

Last weekend, accompanied by my burly friend and fellow volunteer Andrei, I drove a van loaded with tires, tools and tourniquets eleven hours from Odesa to the northeastern Ukrainian city of Kramatorsk. It's a grimly post-industrial place, regularly bombed and shelled, and just a short distance from the front lines where each and every day tired and outnumbered Ukrainian defenders are fending off assaults by Russians who drop in staggering numbers.

Thoughts of the trip occupied my mind for days and various competing impressions left me at a loss as to what to convey to you. Was it the desolation of the Donetsk region where the winter color pallet ranges from graphite grey to nicotine brown? The potential consequences of Ukrainian lines breaking under the relentless Russian assaults? The history of a place that still seems haunted by the wicked ghosts of its Soviet past? Or the sense in fighting so fiercely over an area so seemingly dystopian, littered with abandoned factories and slag heaps, and home to fewer and fewer people.



Fortunately my smart girlfriend recommended I just focus on a couple of the individuals I encountered.

It's dark when we meet Misha and the air raid alarms wail as we transfer equipment from our vehicle to his. This thirty-something soldier has been fighting the Russians



since 2014 with a wild bravery that's earned him a "Hero of the Nation" medal, the nation's highest award. His trim tense body bears the scars of multiple wounds, but he exudes energy and total confidence in his abilities as a warrior. Handing us plastic bags loaded with hamburgers and chicken wings, he laughs loudly and happily shows us gruesome war videos on his phone, small skirmishes in obscure places, which are so chaotically violent that Quentin Tarantino might blush if he saw them. Unsurprisingly, after ten years of fighting and thirty concussions, Misha also carries a touch of madness with him, revealed by the involuntary twitching of his face. He has a fiancée and a child, but it's hard for me to imagine him re-adapting to life as a civilian. War fuels him, as it does so many others. And sadly, Ukraine desperately needs these berserkers right now.

Brett is a pale, thoughtful young Canadian from Saskatchewan whose ancestors immigrated from the Kyiv region generations ago. Despite this distant connection, he packed a bag and traveled to Ukraine barely a month after the start of the 2022 full-scale invasion looking for a way to help. Now, nearly three years later, he lives in a dilapidated Brezhnev era apartment block on the outskirts of Kramatorsk and goes to work every day with a small band of foreign volunteers who repair country roads, facilitating the evacuation of wounded soldier and those civilians who have decided



they've had enough of living under the threat of constant shelling. He drives a van so creaky that wouldn't pass inspection in South Sudan and, while filling potholes and trimming vegetation, scans the sky constantly for Russian drones out hunting for targets. He's run through most of his life savings and his parents no longer support their son's mission; they want him home. I'd like to

give him full body armor and a brand-new van, but the best I can do is promise three good tires and a jack. They're en route to him now.

Nearly everyone in Ukraine lives with the stress of daily air raid warnings, constant power cuts, and economic uncertainty. But there are some, like Misha and Brett, who carry much heavier burdens, who pull the load for the rest is us. One day there will be statues erected to such people. In the meantime, all we can do is try and ease their lot.

www.inthetrenchesukraine.org

