, never to be seen again.

March turned into April, with weather warming and rain melting the snow. A couple more journalists came to Spartak to interview me. They were good guys, on our side, and did good work.

A new soldier had joined our ranks, Eric Shamaiev, “Shamai”. From Eastern Russia and a veteran of the VDV in Afghanistan and Chechnya, he was small and wiry, an expert soldier who always had a smile. He really liked me and looked out for me a lot. An experienced sniper and recon man, he led many successful missions behind Ukrop lines. Shamay, Pover and I were tight. Another new soldier was Shmel, also a veteran of the VDV, but not a combat vet prior to coming to Donbass. Shmel was tough, with a great deal of technical knowledge. He knew every weapon on the position, and was generous with his knowledge. Shmel became very close friends with Poet, and they spent a lot of time playing guitars together.

Another good guitar player at Bliz was “Garcon”, an intellectual young man from Lugansk who was also an expert soldier. He had not done military service before the war, but upon joining, had found every online manual and video about Russian weapons and army tactics and made himself into a true expert. Every weapon we had at Bliz, from the PTRD to the SPG and even wire guided anti-tank missiles, Garcon knew their operational parameters, how to use them, clean and maintain them before he ever even touched them. He also spoke pretty good English, and took it upon himself to try to teach me Russian. A self-taught classical guitar player, he really loved my rock n roll and country blues, and we had many good jam sessions. Technically, he was a much better guitar player than I was, but I ended up teaching him the “soul” of American music, and he was an avid student.

Pover, Shamay and I were good friends and usually hung out together. Shamay’s English was not so good, but his open and friendly attitude towards me was more than enough to overcome the language barrier. His usual greeting to me was “Wassup, mazzavaga?!”. And whatever he said that I didn’t understand would usually be translated and explained by Pover. When we weren’t at Club Chorney Dembel, we were usually around the campfire in the big garage. This was where the meals were cooked and there was usually a chainik (teapot) with hot water for tea. Drinking tea was one of our main pastimes, so a lot of talking, story-telling, guitar playing and tea drinking went on there. It was generally pretty safe, except for once when a Ukrop recon group snuck up on us from the east and surprised us from behind. Shamay and I made a

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2 VDV (Vozdushno-Desantnye Voyska), the Russian Airborne Troops. Elite paratroopers trained for rapid deployment, who make parachute assaults into a combat zone along with their light armor and artillery pieces for support.
Donbass Cowboy

strong defense, with SVD and avomat, and the Ukrops were soon running back across the sunflower field, where they came under heavy fire from Pover’s rifle from one of the east-facing windows of our club.

One day, Iris and his driver, “Red” showed up at Bliz with a prisoner – Maxim. Maxim had been discovered wandering around the industrial zone that was the front line between us and the Ukrops. He was wearing some pretty nice civilian clothes, clean cut, in his mid-twenties and in good shape. He told us he was from Donetsk and had come to Spartak to see what he could find to sell. Or rather, steal. It was not common, but sometimes civilians did enter the combat zone to loot the abandoned houses and businesses. It was called “marauding” and dealt with on a case by case basis, depending on who was doing the stealing, what and who was being robbed, and who was meting out the punishment.

In Max’s case, it was us who would do the punishing. Since as far as we knew, he hadn’t actually stolen anything, we decided to go easy on him. He’d be a “robot” with us for a while, kind of a cross between a prisoner and a slave. He was locked in a secure room at night, and during the day would be put to work doing the shittiest jobs – filling sand bags, breaking through walls for firing ports, cleaning latrines, etc. He had a warm cell with a bed equally as uncomfortable as ours, ate the same food we did, and was not abused in the least. He was worked hard, but humanely.

We actually had another Robot at the same time – one of our comrades, and one of the best soldiers in our unit, if not the entire NAF. “Olympic” got his nickname from the fact that he had spent 5 years with the Russian Olympic team in the sport of biathlon. An Olympic caliber athlete and an expert shot, he had left the good life as the eldest son of a very wealthy family in Moscow to come to defend Donbass.

Though he never had any formal military training, he, like Garcon, had taught himself weapons and tactics, and was a first class soldier. His courage, dedication and enthusiasm were all of the highest quality. I had been impressed, astounded actually, since the first time I had met him in Yasynuvata when I was back there for RPG school. He was the fastest runner, the most physically fit, the best shot and the most dedicated of all the guys in our class. I liked and respected him a lot.

He’d been at Bliz for a week or two, but made a habit of strolling around to visit other positions during his free time between guard shifts. Irbis did not approve. When he reprimanded Olympic, in the kubric, over dinner and in front of the whole crew, Olympic did not understand what the problem was, and basically told Irbis to fuck off. Irbis told Olympic to obey or get his ass kicked, and Olympic took up the gauntlet. Irbis and Olympic retired upstairs to the deserted Club Chorney Dembel for the denouement. When they returned a good 15 minutes later, Irbis was breathing hard, but Olympic was bloody and beaten. He was disarmed and assumed his new role as a robot. He did so with his usual good cheer and enthusiasm.

So, Olympic and Maxim were locked in together at night, and released the next morning around 7 AM for breakfast and to go to work. Club Chorney Dembel had finally earned the interest and won the approval of the commanders, and was to be reinforced and armored as an official fighting position. Olympic and Maxim were to do the heavy lifting, the breaking of bricks and making of firing ports, the filling and placing of sandbags and all the general mule work that is entailed in turning an ordinary room into a fortress. And I was chosen to direct and overseer the process.
Though officially prisoners were to be watched and guarded under the threat of deadly force, Olympic was a respected friend and comrade, and Maxim, just a down on his luck marauder who hadn’t even stolen anything. Having spent 5 years in federal prison myself, I did not relish the role of prison guard.

Nevertheless it was my job, so I did it. But I worked right beside them, and cut them a lot of slack. We took many tea breaks and smoke breaks, talked as much as we worked, thanks to Olympic’s decent English skills. I especially remember one time when we were drinking tea, I told Maxim, “Maybe after you are done being a Robot, you will join the Novorossiyan Army.” “Mozhet bweet”, he replied

“Maybe.” Maybe...

One morning, we were working in the Club, and Reem came up to see how things were going. I had set my rifle down in a corner a few meters away while we moved some heavy logs into place. When Reem came in and saw my weapon at a distance as far from me as from Max or Olympic, he chastised me mildly, looking at the rifle, then the robots, and wagging his finger. I laughed and looked at the other two guys. “If you touch my rifle” I said, and drew my finger across my throat. It was not a joke of course. I did, in fact have a bayonet on my web gear, and certainly would have used it to neutralize any threat, especially from anyone trying to use my own weapon against me. Not that I expected in the least to ever have to with these guys. All four of us laughed and three of us got back to work.

A few days later, Olympic was freed from Robot duty and sent to Depot. Maxim was still working, having a longer sentence, as befitted the crime of marauding. Guys had been beaten, had bones broken, more than one shot or beaten to death, for stealing from people’s houses and businesses on the Front. Maxim, doing some pretty soft slave labor, was getting off easy. Much easier than he deserved, in fact.

A few days later, I was in the kubrik around lunchtime when I heard Iris yelling on the street outside. I went out to see what was going on. Iris was rabid with anger. “What’s the deal?” I asked Pover. “The spy got away” he replied. “What fuckin’ spy?!” I retorted. “Maxim.”

Karras had been guarding Maxim by himself, at Palby. Maxim had been working for several hours and it was time for a tea break. Maxim offered to prepare the tea and Karras accepted. Maxim made two cups of tea, but Karras’s cup had something extra. Poison. Whatever it was, it did not kill him, but not for lack of trying. Karras was incapacitated within minutes, wracked by projectile vomiting and diarrhea. And Maxim took his leave.

The soldiers from Vostok at the next position, about 300 meters away to our south had radioed us to say they had seen a single male in civilian clothes run across the tracks towards the Ukrop lines, and Maxim was the only guy we had in civvies. The catatonic Karras was found a few moments later, collapsed on the stairs with snot, slobber and tears running down his face.

Maxim was heading back to his Ukrop comrades with some very, very dangerous information. He knew the complete lay-out of our position, how many soldiers we had, how many and what kind of weapons we had, even a close estimate of how much ammo we had. He knew where we slept, our routine, which positions were hardened
and which were vulnerable to heavy fire. He knew way too much to be allowed to bring all that info to the 200 Ukrop, Nazis and mercs at the base two klicks away. We had to catch his ass before he got there. He had a ten minute head start, and was already on Ukrop territory.

There were about 10 of us standing on the edge of the railroad, gazing across the tracks into the woods to where the Ukpops often came up to fire at us. Vino, Garcon and Intelligent started sprinting across the tracks towards the Ukrop territory. Before I had time to give it a second thought, I was sprinting right behind them. We made it across the tracks, dove into the trees and looked back. The rest of our guys had given it a second thought. It would be just the four of us on this mission.

It was the only time I was ever behind Ukrop lines. I have to admit, it was scary as fuck. These were the woods in which Alpinist and Suhar had been killed. The Ukpops came here almost every day around sunset to shoot at Blesna. It was a bit after lunch, but time was moving on. We all knew what our chances would be, with the four of us in the open on unfamiliar terrain against a twenty or thirty man Ukrop assault team. But we also knew how dangerous the info Maxim had was. We spread out and silently began the hunt. Vino, the most experienced soldier, led the way. Intelligent, our cleverest soldier followed, then Garcon and I, a couple of guitar players who found ourselves sporting AK's behind enemy lines, took up the rear.

We moved by “bounding overwatch” – Vino and Intelligent would move ahead 30 to 40 meters, then disappear to take up a firing position in the dense undergrowth. Garcon and I would make our move, proceeding beyond their position, then take up one of our own. We were not only hunting Maxim, who was to be shot on sight, but we were also watching out for the guys who might be hunting us and would not hesitate to kill us given any opportunity. And then, of course, there were the trip wires and mines.

We swept a kilometer or so, deep into Ukrop territory. There were several abandoned houses and shacks we had to search, any of which could have been hiding Maxim or an enemy squad. There were several trails and dirt roads we followed, seeing footprints, but with no way of knowing whose they were. We also combed the under-brush on the off chance Max was hiding there. We even got close enough to overlook the Ukrop base, but Max was nowhere to be found. He had had a good head start, and the clever little bastard had outrun us.

Though the Ukpops now had very damaging information about us and our position, I was personally glad we did not find him. Although the shoot on sight order made sense and was justified by the rules of war as well as by the practical considerations of the info he had, it still would have been an execution of an unarmed man. I would have done it, but it would have really bothered me. I was, and still am, relieved I didn't have to.

The dude was very clever and he certainly had balls of steel. Looking back, I think I was pretty lucky he didn’t make a grab for my rifle. He could not have escaped if he had shot me, but there’s no telling what might have happened if I’d left my bayonet where he could have gotten it. Of course, I never expected a deadly threat from a marauder. I was given the impression by guys who should have known better than to assume Max was only a thief.
There’s a fair chance Maxim is still alive and perhaps even still in the Ukrop army. He certainly should have gotten a promotion and a medal for his work behind our lines. But maybe he decided to retire after seeing who “the enemy” really was. Who knows? Maybe he’ll write a book someday. Maybe he’ll read this one.

We made our way back to our position after three hours of searching. It was probably the longest three hours of my life. The sun was getting low. We decided to run across the railroad tracks all at once, together. If we had run across the open tracks one at a time and a Ukrop machine gunner was watching, he’d have certainly opened fire before the last of us got across. We all knew this and didn’t want to draw straws to see who would go last. It is not easy to run in combat gear. Combat boots, a rifle, helmet, twenty pounds of body armor and twenty more of bullets and grenades. But when we ran back across those tracks, all of us were moving fast. And we made it.

Iris was at the kubrik, livid that we had let the spy get away. The four of us who had gone hunting him were complimented for our courage, but the fact was that he’d gotten away with very dangerous info. However, Iris seemed to be more upset by the fact that Vostok commanders were sure to learn of the episode, and it would make us, and therefore him, look like amateurs. Still, it was Iris and his driver who had captured Maxim, and brought him to our position with the explanation he was only a local thief. We’d have all treated the situation differently if we’d been told there was a chance he was a spy.

Of course, we should have figured that out for ourselves, Max being a young fit male of military age, but we all approached the situation quite casually, too casually, and we all got taught a lesson for it. One I never forgot.

There wasn’t much we could do about the info Maxim had taken back to the Ukrops. We changed the hours of guard rotation, both the time of rotation and the length of each shift. From two 4 hour shifts per 24 hours, we changed to three or four 2 hour shifts. We brought in a few extra guys to beef up the position in case the Ukrops made a serious attempt to take the position based on what they knew, and we brought in a half dozen wire guided anti-tank missiles to throw into the mix. For the next few days, we’d fire one at the big Ukrop base every day, just to let them know we’d beefed up our armory. We even hit a Ukrop BMP parked at the base with our second shot.

So the Ukrops were armed with tactical information, and we were armed with new weapons. They knew a lot about us, but they also knew that we knew that they knew, and they did not know what changes we made in response. So, the status quo was maintained, and life, and the war, continued.

Shmel came back from a three day pass at Yaz, and he must have made it into Donetsk too, because he had some weed. Drinking at the Front was seriously frowned upon, but smoking weed was reluctantly tolerated, even by commanders. The word “assassin” comes from the word “Hashishin”, “hashsmokers”, in reference to the professional and expert killers of the 11th C Nizari Ismaili of Syria. So, soldiers and marijuana have a long relationship that continues to this day.

Not all the guys in our unit smoked, but a fair percent did, and Shmel spent the day having a smoke with each and every one of us who did. In fact, by the end of the night, he had smoked up all he had brought, generously sharing it until it was gone. It could
have lasted him a week if he had kept to himself, as some guys usually did, but instead he gave it away as if there would be no tomorrow. I remember thinking he should have kept some for himself.

The next day, walking to the adjacent position, Shmel hit a trip wire. He was lucky, as it was one of our own and had been set with an RGD-5 grenade, to be used more as an early warning device than a booby trap. The RGD-5 is dangerous, but is only a fraction as deadly as an F-1 grenade. Shmel was wounded in the arm and evacuated to the hospital. If the trap had been set with an F-1 or RGO, he would have gone to the morgue for sure. The lesson about giving things away when you have the chance was not lost on me. I have long believed you only truly own what you give away...

A few days later, Iris showed up around noon and told me to get ready for an interview. He drove me from Bliz to the Vostok HQ at the airport, an abandoned dacha next to Givi’s HQ in an abandoned nine story apartment block. I walked up to the journalists, and immediately recognized Simon Ostrovsky from VICE News. I had watched many of his videos about Donbass before I left Texas, but had decided he had a strong pro-Nazi bias. He did. He did his best to make me look bad, but I held my own. To ensure that my words were not taken out of context, Sloan from the Sut Vremeny Info Center was there with a camera as well, and recorded every word.

The interview at VOSTOK HQ lasted a couple of hours, and then I invited Ostrovsky and his crew to come to Bliz where we had guitars, to hear my song about Sut Vremeny. I was pleasantly surprised when he agreed.

I am pretty sure Bliz was the closest Ostrovsky ever came to the actual war. It was a very front line position, he knew it and was scared shitless. At one point, he saw Garcon cleaning his AK and asked if we cleaned our weapons every day. I explained we cleaned them after we shot them, and he asked if we had been shooting today. I replied, “We shoot here every day.”

Iris was not happy to see US correspondents with cameras at our position and I think that scared Ostrovsky too. He was there maybe half an hour, and when the VICE team left, their van was moving fast. Can’t say I blame them, and though Ostrovsky is a shitty and corrupt journalistic prostitute, I have to respect the fact that he had the balls to come to Bliz, even if only for a few minutes.

**The VICE interview was a watershed moment for me.** Though I did not know it at the time, it had a big impact when published, quickly gaining over 250,000 views, and an eight to one ratio of thumbs up to thumbs down. People in Washington, Moscow and Donetsk all took note, and my name was being mentioned in high circles. Even Alexander Zakharchenko had mentioned me in a previous VICE video, as a sniper who was brought up by a good mother. Meanwhile, I was back at Bliz, oblivious, and living the life of a soldier.

In mid-April, the word came down that the big Ukrop offensive was imminent, and we only had a few days to prepare. Work was frenzied. All of us at Bliz knew that if the big attack came, we would be the first item on the menu for dozens of tanks and armored vehicles, and the hundreds of soldiers as they advanced from the Ukrop base.

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3 RGO (Ruchnaya Granata Oboronitel’naya), a ‘defensive’ fragmentation hand grenade with a double layered steel shell and a lethal radius out to 20 meters. Developed after the Soviet-Afghan war it is equipped with a dual fuse allowing it to detonate on impact.
2km away. We were told to expect an attack on our specific position by at least 50 infantry, as well as multiple tanks and BMP's simultaneously from the front and back. Any attacking Ukrop force would be tasked with neutralizing our position completely, which meant all of us would either be killed or captured before the Ukrops moved on. There were no illusions about surviving such an attack. We would be surrounded, cut off and wiped out within an hour or two at best, so we were determined to make it as costly for the Ukrops as possible. Thus everyone set about improvising as many lethal surprises for the Ukrops as possible.

I found an ammo can with several hundred 5.45 mm rifle rounds that were too corroded to shoot, but the powder inside was still good. I spent an afternoon pulling the cartridges apart and extracting the powder. By evening, I had over a pound of gunpowder, enough for a potent improvised bomb. When Irbis saw what I had done, he told me he needed the powder. I told him I was going to make a grenade with it to defend myself with, so I wasn’t going to give it to him, but I might be willing to trade. He left and soon returned with an RGD-5 grenade, for which I willingly traded the powder.

Irbis thought he had gotten the best of me, the RGD being the mildest, least lethal Russian grenade. It has a powerful explosive charge, almost equal to an F-1 grenade, but minimal fragmentation. I was quick to fix that by gluing 50 bullets left over from the dissected cartridges to the body of the RGD, and then covering them with a tight wrap of electric tape. If anything, my grenade was now more lethal than an F-1, and far more lethal than a normal RGD. I dubbed my new weapon the “F-2”. Everyone who saw it was impressed, and several more “F-2’s” were produced from RGD’s and the remaining bullets.

Iris brought in a car full of reactive armor off of a disabled Ukrop tank. Reactive armor is a thin box of metal plates with plastic explosive in between. We had about 100 of them, and got to work opening them (carefully!) and harvesting the explosive to be recycled into improvised mines to use against the upcoming Ukrop hordes.

Iris used some of the plastic explosive to make several flame fougasse, which are 55 gallon barrels filled with gasoline and oil partially buried, which are ignited and propelled by an explosive charge at the rear. The fougass spreads flaming liquid over about 50 square meters, which can stop a tank or kill any infantry in the splatter zone.
I made several improvised Claymore anti-infantry mines which we placed at approach points around our position. Pover and I even went to the next position to trade a couple of pounds of sugar for a gallon of gasoline, which we mixed with some used motor oil we had found, to make half a dozen molotov cocktails with. We were as ready as we could be.

All of us understood that there would be no retreat or surrender. No quarter would be asked or given. A quick death by bomb or bullet was preferable to surrender or capture, which would also mean death, but only after agonizing and humiliating torture. There was no escape route, only open fields behind us and to the South. Neither would there be reinforcements. We would be on our own until we were all killed or the ammo ran out. And all of us knew to save the last bullet or grenade for ourselves. The guard was doubled, and we were in a razor's edge, preparing for the coming attack.

The day of the expected attack came... and went.

There were still daily attacks of infantry, RPG and tank fire of course, even more heavy than usual, but the all-out assault from all sides never came. The rest of the month of April, we remained on heightened alert, but the stress of imminent and certain death slowly subsided. The recurring rumors of “The Big Attack” still continue, three years later. Every three or four months, the word comes down, “Prepare! Here it comes!” But as of yet, the big offensive equal to the Ukrop offensive of the summer of 2014 has not materialized.
After a month straight at Blesna and growing realization that “The Big One” was not coming anytime soon, I, along with Pover and Shooka were rotated from Bliz to Depot, our second line position a few kilometers back from the front line.

It was not the same as a 3 day pass to Yaz or Donesk, but it was markedly different from Bliz. We had actual beds with actual mattresses to sleep on, instead of a wooden shelf devoid of any softness. The food was better, more plentiful, and delivered on a regular basis. There was actual (cold) running water, and attacks on Depot were generally small and rare.

Above all, there was a small store within walking distance, which meant personal resupply of good food, cigarettes and even the occasional surreptitious bottle of vodka. But it wasn’t Donetsk. With the exception of a single overnight trip to Yaz, I had been on the Front for over 30 days, and was ready for some leave.

Life at Depot was pretty mellow. The Ukrops had to come about 2km further to attack us there, and they were usually seen by our forward observation posts while on their way. Thus we had a warning about 15 minutes before any attack began. It was a huge advantage. So attacks were infrequent and though snipers were often working in the area, Depot was situated in such a way that we did not present many good targets.

The Depot had been the HQ of the railroad worker’s union before the war. It was a four story office building in pretty good shape, with lots of furniture and other useful and interesting items. Behind the structure were tracks with several hundred passenger train cars that had been parked there when the war began and never moved since. A relatively safe and covered route for vehicles was available, and unlike driving to
Donbass Cowboy

Bliz, could be undertaken at pretty much any time with little risk. This allowed for daily resupply of food, ammo and soldiers.

The small village of Spartak, a few apartment buildings and a small general store, was another couple of kilometers behind us, and a few of us went there every day. At Depot, the vodka flowed fairly regularly. We were not on the frontline, so the danger was greatly diminished, and therefore, boredom quickly set in. There were also plenty of places to hide away for a few hours, so when we were not on guard duty, we could do pretty much as we pleased.

There was one major attack at Depot, a few nights after I got there. At about 9 PM, we got a call on the radio from the Vostok position to our West, that a large contingent of Ukrops, between 50 and 100 men, had been spotted heading our way. There were about 20 of us at Depot with pre-warning, which gave us the element of surprise and deprived the Ukrops of it. So, the odds were in our favor. Pover and I took the RPG and headed to a forward position.

Within half an hour, the Ukrops opened fire and began the attack. We replied with small arms, the RPG, an Uchos MG and the cannon of our BMP-1. The engagement was short and decisive. We hit them hard, replying to their opening salvos with overwhelming firepower. The hunters had suddenly found themselves being hunted. Soon the Ukrops were in full retreat, taking their dead and wounded with them. None of our guys even got hit. It was a major battle and a major victory for us.

As the days at Depot wore on, April turned into May, and May 9th, Victory Day, came and went. I was really becoming impatient for leave. I had been at Bliz for a month straight, and was now coming up on 2 weeks at Depot. Guys who had only been at frontline positions half as long as I had were being sent back to Yaz, so I was...
getting pissed. The stress and weariness of staying on frontline positions has a cumulative effect. The longer you stay, the harder it gets, and I was going for a record. I was at the Front for consecutive days as long or longer than anyone in Sut Vremeny had ever been, and getting tired of it.

Finally, I got the word to pack my gear and be ready to move. I did, waiting when the van arrived. It was then that I learned I was not going to Yaz or Donetsk, I was going back to Bliz. There was no use in complaining. To truly express my rage would have entailed gunshots and grenades. I returned to Bliz dutifully.

Our Commanders had good news and “other” news. The good news was that we would be getting paid for the first time in several months. The other news, good or bad, it was hard to tell which, was that we, Sut Vremeny, would be joining the XAH (pronounced “Khan”, as in Gengis Khan) Spetsnaz Battalion and be moving to new quarters in Donetsk. Vostok Battalion, which was now called “11th Infantry”, would take over the Bliz position, and XAH would handle Depot.

In the mean time we were to pack up everything of any worth at Bliz, to bring with us to XAH. This included all weapons, ammo, tools, cookware, armor, anything of use or value. We were to have it ready for transport in 72 hours. The trucks would come for the gear and material, and then for us.

That night, the paymasters from Vostok arrived, and we all lined up for pay. As usual, we signed for the 15,000 rubles that was standard soldier pay, and the 6,000 rubles that was the standard bonus for being in a frontline combat position. But instead of the usual 5,000 rubles out of the 21,000 rubles, we got 6,000. The bulk of our money was still, as always, going “somewhere else”, either to Vostok or Sut Vremeny, but this time, we got to keep a little more of what we earned. I was lucky to still have a few hundred dollars a month coming in from my old job in the States. After six months, the $3,000 I had brought with me was long gone.
The next two days were spent scavenging and packing. The trucks arrived. With them, Volga and Iris, along with some food and a few bottles of vodka. We had an impromptu party, a ceremony in honor of the men who had defended one of the toughest positions on the Front, and to Alpinist and Suhar, who had lost their lives here. It was a poignant moment. Then several truckloads of 11th Infantry Battalion soldiers showed up, we turned the position over to them, and mounted up for the ride to our new home in the XAH Spetsnaz Battalion barracks in Donetsk. We had no idea what to expect, but figured we’d be more comfortable in Donetsk than at the Front or in Yasynuvata.

We were in for a surprise.
As Sut Vremeny pulled out of Blisna for the last time in the early summer of 2015, I reflected on the last half year of combat at front line positions. I had made it through a war during Russian winter, something I had not really expected to do. Spring had come and gone, and, now, I looked forward to what my first Russian summer would bring.

None of us knew what to expect from our new battalion. XAH was a spetsnaz unit, one of the most highly-trained, hardcore and technically advanced units in the Novorossiyans Army. We knew we would be transitioning from militia guerrilla troops to regular army, but were not sure if we would like it or be up for the task.

The XAH Battalion base was in Donetsk city proper, a converted office complex with lights and electricity, central heating, showers and flush toilets. It even had a swimming pool. A far cry from the Neanderthal conditions of Yasynuvata or the Third World conditions in Vostok’s Base 4. There was a nearby sports complex, and a variety of shops lined the street just a few meters from the base. I remember thinking, as we approached, “This looks convenient. At least it will be comfortable.”
We pulled up to the front of the gate, and a couple of armed guards in full combat gear came out to take our names and to count the number of soldiers on each truck as it entered. No one moved on or off XAH base without documentation and permission. A high, steel fence, topped with razor wire, surrounded the entire place. Looking at it closely as we entered, I noticed booby traps strung through the wire on the inside of the wall. The base was as heavily fortified as – if not more so than – any of the frontline positions at which I had served. The high security actually reminded me of some of the more serious prisons I had been in, back in the States. It was a strong, distinct feeling, and not one that I relished. I understood that walls work both ways.

We all dismounted from the trucks in front of the XAH arms room. We were required to turn over every weapon, every bullet, and every grenade, but we could keep our bayonets. XAH would catalog all weapons and, later, we were told, we would get them back. And get them back we did. XAH soldiers kept their weapons and a full combat load of ammo and grenades in their barracks rooms, beside their beds. They were expected to be ready to move out, straight into combat, with ten minutes notice, 24 hours a day.

We pulled into the base, three Kamaz trucks with about two dozen of us riding in the back, dressed in a motley of camouflage. I was wearing my tan Carhartt work clothes and straw cowboy hat. The impeccably uniformed and highly disciplined XAH troops regarded our ragtag band of partisans with amazement and perhaps some skepticism. But most certainly with respect. These troops knew what we had done, and what we had been through. This was one of the reasons Sut Vremeny had been invited to join them.

XAH was one of the most elite units in all of the Novorossiyan Armed Forces. They had two main missions. First, they were deployed as fast-reaction, shock troops, sent into positions which were in danger of being overrun. When the Ukrops made a concentrated attack and a position called for emergency reinforcement, it was XAH that served as the cavalry, riding in to the rescue in the nick of time. XAH could put up to 50 crack troops anywhere along the Donetsk Front within an hour.

Of course, the Nazis monitored our radio channels, since many of our positions used radios without encryption, (that was all we had.) And, of course, with XAH being located in town, there were many hundreds, if not thousands, of people who could see every time a half dozen Kamaz trucks sped out of the base. Not all of those people were on our side, and I am sure the Ukrops knew within minutes whenever a convoy headed out on a rescue mission. Many times, when the enemy heard that XAH was coming, they would decide it was time for them to leave, even sometimes calling off the attack before we got there.

Our second main function was to conduct deep recon patrols for days at a time, sometimes as far as 50km behind Ukrop lines. We did not always go so far just to look around. We were often tasked with capturing or eliminating specific targets. For more than a few Ukrop officers, the last thing they ever heard was the muffled report from a silenced Makarov pistol or SVD sniper rifle. And they deserved what they got. XAH struck terror into the Ukrop Nazis on the Front, as well as behind the lines. As far as they were concerned, XAH was the real-life bogeyman that haunted their dreams. Of course, some of these missions were impossible. Our guys went anyway, and sometimes patrols didn’t come back. That is what it meant to be a spetsnaz unit. And now, Sut Vremeny would be a part of it.
Our barracks were clean and modern. They were crowded, but not intolerably so. Six beds to a room – real beds! – and enough space to stow your personal gear without having to stumble over it. Not bad for soldiers’ quarters. I was in the “Internationalists’ Room,” along with Alfonzo, Paco, Rio, and Mars. As we unpacked and began to settle in, Iris stopped by to tell me that I was not to wear my cowboy hat anywhere on the base at any time, and that I was to wear the uniform I had been given by the SOBR troops whenever I was on duty. Welcome to the real Army...

The food was good, but the dining hall was a bit small. We had to eat our meals in rotations. There was room for about 40 soldiers at a time, so each meal consisted of about three shifts. First, on-duty personnel were served, then off-duty personnel, and the higher ranks ate last. However, the highest ranks had a special, separate dining room with a whole different class of food and service. It is always thus, in every army, throughout history. Rank has its privileges.

Our Commander, “Khan,” who had named the battalion after himself, and whose code name meant “Warrior King,” was a solid and compact man of Asiatic features and descent. He looked and carried himself like an ancient Samurai, and his feats as a warrior were legendary. At Saur Mogila, in the summer of 2014, where the fighting had been hand to hand, and you couldn’t see or identify a soldier until he was literally within arm’s reach, he had killed many (some who were there say “dozens”) of attacking Ukrop Nazis with the sharp end of a short spetsnaz shovel. And he didn’t really need the shovel; he only used it for convenience. He could have done the same with his bare hands, if he’d needed to. You could tell it, just by looking at him.

1 SOBR (Spetsial'nyi Otryad Bystrovo Reagirovaniya), a special rapid response unit.
Khan was the real deal – as real as it gets. When he was looking at you, you always got an uneasy feeling that, in the back of his mind, he was thinking about how easy it would be to kill you. But he was a wise man – proud, honest and fair, and a world-class expert at his chosen profession. It is a great honor to meet such a man even once in life. To work with one is a priceless experience. It cannot be bought, only earned, and there are few in this world who earn it. And I found myself, along with the rest of Sut Vremeny, in just such a place that summer.

Though the amenities were of impressive quality, they were rather minimal for the number of soldiers who needed to use them. Three washing machines, which basically worked non-stop, and a dozen showers, for which an hour was the average wait. What would have been comfortable and quite sufficient for 40 or so soldiers was something quite different for four times that many.

Summer had come, and with no air conditioning, windows were left open to allow in whatever cooling breezes were available and to try to dissipate the ‘soldier smell’ that is a part of everyday military life. The open windows were also the entry point for Donbass mosquitoes. Being my first summer in Donbass, this was my initial introduction to the flying blood-suckers of the southern Russian steppes. I had dealt with mosquitoes in Texas, Louisiana, Minnesota and even Alaska, but these were as bad as or worse than any of those. Without bug spray, the only escape at night was to cover yourself completely with a blanket, which, without air conditioning, was an instant sauna. So, buzzing blood-suckers or stinking sauna, either way, sleep was hard to come by.

Fortunately, the training regime at XAH was guaranteed to lead to physical exhaustion, which in turn led to deep sleep, even in these less than ideal conditions. We spent at least 10 hours a day, every day, training or studying weapons and tactics. If there was not a class scheduled, we would suit up in full combat gear, with our weapons, and march around the base in circles, sometimes as much as 20km a day. All soldiers love to complain, and it was easy enough to complain about walking around in circles all day, but it could not be denied that it was excellent exercise, particularly for troops whose jobs were to walk (and run) long distances in full kit. Those circular strolls also made it easy to eliminate everything that was not absolutely essential to carry.

The other advantage was that, if we got a call to reinforce a position, many minutes could be saved. We were already suited up for combat, so all we had to do was get on the trucks and go. A regular, fast-reaction force might take thirty minutes to hit the road – and that is considered fast. From the time we got the call, XAH was often out the gate and on the road in less than our mandatory ten.

The spetsnaz of XAH Battalion were the equivalent of the spetsnaz soldiers in the Russian Army. The training and requirements were the same. Break a bottle on your head, break a cinder block with your fist, run 10km with a full combat load without stopping. These were all things that XAH soldiers could and did do, on a regular basis. But I began to think that perhaps I was getting a little old for all of that.

I celebrated my 55th birthday in XAH Battalion. After breakfast on June 20th, 2015, I was invited to a meeting with Commander Khan himself. We met outside, under a canopy, where serious meetings were held, away from office computers and cell phones. He presented me with a state-of-the-art Kevlar helmet and bulletproof googles. He asked me how I liked it there. Speaking Spanish to Mars, who then translated
The Legend of XAH

my words into Russian for our Commander, I explained that I was very proud to be in such a unit, but felt it was not realistic to think that I could do what the Olympian athletes and acrobats of XAH, who were thirty years younger than I was, could do.

The most important skill any soldier can have is to be able to make an accurate assessment of reality, of the situation as it actually exists. Both my Commander and I agreed that my assessment was correct. I then told him that I thought I could do very good work as an “Information Warrior,” fighting Western propaganda with the truth about our Republic. The few interviews I had done so far were popular, well received, and showed Donbass in a positive light. Even the VICE News interview, which had been an attempt by well-paid, experienced, professional propagandists to discredit me and Donbass, had garnered over a quarter million views in just a month and a big majority of positive reactions and comments.

It was agreed that I would start working with the XAH video crew, as well as with the Sut Vременy Info Center. The first thing we produced was a video about the attack on the Tuv family in Gorlovka. We did another a few days later, interviewing Anna Tuv and her surviving children in the hospital. Shortly after, I met Graham Phillips and made a couple of videos with him. Within a month, with half a dozen videos, I had over a million views.

A few dollars of truth can defeat a million dollars of bullshit, and truth is a powerful weapon against professional liars, propagandists and Nazi apologists.

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2 The Tuv family were among the casualties of indiscriminate shelling of Gorlovka on the 25th May 2015. Anna’s husband and eleven year old daughter were torn apart when artillery shells landed on their home, whilst her two youngest children escaped with minor injuries. She herself lost her left forearm. In November 2017 she made an address to the United Nations rendering the hall silent. Sadly, as yet, no positive action has resulted from her presentation of the tragic civil war in Ukraine.

3 Graham Phillips was a British citizen working as a journalist and English teacher in Ukraine when the Euromaidan started. Ostensibly an independent reporter, he briefly worked with RT (Russia Today) to present an on-the-ground view of what was occurring. He covered the Crimean referendum to reunify with Russia, the sending of the army against activists protesting a coup led by far right, anti-Russian groups, and the Downing of MH-17. He was eventually arrested and deported from Ukraine for not supporting the official Kiev line, but returned to Donbass and Lugansk to continue reporting about the war. You can read his reports written at the time at https://thetruthspeaker.co
Chapter 12

The Wrath of XAH

As an Info Warrior for XAH Battalion, my job would be counter-propaganda, to enhance and expand the reputation of the battalion, promote recruitment, and engage in fund-raising – the latter not only for the battalion, but also humanitarian aid for the victims of the war, both civilians and wounded soldiers.

It was a serious and important job, and not without its own difficulties and dangers.

It was also an artistic job, one that military regimentation and discipline would only hamper. I needed my own space, my own timetable, to be left alone to do my work, which would and should be judged only by the results. I explained this to commander Khan, who agreed. He had seen what I could do, and knew I was not being a Prima Donna. I would live at an apartment he’d rented near the base and make daily progress reports from there. I was offered the services of “Mariupol” the battalion IT guy, who had done a few videos and had some experience in filming and editing. But I had another candidate in mind.

Madman Batkovich was a Sut Vremeny volunteer who came to XAH with the rest of us, though he did not have any real combat experience. He was a smart and talented young man, the scion of a wealthy Moscow family, who had come to Donbass against his family’s wishes. An avid paintball player in Moscow, which is actually excellent training for combat, he also had experience making action videos from the paintball matches. “Mad” spoke passable English, and had a natural talent for visual media.

He had injured his knee in training, and was just sitting around the base waiting to heal. I suggested he move into the apartment with me, as translator and assistant. The commander approved. He issued us both Makarov 9mm pistols with two magazines.
and extra bullets, as I was already well-known enough to be on Ukrop hit-lists, and there were still plenty of pro-Nazi assassins in Donetsk.

The apartment was about 500 meters from the base, a standard Soviet-style one family flat, furnished with all necessities. I took the master bedroom, Mad took the kid’s room, and we set up the spacious living room as our office and press center. Mad had several laptop computers and I had two, so we were looking good and ready to rock.

There was an open air market and a good selection of stores nearby, so we were pretty well set. My few hundred dollars a month was still coming in from my old job in the States, and our 15,000 rubles a month soldier’s pay was now actually 15,000 a month, instead of 5,000 and the other 10,000 going ‘elsewhere’... Mad also had money coming from home, and XAH paid for the apartment and utility bills, so we were stylin’.

Work started immediately. We would make a couple of videos a week, either on our own or with the Sut Vremeny video crew, and our first big fund-raising project was to buy a new arm for Anna Tuv. We worked hard, for long hours. If we were not out in the field making videos, we were both on the computers, raising funds and posting news. We usually worked till 1 or 2 AM, and were back in front of the computers or cameras by 8 the next morning. We didn’t take days off. Usually, around 5 PM, I’d go to the nearby market and buy some food for dinner and a small bottle of vodka. Then take a break to cook and eat dinner for an hour or two, then back in front of the computer with a glass of vodka to work the second shift from 8 PM till whenever it was we finally got exhausted.

I told commander Khan and Madman that I would raise $10,000 in a month for Anna’s new arm. It was an arbitrary figure; simply one I had picked that seemed to me (with my limited knowledge of the subject) enough to get a good prosthetic for her.
Anything left over could go towards her family. Both men were openly skeptical about my ability to raise such a princely sum, but were willing to see what I could do. I had experience from my previous political campaigns in the States, and felt confident.

Fund-raising is a complex and time consuming endeavor. It takes some skill to talk people into giving away money for free. First, I had to encourage people to trust me, and more than just trust, I had to make them like me. Second, convince them that the cause was worthy of their support. There was also a huge logistical problem – no banks, credit cards or wire transfers worked in Donetsk. The closest place for any of that was Rostov, 200km away over the Russian border. At minimum, a day’s trip each way. I could not even go myself, as my Russian visa had long ago expired. So not only did I have to talk people into donating, I had to figure out how to get it to Donetsk once they did.

The logistics were soon sorted – Madman would use his personal Paypal account to raise money from Russia, and I would use Western Union to raise money from the West. “Gazetchik” from Sut Vremeny made trips to Rostov every couple of weeks, and he could pick up the money. He was absolutely trusted and trustworthy. So, we were in business. Now, all we had to do was make the money start flowing in...

Facebook was my main platform at the time, I had about 3,000 ‘friends’, and a lot of people knew who I was. Our videos were being viewed widely, not only in the West, but were also being played on local and Russian TV. I had a mountain of messages waiting for me on the computer every morning, at least fifty, some days many more than that. I had to read every one and gauge whether it was from someone who was a potential donor or just a well-wisher. And (almost) every message had to be replied to, because you never know if a well-wisher might turn out to be, or turn into, a donor.

I made generic broad-based appeals to regular donors and concentrated correspondence on those who looked likely to be ‘heavy hitters’ – major donors of $500 or more. Soon enough the major donors rolled on in. Several were multi-thousand dollar contributions; the first one was for $2,500! I told Mad I was working on it, but he was utterly skeptical. The idea that I was going to talk a stranger into sending $2,500 to Russia, to someone they had never met seemed impossible to him, beyond imagination. But I did it.

When confirmation came in, Mad seemed more irritated that I had succeeded, than glad we had just gotten a hefty chunk to help out an injured and innocent young mother. My success became a source of friction between us. Madman, like many Russians upon first meeting me, thought of me as a goofy American dilettante with a good heart but not to be taken seriously. Those who really got to know me, found that when it came down to serious things like bullets or money, I could and did hold my own.

Mad seemed to under-estimate me as much as he over-estimated himself. He was a smart and skilled young man, and though he came from an upper class background, he was tough. Just a little too big for his britches. He was in his early thirties, in his prime, and I had just turned fifty five. Which meant I was old enough to be his father. I’d also seen a lot more of the world and survived a lot harder times than he’d ever been through. I was the one running the show, and I had hired him to help me, not the other way around. He seemed to think he was tougher and smarter than me, and he was wrong on both counts. The better I did at fund-raising, the more it seemed to piss Madman off. And I knew it. As we were already more competitors than comrades,
I’d rub it in his face a bit, every time I succeeded when he didn’t think I could do it. It also bothered him also that I drank as I worked at night. If I drank during the day, it was a single beer with lunch, nothing more. But after dinner, after eight hours of work, and going back for another five or six more, I did not mind drinking vodka as I did my work. Some of my best work was done at night, I might add.

Alcohol is a social lubricant, it does facilitate communication. Whether it improves it or not is open to debate, but in my case, I think it did. Whether it helped or not, the proof was in the pudding. The results of my work were outstanding. I was doing what I said I’d do, far surpassing anything they actually thought I could. And the thing I think bugged Mad the most, I made it look easy, though of course, it was far from it.

To raise ten grand in a month by words is not easy. I know guys who have robbed banks for less, a lot less. Furthermore I was raising it just to give away. And I did raise it, and I did give it away. I had such a good time doing it, that it really, really irritated Mad. So he would start talking shit, telling me what I needed to do differently, and I’d laugh and point to my results and to his. Mad’s fund-raising was negligible. We’d pretty much quit even talking about it. He raised a few hundred dollars at the most. For every hundred he raised, I raised more than a thousand. Money talks.

Unfortunately Mad kept talking shit. It was starting to piss me off. I can take a lot of shit-talking from a youngster before it finally makes me have to give a lesson, but I was getting tired of the sass. I told him one night that if he kept it up, it would go beyond talking and I would shut him up myself. He got up the next morning and was talking shit before the water for coffee had even boiled. I knew it was going to be a long day.

And so it was... On and on into the night.

I had been drinking more than usual and by midnight I finally told Mad, “If you say another fucking word, I am going to lay down my pistol on this table and come across this room and whip your ass.” His reply, “Try it, you drunken fool”, was all that was needed, and it was on. I got up, very clearly and obviously removed my pistol and placed it on the table, and prepared for fisticuffs.

We each threw and landed a few punches, then began to grapple and hit the floor. Mad was a tough opponent, but we were evenly matched. Shortly, I got a hold of his ear. I gave it a hard jerk, and got Mad’s attention. It only takes moderate force to rip a human ear off the head, and it’s almost always an instant fight stopper. As we lay on the floor, face to face, panting for breath, I explained this to Mad. I had his ear, there was no way he could pull away, and going through the rest of his life with only one ear would be a heavy price to pay for talking shit. I told him I’d let him up if he’d mind his manners. He nodded. I released his ear and his neck and sat up.

Mad pounced on me like a panther, raining down blows for which I was totally unprepared. He quickly got me on my back, sitting on my chest and proceeded to pound my face with a dozen full-force blows. I was seriously injured, but laughing, said, “Alright, alright, you dirty motherfucker, you win, let me up.” He stood up and walked over and grabbed my pistol, as if I would use it if I had the chance. I sat on the floor, gathering my wits. I looked at Mad, and we both knew that his treachery was totally devoid of honor. He made a phone call to the XAH base, and shortly a truck was dispatched with an officer and two heavily armed guards to pick me up. Though
my left eye was swollen shut, by the time they got there I was fully coherent and even cracking jokes. It truly was a ridiculous situation.

Taken back to base, I was placed in the infirmary under guard. The next morning, hauled before Khan himself, Madman led, saying he had been forced to disarm and beat me as I was in a drunken rage. I simply looked at Mad, and we both knew that we both knew what was the truth, but I said nothing. I was told by Khan that I had dishonored the battalion and would be punished.

I was held in the infirmary. One of the mid-level super hardcore officers ordered me to his office one afternoon. He took a photo of me, still with giant purple black eye, and he posted it on the battalion bulletin board with a caption along the lines of “Fuck-Up of the Week.” The black eye was still savage, and of course, I was grinning. The photo was posted near the front door guard post, where everyone who came in or out would see it. Within an hour, it was torn down. I didn’t do it myself, of course, but apparently, at substantial risk, one of my friends did. The photo was not replaced.

After a few days of recuperation, I was sent to the polygon field training area as a “robot”, an unarmed working slave. I was assigned to sapper school, run by Iris, the Sut Vremeny combat commander, who had never had a good opinion of any Western volunteer.

Though many of the spetsnaz soldiers were kind to me and even respectful, Iris treated me like shit. I was not allowed to even sleep in the tent with the other soldiers. No tent, no bed, not even a sleeping bag or blanket, left outside like a dog, even on the many nights it rained. My only shelter, which I improvised myself, was to overturn a small rowboat and sleep beneath it, which was only semieffective in protecting me from rain. But every morning, I woke with a smile, ready to work – digging ditches, building new huts for supplies and classrooms, peeling potatoes and washing dishes. The harder the conditions, the more I shrugged them off. Perhaps, perhaps, I had fucked up drinking at the apartment at night, but no one could ever call me weak or soft. I took everything they dished out in stride, and never once complained. The harder it was the more I joked about it. So, I laughed a lot.

When I wasn’t doing slave work, I would observe the sapper classes led by Iris. I was a Combat Engineer in the US Army, what Russians call a “sapper”, and though it had been many years before, and we were working with Russian explosives instead of US ones, I knew the skills of a demolition man very well, and was interested to see what was being taught.

Iris led classes on mine clearing that were, in actual fact, completely incorrect. He set up a minefield with tripwires and real hand grenades (RGD’s) then had a sapper squad move forward five men at a time, clearing a swath 20 meters wide by throwing grappling hooks ahead and pulling them back to set off the tripwires. This method is absolutely incorrect on several levels. First, a minefield is crossed in a small path, two or three meters wide, at most. Especially under combat conditions (which is what they were training for).

Minefields are obstacles and all military obstacles are covered by fire. Using the grappling hook method, which sets off the grenades, is a clear indication to the enemy not only is someone in the minefield, but where exactly they should shoot. The correct procedure is to clear a path by stealth, slowly and silently; disarming rather than
detonating mines that are found. The path should be only as big as is needed to pass through the minefield with enough troops and equipment to secure the other side. The entire minefield is cleared only after the area is no longer under enemy fire or observation. These are among the most basic principles that I was taught in the US Army, but I was hardly in a position to be lecturing Iris, even if I was right and he was wrong. So, I said nothing.

The next day, Iris led a demolition class on how to blow railroad lines using Semtex plastic explosive. A seven meter piece of steel railroad track was carried about 150 meters out into the field to a large crater made by a detonation from a previous demo class. Each team of soldiers would walk out together through the waist high grass and apply the plastic explosive to the section of track, then walk back to the firing line where the detonator was activated. They would then return to the crater and see if their explosive charge had been successful in cutting the steel.

I was walking out with each group, observing their technique, then returning to the firing line to observe the detonation. Late in the day, I walked out with one of the last groups, a team of five men.

The railroad track was now just a fragment, maybe half a meter long, and the guys were really concerned with getting the plastic explosive set just right. Finally, the group started to head back to the firing line, and I went with them. A new soldier named “Ruin” stayed behind, intent on making last minute adjustments to perfection. The rest of us walked back to the firing line, and I sat down on the bench next to Iris.

Iris had the detonator in his hand, and connected the firing wire to the terminals. I thought this was a very dangerous and stupid move, but said nothing. Iris was a commander, I was a lowly robot. Iris then proceeded to check the connection, and then raised his hand to hit the detonator and set off the half kilogram of plastic explosive that was still in front of Ruin’s face. “NYET! NYET! NYET!” I shouted, “Tam soldat!, Tam soldat!”, “A soldier is there!”. Iris froze and looked toward the crater, just as “Ruin” stood up above the grass and became visible. The color drained from Iris’s face and he sat there motionless as Ruin made his way back, Iris’s hand still poised above the detonator. A few seconds later, glancing about, he furtively lowered his hand and disconnected the wires to the detonator. He looked at me and did not speak, but we both knew I had just saved Ruin’s life, and probably Iris’s as well.

Khan was the kind of commander who was fully capable of extra-judicial capital punishment for such a mistake. Several other XAH officers were nearby and saw everything. They looked at Iris and looked at me, but said nothing. Nothing needed to be said. We all knew what had just gone down. As always, our actions spoke for us, both for Iris and for me. I had not been any kind of genius or hero, but if I had not been there, Iris would have killed one of his own men through negligence, which would have brought death to a good man and dishonor to XAH, Sut Vremeny and Iris himself. Even if just through dumb luck, I had personally saved us all from all of that. And in life or death situation, luck counts. So, you can call me a lucky man...

Ruin made his way to the bench, Iris handed him the detonator and wires, and Ruin set off the explosive that had come so close to taking his life. I don’t know if anybody ever even told him how close he had come to death. I know he didn’t realize it at the time. He never thanked me, though we remained friends. A little over a year later, he was hit by a detonated Ukrop mine on patrol behind enemy lines. Though he survived,
he lost both eyes, and will be blind for the rest of his life. I sometimes wonder which explosion he would have preferred, had he been given the choice. I also wonder which I would have chosen, had I been in his boots.

I was kept as robot for a few more days, still sleeping under the rowboat, but treated with respect by the other soldiers, if not Iris. Enough of them had seen what happened, and I’m sure the word had gotten back to Khan himself. In war, and in any army, there is one thing greater than killing the enemy, and that is saving your comrades. I had saved one from certain death, and another from death or worse, and soon after, everybody in the spetsnaz battalion knew it. It was hard to keep me on the shit list after that.

A few days later I was recalled back to base. Treated like soldier now, instead of a slave, I was brought before Khan again. Madman was there, and so was Volga, the Sut Vremeny commander. Gazetchik was also there as translator, to make sure all was crystal clear. Khan told me things would be as before, but Mad would now be my commander. I refused on the spot, reaching over to my left shoulder and peeling off the velcro-backed XAH Battalion patch and slamming it down on the desk. “Nyet, blyet”, I said, probably the first person in history to say that to Khan and live. “Mad is not qualified to be my commander. The work speaks for itself.”

Mad had raised less than a thousand dollars, I’d raised more than ten times as much. I looked into Khan’s eyes as I said it, then at Volga, then at Mad. There was no disagreement, how could there be?

Numbers don’t lie. I had spoken the truth. None there could dispute it. Khan said “OK, go back to the apartment, we will discuss this further.” I was no longer authorized to carry a pistol. But neither was Madman. He and I walked together through the night, unarmed, with few words between us. I am sure Mad was wondering if I’d take a butcher knife from the kitchen and filet him as he slept. I must admit, I gave it a passing thought. But I had bigger fish to fry, and more important business in mind.
Donbass Cowboy

I had paid my dues, and earned my place in the Donetsk People’s Republic. Being a soldier is a young man’s job, and I had just turned 55. The war had lost the intensity and urgency of just a few months before. The Minsk Agreements had been signed, twice, and it seemed the Ukrops had learned their lesson about the futility of trying to take the Republics by force. If we didn’t have peace, at least we had a truce.

As a soldier, the range of my Kalashnikov was about 500 meters, my RPG could reach 900 meters. As an Information Warrior, my words have reached around the world, and the truth is a powerful weapon. And the truth is something that each of us can stand up for and defend.

Thus I made my decision to retire from being a fulltime soldier and begin to focus on my work as a correspondent and fund-raiser for human aid projects.
I finished this book in the summer of 2018, three years after the events took place. I had kept a small journal while I was at the Front, and that journal was the basis for this book. Everything in this book actually happened. I have not written everything that happened, but everything I have written is true. I have heard some criticism about writing things that put DPR soldiers and commanders in a bad light. I showed them as they were, and it is not a bad thing to show the truth. None of us are perfect, and I did not intend to write a fairy tale about epic angels. But I did not have to.

Everyone in Donetsk is a true hero to some degree, some more, some less - it took courage and sacrifice to stay here during the war, and even more to go to the Front and fight. Those who stayed in Donbass, and those who came here to help, especially in the dark days of 2014 and 2015, deserve the respect of all good people. Anyone who has not done as much or more than we did, (and as we continue to do) should overlook the mistakes and shortcomings and learn from the good in our examples. And someday, try to do the same yourself. Or better. None of us here are superhuman, just people who did the right thing, regardless of the cost. If we can do it, so can you, if you want to.
War is a hard and terrible thing, but it does bring out a person’s true character. Ordinary men and women rose to the occasion, because ordinary people were all there were. That’s all there ever are. Some were good, some were bad, none got through it unscathed. War takes its toll, even on those who never got hit by bombs or bullets. There is a cost that is paid, mental, physical, spiritual, by soldiers and civilians, the good guys and the bad. But those who cower and hide in times of strife, who shrink from standing up against genuine evil, who fail to do their duty, not as “heroes”, but as human beings, they too have a price to pay. Cowardice, ignorance and indifference, too, take their toll. We all die in the end, but it is up to each of us to choose how we live. We are what we do. This book is about what I and the Defenders of Donbass did. You can do the same.

The thing I remember most about Troishka is the smoke. My lungs have never fully recovered from the infection and the smoke from those early days in 2015. From Milnitsa, I remember the 800 meter walk to Ushi, getting shot at by snipers and machine guns on the way there and back, and knowing the big guns would be shooting at me while I was there. It was like taking that last walk on death row, twice a day, every day, not expecting to make it back again. The hardest part of the whole war for me was getting up and doing it again, every day. But at Spartak, where the fighting was just as heavy, I remember most the friendships - Reem, Mir, Poet, Shamai, Garcon and most of all, Pover. Friends, Brothers for life. So, even though war is a horrible thing, sometimes it is necessary, and sometimes some good may come of it. And there are things that are worse than war.

“Is life so dear, or peace so sweet, as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery?” Fascism is worse than war. Slavery is worse than war, and worst of all, the willing slavery of those whose honor, humanity, and very souls are bought for bread and circuses, for the measly price of creature comforts. Those who have learned to hug their chains. No good can ever come from that.

But best of all is to breathe free in your own country, where you actually trust and respect the government, where the police and the army are your friends, because they are your friends, because you defended your country together. Where you can actually see things getting better, in real and measurable ways, where you have real pride in the present and hope for the future. Where you have a stake, and therefore a say, in the future. Where your country is like a mirror, a reflection of yourself, where it is beautiful, and you are proud of it, and will be proud to hand it down to future generations, which is, after all, our greatest obligation. This is how a society should be built, and how it should be measured. This is how humans should live. Fearless and free.

And that is how we live here, fearless and free. We fought for the right to do so, and we have earned it. Sometimes you have to fight, even if you don’t expect to win. Ask the Spartans at Thermopylae, ask the Texicans at the Alamo. Or the people of the Donetsk People’s Republic. Because sometimes you win, even when you don’t expect to, even when the odds are stacked against you. But you never know unless you try.

People get the government they deserve. The Donbass Republics are an example to the world. It is not a Utopian dream, we have actually done it. The fact that the Republics still exist proves it. And if we can do it, others can too. Take a lesson from it. This is what it costs, and this is how to do it. And it is worth it.

I would like to thank all my comrades and friends who have journeyed with me, not just through this war, but through my life. My Mom, my brother Carter, Russ,
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Friends don’t get any better than that...

Good luck to all good people. May God protect the innocent, and may the rest of us get all we deserve
Memoirs of an Uncivil War