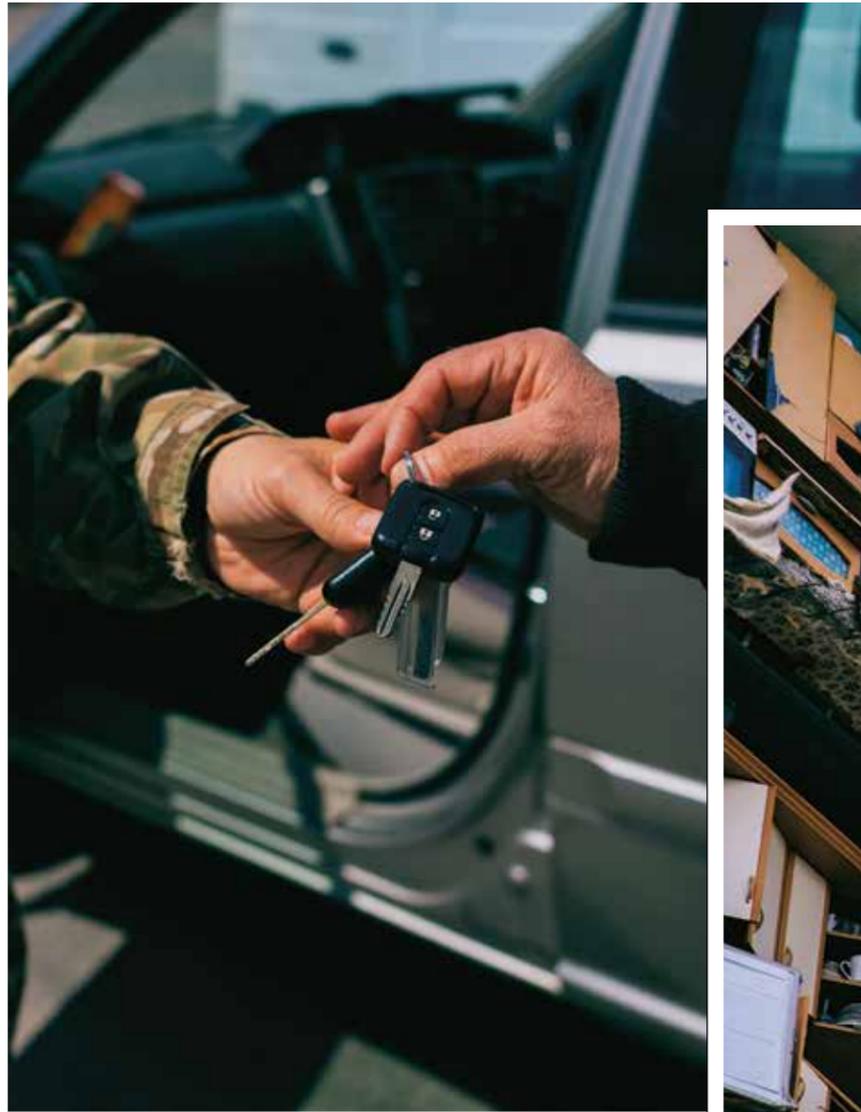
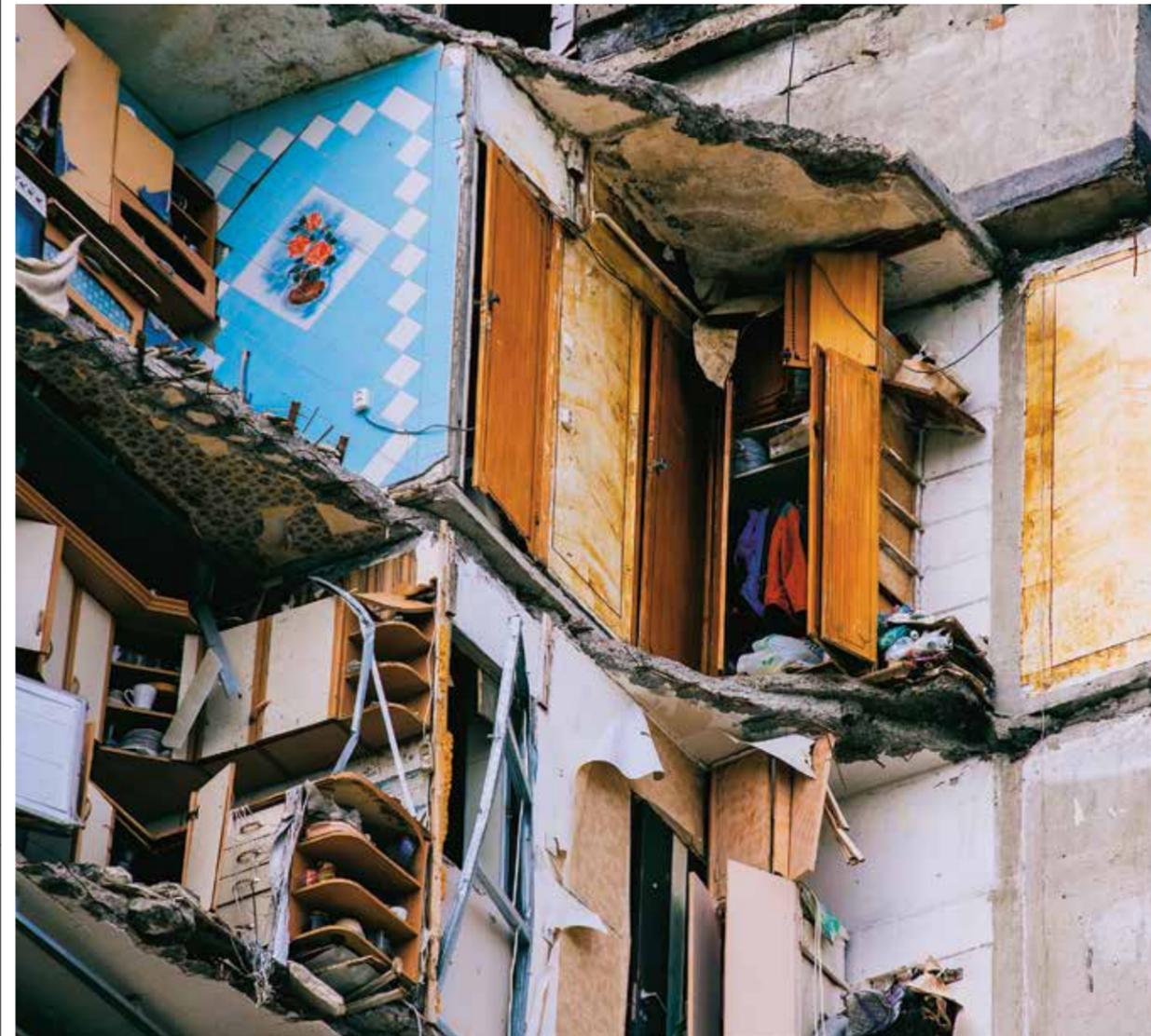


From Macclesfield with love



Handing the keys to a donated vehicle to a Ukrainian fighter



An apartment building in Dnipro destroyed by a Russian missile



A Ukrainian soldier thanks Hans Daams, one of the convoy drivers, for his support

A small town in Cheshire has become the base camp for an operation driving medical, humanitarian and military aid to the front line in Ukraine, using vehicles that will then serve as ambulances and supply trucks. So far, its team of volunteers has delivered

more than £1.5 million worth of essential supplies. Martin Fletcher joined a convoy

Let me start with a vignette. Having driven across Europe from the improbable starting point of Macclesfield, we arrive at a supermarket in Zaporizhzhya, a city near the front line of the war in Ukraine. An air raid siren sounds, but nobody takes any notice. We hand over a laptop, iPad and outsized television screen to a burly, fatigued former British soldier named Zak who is fighting with the Ukrainian army.

Zak, 51, was living in Ukraine before the war. He ran an extreme sports company, and has a Ukrainian son. He now commands 30 men who are battling the Russian invaders. He explains that our equipment will be used in a mobile command centre receiving a live feed from drones flying over Russian positions. 'It will make a huge difference,' he says.

Zak talks of how this is the first modern war in which one army must go outside the normal military supply chains to procure vital kit. He talks about the conflict's terrible attrition rate, the incredible 'Blitz spirit' of the Ukrainian soldiers, and how contributions like ours boost their morale as well as their fighting capability. 'They understand what evil is, and they are fighting evil,' he declares. 'That's why I will do everything I can to be here with them.'

I ask how many men his unit has lost. 'Twenty-seven,' he replies. Then, suddenly, this seasoned warrior turns and walks away, overcome with emotion.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. This story really begins a year ago, when my wife and I agreed to house three Ukrainian refugees – a mother, grandmother and daughter named Svitlana, Nadia and Daria – in our London home. They have been perfect guests – considerate, appreciative and helpful. Daria joined a Ukrainian choir, and in January we attended a concert replete with a tear-jerking rendition of the Ukrainian national anthem and cries of 'Slava Ukraini!' (Glory to Ukraine!).

During the interval, I chatted to the woman beside me. She mentioned Anton, a Ukrainian émigré living in Brighton, who delivers aid to his homeland when not serving as an interpreter for the

Ukrainian troops training in Britain. An idea took root. Perhaps I could accompany him. Perhaps I could contribute a little more to the war effort by finding a fresh way to write about a conflict that has been raging for 16 months, by personalising it and making the point that it is taking place not in some distant corner of the world but a four-day drive from London.

I called Anton. He consented. Then I heard about Macclesfield Ukrainian Aid (MUA), a remarkable group of volunteers from that small Cheshire town, which had already sent out 72 vans and pick-ups carrying more than £1.5 million worth of medical, humanitarian and military aid. The vehicles serve as ambulances, supply trucks and gun platforms.

We agreed to join forces, and thus I presented myself one sunny May morning at a welding company on an industrial estate in Macclesfield for the start of MUA's 14th Ukrainian convoy. Volunteers were packing aid into five battered vehicles – a Nissan X-Trail, two Toyota Hiluxes, a Ford Transit van and a 2004 Isuzu pick-up with 114,000 miles on the clock that had been painted olive green overnight because it was destined for the front. The paint was still wet. 'F—k Putin' had been soldered on to the bodywork.

Anne Hancock, a retired nurse, and her son, Tom, the welding company's owner, set up MUA. Her father was Ukrainian. At 17, he was seized from his village as the Germans retreated from Russia in



'IF IT WASN'T FOR THE KINDNESS OF STRANGERS, I WOULDN'T BE HERE. THIS IS MY ACT OF KINDNESS'

1943 and sent to work in a field kitchen in France. Liberated by the Canadians, he settled in Britain. His family thought he was Polish until – after his death – they discovered the truth and made contact with his relatives in Ukraine.

Horrified by Russia's invasion in February last year, the Hancocks appealed for aid on social media. Food, clothes, toys, sleeping bags and generators poured in. Hospitals started donating surplus or out-of-date medicines, bandages, infusion kits, oxygen masks, hazard suits, scanners and a whole operating theatre. It is still coming. 'We just felt we had to do something,' says Hancock. 'The response has been phenomenal.'

Separately Jonathan Verney, 61, an Old Harroviaan businessman from Chester, had begun sending second-hand vehicles out to

Ukraine. He felt compelled to help because a month before the invasion he had been in Mariupol, negotiating the construction of a recycling plant. Being a great-nephew of Florence Nightingale, heroine of the Crimea, probably played a part too.

Soon Verney and MUA linked up. With everyone from his cleaner to a wealthy City friend and a rich Ukrainian contact making donations, he purchased the 'end-of-life' vehicles for a few thousand pounds apiece and delivered them to Tom's premises to be rendered roadworthy and loaded with supplies. There is no point in buying newer vehicles because most are 'shot to pieces' in weeks, Verney explains. 'It's costing me a fortune,' Tom protests, before adding: 'It's the most satisfying thing I've ever done.'

life by smuggling leaflets through Nazi checkpoints in Utrecht as a member of the Resistance.

Dmytro Kryvko, 34, a video designer, fled when the Russians overran Melitopol, his home city, last year and came to Britain with his wife and daughter. Unable to fight because of a medical condition, this is his way of helping his country. A retired doctor from Edinburgh, the owner of a first aid-training company from Tamworth and Verney complete our group.

The next day we drive 629 miles across Germany. The day after, we cross Poland, stopping at a Benedictine abbey near the Ukrainian border to collect emergency medical packs for soldiers. Four priests and six nuns live here, along with 30 Ukrainian refugees. Father Marek, the senior priest, tells me he has no problem storing non-lethal military equipment. What about weapons, I ask? 'I'd have to ask the bishop,' he grins.

That evening we reach the Ukrainian border at Korczowa to find a long, stationary line of vehicles ahead. Spotting our British number plates, a young Ukrainian woman knocks on the window of every vehicle in front of us, asking if we can go first because we are bringing aid and have come so far. All readily agree, but the Polish border guards send us back.

We talk to our neighbours while waiting. The van next to us is bringing hospital beds from Germany. The young Ukrainian woman behind is delivering her 14th Polish vehicle to the front

Before leaving, Rick Mobbs, 60, a former soldier and volunteer driver, gives us a security briefing. Nurse the vehicles, he tells us. Stay in convoy. Turn off our mobiles at the Ukrainian border. Post nothing on social media. This is Mobbs' eighth trip to post-invasion Ukraine. 'I'm a Cold War soldier. I've been fighting the Russians since 1982,' he explains.

On the overnight ferry from Hull to Rotterdam, I learn more about my fellow drivers.

Ruth Moore, 51, is a former police force manager whose Jewish grandparents were hidden by a Dutch family during the Second World War. 'If it wasn't for the kindness of strangers I wouldn't be here. This is my act of kindness to strangers,' she says. Hans Daams, 68, a Dutch retiree, is inspired by his mother: aged 17, she risked her

Clockwise from left: near Dnipro, a visit to relatives of the refugees that writer Martin Fletcher took in; passing supplies to a Ukrainian soldier

line, all in her spare time. A grey-haired man, told he was too old to enlist as a soldier, is delivering his 39th. Probably a third of the queuing vehicles are delivering support to Ukraine.

It takes four hours to negotiate the border bureaucracy. We reach Lviv shortly before the 11pm curfew. The streets are deserted. We have driven another 538 miles.

The next morning, we transfer the Hiluxes to a de-mining organisation, and the medical packs to Medics4Ukraine. Kryvko visits a dentist because it is cheaper here. Verney and I wander around Lviv's lovely Hapsburg-era heart.

It is hard to tell there's a war on. Children head for school, workers to their jobs. The cobbled streets are freshly washed. The trams are running. Tulips ring the famous opera house. Coffee kiosks do brisk business. But the city cemetery tells another story: some 200 soldiers' coffins await burial, each adorned with a Ukrainian flag.

Back at the hotel we meet a plucky young woman named Uliana. She had accosted Verney on a previous trip to ask if he could find a vehicle for her husband, a former computer repairman now fighting near Bakhmut. He delivered one in 10 days. Our Isuzu is now destined for her husband's colleague. She is full of gratitude. 'It's so nice to know people are not

forgetting our problems,' she says.

I ask how she and her two children are coping. 'When someone from the family is fighting, all the family is fighting,' she replies. 'It's very hard, but I know if he wasn't there, another father or son would be there in his place.'

Leaving Lviv, Anton and I get lost. We find ourselves on a dirt track leading through rustic villages. We stop a man in a car who leads us to the right road. Then, astonishingly, he gives us a \$100 note. 'For our army,' he says.

Anton, a Brighton & Hove Albion fan, recounts how he gave an acquaintance his ticket for a match while we're away. When he next looked at his crowdfunding page, the recipient had donated £1,100. As Verney says: 'Every man and his dog wants to do something to help.'

We drive through forests and across great plains. In every town, flags fly over fresh graves in cemeteries. As we near Kyiv, the war really begins to intrude. Road signs have been painted over to confuse invaders. Billboards proclaim JOIN UP FOR OUR VICTORY, TURN YOUR ANGER INTO YOUR WEAPON and HEROES DON'T DIE. We drive through manned and unmanned checkpoints. On the edge of the capital, we pass the charred shells of homes and shops.

Anton, 44, lived in Kyiv until his parents moved to Britain when he was 15. That night he shows me the somewhat depopulated city of golden domes. In St Volodymyr's Cathedral, a priest tells us: 'We are burying more than we are marrying.' He introduces us to a young widow. We commiserate, but say she must be proud her husband died fighting for his country. 'All our soldiers are heroes,' she says.

We pass statues boarded up for protection against missile strikes. In St Michael's Square we inspect the burnt remains of Russian tanks, and the wall of the monastery, which is covered in thousands of photos of dead soldiers. We walk through Independence Square where, arguably, the present war was triggered back in 2013. Vast crowds gathered to protest President Yanukovich's decision to align Ukraine with Moscow instead of the European



Union. Yanukovich fled, but Russia responded by seizing Crimea.

We leave Kyiv early the next morning. The road south is lined with sandbagged foxholes and the bridges are all guarded. Thousands of steel girder tank traps stand ready to block roads. We activate the air raid app on our phones, and soon a disembodied voice warns: 'Attention! Attention! Shelling attack alert! Proceed to the nearest shelter.' But we see nothing, and after several such warnings we cease to worry.

Near Dnipro we deliver the contents of our transit van to a church group supporting women and children rendered homeless by the war. There is food, sanitary products, nappies, toothpaste and shampoo, all donated by the people of Macclesfield, plus cards drawn by its schoolchildren. The

grown-ups give us pizza. A young girl gives us dandelions.

I leave the convoy to visit our London refugees' relatives. Nadia's brother, his wife, two daughters and grandson were driven from their home in Donetsk by the invasion. When Nadia left, they squeezed into her one-bedroom flat.

It is an emotional meeting. I give them Coronation chocolates, biscuits and tea towels sent by Svitlana in, somewhat incongruously, a Fortnum & Mason bag. They give me a handmade teddy.

They say Dnipro's air defences now bring down most Russian missiles, but not all: 'When the dogs bark and the alarms go off, we know they've landed not far from here.' They try not to accept humanitarian aid because others need it more. Irena makes camouflage netting for front-line units

in her spare time. I have to rejoin the convoy so we hug and part with cries of 'Slava Ukraini! Slava Brytaniyi!' I learn later that they had cooked me dinner.

At 3.30am an alarm sounds inside my hotel room, warning of another air strike. I fall straight back to sleep.

Our final day is the most moving. Leaving Dnipro, we stop at a monument to Putin's barbarity: a nine-storey apartment block destroyed by a Russian missile in January. Forty-six people were killed, including several children. The fronts of the flats were ripped away, exposing tattered wallpaper, ovens, bookshelves, plastic flowers, clothes in a wardrobe, a potty – poignant reminders of domestic life. A bus stop opposite is now a shrine, filled with teddy bears.

We drive on to our final destination, Zaporizhzhia, a city bristling with soldiers and refugees scarcely 30 miles from the front line, and not much further from a giant nuclear power station controlled by the Russian military and the Kakhovka reservoir whose dam was recently destroyed. We meet Zak before coming to rest in the station car park, precisely 2,069 miles from Macclesfield.

A soldier arrives to collect the green Isuzu, a thermal scope and a drone. He says the vehicle will be used as a machine-gun platform. It's like saying goodbye to an old friend.

Another soldier approaches simply to thank us for our work. A policewoman forced to flee her home town, Polohy, hugs us all. Kryvko discovers old friends at a nearby centre for refugees from his native Melitopol, and sobs as he embraces them. Olexsandr, a business associate of Verney, takes the Transit van away for use as a front-line delivery vehicle.

Then Vladimir arrives to fetch the last pick-up. An offshore engineer in civilian life, the 45-year-old has spent the past 15 months clearing buildings, trenches and woods of Russian soldiers – one of the most dangerous tasks. He has discharged himself from hospital and walks with a crutch following a shrapnel wound.

Vladimir says he has not seen his wife and children for eight months. He has lost more than 30 colleagues. He shows us video clips of dead Russian soldiers, of a mortar attack in which 11 comrades died, and of the ruined buildings his men inhabit for days

A SOLDIER THANKS US FOR OUR WORK. A POLICEWOMAN WHO'S FLED HER HOME TOWN HUGS US

at a time. How does he cope, I ask? 'After each mission we remove the memory card from our brain,' he replies. Will he return to the front line? Of course, he says. 'My duty will finish when we finish with the Russians.' But, he asks rhetorically: 'When will my luck run out?'

Vladimir thanks us for the aid. 'Without support from your country we would not have survived this long,' he says. By way of a gift he gives Verney a bayonet taken from a Russian he had killed. He then hugs us all and drives away, leaving us distinctly damp-eyed.

We catch the sleeper train back to Lviv, passing trains carrying tanks to the front for the long-awaited counter-offensive that Ukraine launched last month. Mission complete? Not quite.

Verney has a new shopping list – secure communication devices for Zak, drones for Vladimir, diabetic medicines for a doctor in a refugee centre. We share a compartment with Tatiana, a front-line medic whose husband was killed 40 days earlier. She asks for neck braces and blood coagulants.

As I fall asleep, Verney is on his mobile, buying a second-hand pick-up from someone in Inverness, hunting down coagulants, preparing for the next convoy. 'I'm aware that what I'm doing is a drop in the ocean,' he tells me. 'But so many others are doing the same that those drops are becoming a tidal wave.'

To donate to Macclesfield Ukrainian Aid, go to www.ukrainianaid.org.uk



From top: a shrine of stuffed toys outside a bombed-out apartment block in Dnipro; Jonathan Verney (far left), Rick Mobbs (second from right) and Hans Daams (far right) with Ukrainian children after delivering aid in the city



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