

STRONG IN SPIRIT

Stories of sappers
during the russia-Ukraine war

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The book contains stories of the servicemen of the 143rd Combined Training Center "Podillia" of the Support Forces of the Armed Forces of Ukraine about their combat missions during the russia-Ukraine war in the period from 2014 to 2023. The successful repulsion of the aggressive offensive of russian troops from the capital, in which the Center's servicemen took part, inspired the writing of this book. The book will not leave any reader indifferent as it allows you to see current events through the eyes of their direct participants.

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With the assistance of Kamianets-Podilskyi Mayor Mykhailo Positko.

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FROM THE AUTHORS

Dedication, courage and an indescribable thirst for victory – these character traits are an integral part of the life and service of military personnel who have faced the extraordinary challenges our country has endured over the past ten years. The year 2014 is considered a turning point for Ukraine. Not bowing down to enemy aggression, Ukraine resolutely stood up to defend its independence and sovereignty.

February 24, 2022 marks a new beginning in the country's modern history. Enemy shelling and air raid alerts are perceived as a difficult reality of Ukrainian life. Our country, courageously repelling enemy attacks on the ground and in the sky, remains strong, unbreakable and invincible.

This book is a testament to the great power of the human spirit, an energy that does not yield in the face of the most difficult challenges. The interviews with the servicemen of Combined Training Center of Support Forces of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, who bravely defended Ukraine from 2014 to 2023, are a mirror reflecting their thoughts, feelings, hopes and devotion to their country. The eyewitnesses of the events tell about the battles they survived and the difficult tasks they performed. But this book is not just a description of military operations, it is an opportunity to delve into the inner world of those who are shaping Ukraine's future through their actions.

The stories of the book's heroes are memories of how, amidst the waves of war and fear, there is a place for dignity, friendship and compassion. They will tell you how they tried to find a normal life in extraordinary circumstances, how they communicated with locals, supported each other and filled the unquenchable spirit of struggle.

The idea for the book was born after the liberation of the occupied Kyiv region. The units of Support Forces among which the sappers of Combined Training Center played a prominent role from the very first days of the war became a direct participants of Ukrainian troops that took part in the defensive battles around the capital. At the same time, there was a desire and need to record these facts and the first interviews were recorded.

Most of the questions are almost the same for each serviceman. The interview begins with a story about the motivation and reason for joining the Armed Forces of Ukraine. Attention is also paid to the first combat experience which most of them had during the ATO/JFO. Much attention is paid to the events after February 24, 2022. Of course, the story of each sapper is unique so the interviewers did not particularly follow a standardized template in their communication. The book contains only the names of the servicemen as we respected their reluctance to disclose their personal data, surnames and call signs. In general, this contributed to openness and frankness during the interviews.

These are not just pages of a book but evidence of high courage and strength of spirit, documents of how our military men and women demonstrated heroism every day, standing at the forefront of defense. Let this book be a tribute to their victories and deeds, a reminder that the country is forged on loyalty and unity and an inspiration for all of us to continue the struggle for victorious peace and freedom.



ARTEM, 28 years old

*Awarded the Order “For Courage”, III class,
Medal “For Military Service to Ukraine”*

***What made you choose
the military profession?***

– I have always dreamed of becoming a military officer, for me this profession is a model of what a real man should be. At the age of 15, after completing nine years of school, I entered a military lyceum with enhanced military training, successfully studied and gained the necessary knowledge and learned the basics of the military profession. The lyceum was the start of my professional growth. After graduation there was no hesitation in choosing a profession. I entered the National Army Academy named after Hetman Petro Sahaidachnyi in Lviv and obtained a military degree. I began my military service in the Ukrainian Navy in Mykolaiv. I served as an engineer platoon commander. This was the first stage of my military career.

I gained my first combat experience in 2016 during the operations in the Mariupol area in the settlements of Donetsk region. I told

the brigade commander that I didn't want to be inactive, that I would better go to the area of operation. I obtained the permission from the command and soon became an engineer support chief specialist of the artillery battery of the division. Chief engineer in other words. The skills I learned at the Army Academy came in handy. It would have been difficult to manage processes and personnel without the appropriate training.

We performed tasks of engineer reconnaissance, fortification, camouflage, terrain checks and equipping false positions. I was more attached to artillery firing from a 2A36 gun, a 152-caliber "Hyacinth". We were based in Azovsk, Mangush, near Mariupol, in the village of Dachny, towards Kurakhove. I travelled all over the Donetsk region as the battery could not stay in one place for a long time, it had constantly move due to new tasks. When the tasks were completed, in order to avoid being attacked by enemy artillery we would relocate to another place.

How did you become a sapper?

– I have always dreamed of doing sapper work, doing what I studied for, what I am best at, what I like, so I decided to return to my favorite job. I was transferred from the 406th Artillery Brigade and continued my service at the Demining Center. When I was still in the artillery, I used to send my subordinates to this unit for training. When they were leaving, I ordered them: "Don't let me down, you are going to my home, don't disgrace me, you have to be the best". I was an engineer company commander within the artillery brigade and I taught my subordinates sapper techniques and tried to increase the material resources of the unit.

When I transferred to the Demining Center in 2021, I was able to do my favorite thing. At first, I had to refresh my knowledge as I had forgotten a lot. When I refreshed it I started operating as a sapper group commander, I was calm and confident in my actions during explosive ordnance clearance, detection and destruction.

In the first rotation I executed tasks in Kramatorsk and moved to different places in the area of responsibility in Donetsk region. The rotation went smoothly, everyone knew their tasks and fulfilled their duties conscientiously. First of all, it is very important for a sapper to take care of his own safety because every rash step can cost him and his comrades' lives. You should never forget that the enemy is close and the most dangerous enemy of a sapper is mines. They can be everywhere, wherever you are, wherever you go. I constantly emphasize this to my trainees.

***How did you perceive the beginning
of the large-scale war with the russian enemy?***

– I learned that the war had begun from my father who was the first to call me on February 24 and tell me this terrible news. I heard the alarm through the window, looked out over the balcony and realized that the situation was tense, everything was breathing with uncertainty and panic. The Great War had begun.

I spent the morning of February 24 at home but around 5 o'clock I received a call from my commander who said that I had to come to my unit immediately on a combat alert to coordinate further actions. I was ready, my things were packed. Our unit was scheduled for a rotation. When I arrived, everything went according to protocol: first of all, I had to manage the personnel entrusted to me with equipment and gear, think everything through, not forget anything and hit the road.

In the morning of the same day, a group of sappers left the unit in the direction of Kyiv. As part of a unit of one of the Army's mechanized brigades, they were engaged in combat missions to defend the capital. The main tasks assigned to the sappers were engineer reconnaissance, laying minefields, preparation of bridges, dams and reservoirs for demolition, etc.

We arrived in Kyiv at night. It took us a long time to get there, the road was difficult. Not far from the capital there were six lanes

of traffic in one direction and it was impossible to pass. The road was clogged with traffic. There was a particularly large flow of cars in Vinnytsia region. It was obvious that a large evacuation had begun. As we approached Kyiv we were thinking: something is wrong, everyone is escaping from there and we were heading there. The situation looked tense and incomprehensible. The guys were mostly silent and when they spoke, they were impressed at what was happening around them. The deceased Borys Orikh was travelling with us in the Ural truck. Unfortunately, we lost a comrade-in-arms, he was blown up on a tripwire. He was an experienced, good soldier and an expert in his field.

After crossing Kyiv, we were stationed near Brovary at a chemical processing plant. We distributed the tasks and assigned the leaders. Everything changed very quickly, I was rotated as a group commander and became a non-staff detachment commander. I was in charge of 12-13 people including 2 officers. The unit remained subordinate to one of the Army mechanized brigades. Together we were placing explosive devices, blowing up bridges and other strategically important facilities.

The first bridge I blew up was the one in Vyshhorod. At first we faced with the difficulties establishing interaction with the units. In extreme situations we had to look for a way out. And we did. But it was a waste of time. We were ordered to blow up the Vyshhorod bridge. They said everything was ready but in fact the boxes of ammunition were sealed. The first two or three weeks were especially hard. I was entering the shelter where we lived, took off my helmet without taking off my clothes, and fell on the bed. I set an alarm for half an hour of sleep and when the phone rang I jumped up and got back to work. There was a lot of work, we worked 24/7 without exaggeration. It was especially challenging between February 24 and early March. Now people ask me when I slept and ate and I can't remember, it seemed like I neither slept nor ate but only worked and only occasionally took a nap (smiles).

Tell us about your first combat missions.

– The situation in Borshchiv village in the Brovary district of Kyiv region looked like a detective story. Our unit was tasked with destroying a bridge over the Trubizh River. It is unclear why but there was serious confusion about its implementation. One of the commanders of the unit to which we were subordinated set the task remotely, over the phone. There were no clarifications, no data: “You’ll find out it by yourself, it’s the area of responsibility of so-and-so”. We left for the assignment around five in the morning. I called the person in charge and he was ten kilometers away. Whatever you want to do, do it. I took the responsibility. We drove up to the bridge, placed the explosives to the bridge supports. The river there was small and the bridge was long and wide, about 32 meters wide and the same length, some of the supports were in the water. At this time I heard the click of a shutter frame above me. They shouted at us in Russian: “You have ten seconds to put down your weapons otherwise we will open fire”. Less than ten seconds later they started shooting at us. My subordinates ask me: “Commander, what should we do?”. Everything happened in a second and we had to make a smart decision very quickly. And at that time we were all under the bridge. Shooting started and I ordered my guys: “Take your positions, fire to kill, let them get closer to you!!! If you can’t do it, – I say to one of the sappers – I’ll do it. Take the wires, connect them and blow up!!!”.

The shooting continued, the guys took up their positions. There were four of us – me, Denys, Zhenya and Anatolii. When the charges were already laid out, a grenade hit the ground 12-13 meters away and we were very lucky that it did not hit us. I heard shouting at us in Ukrainian. I lowered my weapon, came out from under the bridge and started shouting loudly Ukrainian words: «kvarta», «palyanytsia», «polunytsya»! I shouted with all my might: “I, so-and-so, was born on that date, group commander, stop shooting, I am an officer, a military man!!!”. I thought: either it’s ours or if it’s the enemy they would capture only me and I gave the guys an order to run

in the opposite direction. Whatever it would happen, the main thing was to protect my people. This is how we interacted in the first weeks of the war. The happy ending of this story: it was the members of the State Security Service (SSSU) and Territorial Defense Forces. They threw me face down in the snow, in the mud. They searched me, I was screaming, proving who I was. They did not believe until the last moment that we were Ukrainians. But we managed to get away with it. This event happened on the 5th or 6th day of the war. I didn't think about the danger, I just kept going.

What events in the course of military operations are particularly memorable to you?

– If I recall which episode of the assigned task is most memorable, it is probably the battle for the village of Moshchun. There was a moment when the enemy seized a bridgehead near this village. And it was very dangerous because this village is the “gateway” to Kyiv, a strategically very important settlement. If the enemy had passed through Moshchun it would have been difficult for the Armed Forces to hold the line. We were tasked with destroying the bridge over the Irpin River in Moshchun. It was clearly stated what needed to be done and who would do what. Having assessed the situation and clarified the task, my group and I started to fulfill it. Upon arrival we realized that this settlement was in the vicinity of enemy troops. The bridge was the main crossing point for the Russian forces, they had no other way through, there was swampy terrain around and their vehicles were stuck and unable to move forward. I remember hearing an explosion on the approach to the bridge: enemy rocket hit about 400-500 meters away. Our group immediately reacted, we lay down. Having examined the personnel and assessed their condition I did not see fear in their eyes but only fierce motivation. I decided to keep moving and accomplish the task. I told my group to hurry up under the shelling towards the bridge. While placing the charges helicopters took off, but our guys did not lose their morale and enthusiasm and continued to place ammunition as quickly

as possible. Probably, in 15 minutes maximum, it took us to place charges, retreat and blow up the bridge and this was just one of the combat tasks my group successfully completed.

During the battles for the village of Moshchun the forces of Ukrainians and russian occupiers were not equal. Ukrainian Armed Forces were able to hold the Ukrainian positions on the eastern bank of the Irpin River due to determination, professionalism and courage of our sappers who blew up the bridge across the river. The russians failed to move their main forces closer to the capital. Despite the difficult situation, visual advance of the russians, mortar fire and shelling from the enemy's heavy armored vehicles we managed to destroy the bridge which allowed us to stop the enemy convoy from advancing towards the capital.

The village of Moshchun was destroyed by more than 50%. There were almost no locals left, the front line passed through the village and people were forced to leave their homes. One of the locals who did not leave the village started helping us, he drove us where we needed to go by his car and supported us as he could. I don't know where he got the grenades from but he showed us. When I saw it... "Oh, man," I said, "give me these "toys" otherwise something bad can happen". I took them away from him, maybe I saved his life. He was a very generous man. If you want coffee, tea, you're welcome. He would get it out of the ground. He showed a very human attitude. Later I came to the village, looking for him, wanted to see him, say hello, thank him for his help but I didn't find him, the locals said he had already left.

We saw terrible crimes committed by russians in Moshchun, everything around was completely destroyed. The situation was no better in Ivankiv, Termakhivka in the villages on the other side of Moshchun. Houses were destroyed, people were scared, crying and pouring out their pain. I saw children's things scattered, bicycles in traces of blood. There were piles of garbage on the sites of former buildings which were half or completely destroyed. Blood dried on various things and objects. Everything around was breathing death. I did not see any corpses, they had already been cleaned up.

***Did you have tasks in other settlements
in the Kyiv region in addition to Moshchun?***

– My group was tasked to prepare the Irpin dam for demolition. It was under fire from all sides. Maybe because of this task I received a state award... This facility turned out to be difficult to access. We tried to approach it one day and two nights and only on the second day we managed to reach it at nighttime. It was the area of the village of Novi Petrivtsi followed by Kozarovychi. We drove at night with headlights off in complete darkness for about twenty minutes. We were accompanied by a soldier as that was the area of responsibility of infantry which was stationed there. He said that the katsaps shelled the dam every day. Tactically, the dam had to be blown up. Before that infantrymen had torn down the gateway and something went wrong so they called our group. We had to go inside the dam in order to blow up the gateway. But it was still shot through. It took us a long time to get there...

I also performed missions in many locations in the Kyiv region including the radiation-affected Prypiat and Chernobyl. I conducted engineer reconnaissance of roads and terrain in the Chernihiv region. In the beginning we were mostly mobile. For example, if a reconnaissance group needed sappers so I worked with them. If another task appeared, we moved to the other place. We were mainly engaged in area and road reconnaissance as well as destruction of facilities. We also had a free tour to Chernobyl. We saw the radar on the territory of nuclear station. The radar system was the most powerful, the largest in the world at that time and it could detect any hostile actions. But that's in the past. Now it is a city without a future. We were looking for a dam on the Hrezlyia River for a long time and destroying the bridge. A warning sign warned of the danger of staying in that area. The radiation was off the charts. I saw the Red Forest, where the muskovites got exposed to radiation, which is not far from the Chernobyl station. In Prypiat only the Ferris wheel, the observation deck and the Polissya hotel reminded of the former peaceful life. This city is lost forever.

It made me hate to drive by and see green boxes with stars scattered everywhere along the roadside, left over from enemy rations.

Wherever the russians were stationed all their «goodies» were scattered around. I saw enemy's damaged equipment. We found an old warehouse where the muskovites established a repair base, and burnt ammunition and ordnance which were scattered around. A heavy corpse smell was in the air. All this territory was behind Ivankove village. We didn't stay there for long, it was dangerous as the level of radiation in this area was very high. When we had to fly over some areas the dosimeter was beeping loudly as there were clouds of radiation. I saw villages neglected and devastated by the consequences of Chernobyl accident. It's a pity that such a fertile area of Ukraine suffered severe radiation damage.

How was the food for the military during the rotations?

– In the early days we ate what we brought with us. It was a very difficult time, there was so much work that we sometimes forgot about food. Later volunteers helped a lot. The first days and months of the war were an intensive period of volunteer assistance. They provided us with food and everything they could. From 1,5 V batteries to night vision devices and thermal imagers. Sometimes we cooked our own meals but often there was no need for that as the volunteers provided everything we needed. If the volunteers met the soldiers on their way, they stopped and just threw sleeping bags, pillows, water and apples out of their truck and loaded all that into our truck. It was nice to feel the unity of one nation against a common enemy.

Does the military believe in superstition?

– I can't speak for others, I can only speak for myself. You have to believe in God and yourself – then everything will be fine.



VOLODYMYR, 32 years old

*Awarded the Order "For Courage", III class,
Medal "For Military Service to Ukraine"*

***Under what circumstances did you find yourself
in a full-scale war?***

– One of our detachments was preparing for a planned deployment to Kyiv. It was not related to the war. Everything was ready for departure, we were waiting only for the order. On the morning of February 24, Natalia, my dentist, called me and anxiously asked: "Volodymyr, is it true that the war has started?" I could not immediately confirm that because I did not know anything yet. I immediately started looking at Telegram news channels. To be honest, the first thought that popped into my head was that it was a fake, the enemy had hacked into our communications and was spreading false information. Soon after, I received a call from my unit and was informed that we were urgently deployed to the area of operation. Large-scale war... This news did not take us by surprise, we were already prepared.

On the first day of the war, February 24, our unit departed to defend Kyiv. I remember that day very well. The road to Kyiv was completely clogged with vehicles and people in anxiety and uncertainty were leaving the capital in large numbers. We had to wait in traffic jams and the section of the road from Letychiv to Kyiv had the largest concentration of vehicles. It took a long time to get there.

We were assigned to one of the mechanized brigades. During the first days we were completely riveted by the news, checking Telegram channels every half hour, looking for information to know what was happening at the front, where the enemy was and what losses they were suffering. We were excited, we wanted to get into the battle as soon as possible even though we knew about the losses that had already been suffered by our military at that time.

The first days were quite difficult both physically and mentally. We executed various tasks in accordance with certain combat orders. The tasks consisted of destroying crossings, bridges and overpasses in order to prevent the enemy from attacking the capital. We operated within the settlements of Stoyanka, Bilohorodka, Sosnivka and Makariv. We lived at the Kyiv Plastics Plant. There was no question of comfort or conveniences. All the time we were on calls or guarded our camp and nearby strategic facilities. We were always working hard without rest or sleep. When I really wanted to sleep I just closed my eyes from time to time, slept for half an hour and then started working again. Only on the fourth day of the war I brushed my teeth for the first time with cold water in a field near a KrAZ truck without toothpaste. That was the first time we ate normal food. Members of Territorial defense forces brought us homemade broth. Before that we were simply not up to eating.

In the first days of the war we performed tasks in the village of Sosnivka, Kyiv region, not far from Makariv. We made friends with the guys who were in charge of the local Territorial Defense center of the village. We held the bridge over the Irpin River in Sosnivka for

some time together with them. Then it was destroyed so that the enemy could not use this strategic objective on the outskirts of the capital. Sosnivka is located within the village of Makariv. At that time the russians had already crossed the Zhytomyr highway and were advancing on Kyiv. According to the information we got, the enemy planned offensive on the city of Fastiv and hoped to reach the Odesa highway and completely encircle Kyiv.

Are you asking about everyday life? The worst thing is that we did not wash for a long time. There was no opportunity. I took off my boots only on the third day. The abandoned Plastics plant was absolutely not suitable for living. When it was raining, water dripped from the ceiling in the rooms where we lived. It was unbearably cold. The living conditions were just terrible. The cold was the most annoying. We slept wherever we could: on the back of a truck, in the cab of KrAZ or Ural truck. The next day after our arrival the guys who stayed there began to improve the rooms for living. There were two rooms there and they were quite enough for us to stay. They swept, removed garbage, put up a potbelly stove, set up folding beds and mattresses. No one took out their sleeping bags, they didn't even take off their shoes, they slept dressed wherever they could. We took turns going on calls.

Was it scary? It was scary but everyone understood that "fear has not given anyone freedom yet" and we had to fulfill our tasks to prevent the enemy from entering our hometown, region, capital and advancing further. Everyone realized that Kyiv had to be defended to the last. If Kyiv had fallen, God forbid, there is no telling what would have happened to Ukraine.

How long were you on rotation in the Kyiv region?

– Up to and including May 14. By that time the Armed Forces had already driven the enemy out of Kyiv region and liberated the occupied territories. Our unit stayed for another month and a half to clear the area from enemy's "gifts". Everything around was

contaminated with anti-tank mines, anti-tank and anti-personnel improvised explosive devices. We got a lot of trophy shells, thousands of them. Most of them were 152-caliber self-propelled artillery shells with shell casings and gunpowder. There is always a shortage of such stuff in war. The seized ammunition was delivered to storage so that our artillerymen could use it for its intended purpose. When fleeing the russians left entire field depots behind. Everything they had. A lot of things remained from the russian guard: elbow pads, knee pads, their uniforms. If I had known that a museum was going to be created in our military unit I would have taken something of that "goods", but it was disgusting to even touch it.

What crimes did russians commit on that territory?

– They raped Ukrainian women, girls and children. Locals told us about their grave crimes in the village of Peremoha on the border with Chernihiv and Kyiv regions. This village is located on the left bank of the river behind Boryspil. Several enemy units were stationed there. It was quiet at one end of the village, none of them were there. Dagestanis and Buryats were stationed at the other end and they were severely abusing the locals. They raped our girls. Just imagine: men were shot in front of their relatives and women were abused. Local citizens told us a story about a boy of about eight years old who turned gray from what he experienced. His father was killed in front of him and his mother was raped in his presence. Animals do not behave like that. They killed her psychologically; the locals said that as soon as the village was liberated she fled to Kyiv as she could not stay there. And the men were killed physically, just killed for no reason. There were mass graves everywhere in the village. Spontaneous burials of innocent civilians.

How long did the orcs commit atrocities in Peremoha?

– For a long time. They occupied Peremoha on the first day of the war and stayed there until the end of March. Our group of sappers

entered the liberated village on March 30. In the afternoon we were already in Peremoha and immediately started doing our job. And in the morning of the same day the occupants left. Our artillerymen gave them a good thrashing afterwards.

The village was almost completely destroyed. There were few houses left, about thirty percent of them. The school survived surprisingly, I don't even know how. In one of the classrooms the TV set remained on the wall, it was not stolen. Children's drawings hung on the walls in the classrooms reminding of the former school life. It was sad. To put it bluntly, life in the village ended on February 23. And on the 24th, when the Russians entered, everything froze and turned into a wasteland. We saw something similar in the Chernobyl exclusion zone. On April 25, 1986, on the eve of the accident, children in Prypiat came to school (the notes on the blackboard have been preserved), and on the 26th they were forced to leave their homes forever.

How did the locals greet the Ukrainian military?

– They greeted us kindly but it made us, the military, feel very uncomfortable. I wondered whether it was our fault or not that all this trouble happened. People suffered severe abuse during the occupation and we failed to protect them (I personally was disturbed by such thoughts). Unfortunately not all locals had the opportunity to evacuate. And this led to irreparable damage.

The people in Peremoha were very friendly, they were extremely grateful for the liberation from the occupation. Let me tell you about an incident. My friend Anatolii and I were walking the streets of the village and inspecting houses for explosive devices. An old man came out of one yard and asked us if we had anything to eat. The first thing that came to mind was that he was hungry and asking for food. We wanted to give him some stew. It turned out to be the opposite! He invited us into his house: "Come in, I'll feed you, I have potatoes, I'll find something more." It was so touching.

So we went in. We didn't eat but talked to the old man. "The katsaps were drinking, – he said, – and when they got drunk they took up weapon and shot each other. We suffered a lot from them".

An enemy T-72 tank was left in the village. One track was damaged – it had hit an anti-tank mine. We repaired it on our own and then handed it over to the representatives of the Army Command for further use. There were some dishonest people among the locals who wanted to take thermal imagers from the tank and profit from it. We had to post guards near the tank until the representatives of the Army Command arrived. We suspected that there might not have been anything left of the tank.

***Did you get to see the destroyed "Mriya"?
How did you feel?***

– Our immediate task was to clear the Gostomel airport of mines. There were fierce battles on this territory and our military made titanic efforts to prevent the enemy from entering Kyiv. Irpin, Bucha and Gostomel were caught in the enemy's ring. The Armed Forces of Ukraine managed to push the enemy to the brink with heavy efforts and losses and forced him to retreat. Then the sappers had a job to do. We were checking and clearing areas of explosive devices. Among other tasks we cleared Gostomel airport from explosive devices. That's when we had a chance to see "Mriya". It is, let's say, the same size as our headquarters and maybe even bigger. Eighty meters long and as high as a three-story building. There was nothing left of it – from the wings to the cockpit, everything was destroyed. It was a direct hit, probably from a helicopter.

I also had a chance to see "Ruslan", it was in the hangar. It's a smaller copy of the original. If I'm not mistaken there are seven or eight of them in the world. It is two and a half times smaller than the "Mriya". It was riddled with shrapnel. The body, wings and fuselage were heavily damaged. According to experts it was beyond repair. There were also many smaller planes in the hangars all of which were damaged.

Did you have time for leisure?

– You should ask if there was leisure at all. There were days when we worked from morning to evening and we also had to work at night. We were always working. And when we arrived on site we discussed various aspects of the tasks, consulted on how to do the job better, faster and more efficiently. Physically it was hard, we had to carry large loads of explosives to place charges. It was, let's say, a ton, a ton and a half or two tons a day. The task was for three, four or five people to cover a distance of twenty, thirty or fifty meters. As far as it was possible to drive a KrAZ truck to the necessary place. We got all sorts of injuries – some had hemorrhoids, others complained about their backs. But even then we decided with the guys that we would get treatment after our Victory.

What episodes of tasks are most memorable?

(Laughs). When you return from a mission at night you are afraid to pass the Territorial Defense checkpoints. Each village has its own checkpoint, its own password. In early February and March people do not know the names of the Commander-in-chief or the Chief of General staff but they firmly held their posts, took care of security and did not let anyone through. There were a lot of nuances and worries to get back to the base safely from the mission. Enemy sabotage and reconnaissance groups were scouring everywhere. There was no telling who you could run into. It was especially frightening when armed men stopped us in the center of Kyiv and demanded our documents in clear russian: "Who are you, where are you from, what unit?" They were Ukrainians but unfortunately they spoke russian. Can anyone else say today that language does not matter?

But did you have to perform tasks under fire?

– We did not work directly under fire. There were no cases when we were working and the enemy was shooting at us. Yes, we were in close proximity to the enemy. But no more. I saw from a distance

how our "Pion" hit them hard. In the area of Stoyanka along the Zhytomyr highway, rather between Stoyanka and Makariv, there was a cemetery of russian equipment: broken T-72 tanks, self-propelled artillery systems and armored personnel carriers. It was nice to realize that the occupiers were not having much fun there.

Have you seen the enemy up close?

– In Peremoha, I had the opportunity to see russian prisoners of war. I didn't communicate with them and there was no interest in doing so. The relevant services were dealing with them. Three of them were detained. They were found at a checkpoint. When russian troops retreated, they simply left them behind. Maybe they were sleeping somewhere drunk (Laughs). They didn't have any bottles of vodka with them so I think they kept the alcohol in their bodies so that no one would take it away from them. When they were detained I can assure you that they were treated humanely compared to the trouble they caused and the punishment they deserved.

Were there any more deployments after Kyiv region?

– Our detachment returned on May 14. We were stationed at our permanent location until the end of June. And on the next rotation I went to the city of Pryluky, Chernihiv region. The city was subjected to massive shelling by X-22 missiles. Our task was to neutralize and dispose the bomb clusters left over from the enemy bombardment. When we arrived in Pryluky we saw how much everything was destroyed. There was no war as such but the consequences of the cluster bombings were impressive. The war is not only where there the battles are, it is everywhere in Ukraine. In general, we managed to do some protective works and blow up the ammunition in place. We took special care of the safety of civilian population. When the sappers were working, the authorities warned people not to leave their homes and to stay at home at that time. There was a threat

of injury from explosive shrapnel. Very few locals left the city even though the enemy was not far away, at a distance of 15 kilometers.

During this deployment our unit performed tasks until mid-August. Then we handed the duties over to another unit and we returned to our permanent location and at the end of September we went on another rotation to the Chernobyl zone. It was here, in Pryluky, that I gained new combat experience, as I had never had to dispose aerial bombs before.

How did you communicate with your family?

– In the beginning and later we communicated via text messages there was no time to talk. If I sent a plus sign (“+”) to my family it meant I was safe and sound. The first time I had a normal conversation with my family was in April when the danger had more or less subsided and the topics for conversation started to come up. Before April our conversations were like this: “Everything is ok”, “I’m fine”, “I have no time to talk”. And once a day I sent them “+” message. I often wondered back then: who has it harder – a soldier at war (judging by myself) or his family at home. They are waiting for you all this time in anxiety. And you are not there and they do not know what is happening to you at this moment. You are responsible for yourself and they know nothing about you. It is very difficult psychologically.

***Tell us about your third rotation
in the Chernobyl zone.***

– I went on my third rotation to the Chernobyl zone on September 29 and stayed there until November 29. I was in charge of a unit consisting of eighteen soldiers. We lived in a boarding house. The living conditions were pretty decent and volunteers provided us with everything we needed. We mined areas on the belarusian border near the village of Stari Shepelychi and in villages to the left of Pripyat. From what I saw, the most striking thing was the ghost town of Prypiat. The contrasts were especially painful: people used

to live here but today time has stopped, the city is dead. It was sad to see the traces of the former life. Central roads of the village are overgrown with trees and houses are being destroyed. I saw the the blocked fourth power unit. However, there was no time for looking around, no time to relax as there was always a threat of an enemy attack from Belarus. We tried to do our job very quickly and efficiently.

We went on missions every day, the route averaged five to ten kilometers in one direction and the other. With backpacks, an assault rifle, body armor and load bearing equipment on our backs. I laughed at the Territorial Defense recce team members who could not stand such a load, they went with us on a mission for a day or two and then realized that it was a very difficult job. They cannot do it. It's too hard. We executed all the task together with the Border guards. Although not everyone is like that. The soldiers are different, there are those who are respectful of their tasks and there are those who are not, to put it mildly. But in general, there are a lot of decent people among us who are ready to defend, are able to defend and will defend Ukraine.

***Compare the fighting before and after
the full-scale invasion.***

– I have not been to either the ATO or the JFO area since my time at the Demining center. Therefore, it is difficult for me to compare. At that time I served in a pontoon and bridge battalion of one of the engineer brigades as a platoon commander.

The only thing I can say is that people in the east and in the center of Ukraine are mentally very different. In the east I would not take food from any of the locals. But in the Kyiv region people are friendly, kind, they were concerned about our problems and treated us generously. They trusted us and we trusted them.

Were you scared?

– Once there was an incident when we were returning from a mission in the village of Sosnivka. We destroyed a bridge to block the enemy's way to the city of Fastiv. Almost a minute before the explosion a van arrived with some unfamiliar people. They were dressed in civilian work uniforms like electricians or something similar. They looked distrustful. "Let us pass," they said to us in Russian, "don't blow up the bridge, our people have to be pulled out". Colonel Oleksandr Makhachyk, may he rest in peace, refused them, forbade them to pass and gave the order to blow up the structure. Then we heard rumors that our Special forces detained an enemy sabotage group. Later it turned out that they were the same ones who asked not to destroy the bridge. They were disguised katsaps, the so-called "sleeper groups" – enemy sabotage groups that had been operating on the territory of Ukraine even before the full-scale invasion. Now after being in the shadows they have "woken up". We were in danger of being ambushed by them. Fortunately, we did not get into a fight with them as they were eliminated by our Special forces. When we contacted the checkpoint in Fastiv they said that their van had driven in our direction and never returned. Thank God, they were neutralized.

My comrade-in-arms Anatolii said that his KrAZ truck had never driven so fast before. The level of danger was off the charts. We were ready to shoot back, the windows were rolled down, and our weapons were at the ready. But everything went well.

I would like to say a few kind words about Colonel Makhachyk. He was our supervisor from the Support Forces Command, his call sign was "Czech". The positive traits of his character are countless. He is a professional in his field. I learned a lot from him. He was able to suggest what to do and show how to do. I have only good things to say about him. Unfortunately, he was killed in Donbas near Lysychansk when a rocket hit the trench shelter he was in.

And when was it unbearably hard?

– It was not hard. It was just cold. We carried out our tasks at various facilities including water facilities. In the village of Sosnivka we had to go into the river – you come out of the cold water and there is nowhere to warm up. I was afraid that my limbs would get frozen. I was naked just in my underwear and the temperature was sub-zero. Before that I had some experience of ice swimming only on Epiphany. But that was completely different. It took time to set up the charges and my frozen hands in cold water did not obey. There was no boat and no time to look for one. I decided that I would do this work myself. My guys, Anatolii and Volodymyr, were dropping the lines, handing me the boxes and Serhiy was covering us so that we wouldn't be attacked by surprise.

Should we underestimate the enemy?

– Of course, we should not. The enemy is not a little boy from the fifth grade. This is a serious opponent. We have to be honest, there are many professionals among the russians. Let's hope that by now their number has already decreased because they suffer enormous losses every day and many of them have already gone to Kobzon's concert.

What exciting moments from your military service are particularly memorable?

– Probably the most touching moments were children's drawings sent from peaceful territory. And also handmade gifts from children, sweets in particular. The things the children worked on and put their hearts into. I was touched by the drawings of my son Kostya, which he sent to the places of service. This is what inspires and keeps me going.

The moments of people's trust, support and help are especially memorable. I remember the Kyiv region which had just been liberated from the russian occupiers. Strangers tried to help in every

way possible, not knowing who we were. They let me, Anatolii and Volodymyr, three unfamiliar armed men, into their house. They allowed us to wash, use everything in the house, and fed us. By the way, it was the first time since the beginning of the war that I had a proper bath. We stayed there for several days. When we left, they packed us food and things for the road. We refused but our excuses were categorically not accepted. We discussed this event with the guys later and were pleasantly surprised by people's gratitude. I don't know if I could have done it myself if I had been in their shoes. They are very sincere and open people. We became friends with Dmytro, the owner of the house, and we are actively communicating to this day. A big advantage is that all these people were for us, for Ukraine!

Is leisure possible in times of war?

– Yes, it is! The guys were laughing at me when my wife sent dumbbells through volunteers at my request. After completing the tasks I did my workouts. “Vova, please don't touch those dumbbells,” the guys would laugh, “as a rule after your workout we have a lot of work to do the next day”. It was often the case. Once after my dumbbell training we had to transfer trophy ammunition left by the fleeing muscovites sized three KrAZ trucks. First of all we hunted for 152s and shell casings filled with gunpowder because at that time there was a shortage of these shells. Then we collected 122 and 125 mm tank shells. We started with collecting lacking projectiles and we always had a lot of work to do.

We went to church at Easter in Kyiv. Those who wanted to, of course. Relatives sent us Easter cake, Easter eggs and sausage from home. Volunteers also helped with Easter food. We were well prepared for the holiday: we had Easter cake, sausage and Easter eggs. We lit the candles and the priest blessed the baskets.

In short, we are working for Victory and we hope that everything will be fine.



VASYL, 30 years old

Awarded the Medal "For Military Service to Ukraine"

Tell us about your first combat experience during the anti-terrorist operation.

– I don't consider it to be my first combat experience, more like combat tasks in the east of the country where the fighting was going on. We were fighting an invisible enemy – explosive devices and there was no direct contact with the real one. We were based in Kramatorsk and performed tasks which consisted of clearing the area of explosive devices in different directions. There was nothing special about the rotation, it was more like a normal routine job. I don't remember any specific emotions or bright moments as there were no any.

What tasks did you perform during the peacekeeping mission?

– When I was in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan we were subordinated to an Italian engineer battalion. During the mission there were no hostilities, it was calm and quiet. The base was located near the city of Herat and was under NATO command.

The mission was to maintain peace and order in the country. Our sapper team, as part of a convoy, travelled to the area of responsibility to demonstrate the force, patrol the route and the designated area of responsibility of this particular battalion.

Everything in Afghanistan was unusual for me. The heat was especially annoying. The first time I stepped off the plane, I almost fainted, the temperature reached +50. Later I got used to it. New people, traditions, a lot of incomprehensible things. The local population lives in poverty and receives meager wages. Their families are large, with 4-5 children. They sleep on the floor, there are no trees there and their parents are unable to earn money for their beds in a few years. The neighborhood is chaotic. A house made of sand and clay can appear near the road which did not exist a week ago. They eat mostly pita bread and some minimal vegetables and fruits. That's at least what I saw but it's hard to say what it was like in reality.

Improvised explosive devices (IEDs), the so-called "pressure plates" were the biggest threat during the missions. When a car or any other vehicle runs over this plate, the contacts close and the charge explodes. Fortunately, in all my experience, I have never encountered such explosive devices. We practiced, worked out IEDD scenarios, but during the calls when we checked the dangerous areas, thank God, we never found any IEDs. The first and second rotations were very calm for me. Unlike a full-scale invasion, it was not a combat experience, but rather a military service experience.

***Under what circumstances did you find yourself
in a full-scale war?***

– I woke up from the sound of a message on my cell phone. One of my military colleagues had sent me the President's address announcing martial law. I looked at my wife and told her to pack my bag and her things and go abroad with the children. She started crying and I had no time to continue talking to her and persuading her, I had to report to the unit immediately. At that time, all the soldiers

were staying at the barracks and we were waiting for further orders. On March 8, we left in two separate groups, one to the northeast and ours to the Zaporizhzhia region. I was a sapper-driver. That's when I got my first combat experience. We were subordinated to the Dnipro Grouping of Forces, we received orders from them and reported to them. Our tasks were to provide engineer support to infantry units. Most of our tasks involved direct participation in the assault of Malynivka, Novozlatopil and several other villages in Zaporizhzhia region. Malynivka was occupied by the russians, and situation in Novozlatopil was very "interesting". Three times the hostilities took place in this village: the first time it was "gray zone", the second time it was occupied by the russians and the third time the Armed Forces of Ukraine tried to assault and retake our territories but the village remained under russian occupation.

How did the assault take place?

– At the time I didn't quite understand what an assault was. We used to fight only with invisible enemies and I had no fear that someone might shoot at you. First, we formed columns for the offensive. Before the village, when the battle began, we had time to regroup, hide behind a tank, third or fourth in the convoy. We left at night and drove through the fields all night. The sappers were moving ahead because first of all we had to check the road. Even if we found something that posed minimal threat we would neutralize it. The team leader checked the area with metal detector, infantrymen and tanks were moving behind him. We regrouped in two hundred meters to the village, the tanks were the first in convoy and we were the third or fourth in a Hummer. The emotions were indescribable.

It was a direct contact with the enemy. We saw the russians shooting at us at close range and saw our machine gunner shooting at them. It was a very successful assault, our command had planned everything properly. Everything went smoothly, the convoy entered the village, the infantrymen dismounted, walked all the streets, clearing them. We all formed the combined tactical group, and

there were other units that supplemented it. Together, the combined tactical group took the village. The battle started at dawn around four or five o'clock and ended in the afternoon around three or four. At that moment time stops you get used to the firefight, you don't even notice that they are shooting.

We entered Malynivka through the fields, behind the village, in order to take the enemy by surprise. Tanks were the first to break through the road and they were the first to start shooting, followed by APCs, then infantry entered and dismounted. An infantry group checked every street and cleared every house and basement. Obviously, the enemy did not expect an assault in Malynivka. The village was cleared, there were many wounded and some killed. The battle ended with small skirmishes on the outskirts of the village. When the battle was over we were in the central part so we did not see everything. We were waiting for the Territorial Defence troops and the units that were supposed to keep the village in defense to enter and we would leave.

One of our commanders was wounded, his leg was damaged. We evacuated him from the village and when we returned, the battle was still going on. They attacked us with mortars and "Grad" rockets. The only thing that saved us was that we were in an armored Hummer and maneuvering.

What were your emotions during the assault?

– There were no emotions, I don't even understand why. There was no fear either. It was my second experience of direct contact with the enemy. During the first one I really experienced fear. It was near the village of Novozlatopil. We were the first to enter. I see a convoy of russian armored personnel carriers leaving the field and starting to shoot at us. My first thought was – not to be captured, it's good that I had a gun with me. It was a very difficult situation for which we were not mentally prepared.

And during the second contact with the enemy in the village of Malynivka, I was in a completely different morale condition. We already realized what the enemy was, we understood how to behave in such a situation. When the fighting started, I seemed to switch. Mortar hit the Humvee from the side and it shook. But we knew what to do, what orders to follow, to drive away, regroup, take cover, etc.

Where were the civilians during the assault?

– Civilians were hiding in cellars. They could say that they were already waiting for their deaths, realizing that they might not be alive tomorrow. In such conditions there was no direct communication with them. And if we did communicate it was only from an open car window. We did not see any civilians in the village of Malynivka but there were people in the village of Novozlatopil. They cried when a Ukrainian convoy drove in after clearing the territory of the enemy. They cried and were very happy to see us. They said that among them were those who were waiting for the “liberators”. The locals met us we, the Ukrainian military, on their knees, crying and very happy to be liberated from the occupation.

Where did you live during the missions?

– When we arrived in Zaporizhzhia we were immediately accommodated at a factory in a closed area where no one could see anyone or anything. We could even hide our vehicles. We performed missions at long distances, usually living where the assault groups were formed. For example, it could be a school in a village and the rally point was there. The village cooks would prepare food for all the units that came here and stayed for a day or two. It was here that the military column was formed and from here it left to assault the settlement.

Is there an addiction to war?

– I think so. The longer we do this job the less fear we have.

***Were there any breaks between battles
when assaulting settlements?***

– Between battles we were engaged in other types of tasks. We placed engineer obstacles and then participated in the assault. This went on for about a month and a half until we were replaced by another group from our unit. They were laughing at us that we had shot a Hummer for effect. The windows, the hood and the wheel were shot out of the Hummer. They, like us at the beginning, arrived and were not yet under fire and did not fully understand what was happening here.

The end of the rotation was very difficult. We knew that we would be rotated but we received the task to go on the assault again. None of the group understood why we should do this when we were supposed to be replaced. Everyone was silent and did not want to go but we had to follow the order. We were going to assault Novozlatopil which remained under enemy's occupation. We arrived at the prior village, our team leader went to remove the mine barrier, our troops stayed in the rear. As soon as we left, our tank was blown up on an enemy landmine. The crew was contused. We did not take the settlement, we suffered losses, the assault was unsuccessful. I don't even understand what could have saved us then. The katsaps attacked us with small arms and anti-tank grenade launcher. They shot at the wheel, hood and windows. The only thing that saved us was that the tire did not go flat completely and we were able to drive out of there. The mood was shitty, everybody was silent and when we returned to the rally point, we quietly packed our things and waited for the departure.

What was the next rotation like?

– In September I went to the Kharkiv region as a senior sapper within a team. There were good soldiers in our group. The second rotation was calm and balanced. We were engaged in engineer reconnaissance, clearing the area in the de-occupied territories

in the settlements of Krestyshche, Dolyna, Krasnopillia, which are not far from Sloviansk. The villages there are not subject to restoration at all, not a single village – everything is in ruins, one general ruin around. The katsaps were placing anti-tank mines and anti-personnel mines with tripwires, which are prohibited by the international convention. While dealing with anti-tank mines, we sometimes found grenades underneath. You pull off the explosive ordnance and they denotate in three seconds. We had to be extremely careful. However, it was nothing special, just the usual sapper's hard work.

Every morning, our commander Viktor, as the head of the village of Dolyna, blocked the entrance to the village and warned the locals, who wanted to take the remains of their property from the destroyed buildings, about the danger. At the entrance, he stretched out a mine tape and forbade anyone to enter. There were different types of people. There were those who wanted to take advantage of the situation. But mostly the locals wanted to take their property. It was very dangerous, everything was mined. Mines were everywhere. The locals were very careless, saying they had already been here, knew everything and were in great danger, not fully realizing the threat to their lives. It was necessary to conduct daily explanatory work with the population and only after that to start clearing the areas.

Did anything extraordinary or unusual happen?

– A lot of muscovites' corpses were scattered all over the village. It was October and the corpses had already decomposed, lying there since spring, and turned into mummies. You would walk and see half an Ivan lying there and half an Ivan lying in another place. No one took them back, no one wanted them. Viktor established cooperation with the village elders and made contacts with people who were engaged in the removal of corpses. These services took russian bodies and exchanged them for ours. We provided them with assistance. If we found anything, we made a safe approach and call in experts. They would come and take them away. The most memorable thing I remember is the russian Ivans that were lying around and nobody needed them.

In a village outside Novozlatopil in Zaporizhzhia region, I was struck by what I saw. There were 5-6 houses left, the rest were smashed. An old man was sitting on a bench outside the house, just sitting without hope with a heavy sadness in his eyes and waiting. He was sitting on the bench and not moving during the mortar shelling. We were driving and looking at this picture, we realized that the man had already said goodbye to life, but he wanted to live... During one of the assaults we saw our tank entering, and a child, a boy of 4-5 years old, broke out of the cellar. He ran out to look at the tank. And his distraught mother ran after him, grabbed his hand and pulled him back to the cellar, because there was death all around. Life and death were next to each other.

To summarize, the first rotation in Zaporizhzhia region was mentally challenging, because physically, of course, it is always difficult, but you usually do not pay attention to it, because there are tasks to be completed. And the second rotation in Kharkiv region was not physically difficult but it was not morally difficult. There you do your job smoothly, you realize that there is an invisible enemy, you have to be careful with it, but there are no missile strikes and no shooting.

***How did you communicate
with the local population?***

– The communication with the civilian population was quite interesting. There was a line of contact between our troops and the russians in the village of Krasnopillia, where we carried out our mission in the spring. One part of the village was under occupation, and our troops were holding back the enemy in the other part. The Armed Forces stopped them on this line and began to push them back. Every time we went there, we were bringing food for dogs and cats and humanitarian aid for civilians. When we arrived, we first distributed it and talked to the locals. They, just like the residents of Dolyna (these villages are adjacent to each other), wanted to get into their homes and get their things, but we did not allow them to, and they, of course, did not like it. The area was unchecked, we could

not allow accidents to happen and we could not let them go to their former places of residence. Viktor Poliukh dealt with the situation by talking and explaining, first of all, explaining what explosive devices are and how dangerous they can be.

There was a funny case. The population in Sloviansk is predominantly pro-russian and we noticed that. Our driver Yurii used to warm up the vehicle in the morning when we left for a mission and turn on the Ukrainian national anthem or something patriotic to irritate the local population, to make them grimace, just to spoil their mood. There were some who grimaced and there were some who said, "You guys are great". Not everyone there is a Ukrainian-hater, there is some pro-russian population but in general they are in favor of Ukraine.

I had a conversation with an entrepreneur who was pro-russian in 2014 and when the city came under occupation, he changed his position dramatically. He said that he was now only pro-Ukrainian. What prompted him to do this? He had a large household, was engaged in farming and beekeeping. He owned a luxurious house and expensive property. As he said, unsuccessful people who liked to drink and did not want to work came to power. The village was under occupation. The katsaps recruited collaborators and place them at the checkpoints, gave them full power and they began to seize his and other residents' property. If they wanted a car – you have to give them a car, if they wanted a coffee machine – you have to give them a coffee machine. He had a trailer, he took his family out (they had been living somewhere in the woods all this time) and all his valuable belongings. Then he came back to his house and stayed there to make sure that his "countrymen" did not loot the rest. And he said: I don't want anything russian anymore.

What do you believe in, what is your talisman?

– Талисман My talisman is God. When we were under the fire, I was praying all the time, I can not tell about the rest of the group but I was praying all the time. And when I was praying, I didn't pay attention to the fact that the russians were shooting at us. God is my talisman.



VIKTOR, 38 years old

– I have been in the Armed Forces since October 2007. After graduating from university, I was at a crossroads in terms of choosing my future. At that time, I received a call from the military enlistment office offering me military service. At first, I had no desire to serve in the Armed Forces of Ukraine. Perhaps because of stereotypical perceptions or because I did not understand my role in the army. But I changed my mind thanks to my father. He is a former military officer, a senior warrant officer, who was recruiting young soldiers, and he took his service very seriously. At some point I felt ashamed that his own son was trying to evade military service. Given the choice of conscript service or contract service, I decided to sign a contract with the Armed Forces of Ukraine.

In 2009, I was transferred to the Demining Center, a newly created separate military unit. At that time, the staff was very small, about 40 people. I was lucky to be part of this friendly military team. I gained my first experience during the clearance of former Bushcha airfield in Dubno, Rivne region from June to August 2011.

I was shocked by the level of contamination of this area. The entire forested area was simply covered with aircraft bombs. We even managed to find ammunition from the First and Second World Wars. There I learned a lot, it was very interesting because it's not every day that you find powerful aircraft bombs like the FAB-500.

During my next deployment I was engaged in disposal of surplus ammunition at the Rivne training area. At first, we thought we were only disposing of unusable weapons but when the war broke out, it became clear that this was all a deliberate action planned by the higher military command of Yanukovych presidency to destroy the ammunition arsenals and disarm the Ukrainian army. At that time, a citizen of the Russian Federation, Dmytro Salamatin was the Minister of Defense of Ukraine. The criminal authorities had been preparing this offensive for decades and under the guise of disposing unusable ammunition, they were weakening our defense capabilities. But in 2012 nobody could anticipate that and we faithfully followed the orders of our higher command. You won't believe it, but 10 tons of ammunition were disposed every day. It took us only half a day to unload them. Today during the war, it is scary to think about how many thousands of ammunition we destroyed, and today we could have fired them at the enemy.

In 2013, I was transferred to a dog training unit and I was willing to participate in a peacekeeping mission in the Republic of Kosovo. I was traveling with my service dog Lord.

I have my own observations about the Serbian attitude to our war. At first, we got along well with the Serbs, they mostly worked in the kitchen at our base. We communicated in Russian and Serbian, had a lot in common with this nation at that time, we shared the same faith... But when the events on the Maidan began and Russia annexed Crimea, the Serbs changed their behavior and their attitude towards Ukrainians dramatically. In the north of Kosovo, where the majority

of Serbs lived, locals began to hang banners with Putin on their houses, stating: "Crimea is russia, Kosovo is Serbia", "Serbia and russia are forever" etc. It even got to the point when the locals were throwing stones at the guys from the 30th Separate Mechanized Brigade, who were patrolling that area.

I realized for myself that the war between Serbs and Albanians was very brutal and it broke out due to ethnic differences and religion. I was at that Orthodox church which was captured by the Kosovars who killed all the Serbian monks and knocked all the frescoes off the walls and gouged out the eyes of the Saints. In general, while Serbs are grateful to russia, Albanians are grateful to Germany and the United States and almost every house in their country has flags of these countries. They greatly honor these nations for helping them defend their country.

The mission was very interesting. I was mostly engaged in area and road clearance. I gained a lot of experience during this mission, met people from all over the world and saw how foreign sappers and sapper units were equipped. I was particularly impressed with the equipment of the Swiss Demining group. They have everything they need for demining in their vehicles: from a screw to a portable power station. You can clearly see the gap that existed in 2014 between the material and equipment of the leading Western countries and ours.

I returned to Ukraine from the peacekeeping mission in December 2014. At that time, active hostilities were already underway in the east of our country. While still in the Republic of Kosovo, I kept in touch with my colleagues from the Demining Center and knew where they were going and what they were doing.

My first rotation was in Kramatorsk within a combined demining unit. I brought my dog Lord with me and used him as a mine detection dog when it was required during the demining operation. We were constantly together.

I remember the task was to check the area for improvised explosive devices. The day before, a paratrooper was blown up in this area. Soon after it was confirmed that the explosion was caused by an IED, as a group of separatist chemists had been working there for a long time. We received the order to check this area. Lord and I were checking the area, everything around was mangled, broken glass was scattered and ceramics was broken. My four-legged friend was injured, his paw was cut very badly. And I had to take him to a veterinary clinic in Kramatorsk, where his paw was stitched up.

Once we received a very peculiar task. The Ukrainian authorities agreed with the so-called "DN" to check the water supply system for serviceability. As I understand, it was more of a separatist initiative. During the "Grad" and "Smerch" attack, shrapnel hit the water supply system which was located on the surface and the water leaked out without reaching the occupied cities. There was an agreement: a demining team would come and check the approaches to the water supply system so that emergency services could safely resume water supply to the occupied cities. The enemy side promised that there would be no incidents or attacks. While we were travelling to the task site, mortar attacks started, the road was constantly under fire. When we arrived on site, we met the soldiers from the 80th Separate Air Assault brigade there. The paratroopers were extremely shocked by our safety. What kind of agreements can we talk about with an enemy that never honors them? Who could have sent us on such a mission? According to them, a few days ago, representatives of the Ministry of Emergency Situations came to perform a similar task and the so-called militia took them prisoner. They made them kneel, checked their documents and only because they were civilians and had no weapons on them, they were miraculously released. Can you imagine what could have been waiting for us? After assessing the situation, we reported to the command and the mission was cancelled.

***What were your impressions of what you saw
in the east of the country?***

– Everything around was covered with ammunition, mortar shells were everywhere, they were just sticking out of the ground, out of the asphalt, you could see them at gas and service stations. People just covered them with box lids and drove around them, and lived like that. Everything was saturated with mines at that time... The level of danger was simply off scale.

Once we were tasked to check a local cemetery for explosive ordnance. According to our intelligence, the separatists were planning to commit a mass terrorist attack in Kramatorsk on Palm Sunday. They did not care what they mined even if it was a cemetery.

Sometimes locals openly rejected us, the military. I repeatedly recall at the exits through Kramatorsk and Sloviansk how we were shown the offensive “f*ckyou” sign by everyone from teenagers to old men. And only a few people were standing with Ukrainian flags and supported us. It was true, the vast majority looked at us with hatred and were angry with our presence there. From my own experience, I can say that in 2015, people in Donetsk region had negative attitude towards Ukrainians and Ukraine. Perhaps to some extent, this was influenced by the fact that Ukrainian soldiers often wore German uniforms. At that time, there was a transitional period with regard to military uniforms, the army was switching from “dubok” military uniform to the “pixel”. There was no proper supply, volunteer assistance was used a lot, our soldiers scavenged whatever they could from second-hand stores and some guys didn't even bother to remove the German flags from their uniforms. And Russian propaganda quickly picked up on this topic and set up the local population, saying that the Nazis had come to our land again. At least, that's my opinion. I personally heard the locals talking about how they regretted the DNR, saying that everything was better under their authority and these “khokhly” came, and they were no good... In 2015, we had to keep a close eye on the locals, they were everywhere, monitoring the situation, writing down something, it was

clear that they were informants. The separatists had a great influence on the local population.

I left for my next rotation just a week later. As I remember it now, I was cooking fish soup and my former boss called me and said: "Fish soup is canceled, you have to be deployed to the area of operation immediately". Sectors A, B, C and M had to be supplemented with a dog handler and a mine detection dog. I was sent to Kramatorsk. My tasks were mainly to check dirt roads for anti-tank mines. At that time, OSCE representatives often visited various sites, and my dog Lord and I were involved in mine-searching operations.

Is leisure time possible during the rotation?

– Yes. We tried to go to Bakhmut on weekends. It is a very beautiful, pro-Ukrainian city. There was an Artemivsk sparkling wine factory there and we often went on a tour there, bought some "champagne" and sent it home as a souvenir or gift. Since 2015, people there have been speaking Ukrainian, there were many Ukrainian flags, and the residents were more friendly to us than in Kramatorsk and Sloviansk. No one there gave us the middle finger.

How did you meet the large-scale invasion?

– I was rotated to the Sarmat base camp in Kramatorsk in December 2021. I remember that in early February, there were almost daily drills to practice the battle alert, constant "Shelter" commands. On February 23, all aviation instantly disappeared, which was very strange because before that helicopters had been flying over the city and the airfield every day. In 2015 I never saw any aircraft in the air but a week before February 24 I saw them every day. This alerted us even then and we realized that it was all for a reason...

I also recall that about a week before the full-scale invasion, we were tasked by the HUR (Main Directorate of Intelligence) to check mined bridges near Kupyansk. Back then, the intelligence officers

hinted to us that Putin was serious about the war and that a full-scale offensive by the katsaps into Ukraine was planned. We were even advised to change into civilian clothes and move from Sarmat base to apartments in the city. To be honest, we were skeptical about these conversations. How could they know what was going on in Putin's mind? But on the morning of February 24 everyone remembered the words of the HUR members and realized how wrong we were. So HUR is not just "shady office", they are real experts who know their job and have all the necessary information.

It was five o'clock in the morning, another "Shelter" signal. Half of us thought it would be over again in 15 minutes so we didn't even go down to the trench shelter, we just stood by it. The first strike... And we still didn't believe it, we thought it was a serious imitation to scare us and make the training more realistic. After 3 minutes there was another strike followed by an extremely powerful blast wave! Everyone realized that this was no longer a training exercise! My comrade Oleksandr acted with lightning speed, he was the first to order everyone immediately to go down to the trench shelter. The first few minutes were chaotic, the trench shelter was made of earth, it was very uncomfortable and cramped, we had our assault rifles with us and two dogs in addition. Someone's arm or leg was squeezed, someone was screaming in panic that they had no air to breathe. In those first moments we realized that a war had started. Words cannot express it. Something was happening to us until we came to our senses from the state of affect and shock!

A little later, we moved to a concrete dugout with light, communication and furniture. We were shelled until 7 a.m. I couldn't believe it, I couldn't believe that a full-scale war had started. When we came out from the shelter, we saw craters all around, everything was on fire... Warehouses, dining room, containers, facilities... The guys came out from under the rubble, they were all black, covered with earth.

The first task after that day... We were tasked with blowing up a coalmine in the village of Paraskoviivka, which is near the city of Soledar. The task was extremely challenging. The guys even said goodbye to us before we left.

Later I was transferred to Chasiv Yar. When I arrived there, I saw the enemy targeting the command post of the Joint Forces. All the wooden houses were damaged, the equipment was burned and the facilities were destroyed. Most of the personnel were evacuated. On February 25 about fourteen people remained in the bunker. My task was to blow up the bunker if necessary. But the officers were determined to keep fighting to the last. After five days, almost all the personnel returned. I stayed there for three weeks.

I want to share another memory that particularly struck me. Once I attended a meeting with Pavlo Kyrylenko, the head of the Donetsk regional military administration. The governor told me that he had deliberately not invited the mayors of Konstantynivka and Druzhkivka to this meeting. As it turned out, the main reason was that they were anti-Ukrainian separatists and they shouldn't know further plans and actions for the defense and de-occupation of the Donetsk region. It was agreed: the war will end and we will deal with them.

But when I went to Lyman I saw the opposite picture. It was immediately apparent that the mayor and police were determined to side with the enemy.

After completing the tasks in Chasiv Yar I was mostly engaged in mining fields, dams and bridges. I remember the village of Novomykhailivka near Maryinka. We, the sappers, were laying a minefield and an artillery fight broke out between Ukrainian and Russian sides trying to hit each other's positions. We were forced to work in such conditions – you deal with mines while the rockets are flying over your head.

I was sent on a mission to the village of Neskuchne, Volnovakha district. At that time Volnovakha itself was already occupied. I was

pleasantly surprised to see that there were many patriotic people among the locals. They donated their vehicles – Zhyguli and Deo – for defense purposes. The guys wanted to fight, to defend their land, family and home. Unfortunately, today this village is under occupation.

In my second rotation after the full-scale invasion I was deployed to Barvinkove in the Kharkiv region. I picked a very decent team to work with. At that time, the Kharkiv region had already been liberated and our job was to clear the villages of Krestyshche, Dolyna and Krasnopillia. The villages were so heavily mined that the map on my tablet turned red from the markings. And these were only the mines we knew about and how many more such munitions were found that were not identified or marked... Just imagine, we found from twenty to thirty mines in each yard. Gardens, vegetable gardens – everything was covered with mines. The yards were contaminated with ammunition fragments and a lot of metal particles were scattered. It was very difficult to work with an ordinary mine detector or metal detector. Many mines were found under the rubble of houses. That's why I decided that it is worth using a mine detection dog in order to effectively clear these settlements and not to miss anything during the area clearance. The trained dog, Herta, found mines in such hard-to-reach places where a human could not detect them. If there had been no dog, it would have been a long and arduous search process. It could take several days to completely dismantle the rubble of one house and check everything. But with the help of a dog, everything was done much faster and more efficiently.

The local population made it very difficult to work effectively in these settlements. Civilians came to their homes almost every day, trying to take away anything that had survived. They did not react to the signs "Beware of mines!" and "No passage". Of course, I can understand these people because they had lost their homes and

wanted to save or take away at least something of their possessions. However, for us, the sappers, it was extremely important to warn people of the danger and save their lives. Every morning, our team's work began with an hour-long drive around these two villages – Dolyna and Krasnopillia – to identify illegal residence of local citizens. Early in the morning, still in the dark, people would appear there before we arrived, hide behind the rubble and dismantle what was left. It was deadly dangerous.

There were cases when the orcs' corpses were found scattered everywhere in these villages. A black shoe sticks out from the ground and this is the leg of an enemy that has turned into a mummy. It was very difficult to organize the exhumation of these bodies. We called representatives of the National Police to try to get this process started but mostly we heard from them: "May they rest in concrete". I understand everything, it's the enemy, but unfortunately, our guys are also dying in the occupied territories and their bodies need to be returned to their families. And for this, we needed to have an appropriate exchange fund. Therefore, I tried my best to organize the search process for the dead. When enemy corpses were found, I sometimes surprised myself: I had no pity for them, I didn't even feel disgust, I had a kind of neutral attitude, a feeling that I was doing something mundane.

In general, there is still a lot of work to be done there. During my second rotation, our group removed and neutralized 1557 of TM-62M anti-tank mines, 12 of OZM-72 and 6 of MON-50 tripwire mines, destroyed many grenades with tripwires...

During this rotation, my left leg was injured by fragments. When you neutralize thirty to forty mines every day, you get used to it, maybe even lose your vigilance and fear. The task turns into a routine, into everyday life, and, unfortunately, caution becomes dull. I remotely removed the mine, hiding behind the remains of the house wall – and there was nothing to hide behind, just ruins. Three seconds later, there was an explosion. Everything happened with lightning speed,

everything went dark, my eyes went black. I felt a cold stream on my leg. I did not feel any pain at that moment. I turned around and saw that my whole pant was covered in blood. Medics immediately provided first aid to me. The doctor in Kramatorsk recommended surgery to remove the shrapnel but I refused because I did not want to leave my people without a commander. So I decided to leave the shrapnel in my leg until the end of the rotation. I had it removed in January 2023 in a Khmelnytskyi military hospital. Now I always carry this shrapnel in my backpack as a talisman.

It is very pleasant that the local residents of Dolyna village and their village head keep in touch with us, write to us from time to time and always thank us for the clearance. We are constantly in touch and he continues to help my friends from different military units.

Ukraine is invincible with such people!



YAROSLAV, 29 years old

*Awarded the Order "For Courage" III class,
"For Courage" II class*

***Yaroslav, please tell us,
how your military career began?***

There were military among my close relatives and I have repeatedly heard their fascinating stories about the moments of military service, which at some point influenced my choice of profession. In 2012, after the first year of study, I was transferred to the Hetman Petro Sahaidachnyi National Army Academy in Lviv. The faculty was disbanded, and the Department of Military Training was established on its basis, which trained officers from among the students of Ivan Ohienko National University of Kamianets-Podilskyi. In 2016, I graduated early, received commission and was sent to serve in a military unit that was part of the 81st Separate Airmobile brigade. During my service, I was the commander of an engineer platoon and the chief of engineer service. In 2021, because of the end of my contract, I retired to reserve. I have been back on duty since 4 March 2022.

***Yaroslav, for what merits did you receive
the Order for Courage III class?***

– I was awarded the Order for Courage III class when I served in my previous military unit. From 2016 until my release in 2017, I was involved in the demining of an ammunition arsenal in the city of Balakliya, Kharkiv region. When the ammunition arsenal exploded there, I was working with soldiers from my former brigade to eliminate the consequences of this man-made disaster. For three months, we worked on demining the territory of military stores in Balakliya. After that, our unit was involved in tasks in the village of Shchastya, not far from Sievierodonetsk. We worked on building up engineering barriers and fortification equipment of our positions. The last place where I performed combat missions was the village of Novoluhanske, not far from Bakhmut. The missions were similar. I was awarded the Order for Courage III class for performing combat missions during the disposal of ammunition at military stores in Balakliya. To be honest, I did not do anything extraordinary. My unit and I carried out our combat missions in a professional manner, which was highly appreciated by the authorities.

***Is there a difference if you compare
the combat actions before and after
the beginning of the full-scale war?***

– Of course. A completely different experience and completely different realities. At that time, the tasks were carried out in a calmer environment and the sides did not conduct massive artillery attacks. The distance from the enemy allowed us to more or less safely perform the tasks of installing engineering obstacles, checking and clearing facilities. The situation is much more complicated now. In today's realities, our servicemen are performing tasks under artillery and mortar fire and are constantly exposed to danger. And the distance today is much closer to the enemy than it used to be. It is worth taking into account the fact that earlier tasks were performed in more prepared positions and in the current realities they are carried out

either in the gray zone or in unprepared positions. There is a constant movement of troops: either forward, or we have to retreat back to previously prepared positions.

***Under what circumstances
did you find yourself in a full-scale war?***

– On 24 February, I was in our city. At that time, I had already retired from the Army and was working as a labour protection specialist in a civilian organisation. I did not see any prospects for service in the previous unit. I was considering the option of going to serve, preparing to undergo an interview.

On the morning of the 24th I heard an alarm howling and thought that military exercises were being held, as it had just been tested the day before. Soon after, a friend of mine called and told me that war had started. I was among those who were in the operational reserve of the first stage and I understood that I could be called up in the near future. On 4 March, I went to the military registration and enlistment office and asked about vacancies. I found out that there was an opportunity to serve in the Demining center. On the same day, I arrived at the unit, had an interview with the deputy commander of the unit and started my service.

***When and under what circumstances
did you go on your first rotation?***

– On 22 April, I went on a rotation to Izium. At that time, Izium was already under occupation. The enemy attacked the settlement of Barvinkove and actively assaulted it. Our group consisted of five people.

During the first weeks, we worked in two small groups in the Barvinkove area. In order to disperse people in my group not all the personnel were always involved in the tasks, as the tasks were different and the presence of the entire team was not necessary. We laid anti-tank mines and blocked tank-accessible areas

in the direction of the enemy's movement. We performed tasks in Velyka Komyshuvakha and Hroshuvakha.

When the Russian Federation intensified its offensive in the Sloviansk direction, our group was redeployed to the 95th Air Assault Brigade by military order, acting in their interests and working as part of their Brigade. We were tasked to protect possible routes for the advance of Russian troops with engineer obstacles. I consider the main achievement to be the explosion of several Russian tanks on our engineer obstacle, which we placed together with the 81st Brigade's engineer unit and Territorial Defence Forces in the area of Bohorodichne village near the Siverskyi Donets River. The minefield was laid by our group and refined by the 81st Brigade and Territorial Defence Forces. On YouTube, you can see a video of the explosion of this vehicle, a beautiful scene! There were four or five tanks. I can't say that all of them exploded on mines planted by us. But our involvement is undeniable. Of course, I don't take all the credit. For my successful leadership and work, I was awarded the Order for Courage II class.

In addition, the group worked on the laying of anti-tank explosive devices in the Bohorodichne and Dolyna. We were carrying out the usual work of mining the territories to prevent the enemy from advancing in the Sloviansk direction.

***What emotions did you feel
when you first came under fire?***

– I tried to keep my actions and thoughts as calm as possible, and tried to assess the situation calmly. I read the stories and interviews of soldiers who had performed similar tasks under fire, listened to their recommendations and advice and implemented what I had learnt in my own experience. During the shelling, I paid special attention to launching and flight of a projectile – if the sound increased and then decreased, I knew I could be calm, the ammunition would fly over you or somewhere to the side. If the sound is constantly increasing,

it's clear that someone is shooting at you and you need to leave the place immediately, because it's quite possible that someone is targeting you. There were two or three occasions when I heard the sound of a quadcopter above me, its humming. I was also under massive artillery fire from multiple launch rocket systems on a nearby settlement. This was a signal for everyone to leave the workplace immediately, put the mines in a hole or crater and move to a safe distance. We returned and completed the unfinished work only when the attack stopped.

Was there close fire contact with the enemy?

– If we take into account small arms fights, there was no such thing. However, almost every time we went on a mission, we were attacked by artillery. The Sloviansk direction was particularly “hot”. There, ammunition was constantly flying over your head and the enemy was constantly firing at the nearby field. We also were often under artillery fire in the Barvinkove direction. There we lived in one settlement and worked in another. The shells hit both places.

What is particularly memorable?

– The most memorable was the arrival of our group to interact with the commander of one of the battalions of the 81st Airmobile Brigade in Bohorodichne. At that time, the village was under our control but soon the Russian Federation entered it and the Armed Forces of Ukraine were forced to leave the territory and cross the Siverskyi Donetsk river. There was a battle going on in the village, enemy artillery was employed on a parallel street from us, I could hear fragments flying right over my head and the rocket strikes so close that I could even feel the vibration of the ground under my feet. We ran away from there and hid in the basement. It was a very dangerous moment for our lives.

The most memorable event was the one in Sloviansk. At the time, we were working in the interests of the 95th Brigade and lived

in Sloviansk Kurort (the area is called that within the city). This is a resort area, with sanatoriums all around. In peacetime, people came here for medical treatment and recuperation. The area has very picturesque landscapes. The lakes are salty and healing. On the side of the sanatorium there were houses rented by visitors who came to have a rest. During wartime, one of these houses was provided for military personnel. We arrived there at night, and the next morning we had to leave for a mission. There was a settlement called Adamivka near Sloviansk Kurort, about three to five kilometres in a straight line. It was that night that the enemy fired at it with cluster munitions. I remember waking up from the sound of explosions, jumping up to the window, and there was a huge flash, everything was burning and glowing like in the daytime. It seemed too close, within arm's reach. The first thought was that the enemy was aiming at our area, at our place of living. But in the morning it turned out (at night, the hearing is better, there were less disturbing sounds) that they were shooting at Adamivka. It seemed like it was coming from the neighbouring street.

Tell us about your leisure time.

– I cannot say that the living conditions were bad. Everything was enough for a normal existence in combat conditions. We had place for normal rest and for cooking. Our main location was 70 kilometres from Izium in a direct line. Yuri, a local farmer, provided us with his property, where he kept his agricultural machinery. He was engaged in gardening and had an administrative building where we lived. The room was equipped with a kitchen and furnished. In addition to us, there were two other groups living here – one from the 91st Engineer Regiment from Okhtyrka, and the other from an Anti-aircraft missile unit located near Novomoskovsk. So we lived in three groups. It was a small joint unit. We cooked our own food. When the groups went on missions, we would leave one or two soldiers in place and involve them in cooking. We returned hungry and tired, but we could always eat a hot meal. There was a shower so we could wash whenever we needed. Our neighbours who lived nearby helped

with the laundry. We would leave them our dirty clothes in bags and washing powder and they would wash them and give them back to us clean. People helped us in everything and we helped them back as much as we could.

The civilians were quite adequate people. We have never had any problems with them. This is not Donetsk and Luhansk regions, where a significant number of people are pro-russian. Most people here speak either mixed language or Ukrainian. I have not met anyone with pro-russian thoughts there.

When I served in my previous military unit, I encountered various acts of intolerance towards Ukraine. The older population in the settlements of Shchastia and Novoluhanske is very categorical, with pro-russian attitudes. We met them mostly in shops. No one from the military has ever harmed them. Let's say there's a military vehicle and an old man walks by and says: "We're waiting for russia, they're going to kick you all out soon, get out of here". This was not so common, because we had almost no contact with the locals, but it did happen. Out of respect for their age, we did not allow ourselves to respond in the way they deserved. In Sloviansk, for example, they were very upset that the russian world had left them in 2014, they regretted it, they were angry with the Ukrainian military. No one provoked them, they were stumbling into the conflict themselves.

Later we moved from Mykolaivka to Sviatohirsk. This is a resort town. Holy Dormition Sviatohirsk Lavra was situated not far from it. It stood on the chalky right bank of the Siverskyi Donets (the so-called Holy Mountains). As the locals said, in 2014, Kuban Cossacks were hiding there. The military men were provided with accommodation at the sanatorium. Our Airborne battalion was based there. After the full-scale invasion, when the russian federation occupied this settlement for a short period of time, the enemy fired massive artillery at the Lavra, knowing that our units were behind it, who prevented them

from forcing the river. The Lavra was under heavy fire. An architectural landmark of the 16th and 17th centuries, ancient wooden monastery of All Saints was situated behind it on the slope. When I was there, the russians were attacking it, it was hit and it was burning. I was driving by and saw the fire. It's sad that this famous historical monument has been destroyed, there were a lot of tours in peacetime.

The enemy destroyed the church in Bohorodichne. It was also hit directly, I saw the russians shelling it. The "liberators" left only ruins of the shrine. The russians understood that it could be a place where Ukrainian soldiers could stay. Although at that time only monks and civilians were there. Our military were in other places.

Today you can often hear that local priests passed the location of military positions on to the enemy. This has never happened in my practice. It was rather opposite. The priest from Sloviansk was leaving the city, because it was at risk of being occupied so he let the soldiers of the 95th Brigade stay in his house and use all his property. I don't know what denomination he was, a moscovian priest or Ukrainian but he acted like a Ukrainian patriot.

***What kind of relationship did you have
with the personnel entrusted to you?***

– We mostly went on missions at night to arrive at our destination in the morning. At dawn, there was usually a little less firing, so we could do our work more calmly and efficiently. I constantly kept in close contact with the personnel. The next evening, I tried to explain each soldier's task as clearly as possible. I explained what missions we had to perform, opened the map on my phone, clarified where we were arriving, where the enemy was and how to act in case of emergency. Let me tell you, some soldiers either had no combat experience at all or joined the army at a time when there was a lull at the front. They had never heard an artillery attack or strike. It was a stressful situation for them. I tried to give clear orders, keep eye contact and encouraged them so that they would feel

supported, they would know they were not alone, someone was guiding them, and someone was responsible for them. I personally performed the tasks together with everyone, never sent anyone anywhere separately and never watched from the sidelines. The guys always felt my support. They performed their tasks efficiently, in full, with mutual support and assistance. After completing our missions, we would come back to the base and have a rest. In an informal atmosphere, with a cup of coffee or tea, I tried to discuss each situation, if necessary, conduct a debriefing and express my suggestions and recommendations.

Have you had any funny situations?

– Yes, it happened. We performed missions in the area of Sloviansk. The city was famous for its porcelain factory, which produced ceramic tableware. Once, on our way back from a mission, we came across a small fair of souvenirs from this factory. The enemy was carrying out massive artillery attacks along this road. The people who were selling at the market left everything behind and moved away. The owners of those treasures told us: you can take everything there if you want, it will be destroyed anyway, so it's better to take it home. The guys took some mugs. We lived on the farm and it was grey and uncomfortable. To make it more atmospheric, we took large statues of animals several times when we drove by. I took figures of a wild boar and a fox. We made some design decisions, carried out landscape design, brought figures of dogs, cats and hedgehogs. We furnished the territory and it became a little more joyful and pleasing to the eye.

I became friends with a soldier from another unit and we shared a room. He spoke English well and had been on military missions in Africa many times. So I learned a little English with him. We tried to communicate in a foreign language as much as possible, exchanging vocabulary. I covered the wall with paper and wrote down words I didn't know, memorised them, and he would then test my knowledge. This was how we tried to distract ourselves from

the tough military situation. When there were no combat missions, we looked for hobbies. There was a pond in Sadove and the guys sometimes went fishing. I wanted to feel like a civilian, to take a moral break from the daily stress.

When the farmer, we were staying at, saw our landscaping and the statues placed around, he said he would like to take them to another site to change the atmosphere there. We said, "Of course, take it". As a gift, he promised to slaughter a pig for us. As a joke, I answered him: "Go ahead and slaughter it. In the afternoon, he arrived by van and brought a pig carcass. The guys were shocked. We grilled the meat together and had a very warm conversation. We have never had any conflicts with the locals, everything was based on help and mutual assistance. Ukrainians are incredible!



ROMAN, 28 years old

Awarded the Medal "For Military Service to Ukraine"

What motivated you to join the military?

How did your military career develop?

– With the outbreak of hostilities in eastern Ukraine, I realized that I had to defend my homeland, my family and the people closest to me. Hence the desire to choose the military profession. On my own accord, I was drafted for military service under a contract to the Demining center. I served here for ten months. I was a sapper. My friend told me about the enrollment to the Hetman Petro Sahaidachnyi National Army Academy in Lviv and asked if I wanted to get a military education. I did not object and soon became a cadet of this educational institution, studying in the army from 2016 to 2020. After graduation, I served as a platoon commander of a pontoon and bridge company in the Bilhorod-Dnistrovskyi Pontoon and Bridge Regiment, where I served for a year (2020-2021). There I developed my soldier skills and gained considerable experience. After serving for a year, I was transferred to the Demining Center, where my military service began.

***From what sources did you learn
that a full-scale war had begun?***

– Nothing foretold trouble. I was sleeping. At six or seven o'clock in the morning, my mother called. She asked from afar:

– “Roma, what's going on?”

– “Nothing,” I said, “everything is fine”.

– “The war has started... all the channels are blaring...”

And as soon as I talked to my mom, I got a call from my unit. It was a mess. I was ordered to report to the unit immediately. I had already packed everything as I was about to depart for a planned rotation, I took all my things and went to my unit. At eight o'clock in the morning the entire unit of the Demining center departed to the area of operation in the Kyiv direction

***Tell us how you got there,
what did you talk about on the way?***

– We were driving and were silent, each thinking about his own thing, and here and there we exchanged words. It was impossible to drive along the stretch of road from Khmelnytskyi to Kyiv because the entire highway was clogged with cars. On the Kyiv side, cars were moving in four rows even in the oncoming lane. People were fleeing... from the war. A wide stream of cars was stretching towards us and it seemed that we were the only ones traveling towards the capital. Everything was clogged with traffic. The cars were moving in front of us, in the field, at gas stations and in the neighboring lane. We drove for a long time, arriving in Kyiv at night. There was not a soul around, the city seemed to have died out, the streets were empty, there was no light in the windows. My impressions of what I saw were depressing.

And where were you going next?

– We drove through the center of Kyiv to Brovary. An element of engineer support group of a Separate Mechanized Brigade was

stationed there and we were subordinated to it. In Brovary we got lost, drove into some woods, stayed there for probably twenty minutes, then turned around and drove back. We found the brigade, they were stationed at some abandoned factory in Brovary, we stopped by, settled in and spent the night there. We slept in the vehicles in hangars. It was cold, raining, snowing. Somehow we survived that night. The next day we received an order to leave. We went to Vyshhorod, to the Kyiv Sea area. We passed the Kyiv Sea and drove another two kilometers. The order was to blow up a bridge that led directly to Kyiv. The enemy was still far away. But there was a constant danger of its advance. They would shout into our radios: "Come on, let's go, blow it up because in five minutes russian tanks will be here". We made two attempts to blow it up, came back, failed to blow it up again either because the blasting machine was not working or something else... We were lucky to find a guy from the brigade in a car, we connected the wires to the battery of his "Lada" and that's how we blew up the bridge. We drove away and waited for the commander as he stayed there in order to detonate it. When he was returning from the site I heard our guys shouting: an airplane or maybe a drone (I don't remember). We scattered in all directions from the car like ants. But fortunately, nothing hit us so we gathered ourselves and went to the base.

It was a big reinforced concrete bridge, 50 meters long and 20 meters wide. The russians never reached it. The blown-up bridge was supposed to hold back the enemy on the outskirts of the capital, but the muscovites under pressure from the Ukrainian Armed Forces took a different route, from the direction of Chernobyl. They deployed across the Desna River. But the entrance to Kyiv was already closed to them.

Were there moments when you were scared?

– War is always scary because you don't know what can happen to you and your comrades at any moment. But you get used to everything, you start to live in a measured rhythm, do your job

well and don't think about bad things. It was really scary when my comrade-in-arms died. Borys Orikh. Right before my eyes. Everything happened in one moment. A shrapnel hit Borys in the artery, he died instantly. I was evacuating him together with a sergeant from the 72nd Brigade. Territorial Defense medic examined him and pronounced him dead. I escorted the body to Kyiv's 8th hospital, handed it over to the medical staff and only then realized what had happened. I was already overwhelmed. The tears just came out of my eyes. The guys took the news of Borys's death very hard. Everyone respected him a lot. He was a highly skilled sapper and a very decent person. Ruslan, his closest friend, was with me in the group, and he took the death the hardest, he had a hard time coming to, crying. All of us were experiencing severe pain from the loss of our comrade. It was the first time I faced death with my own eyes. I still remember that tragic event.

How did you perceive the enemy shelling?

– When I first came under the enemy shelling near Liutizh, I did not pay much attention to it, and did not immediately realize what was really happening. We were laying explosive devices and then the mortar attacks started. There was no fear, no panic, no such thing. I did not realize the danger that awaited me, what I could be in. Later, I was hiding at the alert, looking for some depression in the ground. And when everything calmed down, we went on to lay mines. When you place one, you hear siren wailing again – that's it, you have to run into the bushes. When it was over we turned back to our task. There was nothing special about it. It was a routine job of a sapper.

We lived in a sanatorium in the forest and we were destroying bridges in the Chernobyl zone. We went to Chernobyl with the guys, it would have been interesting if it wasn't so sad. A ghost town that has frozen forever. Life also stopped in Prypiat, the city was destroyed by time, the roads were overgrown with grass and trees. Wild animals have started to grow, we saw roes running along the road with our own eyes. Everything there reminded us of a great tragedy.

***Did you ever see the places
the katsaps left behind when they retreated?***

– I didn't see any traces of russian crimes, I just heard a lot about it. We worked in places far away from massive population centers. We passed by the Red Forest, we knew that they were operating there. We could see their trenches from afar, the muscovites were holding the line, dug trenches but under pressure of the Ukrainian Armed Forces they were forced to leave the area and retreat. The radiation in the Red Forest is above normal level, they received their dose of radiation. I did not see any traces of their presence. From Prypiat, they left for villages on the belarusian border. The task was to blow up bridges that were to be destroyed. The katsaps had already retreated and it must have been up to a month since then. There was some relief in my heart that they were knocked out of one very important front line. We gave them a good hammering. But until they are driven out of all our territories, there will be no relief.

Did you have to communicate with the locals?

– Yes, we did. When we lived in Ivankiv, before reaching Chernobyl, we had more or less human conditions for living. We lived in a house with a kitchen, a bed, a table and a shower. The neighbors helped in any way they could, cooked food for the soldiers and washed their clothes. A month has passed since we left Vyshhorod. I hadn't bathed for maybe two weeks when I was there. I didn't take off my boots all this time, just wiped myself with napkins. We lived in some research institute, slept on tables, and the conditions were terrible. And so on for two weeks. Then we moved to a poultry farm in Brovary. There is no need to talk about the conditions, the main thing was that we had a roof, a cot and a sleeping bag, everything else was not important.

In Ivankiv we lived near the river in a forester's house. An older couple were our neighbors. We communicated with them in a good way, they cooked for us. We went to a woman's garden to wash ourselves and wash our clothes. We caught Easter just in time.

The older man and woman invited us to the holidays. They laid a luxurious table and treated us to a hearty meal. We had a good time at their house. We had sausages, Easter cake, fried meat – there was a lot of food. We remembered for a long time how we celebrated Easter in Ivankiv. That couple were good people. They cried when we were leaving. The woman burst into tears as we were leaving. They wanted us to stay. They were always bringing us something, taking care of us. We got used to them and they got used to us, and we talked to them every day. Unfortunately, we didn't take their phone number so now we can't communicate with them. We could have called them once in a while. They told us that there were collaborators in the village who reported about the ATO soldiers to the muscovites. The russians came to the head of the village council, threatened her and demanded the lists with the names of those who had served or were currently serving in the Armed Forces. She was the first one to report them to the enemy, driving them around and showing them where they lived. Fortunately, they didn't catch anyone as the soldiers were at war. The katsaps were penetrating into houses and looting.

Did you go on other rotations after Kyiv?

– In the summer we were in Pokrovsk, Donetsk region. We went on missions to different settlements. Our tasks were to mine and clear the territories. We lived in the village of Novotroitske. Very experienced officers – detachment commanders and group commanders – were in our rotation. We had a good team. The rotation went smoothly. Only at the end when our guys went to Lysychansk to blow up bridges near Bakhmut, an S-300 hit an ammunition truck in Kostyantynivka and scattered shells. My task was to dispose them. During this rotation, I also worked in Zaporizhzhia, making calculations for bridge demolition. The other guys were tasked near Bakhmut. When they were mining, they came under small arms fire and got into a firefight. The russians were shooting at them, they were retreating and had to shoot back.

***What emotions did you experience
during your first combat experience?***

– I'm the kind of person who doesn't take things to heart. And even if I do, I don't keep it in for a long time, a couple of hours and not more. I let things happen. At the beginning of the war when I was on my way to Kyiv, I did not think about fear. My mind was occupied with other thoughts: when we arrive, what we will do; I always think about the situation that is developing at that moment. I take any situation with a cold mind. There is work to be done, and in order to do it well, you need to think about how to do it.

I was in Kherson at the time when the city had just been liberated. I saw ruined villages that had been completely destroyed. I have never seen such an atrocity as this in any of the regions I have visited. The villages are gone. You drive by, see russian positions, everything is broken, a lot of shells, and you are very depressed. In the first days of the liberation, we did not meet locals but after a while they started to return. I saw them taking their cows for grazing. Where there was a war, life began to flicker. Here and there we came across houses that had more or less survived, it was still possible to live in them but there were no such houses that were completely preserved.

In Kherson we were tasked to search for explosive devices and clear the territories of mines. We came across anti-personnel mines on tripwires, there were many of them so we had to destroy all those "gifts". We stayed there for two months. We were based in Mykolaiv and went on missions to Kherson and Mykolaiv regions, which had just been liberated from occupation.

We were tasked with checking a building in the center of Kherson where the FSB (Federal Security Service) officers lived. When we were working at that facility, people and children with flags came running up to us, thanking us for the liberation and asking us to sign the flag.

The people were standing in the square, free! A bunch of people, everyone was happy to be liberated from the occupation. It was like that for four days, words cannot describe that euphoria and then the rocket strikes started and people stopped coming to the square. After retreating, the muscovites bombed Kherson and the region every day. People got used to it but at the same time they were nervous about why nothing was being done, why there was shelling and strikes. But none of them wanted russia anymore. Everyone said very bad things about muscovites.

When our guys were on a mission, standing near a KAMAZ truck, waiting for someone and talking about something, an old lady walked by, came up to them and asked when the bus would be leaving for russia. Imagine, an old woman wanted to go to russia, we would better send her away so that she would never return. No one else in Kherson ever said anything in favor of russia, at least I didn't hear any such statements from the locals.

What was it like in Mykolaiv?

– The infrastructure in the Mykolaiv region has suffered severely. Mykolaiv is well beaten. The city comes under rocket fire on a chaotic basis. During our stay there, there were two rocket attacks, the first time two rockets, the second time four, which fell down not far from us. The city suffers from constant rocket strikes.

Closer to Kryvyi Rih, there was a road that we used to travel with the guys from Mykolaiv to the area of operation. The line of defense was right across this road about five kilometers away. We saw a terrible picture: dugouts, enemy equipment, everything broken, equipment burned, a lot of mines and grenades. During the counteroffensive, our guys came to the enemy's positions. Old russian rations were scattered on one side, newer wrappers were lying around on the other side. I had no emotions, I was just used to such landscapes".

***How did your family take your absence,
did they worry?***

– My family was very worried. But nothing can be done, that's life. They worry, often distract me from work with calls. I tried to communicate with my family every day. At first, it was not very successful, I got up at three or four in the morning, worked very hard until the evening, and in the evening I did not have enough energy to talk. In such circumstances, I tried to communicate with my family via text messages.

Should we underestimate the enemy?

– We should never underestimate the enemy. The enemy is unpredictable and insidious, constantly learning from its own and other people's mistakes. The russians are superior in human resources and equipment and are capable of any insidious steps. We saw the results of the enemy's primitive work in Kherson. But this is probably an isolated case. If ordinary men were gathered from the market and tasked to lay mines, this is what the work of the katsap sappers would look like. They simply threw ammunition wherever they could. Mines were lying on the streets of Kherson, near houses. I went for a walk, picked those mines up without much effort, and moved on. But there were also mines laid in a proper way. russians mostly used cluster munition and artillery in order to level all living things to the ground. They were inhuman.



VOLODYMYR, 31 years old

How did you start your military career?

– On March 29, 2016, I signed a contract with the Armed Forces for the first time. I was willing to serve in the army. I had no military experience before, I did not serve in the army. My father, a captain, was a military man. He was strongly against as he did not want me to follow in his footsteps, he was worried about me. And my military career began at the Demining Center, where I held the position of a sapper, and today I am a senior sapper.

When did you first go to the area of operation, what was your first combat experience?

– It was on December 19, 2016. Donetsk region, the city of Kramatorsk. Before going to the east, I had proper combat training at the center. Here I was taught sapper's techniques, I had a thorough theoretical knowledge. The guys who had already been on rotations told me about different situations from their practical experience, which I took into account. I heard about many things and it was useful to me, it was much easier to perform combat missions.

After 2016, before the full-scale invasion, I was in four rotations (all in Kramatorsk). On March 29, 2019, my contract expired and

I resigned, working as a civilian at the Dancharcmed company in the village of Nahoryany. On February 24, 2022, when the full-scale war started, I was mobilized.

Where did the war find you, and under what circumstances did you find out that a full-scale war had begun?

– I was still sleeping, and in the morning my grandfather called, he lives in the village of Chymbarivka in the Dunayevtsi region. He and my grandmother wake up very early and have already heard the terrible news on TV. My grandfather told me that the war had started. But I didn't know anything. The news took me by surprise. I started to quickly get ready for work and all my thoughts were about the war. I arranged a meeting with my friend Roman, we went to the military enlistment office (we had served together before), completed the paperwork and returned to the military service together. So we started our military job at Demining center.

When did you go to the area of operation after the second mobilization?

– Since the beginning of the war, I have been in two rotations. The first one was from April to July in Zaporizhzhia region, in the settlements of Gulyaipole and Raipole, Dnipropetrovs'k region. I went on this rotation a month and a half after I resumed my service at the Demining center. I liked cooperating with the squad leader, the guys respected him as a commander. He treated everyone well, he picked the team members for this rotation on his own and was happy that he had decent and responsible people within his team. He invited me to go with him, which was a recognition of my professionalism.

It's hard to remember and even harder to talk about because I don't want to remind myself of his loss. We were on a mission, clearing the area in Zaporizhzhia region, everything was going well

and did not portend trouble. I don't really remember the name of the village, it was not far from Hulyaipole. We started to fulfill the mission and then the shelling started... I don't want to talk about it anymore... It hurts a lot. We could do nothing and lost our comrade... I can't talk... I want to believe, I really hope he is alive. Since then, I have come back from the second rotation and I still believe and hope that he is alive... The best commander, a good comrade, kind, decent, who was always seeking honesty, taking care of his comrades. That's how all the guys in our group described him.

***What tasks did you perform
during your second rotation?***

– After my rotation in Zaporizhzhia region, I returned to my permanent station, stayed there for two and a half months and went on my second rotation with my detachment under the leadership of another commander. The second rotation was in the Kharkiv region and lasted from October to December. Not far from Kupyansk, we were breaching enemy minefields for our artillery, as well as laying mine clusters for a complex enemy maneuver under artillery fire.

First, we arrived in Novotroitsk, Donetsk region, then were redeployed to Kupiansk, Kharkiv region, then from Kupiansk to Kramatorsk and from Kramatorsk to Bakhmut. We were stationed in Bakhmut and travelled to Opytne and Bakhmut for missions. After Stas was seriously injured, we moved back to Kramatorsk.

We carried out a task in Opytne, near Bakhmut. We were tasked to place command operated MON-90. The task was performed under intense fire. Stas was not with us that day. We did our job, everything went well and the next day we had to continue it. On December 9, we had to emplace wire entanglements so that enemy vehicles and personnel could not advance further. We left Kramatorsk at 5:30 a.m. in two vehicles. Then in Bakhmut we waited for two hours for the battalion commander to explain the situation regarding the tasks. He arrived and set the tasks. As on the previous day, we had

to set up five wire entanglements, which would stop the enemy. We arrived in Opytne, everything was fine, just like yesterday, and parked the vehicles in the garage. And... then the shelling started. The first group got through. They got out and we waited a little longer because the shelling started. Our guide asked if we should go. There was a lull for a while, so we went... We went out, Stas was the last one. I don't know how we didn't get hit... but only he was hit. We came out and the shelling started again. We were only a meter and a half away from the garages. The only thing that saved us was that we were walking behind each other, keeping our distance. The first one came out, followed by the second, third, fourth, fifth.

Stas also came out, walked a meter and a half, two meters and then – bang... We heard nothing, no whistling, as usual, and it was just a BOOM... we all ducked... I turned my head – I could only see dust. I turn to the guys – to Ihor and Stas to see how they were. I turned around and saw Stas lying down, pulling his leg and trying to hide. He didn't scream, only later he shouted "300th" (WIA), but we only heard "three hundredth" – that's all. Ihor ran over while he was getting the tourniquet, I had already gotten mine on the way. Ihor took the weapon away from him right away and Yurii ran over, and the two of us started to provide first aid, applying the tourniquet. Ihor was already at the car, getting ready to leave. We grabbed Stas under the armpits, brought him to the car, and then there was another explosion – one more strike. We had just left and it happened again. It hit the vehicle, fortunately, from the side. And then I could not hear anything. My head was spinning. I had a concussion. I thought only about what to do and how to do it! We were lucky that the vehicle didn't stop, Ihor pushed the accelerator and we drove to find a hospital. We asked the guys on the way where the hospital might be, but no one knew. By chance, we found an ambulance in an archway in Bakhmut. Ihor stopped, I ran out and shouted to them: "The 300th". The medics ran up and brought Stas in.

As it turned out later, it was a shrapnel wound to the artery of his left thigh. Yurii went on with Stas because I could not accompany him because of the contusion, I could not hear anything. From there, I was sent to the Khmelnytskyi Regional Hospital for War Veterans, where I got an intensive course of treatment.

How do you feel now?

– I still feel bad. My head is dizzy and I have constant pain. When I walk down the street, the generators are running and the noise makes me feel sick. I don't sleep well. I had an MRI scan and the doctor sent me to a military hospital. I need to be treated. Two heavy rotations are taking their toll.

What episode of your military service is most memorable?

On the good side, it was everyday life moments when we managed to successfully complete tasks and return to the base safely. We returned with a sense of accomplishment: we discussed work situations, shared our impressions and experiences. We planned the next day, determined who would do what. We paid special attention to successes and mistakes. To be honest, our relationship between our brothers was based on mutual assistance, we gave each other tips, helped each other and always supported each other. There was practically no free time then. Sometimes we could discuss football matches or watch football, but it was not often. Mostly, everything was related to work.

We carried out various tasks including laying mines, checking the location for the artillery. We had to carefully check the sites, which were occupied by the russians. The artillerymen did not want to go on missions without us, they were afraid of explosions. During both rotations, we conducted the tasks mostly in daytime, there were only a few nighttime missions.

***Did you have to communicate
with the civilian population?***

– We did not communicate much, both in Kupiansk and in Bakhmut. We experienced an incredible uplift in the liberated Kupiansk. Locals came up to us, thanked us, asked who we were, what kind of help we needed, were glad that we had come, and were happy that they were not under occupation any more. One woman ran up, brought us pears and apples, and treated us generously. Her husband came over, hugged us, thanked us for taking back their city from the enemy. People live very hard in Bakhmut, they are poor but they gave us their last. They offered us food, apples, pears, invited us home for hot soup. They shared everything they had. In return, we offered our food, we wanted to thank people. We felt a very good attitude of the locals towards us in the Donetsk axis.

When was it unbearably hard?

– It is unbearably hard when comrades die in the war. When one comrade, another comrade died... Rostyslav Ostafyichuk and Borys Orikh from our Demining center died. I learned about Borys here, in the unit. I served with Rostyslav for three years. When he died, I was on rotation in Zaporizhzhia region. I couldn't regain consciousness. It was psychologically very difficult for me to accept his loss. Before mobilization, I served with him in the same unit for all three rotations and he went to Afghanistan on the last one. I didn't want to talk to anyone in those days, I drank coffee endlessly, smoked cigarettes in packs. It was like that for several days until I was sent on a mission.

I remember Stas's injury very painfully. I was tormented by these thoughts for a long time when I came back from the rotation. His injury has not left my mind to this day: what I did wrong then. I was very worried about him. I was not as worried about myself as I was about him. My colleagues reassured me: you did everything right then, it was not your fault at all. Now I often have video calls with Stas. Thank God he is alive.

***What was your everyday life like,
what and where did you eat?***

– It was different. It depended on where we ate. Sometimes we slept in the cellar, sometimes in a Hummer (five people in one car), sometimes in a house, sometimes in a chicken coop. We slept wherever it was possible. In Kupiansk, volunteers found us a house for us, and it was more or less normal. The guys fixed it up so we could wash. There was no electricity for some time so we connected a generator. Everything was fine.

It was much harder with everyday life in Zaporizhzhia. The best was at the Zaporizhzhia airport. There was only a danger of rocket strikes. But there we had rooms on the second floor, two or three of us lived in them, we could wash, cook and relax. It was more difficult when we were leaving for a mission and had to stay there for two or three days.

We were on mission in the Dnipropetrovs'k region, in Raipol for two weeks. There were women who cooked for us, laid the table. Volunteers brought them food and they cooked especially for the military. We feasted there. We slept in the school on mats in sleeping bags. But how they fed us! When we went on a mission, the women would pack us with food: sausages, meat, cheese, cucumbers, tomatoes. When we arrived in time for lunch, the first courses were already waiting for us – borscht, soups and all kinds of other good food. And when we left, everything became much worse... We were no longer able to drive to the airport to spend the night, and it became harder to get food. It was far from shops, everything was shot up. We ate canned food, lived in cellars because of the constant rocket strikes. But we survived, we didn't even get sick. And when the counteroffensive began, it became fun!

Thank God, everyone survived.



SERHII, 29 years old

Awarded the medal "For Military Service to Ukraine"

Of course, I remember my first combat experience. The first time I went east with my detachment to Kramatorsk in 2020. It was in the summer. Our task consisted of inspecting anti-tank minefields: checking fuses for integrity, replacing unusable mines with new ones, and there was plenty of work to do. This was all before the full-scale war, when it was called the Joint Forces Operation. We stayed there for 4 months, performing tasks in accordance with operational orders. And we arrived at the unit before the New Year in December.

The first memorable thing was Bakhmut in 2020. We went there to inspect minefields. We could already feel the real breath of war there. I saw destroyed buildings and craters on the road. That's where we were working.

I was struck by the fact that everything there was not like here. It was unclear whether these were cities or villages, neither cities nor villages. It seemed that time had stopped there 20 years ago. I saw lines at the grocery store when we drove by without stopping. It was unusual for me.

The full-scale war caught me at the point of permanent deployment. The commander called because all the military were immediately put on alert. I arrived at the unit, there was a forming-up. We were supposed to go to Kyiv but the plans changed. Another group was deployed to Kyiv and we stayed here as a reserve unit, and then in April it was our turn to go on rotation. We left for the east on April 4 and worked as sappers there. We were based in Novotroitske and went on missions from there. My group was assigned to one of the tank brigades and we were at their disposal. That village was called Barvinkove, just below Izium, Kharkiv region. The village was not under occupation, it remained ours, Ukrainian. But it had already been shelled, there were a lot of air raids and artillery attacks. It was dangerous to work there. Once we came under fire.

The tasks were different: mining the area, laying mines, preparing bridges and dams for destruction, replacing destroyed and damaged systems. In order to prepetate the facilities for destruction we had to work every day for about a week or two. We stayed in Barvinkove for a month and a half.

If we compare participation in the Joint Forces Operation (JFO) and a full-scale war, it is completely different. When we were in the JFO in 2020 we did not hear any explosions during the entire four months of our deployment, except for the sounds of explosive ordnance disposal. Although we also travelled to different areas and carried out tasks there. At that time, everything was relatively calm – a ceasefire was introduced and it was forbidden to shoot. During a full-scale war everything was different.

I cannot say that the situation was unpredictable. We knew where we were going, we were given a task in advance, we knew what kind of work we were going to do. But there was always a danger of incoming strikes at any time, and there were strikes very close to us. There were no casualties in my squad, thank God, but there was destruction of infrastructure. One of our soldiers was wounded,

he was in the second group. He was immediately hospitalized, his wound was serious and he was treated for a long time.

We had some options for accommodation. At first, we were accommodated in a school in the village of Dmytrokolyne together with the unit we were assigned to. Then we decided that it was not safe, the school was a large building. So we moved to a village called Oleksandrivka. A local resident helped us with housing – he let us stay at his parents' house. I did not know him at all, and then we became friends, his name was Oleh. Actually, I was impressed by the meeting with this man, who saw us for the first time but did not hesitate to offer us housing: please, live here. I was also impressed by the fact that everyone around me rallied and started helping the military.

We had a good life there, good living conditions, a shower which is important. We can say that we were very lucky with our housing. Every morning we went on missions, returned in the evening, spent the night and so on every day.

We could eat in the school canteen but in the best situation we would cook our own meals. That's what we did. We would come back after completing our tasks and cook dinner. There were good conditions for cooking. We cooked whatever we wanted for the five of us. For example, potatoes. We had all the food we needed.

What was the mood of the local population?

We were told that the majority did not support or like the Armed Forces of Ukraine. The man who helped us with housing in Oleksandrivka comes from this village (he was the member of Territorial Defense Forces); he said that a lot of people were against the Armed Forces. And imagine that during a full-scale war! The village was not occupied. The enemy did not reach Barvinkove either, they were planning an offensive, but due to the minefields the territories were saved.

Most of the locals spoke Russian and Ukrainian and could only be heard here and there. There were very few people in the village, most of them had left. Mostly those who supported Ukraine left the village. Those who stayed were waiting. We did not communicate with them. They didn't shout at us and we didn't hear any bad wishes. However, I say that we mostly talked to the person who helped us, Oleh from Oleksandrivka. This man is the most memorable and we still communicate with him. For security reasons, I'm not going to mention his last name. He is a local, 43-45 years old, his family (parents, wife, child) left. At that time he was left there alone. Recently, I talked to him and found out that his family has already returned. They are all together now, parents and children.

What events are the most memorable?

We could hear shelling all the time, day and night not far from here. Our fighter jets were in action. There was no day without rocket strikes and fire. Izium was 47 kilometers away. I remember that there was nothing left of the administrative building in Oleksandrivka. I remember working in one of the National Guard units. A rocket hit about 10 meters away from their positions. Thank God, no one was hurt, everyone survived. They were lucky, though one soldier was still injured. But compared to what could have happened, it was nothing. These are the stories from the war... Sometimes you wonder how the guys survived. We were laying mines at this position two days before this rocket strike. If we had been there at that time, I don't know what would have happened to us.

We returned from Kharkiv region to our permanent location and stayed there for two months. Then we went to Kyiv. At that time, Russian army had left the Kyiv region and there were no more hostilities. We stayed in the Kyiv region for two months, worked

in Chernobyl, Prypiat, closer to the north, to the border with Belarus. Chernobyl is a very specific place and until now I thought that people didn't live there at all but as I saw they do live in Chernobyl. There is, however, no one in Prypiat. We were mining the area, road junctions, roads and prepared the bridges for destruction. We were stationed near Kyiv, in the village of Liutizh. From there, every morning we drove 3 hours in one direction and 3 hours back, 300 kilometers each way. Every day we were on the road and tasks...

We hardly communicated with the locals because we were mostly in the fields. We worked almost at the border, there were posts that separated Ukraine from belarus. We were clearing mines there. Sometimes it happened that we had to walk five kilometers in one direction with mines. It's physically hard to carry mines so far. A mine weighs about 10 kg and we carried two or three at a time. It was not easy because we also had weapon and military equipment. And sometimes we were lucky and could drive to the task place.

We monitored the radiation level. For this purpose each of us had dosimeter which we handed in upon return and received a certificate with the radiation level in return. There were no excesses of the norm.

We worked in the famous Red Forest, where the muscovites were digging. We saw their positions, where they were based. By that time, there were no traces of their crimes because our military had come before us. But we could not stay there for long. In the morning we quickly completed the task where the radiation was high and immediately left. There were abandoned villages around, everything was overgrown with forest... We saw a lot of wild animals – elk, roe deer, deer, foxes, hares and they are were in danger there.

There was an impression of apocalypse, especially in Prypiat. Everything was overgrown with trees; nine-story buildings were destroyed around. The trees have grown as tall as high-rise buildings.

Every day we drove by the station. People worked there but we did not communicate with them. Everything is the same as here: people drive cars, work as civilians but all wear special uniforms. Entries and exits were only at checkpoints and there were a lot of checkpoints on the road. But everyone there already knew us and we were hardly ever stopped or checked.

Were you scared?

It is not for nothing that people say that only a fool is not afraid. Of course, it was scary under fire. But what can you do, this is war and everyone here must understand that we have a task to accomplish. You don't run away but you are worried. You worry about people and about yourself. It was when the bridge was being mined that we heard enemy artillery 500-700 meters away. One artillery strike and then a few more a little closer to us and then exploded farther away from the place where we had managed to do the work. We tried to work as fast as we could to finish the task and leave. You get used to everything, even to war and explosions.

But definitely the enemy should not be underestimated. The russians are cunning, they make ambushes. We must always be careful with them.

After completing the task we returned to our base. There we had a rest. We washed, had dinner and communicated. In the evening we planned the next day, discussed who would do what, how long it would take and what things to take with us. There were days when we didn't want to do anything so we just washed up and went to bed. The working day varied, usually we left at eight sometimes earlier and returned when it was already dark.

Of course, we always found time to talk to our families. Unless there was no connection, then you couldn't call. But otherwise, of course, we always had five minutes to ask how they were doing.

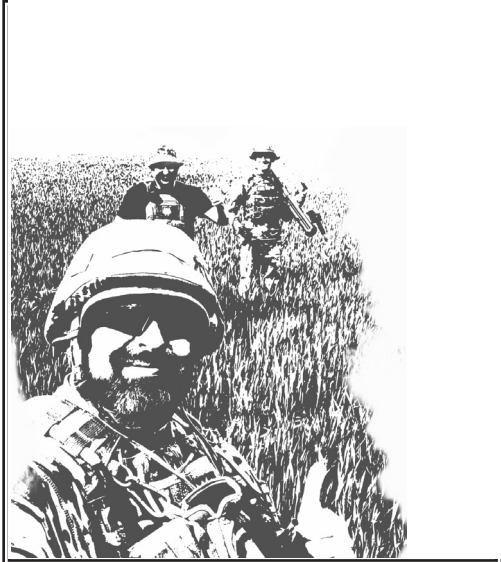
We felt the support of volunteers and caring Ukrainians. Before the departure, the volunteers provided us with sleeping bags and food. I remember how we were traveling in a convoy to the east and some unknown man caught up with us, pulled two large bags of sausage out of his car and gave it to us. He said: "I know you are going there.» This was back in the Khmelnytskyi region. We also stopped at a store and the women sellers came out and gave us various canned goods. Stories like this touch even the war-hardened hearts of soldiers.

Did you take any trophies?

No, I didn't take anything, it was disgusting. On the way, I came across wrappers from rations left by muscovites, they were dirty, torn, in the mud and I didn't even want to touch them. Why would I take them? It was disgusting!

I also saw in Prypiat toilets left by muscovites lying in the forest. They threw them away when they retreated and they were lying on the road. They stole them, couldn't carry them anymore and threw them away.

In general, while performing combat missions, I managed to gain invaluable life experience, to come face to face with evil and at the same time to meet people who believe in goodness and do good deeds despite the circumstances, and who want to live in a peaceful and victorious Ukraine. I was lucky enough to experience the true male friendship of my comrades.



MYKOLA, 40 years old

Awarded the medal "For Military Service to Ukraine"

***What motivated you to join the military
and how did you start your military career?***

– Before joining the military, I worked abroad for a long time. I returned to Ukraine in 2015. There were many soldiers among my friends who were already fighting on the eastern front. Their decision encouraged me to choose the military profession. I voluntarily went to the military enlistment office and was drafted into the Armed Forces for contract service. However, eighteen years ago, after graduating from high school I tried to enter a military institute. However, during the entrance exams I failed to appear for the last exam and, of course, was not enrolled. There were no military men in my family, except for my grandfather Mykola who fought during World War II and was an artilleryman. He told me various military stories, which fascinated and inspired me.

What was your first combat experience?

– I gained my first combat experience in 2016 at the Svitlodarsk Bulge. I served in the 48th Engineer Brigade. Our team was attached

to mobile engineer obstacles detachment, we worked as sappers, we laid minefields by means of tracked minelayer (GMZ). We performed our tasks in the village of Vidrodzhennia, Donetsk region, fifteen kilometers from Popasna. During the withdrawal of troops or an offensive, our task was also to block the access routes for enemy vehicles with our vehicles. We did not have any direct contact with the enemy. However, there was one incident: there were troops in front of us, I don't remember which brigade and then suddenly a battle broke out so we had to pull the vehicles away from the fire as quickly as possible. We successfully completed the task. I do not consider it a combat experience. That was the first time we came under fire, the enemy attacked us with "Grad" rockets. Luckily, there were no injuries or traumas among our military.

I got my military specialty as a sapper in Starychi, took the relevant courses that gave me basic knowledge but I did not have much experience. I knew how to lay mines but I borrowed experience from my colleagues and was constantly increasing it. I did not hesitate to ask for advice.

Our unit performed combat missions in the area of Soledar and Novyi Aidar. In the village of Vidrodzhennia, we were dealing with anti-tank mines of the TM series which were not difficult to lay and remove as they are the easiest mines to use. At first, it was psychologically difficult, we wanted to go home, it was hard to get used to a new team, we tried to get along with each other. But everything fell into place soon, everyone knew his responsibilities, there was cohesion and understanding between the guys. However, we did not know what to expect from the local population, they could always give us a hard time. They did not like us and we did not try to love them. Although not everyone there was like that. One man named Kolya, I don't know his last name, helped the military in every possible way. He was the head of a railway junction. He distributed the Internet from his house, provided us with the electricity and helped to solve the communication issues. He helped us with materials,

tools and welding. He also provided us with water and solved our various household issues.

We tried to help the elderly in every way possible. There was enough food, the supply was good. We gave foodstuff to the old people. And they wanted to thank us too – they cooked food and even baked pies.

However, there were people among the locals who were openly hostile to the Ukrainian Armed Forces. A neighbor came and asked us why we had come here, he told that they were not expecting us, that they were “originally for russia”. He openly threatened us: “I’m going to call my brother and he will adjust the artillery fire on your house”. After that, we “educated” that bastard a bit and he never came to us again and others were afraid to. Another neighbor’s son was an alcoholic, he beat his mother and took her pension away. We had to explain him that he shouldn’t do that and since then that unfortunate woman hasn’t complained about him anymore. Somewhere, something got through to someone. We had to show these scumbags with anti-Ukrainian sentiments that we are the masters of our land.

We were almost constantly under fire. Two or three times a week we were attacked. The neighboring fields were mined by the katsaps. If the enemy broke through the defense, the sappers had to immediately close this breakthrough, mine the areas so that they could not advance further. The defense line ran along Svitlodarsk and Popasna, it was all one line. Our soldiers were pushing the enemy back, the orcs were already retreating and there were fierce battles. The Ukrainian Armed Forces drove them away from our borders.

The first rotation lasted four months. After completing the task, we returned home and two months later I went on the longest rotation which lasted eight months.

Tell us about your second rotation.

– In my second rotation, I performed the same tasks at the Svitlodarsk bulge. At that time, I had already transferred from an engineer battalion and served in a Demining center. Here, the rotations were organized a little differently. As in the previous deployment, our points of deployment were Svitlodar and Novyi Aidar. We cooperated with the 59th, 54th and 24th Brigades. We placed engineer obstacles and constructed platoon strongholds.

Other rotations lasted up to a month, so roughly speaking, I was on rotations for 8-9 months a year. The second, third, you won't remember each one, I had a total of four years of service in the ATO only. Today I can't remember which one was first, second or third in chronology. During all this time, I traveled all over Luhansk and Donetsk regions, where I mined and cleared the area. I know those forests, fields and trails better than I do in Khmelnytskyi region. I had to work in the settlements of Novoaydar, Muratove, Stanytsia Luhanska, Kurakhove, Krasnohorivka, Maryinka, Novomykhailivka, Avdiivka. We could be redeployed to different localities in one rotation. The command set one task – we accomplished it and immediately started the next one.

I mean, all these points are so interconnected that in each rotation you return to the place you have already been, starting from 2016. At first, we mined the territories and then began to clear them. The most experienced sappers were ours, from the Demining center. All the headquarters needed the help of highly qualified sapper specialists from our unit. We were called to the places where the heaviest fighting was going on. That's why we were constantly working in the same settlements. In small villages, we worked in the "gray zone", sometimes 150-200 meters from the enemy. To prevent them from coming up to adjust fire on our positions, we would approach and do our job.

What are some particularly memorable moments of your service at the Demining Center?

– When I was transferred to the Demining Center, as pilots say, it was aerobatics. At first, it seemed like I was serving in a NATO country. The training, support and qualifications of the people were at the highest level. I was exposed to the latest robots, bomb suits and the latest search equipment in sapper business. We can talk about this a lot because the provision and communication of all resources were at a very high level, just like abroad. That's why it was easy and interesting to work. I was at the position of a technician of demining detachment. My responsibilities were to ensure that the equipment and robots were in good condition; everything related to technical equipment was on my shoulders.

Where did you go on rotations from the Demining Center?

– In December 2019 our base was stationed in Kramatorsk, Donetsk region. We went on missions according to operational orders. We moved within three or four hundred kilometers from the place of temporary deployment. We carried out tasks along the entire front line, from Muratov to Mariupol. The rotation lasted 4-5 months and we operated in different places. We helped many brigades to consolidate at platoon strongholds. We cooperated with the 59th, 54th, 25th, 28th, 95th, 92nd, 91st and 93rd Brigades, let's just say, with everyone who needed our support. It is impossible to recall exactly all the settlements where we worked. You need to take a map of Ukraine, separate Donetsk and Luhansk regions, mark the places where the fighting took place and then it will become clear where we were. And we were everywhere – in every place, near every tree.

What do you remember the most?

– When you have a lot of rotations, events and specific episodes – emotions fade away. It's a bit like the work of a programmer. Your

brain becomes dull and you work clearly only on fulfilling your tasks – mining, clearing mines, but there is no memorable thing. The most memorable part of each rotation is the rest and when we get together in our free time. Such moments are especially memorable and important for the team's well-coordinated work. On weekends and birthdays we used to barbecue, socialize and discuss the scope of the tasks performed. Just like in peaceful civilian life. Leisure is leisure, and all the guys got up, rolled up their sleeves and cooked. The menu included the usual food of an Ukrainian – lard, homemade potatoes, barbecue. On the day off, we would let us sit on the summer terrace and drink beer. God love the truth, we are not seventeen years old and not all of us eat cakes. But everything should be in moderation, and reasonable leisure is mentally relaxing. Four months in a rotation is a long time for a sapper. Fear disappears, only skills remain. You start treating mines like iron. The first months you work very carefully and then the fear disappears and you do not consider mines to be something out of the ordinary. It's just a normal, everyday job for you. You check everything as you should, you have areas of responsibility but you lose your fear of explosives. You should not do it as it's not a toy, it doesn't forgive laxity. As practice shows, many people lose their arms and legs due to careless handling of ammunition. Under no circumstances should you let your vigilance down. This is war.

How did the full-scale war begin for you?

– I woke up at night because the dog was barking loudly. I got up, looked at the light on, my wife was in the kitchen. I heard her crying. I asked her what happened. She was in tears: the war had started. I immediately started watching the news: the information was true. I called my friends in Desna, they said they were under fire. At the same time, I received a text message from the head of the Demining center about an urgent meeting in the unit, and it was emphasized: be ready to leave at six.

Our unit was preparing for a scheduled rotation. Two or three weeks before the war started, our vehicles were already equipped and our belongings were loaded but we did not know the specific date of departure. At six in the morning, after receiving instructions, the groups departed for Kyiv to defend the capital. Our guys left on February 24, and I joined them ten days later. I was waiting for a car. And as soon as I received a new Hummer, I immediately went to my unit which was stationed in Brovary at that time. I stayed there for one day and then I received the order to move to the place of temporary deployment in the village of Hoholeve.

We stayed in Hoholeve from March 8 to 30. We were assigned to a Separate Mechanized brigade named after the Black Cossacks. We carried out the tasks in cooperation with them. Our duties included strictly mining the territories to prevent the enemy from reaching Brovary. We have not yet participated in the enemy's assaults. Kyiv was almost surrounded by the enemy. Our brigade was in the enemy's semi-ring. Brovary and Hoholove were under constant artillery fire every day.

On March 30, when the orcs' columns began to retreat, we were tasked as part of the second battalion of the Brigade to reach the enemy column that was retreating towards Konotop, to inflict fire on it and retreat. We were moving, there were not many of us, about 150 people, three tanks, a couple of armored personnel carriers, trucks and two grenade launchers. We reached Konotop and from there we turned in the direction of Sumy. We moved only at night, it was difficult to move, the road signs were removed for safety reasons. We stopped in villages, slept in elevators and cars. That's how we made it to Sumy.

We mined bridges, railways and roads in Sumy. We also mined canyons, if it was possible for our vehicles to reach it. We carried out missions near the russian border in the area of the village of Tiotkino, Kursk region. I remember there was a sugar factory there. We were tasked with destroying a large railway bridge that allowed

the Russian Federation to advance towards Bilopillia and move further into the Kharkiv region. We made calculations and realized that a powerful explosion could damage houses on the Ukrainian side. We could have drawn fire on ourselves with this explosion. We figured out what to do in this situation. We found four scrap cutting specialists and in order not to blow up the bridge with explosives, we agreed that they would cut it with cutters. After two days of work they left the bridge. There hadn't been any large-scale shelling in the area of Bilopillia yet. After enemy columns left it was relatively quiet. The katsaps had not yet recovered from their losses and fled under the onslaught of the Armed Forces. When Kyiv was recaptured, they fled through Ichnia and we attacked them fiercely. In the Konotop area, unable to withstand the pressure, they fled across the border.

Having finished laying mines in Sumy region, we moved to Kharkiv region. In those places, we saw a large scale of destruction of enemy columns. In the village of Skovorodynivka, Zolochiv district, there was a beautiful museum of Hryhorii Skovoroda. In our presence, the katsaps shot it down. They hit it with a rocket. However, the fire was intended for us.

The soldiers were stationed in Skovorodynivka and lived in a local school, a hundred meters from the museum. Not far from Kharkiv, the road ran through Zolochiv to the village of Kozacha Lopan. We were tasked with taking this village by storm. Under the order, we stormed Kozacha Lopan. Intelligence reported that there were no large enemy forces in the area of Kozacha Lopan. While we were going there, the enemy was already waiting for us, the locals informed them. And as soon as we entered Kozacha Lopan, the area was closed and serious shelling began. They were bombing us for about forty minutes. We lost more than twenty comrades in that battle, seven were missing, about thirty were wounded. We also lost tanks and infantry fighting vehicles. It was the first time that we suffered a serious defeat:

intelligence did not work properly, our equipment was broken. The assault on Kozacha Lopan was thwarted. This settlement was well covered but we were attacked by "Grad" rockets from across the border, artillery was firing from both sides; there was crossfire, two K-52 "Black Shark" helicopters and a Su-27 helicopter were in action. It was unrealistic to resist such enemy strength.

***Your story will be especially valuable for
researchers of Ukrainian literature.***

***Do you remember anything else about
the destroyed Skovoroda Museum?***

– We used to visit the museum in our free time. The village of Skovorodynivka is beautiful, located in a lowland and Skovoroda Museum is its highlight. There is a lake and a magnificent well-kept park. When we were in the village, the museum was still intact. It is quite possible that when the enemy stormed Lopan, they wanted to adjust their fire on the military stationed in Skovorodynivka. Ukrainian troops were stationed in a school 100 meters from the museum. The events took place just before Easter. Easter 2022 fell on April 24. And on Thursday, April 21, there was an assault on Lopan, which was unsuccessful for the Ukrainian military. After the assault, we retreated back to Skovorodynivka. The commander decided to move to the village of Kozache, which is nearby. The 72nd Brigade was moved to another location while we stayed in the village. A missile hit the Skovoroda Museum on the day when Easter was celebrated. The katsaps were monitoring everything that was happening around them with their "Orlanes", tracking where the convoy was going. They wanted to hit the school but hit the museum. They did not take into account that the missile has an error of up to 300 meters, they could have confused something over a large area. As soon as the Ukrainian military left the village, the missile hit the Skovoroda Museum. We realized that the enemy was aiming at us.

We stormed Saltivka, participated in the liberation of Tsyrkuny, Ruska Lozova, Cherkaska Lozova. We demined territories, entered

the enemy's rear and brought in special forces groups. The tasks were very serious, we participated in direct battles with the enemy. But I will tell you more about this later.

***What crimes did you see russians commit
in the liberated territories?***

– We could not see any direct crimes because the Kharkiv region was still being liberated from the occupier. There were direct battles so only those who came to our positions when the enemy was pushed back could talk about russian crimes. Other specialists worked in the liberated territories, they found and excavated burial grounds, identified bodies. We were no longer there, we moved on. We entered the liberated villages, cleared the roads, paths and approaches. We saw burnt houses, traces of enemy looting. We had to remove the corpses of civilians from tripwires. It was hard to say whether the orcs killed them or whether they were blown up on mines by themselves. We did various, very difficult jobs.

There were many civilian casualties in the Kyiv region, particularly in Bucha and Irpin. muscovites committed serious crimes against civilians. We were located near Brovary where the artillery and aviation were in action. We saw broken houses, significant destruction of civilian infrastructure. The local population was often blown up on mines. These territories were heavily mined. In order not to be occupied, people left their homes with the enemy's advance, tried to escape and fell into mine traps. They had to leave in the evening, travel by field roads and take untested routes, which was very dangerous. There were explosions with fatal consequences. And there was no way to direct or explain the ways out – there were active hostilities.

Did you communicate with the locals?

– The entire population in Kyiv is pro-Ukrainian and it is a pleasure to communicate with them. They helped us in every

way they could. Volunteers delivered plenty of food. From Kyiv to Kharkiv, everyone helped us, our people are very kind. But it was not like that in Kharkiv. I have never liked this city. Now, because of the war, Kharkiv residents have begun to turn to Ukraine but before they were mostly pro-russian. We found Kharkiv, a city of a million people, empty, with no one anywhere. It was like an abandoned village, with no one but the military. It's scary, the city was dead...

Just imagine, Kyiv is the capital of Ukraine, and half of the population is russian-speaking. Until they get hurt with hard times, they did remember their language and love Ukraine. They fled Kyiv, and when everything calmed down, they returned to the capital and continued to rock. They have fun in cafes and bars and continue to speak russian. I'm not selfish, I've seen a lot during the war. I have developed a certain immunity to Ukraine-haters, to those who profess the principle of "what's the difference". I have no pity for them. I feel sorry for my comrades whom I lost, for my friends who died. These are patriots, I feel sorry for them. I pity their families, I pity the children who lost their parents because of the war. I don't feel sorry for those who live in Ukraine against Ukraine. There is no pity for them. There are still many who speak russian because it is so convenient for them... These are people who are lost for Ukraine and it is very difficult to win a war with them. This is the internal enemy and it is especially dangerous.

***Do you remember any moments
when it was particularly hard?***

– It was not hard, but at some moments it was very scary. It was scary under fire, when we were attacked by the aircraft and mortars. This happened almost every day, it is difficult to single out a particular case. I was afraid when I took teams out on

missions in a Hummer and did not know if everyone would return. I have always had a great responsibility and obligation: I have people with me who need to be gathered and delivered to the place from which I brought them. I was afraid that for various reasons we would not be able to leave the area of operations. I realized the danger when I was already in a safe place. Then you start filtering the events, imagining what could have happened and that's when it gets really scary. But in the situation itself, when everything is shattering, there is no fear. At that time, the adrenaline kicks in, you think, you reason, you decide what to do and how to do it. When you are under fire, when you come into direct contact with the enemy, there is no fear, you do everything you can. And when you come back, the adrenaline is gone, you've exhaled the situation, smoked a cigarette or had a cup of tea and then it hits your brain that it could have been "the end". Then it becomes scary. In a full-scale war, every day is like that: there are air raids, bombs, "Grad" rockets... You live every day in such conditions.

The brotherhood and support of friends saved me. I regained my strength while communicating with my colleagues, they became my family. Sleep is of great importance too because when you get enough sleep at night, your body recovers and you can take on any task. There were times when we did not even eat because we had to clear the ways for combat groups during their assault. In the forests, we were being watched by "quadropters" and "Orlans» - we could not go to the toilet. We had only water with us, we deliberately took loperamide to avoid going to the toilet, tried not to eat as much as possible, except for a protein bar. A minimum of movement, the main thing was to keep up with the group. During the mission, a Special Forces group would be sent in, maybe seventy of them, no one would wait for you. We deliberately did different procedures in order not to be distracted, but to operate in such a way as not to set anyone up.

What saved you in the war?

– Helmet, body armor, weapon. And if it was something internal, higher, it was God. As for me, I believe in God, but I don't go to church. Since 2016, when I started my military service, I became convinced that there is a higher power that protects me. I also believe in myself and the mutual support of my friends and family. Some guys wear talismans as amulets, some have a knife, a cross and some have a calendar. For each of them, their own special sign has a certain symbolic meaning. I always carry a multitool with me, it is my talisman. I usually use other tools, I've never cut with it but I carry it with me. I always have "Odin" patch, the symbol of a warrior in Scandinavian culture and I love this style because it represents wisdom and devotion, so I believe in its power.



DENYS, 31 years old

What motivated you to join the military?

– I have been on my military career path since 2020. First, I have always been interested in the profession of sapper, and secondly, I was motivated by the social protection of the military, a decent salary and a proper military pension. I am a veterinarian by profession, I graduated from Podilskyi State Agrarian University with a degree in Veterinary Medicine. For two years I did my internship abroad in Norway. For some time I worked as a veterinarian at a farm in the village of Makiv, then still in the Dunayevtsi district. I did an internship in the United States for six months. And... I decided to change my occupation drastically. However, I have no regrets about my current choice. Being a military man, a sapper, is much more interesting to me.

I come from a military dynasty, my maternal grandfather was an officer, now deceased, who served in the city of Dunayivtsi in the missile forces and retired here. I don't remember him, I know him only from photographs. My grandmother was always talking about him and somewhere it stuck in my memory, perhaps his experience

and example encouraged me to change my profession. My father was mobilized and we serve in the same unit.

What was your first combat experience like?

– A month later after basic military training and sapper course I went to the city of Kalynivka, Vinnytsia region, to clean up the area after the explosion of military ammunition depots. I participated in the elimination of the consequences of this accident. Our group cleared the territories of mines, collected and destroyed artillery ammunition scattered after the explosions. The main task was to clear the territory. It was necessary to collect the ammunition, take it to a disposal site and destroy it. This is a routine but extremely necessary job. You search, dig up explosive items, carry them, stack them, transport them, place explosive charges and detonate them. This lasted for two or three months. The ammunition had to be destroyed, it was damaged, burnt and unusable. The damaged area was divided into squares and each square was assigned to a group. A group of sappers divided the boundaries of this square by coordinates and made passages. Each sapper got his own passage and started working.

Tell us about your next rotation.

– I went on my next rotation in 2022 when the full-scale war started. On February 24, several pre-trained sapper groups left the Demining center in the direction of Kyiv. I was not one of them. While the guys were defending the capital, I and the commander of the demining group in our city responded to panic calls from citizens and checked facilities that were suspicious or of concern. We had to check the trophy russian equipment for explosive devices. This equipment was delivered to the plant, repaired, restored and then sent to the front. We were checking self-propelled artillery systems, T-72, T-83, T-64, MTLB tanks. We had a dog handler with us, and the dog sniffed the equipment and helped us to search for explosive objects. The dog did the dog's job but the sapper had to

get into each compartment, climb inside, check everything under the seat to see if there were any anti-handling devices. During the entire period, not a single explosive object was found, but this work was extremely necessary and important. We worked for up to a month. Three or four sappers with a dog handler were sent to the such a task.

***I know you were engaged in clearing
the Kyiv region, what were your tasks?***

In March and April, we worked on a large area near Bucha, Borodyanka, Makariv, clearing and demining the consequences of the enemy occupation. We lived in Kyiv on the territory of the military unit to which we were assigned. Every evening we received a combat order and the next day we went to the area to be cleared. We were going to different cities – Makariv, Bucha, Borodyanka, Irpin, Severynivka. We mostly checked houses and apartments.

We were clearing a military hospital for almost three weeks in Irpin. At first, our positions were located there, then the orcs captured it. There was enough work to do. The enemy left a large amount of ammunition in and around the hospital. Traces of their looting were visible everywhere. They stole a lot of office equipment, expensive equipment worth millions. And they didn't take what they didn't understand. We talked to doctors and they said that if they were a little smarter, they would have taken the MRI, but since they were not smart, they stole computers. There was no such thing as everything being smashed. I remember the mess, I've never seen anything like it in my life. Everything was trashed from the first to the fourth floor of the nine-story hospital building. The worst was from the first to the third floor. Buryats and residents of the Far East lived there. They ate and defecated at the same place. They slept in the corridors, not in the wards, because they were afraid of rocket strikes. Their mattresses were lying on the floor, there was a chair next to the mattress, cookies on the chair, dry rations scattered, leftovers, half-drunk bottles of elite alcohol and faeces right near the comrade's

badhead. This was the scene from the first to the third floor. It was more or less «civilized» on the fourth floor where the paratroopers of the Pskov division, "Europeans", lived. At least they didn't defecate under each other's very nose.

The medical staff and the chief doctor were under occupation all this time. When the orcs came in, they were forced to cooperate with them. They all refused, categorically refused to treat the enemy. They were kept in basements for a long time. I don't know how they escaped: whether the russians let them go or they escaped themselves. Their act is worthy of respect.

I saw looting in private apartments. Even where it was possible not to destroy something, they destroyed everything. They destroyed it out of spite. All the doors were broken down, everything was scattered, pillows and sofas were cut up. They were looking for stashes where jewelry or money might have been hidden. I saw a lot of civilian cars shot up. The bodies of the dead had already been removed when we arrived there. There were dried blood stains on the windows and seats of the smashed cars. The muscovites were deliberately killing defenseless civilians.

The orcs also harmed our military colleague's house, an officer I served with in the Demining center. He comes from the town of Makariv, which is located near the Zhytomyr highway, not far from Kyiv. In the first days of occupation, he took his family and left the capital; he left his wife and child at safe place and mobilized to the Demining center. When we were working in Kyiv region, we visited his house, checking the house and the surrounding area for explosive devices and traps. The Buryats caused significant material damage to his house. They turned the house into a mess, destroyed a very nice renovation. Just for fun, they shot through the refrigerator and dishwasher. It was obvious that it was not due to the rocket attack as the walls were intact but there was a hole in the refrigerator and not just one. The two-meter speakers in the corners of the room, which I understand to be some kind of speaker system, were broken. russians

put a grill in the middle of the central room, whether they were warming themselves or cooking food, it was hard to understand. You can only imagine this picture. All the rooms were turned upside down, even the children's room, with broken tablets and toys lying around. They didn't take valuables, maybe they had already stolen a lot of them, they just brazenly destroyed everything. They forced a neighbor who lived nearby to let them live in his house. He did not let them in. For this, they broke his hands and fingers. He was lucky not to be killed and survived.

***How did the civilian population
accept the military?***

– Oh, they were very happy and friendly everywhere. Especially in the Kyiv region. Children made improvised checkpoints and met Ukrainian soldiers at them. They stopped us with assault rifles made of wood, waved some sticks to make us stop and not pass by. They dressed in our pixel military uniform, they found tactical vests somewhere, some helmets, and put everything on. It was pretty cool. We were constantly carrying sweets and chocolates with us, stopping to give them to the children and thanking them for their support. And if there was no candy, we gave them two hundred hryvnias to buy something for all their gang. Unfortunately, we did not take a picture with them.

The village of Severinovka is quite affluent and is located not far from Kyiv. It's Europe in Ukraine, with its own spas, gyms, lake, swimming pools. People told me that when the katsaps entered it, they destroyed everything. There was a huge fleet of ATVs in the village, and trails in the forests were specially designed for riding. So they stole everything and just burned it in the forest. Apparently, they burned out of anger because they realized that they would not be able to stay in the Kyiv region for long. In the places where we worked, we could see how quickly they were leaving. They had a special equipment with them to clear the forest and uproot the trees. They cleared a large area, built caponiers for storing military equipment

and thought they would stay here for a long time. However, they fled the area very quickly. They left a lot of ammunition and a lot of broken equipment. They were given a good thrashing by our troops near Kyiv.

What was special about your rotation to the Donetsk region?

– I was in the Donetsk region from June to August. We worked not far from Novotroitske (there are two of them, the one closer to Dnipropetrovs'k region). I was a Hummer driver in that rotation but I didn't drive it for the first month. The command forbade us to drive military vehicles. Enemy drones were flying everywhere, so for security reasons, we were allowed to travel only in civilian cars. We lived in Novotroitske and worked in two separate groups. My group was tasked with mining villages near Bakhmut and we needed an armored vehicle because we were working close to the enemy. There was a possibility of rocket attacks, the enemy repeatedly shelled our positions. We mined the area near Zaitseve mostly at night. We carried out reconnaissance, developed plans, maps, developed a plan A and plan B in a particular situation. We determined how to enter, lay mines and exit. It was difficult because it was at night. We had to drive in such a way as not to be exposed to fire and in no case could we turn on the headlights. The enemy was at a distance of assault rifle shot. The first trip was successful. We arrived at the mission at three in the morning. We heard an enemy drone flying in the sky above us (it has a characteristic sound of a moped or scooter). We hid in the wooded area and waited it out. They did not notice us. We started working. There were vehicles and a machine gunner who covered us. But, as it turned out, the vehicles were spotted. Mortar shelling started. The first mortar struck at about 200 meters, then closer and closer. Special Operation Forces member came running and shouted that we should move the vehicles out of the positions because the enemy can attack us. We moved to another place and they started shelling. We moved to the village which was located

fairly far from the enemy. Their mortars were no longer reaching us. Only then we calmed down, sitting and waiting for a message from our guys on the radio that the work was over. There was no communication with them because they were working quite close to the enemy. We were not allowed to get on the radio to avoid them being spotted. So we were waiting for their message. About an hour and a half later, they got in touch, said that the work was finished, we picked them up and returned back safely.

The second time, everything turned out much better. We arrived much later than last time. Back then, we started the task in the dark and finished when it was just getting dark. This time, the local guide was delayed by just an hour and we started working when it was already getting dark. Our guys placed obstacles and covered our units. And on the way out, one of the groups came into contact with the enemy and a firefight started. Frankly speaking, we are not bad specialists: we instantly practiced the tactics of retreat and withdrew very competently. We moved behind the wooded area but continued to fight. Our cover rushed to help us. Special Forces arrived and fired a whole box of forty-millimeter grenades at them. And silence..., they suppressed them with fire. We jumped into the vehicles, holding on to what we could and left in a hurry. On the way we were attacked with mortars, quite precisely, mortars struck everywhere - in front of us, to our left, to our right, behind us. Thank God, we were not hit! It didn't matter! We got out of there safely. We hid behind a stele, under the cover of a gas station, somewhere at the entrance to Bakhmut. We hugged each other, sincerely thanked each other for the work we had done, thanked each other for leaving the battlefield without injury or loss.

***What is particularly memorable
from your next rotation?***

– My next rotation was in the Donetsk region. At first, it was not clear where we were going to: Donetsk or Kharkiv region. Our group

was assigned to the village of Dolyna, Donetsk region. There were bloody battles for it and there was a contact line for a long time.

We were clearing the area of explosive ordnance. Over two months we cleared a very large amount of ammunition: more than 4000 mines and this is only anti-tank mines, a significant number of unexploded or unused anti-personnel mines and artillery rounds. Every day it was the same, to a certain extent routine, work but so necessary and important! Every day, we were giving our one hundred and ten percent, detecting mines, removing and rendering them safe. Houses, fields, roads and sidewalks were contaminated with them. Mostly, we found conventional mines and tripwires and the enemy was somewhat clever while placing them. The tripwires were not placed in a standard way but up in the trees, then they go down, tangle in the grass and then up to the tree again. A person focuses on what is under their feet and may not notice the tripwire at chest level.

Looking at the completely destroyed but well built houses, many of them were 2-3 storeys high, it is hard to imagine that about a thousand people once lived here. Nowadays, you won't find a house with at least one wall left standing. The village will be completely demolished.

***You helped not only people but also animals
in difficult conditions. Tell us about it.***

– In fact, all the residents of Dolyna village left and many pets and domestic animals were abandoned. Everywhere in the village you could see dogs, cats, chickens, pigs, cows and goats. Cattle walked through the minefields and fields, unkempt and un milked. The dogs, having gathered in a pack, clung to the tractor station, where a few remained workers cared for them and fed them. The cats were in a bad way. After all, these animals are more attached to the place of residence than to the owner. Several times, volunteers came here and left feeders for them: dry food was poured into

the drainage pipe with a slope, which spilled down as the cats ate it. When we first came to this village, the cats approached us with fear and one by one. And then every morning we were greeted by a whole flock. Volunteers gave us food and we had something to feed them.

Over time, they got so used to us that they were constantly under our feet. We were placing the explosive charges and they kept getting into our hands, they missed people so much. That's why before the detonation we were catching all the cats, put them into the car, drove to a safe distance and after the detonation we let them go.

***They say you brought a cat back home
from the battlefield?***

– We were carried out missions in the village but every day we returned to the place of deployment – Sloviansk. We lived in a house there. And one day I saw Siechkin jumping into the car. We called him so because we found him on a street named after the Ukrainian composer and pianist Vitalii Siechkin. I kicked him out so that he wouldn't leave "surprise" in the car but he climbed in again. I pulled him out. But when he climbed into the Hummer for the third time and started hissing, I thought: "You can come with us if you want". He tolerated the trip well, he was sitting on my knees and everyone of us had fun. We settled him in the veranda. Instead of a litter box, we found a baking tray, poured sand in it and Seichkin never made a mess.

We took him to the vet because his leg was injured. The doctor examined him, prescribed medication and said that he was a domestic cat, sterilized and about a year old. It is likely that he suffered a mild concussion. Because when he wanted to scratch the leg of the table, he hit it with his head with all his might.

Siechkin is really cool. He doesn't meow even when he's hungry, instead he gently asks for food. When we were still in the east

and the four of us lived in a house, he had a night tour of the four beds at night. He would take turns sitting next to each of us, playing with all of us.

My brother's two young sons would call every day and ask first of all: "How is Siechkin?". One man wanted to take him to his place, even offered me 3000 hryvnias, but friendship is not for sale (smiles).

Now Siechkin is our countryman. He easily endured the 20-hour journey to our city. The cat likes dry and wet food the best. He likes to play with a laser flashlight, carries soft toys in his teeth and sharpens his claws. He can also sit at the window for hours and watch everything that happens on the street.

From a small, frightened and nondescript kitty, Sechkin has turned into a gorgeous cat with shiny fur and weighing 4.5 kilograms. His muzzle became as round as an owl's. His leg healed and the concussion disappeared. His character changed and now he is all mine. I went to visit my grandmother at Christmas and took him with me. He no longer walks on the beds, he sleeps next to me and follows me everywhere. I go to work in the morning and he goes to his, the cat's work. In the evening he waits for me at my parking place. I bought him a medallion with a QR code, which, when scanned, shows the owner's phone number and the cat's name. Several times I received calls saying that they found my cat and when I asked for the address, it turned out that he was always hanging around my house, not going far. He is smart and does not cause any problems. From the first second, he won the affection of my entire family.

– In general our guys managed to bring all the abandoned cats from the abandoned village to the city before the frost. Almost all of them were adopted by new families. And during another rotation near Bakhmut, the guys treated and cared for an abandoned old dog, which was handed over to another group that came to replace them.

If it were possible, they would have taken all the animals out of the hot spots. It was hard to see three goats that had been hit by a mine and came bleeding to their home yard to die. The military called the local elder and the wounded animals were given to the poor family for slaughter. Of course, they felt sorry for them. Here's the thing: animals may initiate a lot of ammunition and tripwires. If it were not for the goats, it could have been a civilian. It's good that it was a goat and not a local resident. In this case, the goats helped the sappers in their work.

Did you carry out any other missions in other rotations after the Donetsk region?

– I went to Kherson region for mine clearance in January. For two months I worked as part of a consolidated demining team. The Armed Forces had just liberated the right bank of the Kherson region. The katsaps left a lot of work for us, a lot of ammunition, completely different, even the kind I had never seen before. We found a PTKM-1R ammunition, which I had never seen before. According to Google, this is the most secret russian anti-tank mine, which has two target sensors, seismic and acoustic, and is aimed exclusively at destroying heavy vehicles. It does not work on humans. It is also unknown how it works on cars and I assume that it does not. The principle of operation of such a mine is that when heavy military vehicles approach, it determines the distance to the target and transfers into armed position. It "sees" the vehicle at a distance of 100 meters, "lets it approach" at 50 meters and fires a charge at the tank or armored personnel carrier turret at a distance of 50 meters. It looks like a POM-2 or POM-3, stands on cylindrical elongated legs and it is pointed up. It is a serious technological mine. To be honest, I did not believe that russians are capable of making such a thing, at first I thought that it was made in Germany or the United States. When I got closer, I realized that it was russian as I saw russian marking on it.

Kherson region is very contaminated with a large amount of ammunition. There are countless anti-tank and anti-personnel

mines like PMN, PMN-2, POM-2, POM-2R. We worked in different districts of the region, traveled all over it in two months, exploring a new settlement every day. There are a lot of settlements called Oleksandrivka – Velyka, Mala, just Oleksandrivka, which is closer to the Kinburn Spit, the southernmost point of the region. Starting from this settlement, we demined the right bank and reached Novokairove and further into the Kherson region.

How did the local population perceive the Ukrainian military in the Kherson region?

– Definitely, they were happy. People had no life during all this time. Having been under Russian occupation, they saw nothing good. We talked to farmers who told us about the occupiers' abuse of them. The katsaps did not allow them to sow the fields, saying that if they saw anyone in the field, they would shoot them without warning. Everything is stagnating, people have lost their jobs and businesses and are facing lawlessness and rudeness. At the checkpoints, 18 years old youngsters are addressing older people: "Hey, you, come in, come out, who are you?" And they consider this the norm. The citizens of Kherson saw nothing good from them and were sincerely glad to see us. They hope that the Ukrainian Armed Forces will soon push the Russians back and they believe in their imminent liberation.

Do you have any talismans that protect you?

– I do have a talisman and I value it immensely. It is a talisman given by my father – the hammer of Thor. In Scandinavian mythology it is associated with lightning and has a protective power. I have never taken it off, it's always with me, I don't take it off. My father specially ordered it from a local jeweler. It has an engraving of our coat of arms – the Trident. It is with me everywhere. I believe in its power, as well as in our victory.



DMYTRO, 28 years old

*Awarded the Order "For Courage", III class,
Medal "For Military Service to Ukraine"*

***Under what circumstances
did you find yourself in a full-scale war?***

Before the full-scale actions, which began on February 24, all my combat experience was gained in the Joint Forces Operation. It was not as exciting and fun as it is now, in this war. In this war, I realized the phrase "terribly fun". At first you are scared but when you complete the task, you have a lot of fun and you are the happiest person in the whole world. In the Joint Forces Operation, we were engaged in mining, demining, such a "cushy job" for a calm person. Maybe a mortar will hit in about a kilometer away from you, and everything will be fine.

Full-scale war began on February 24. By the way, it started very interestingly for me. I was thinking that on February 23 the russians were getting drunk and shouting: "Our grandfathers fought" and in the morning of the 24th, hungover, they would attack us. On the 23rd I came back home, went to bed at seven, took a sleeping pill

to sleep better and set my alarm for 4 a.m. It was a coincidence that I set an alarm for the time the war actually started. I woke up at four, checked the moskal telegram channel and it said that Nord Stream 2 was frozen and Operation North Wind was starting. I thought at the time: a serious hustle starts. I brushed my teeth. Putin had already released a video justifying his actions. I called my boss at about five o'clock and said: "Commander, the war has started". And I have my bags packed, my body armor and everything else ready to go. I came to work and I was told that my unit remained in reserve because we were scheduled to replace people in the Joint Forces Operation. I thought, would this war end without us, such a large-scale, total, decisive war for Ukrainians...

And then this moment comes, we pack up and go to Donbass. We were given an armored Hummer and we were well equipped for sapper work, everything was great, a bunch of things that are very useful for burying and injuring russians.

When we first arrived to Donbas, we spent the night and unpacked our things. And then we received the order to support the 54th Brigade in the Bakhmut direction. I was like, "Yay, it's starting to get interesting". Everyone has gathered and we hurried there. And I had my first task. One of the commanders we cooperated with arrived there (I won't mention his name or position, but I can tell you his call sign "Sever"). He said, "Well, Payne, we're going on mission now and I'll introduce you to Mishka. Mishka will tell you what you'll be doing". We arrived at the village at two in the morning because you can only enter that village in the evening as it was in a lowland and the russians held the heights, and when the vehicle entered, they shelled it all, so it was possible to enter only at night. One night we arrived, went down to the basement, and there was Mishka. Mishka was a healthy, bearded man, and he said: "Well, today there will be an assault". We were attached to the Marines. First, the Marines had to break into the village and I had to hide in the woods somewhere on the outskirts, waiting

for the Marines to consolidate. In the morning the assault of the village started: the Marines flew into battle with five tanks and a couple of armored personnel carriers. The russians had a lot of artillery then. But there were no losses at all, only two pieces of equipment. After that, everything changed dramatically, I no longer had to mine the outskirts of the village but the approaches to the forest belt where our guys retreated.

Just so you understand, this is a "gray zone" and the commander says: "Payne, you know, anyone can lay a minefield in the rear but you're going to lay it in the gray zone!" We hurried to the gray zone to lay minefields, the first day the Marines were in that forest, they helped us to carry mines. We left at night. We crawled, laid and buried the mines... That night we laid approximately 500 mines, which is really a lot. This is despite the fact that I can fit about 50 in my Hummer. I said, guys, we need to work hard so that more of russians get wounded. This is a kind of motivation: the more russians die, the better. In general, mine warfare is more focused not on killing more but on injuring more because when injured russian returns home without arms or legs other "Ivans" would look at him and say: "I'm not going there because another Ivan has returned without arms and legs".

You should never be afraid of something, you should do it. As they say: "A brave man dies once, a coward a thousand times". And there is no guarantee that you will be killed, because in war it's a matter of luck!

In this war, I noticed that their artillery was not working well. There were a lot of us in the field, the russians launched a pack of "Grad" rockets, one incendiary mortar shell and about 20 different mortar shells. They hit our Ural truck. My sergeant Dmytro ran to evacuate the wounded man and unfortunately he was also wounded by a shrapnel. He wanted to save the guy and he actually saved him but after that we had to rescue Dmytro. He was evacuated and is now being treated in Germany. They are building up his bone there,

as medicine has advanced. He sends me pictures all the time, we keep in touch. We have a very friendly team, we all communicate but there is a subordination, everyone understands that there is a commander and a subordinate. But we are all friends because we live, sleep, eat together and go through all the hardships and difficulties together.

After we did our job in the 54th Brigade we then went to perform tasks along the Siversky Donets River. I called this area the Sherwood Forest, the forest of robbers, because it was really wooded. After the Bakhmut direction, where the terrain was almost all fields, the Sherwood Forest was all green and beautiful. And you don't have the feeling that someone is constantly watching you, this phobia of the UAV, and you don't have to work like Batman at night. Because we were working in the Bakhmut sector for 20 days and we were constantly going on missions at night. I remember going out in daytime once in those 20 days! I was like, WOW! It's a really cool feeling! You go out in the daytime and you're just stunned by what you see. You've adapted to the night, you've forgotten what light is. And here you can work during the daytime and see the green forest, it's just unrealistic beauty. Yes, the artillery was more intensive here, hitting everything as there was an offensive on the Iziom and Siverodonetsk directions, trying to force the river. I was tasked to identify the fords on the Siverskyi Donets River so I had already started using my UAV more extensively because we still worked during the day. I was flying along the river, finding places that needed to be mined, providing information and conducting reconnaissance. And this is the difference between combat actions and tasks before and after the full-scale invasion: before February 24, it was purely engineer tasks to lay or clear mines and now you are together with recce team (laughs), you are responsible for reconnaissance, it's much more interesting to fight now. More scary, of course, but more interesting. And we mined Sherwood Forest, Siverskyi Donets.

How did the locals treat the military?

– People were mostly friendly. They supported us. We got out of the Hummer in the village of Dobropillia, which was liberated from the occupiers. Everyone of us looked like Texas Rangers, cool Ukrainian military. Civilians were looking at us and greeting us. We were liberators. People came up, hugged us, cried. A one-eyed man, a lieutenant colonel, a pilot from Kharkiv, said that his apartment was in Lyman and it was bombed to pieces. He asked us to hit the russians as much as possible. I did not see the same hostile attitudes among the locals that existed in 2020. Their views have changed.

But there were also those who looked at us askance, saying: “Why did you come here?”. There were soldiers with red and black UPA flags in Avdiyivka. One old man was walking along the street, he looked in our direction and spat. He didn't like us. Sometimes you greet the locals and they look at us and do not answer.

Donetsk region. The village of Novomykhailivka, the front line is five kilometers away. War and life in a luxury style: you could go to sauna, eat pizza, then go to the front line, lay some mines, come back again and then go back to the mission. And if you go to Kramatorsk you will submerge in a secular life. Shops and nightclubs are open, people are having fun. We relaxed a bit. Of course, we didn't drink alcohol but at least we could relax there. A local man was selling pigs for meat, so we decided to buy one, who know may be we would be eating meat for the last time. It was three times more expensive but there were still buyers.

But now it is different. The real war is in full swing. Shops and supermarkets are closed or even smashed, everything has become deserted, the old city life has stopped, it does not exist any more. Instead, frontline village shops are thriving. You can get there everything you need: ham, sausage, red fish, red caviar. At the relevant prices. The prices for bread and water are okay, not like meat or cigarettes. Everything related to the military is many times

more expensive. Cigarettes, energy drinks, fast food immediately went up in price.

Now everything in Avdiivka is ruined, there is nothing. All the cities that were thriving and developing until recently are simply gone. They were destroyed by the "russian peace".

Where did you eat?

– We received food when we were at the base and cooked it ourselves. We cooked a lot of things and took some of the food with us on missions. I worked according to a proven scheme: when I arrive to the area of operation I find the village council and establish interaction with them. Usually there were three or four people with me. I asked if there is a house or apartment to settle in, to live for a few days. I didn't want to settle in the places where troops were concentrated – like schools and headquarters as such facilities are frequently attacked. I'd rather take a nondescript house on the periphery where I can hide my car and it's safer for the people I'm responsible for. I arranged for such housing and we settled there with recce teams and Territorial Defense Forces. There was a video where the orcs were eating the worst parts of the pig while we were eating a good food. We fried meat on a gas stove, we have good food, chopped tomatoes, we have everything with us. We had a gas tank and we used to cook on it. Everything was just like at home. Sometimes one of the guys stayed behind while the others were on a mission, so when they returned back the dinner was ready.

***Did the village authorities treat you well,
were there any traitors among them?***

– No, there were none. Everyone I talked to was a normal person. Once I established interaction through the district police officer, who knew all the locals, so he warned me who was a separatist and who was not, told me with whom I could communicate and with whom I should not. There were no direct conflicts with the locals, maybe they

were afraid or maybe they respected me. Once an old man came up to me and asked:

– “Do you have a girlfriend?”

– “No” – I answered.

He then started talking to someone else:

– “You’re here and your girlfriend is being f*cked by other men at home”.

When I heard that I told him:

– “You’re sexually deranged old man, you can have some fun in your old age. You have problems with potency but what’s going on in your head? Poor guy”.

He realized that I was not aggressive, that I could make a joke in return.

The second incident happened at Sloviansk TPP in the village of Mykolaivka. An old man comes up and says:

– “Guys, how come you are fighting with your brothers...?”

– “Grandpa, are you out of your mind? The katsaps are shelling your house, “Grad” rockets hit everything and you say: “brothers”...

– “russia protects us from America,” he says. “It’s protecting you, son, too. How can you not see this? You’ve been brainwashed by the Americans. I see that you speak russian without an accent. But you don’t understand a lot”.

– “Grandpa,” I say in anger, “you should leave immediately because the Lviv Territorial Defense Forces will deal with you seriously”. It’s hard to comprehend: how can this be, what’s going on in his head? His city was being destroyed, artillery was hitting the neighboring street and he was saying: “It’s the Americans shelling and the russians are protecting us”.

When was it scary?

– It was scary to work at night, it was dark everywhere. You can’t see your hand but only a couple of kilometers away through the

thermal imager you can see what is happening around you, and... you work. And you have to clear tripwires but at any moment a gang of guys with a little more firepower than you can come out of the bushes. You can get under mortar fire at any time. It's a "scary" topic. You can be caught in a field under mortar fire, you have nowhere to hide and you just take it as it comes. There is no panic. It's really scary when your close ones are wounded and you can't do anything about it: put yourself in harm's way, sew their legs back on or glue their arms back on. Whatever happened to me, I would just smile. But when I found out that there was first wounded in my unit, it was no laughing matter, it was really hard. This feeling is indescribable, you will never get used to it. You can get used to many things, you can explain to yourself: I can die in the war and I have to live with this thought. That's it. I have to do everything I can not to die in order to fulfill the task. But how do you explain yourself when your subordinates are being wounded and killed in front of your eyes? You cannot explain this yourself, you will never be able to anticipate it. You can make a picture for yourself of the enemy's forces and equipment, which roads to take in order to move unnoticed, identify the units that can or cannot cover you, plan you're the movement of your vehicles, your equipment and your people and pack a first aid kit. But you cannot predict who will die, who will be blown up. This is the problem of war and it is really scary. Because when you are alive, it is pointless to be afraid of death.

Dmytro is lying wounded, without a leg, joking and laughing. He did not scream in pain, he took his situation for granted. He went to rescue his colleague. I was not there at that time. His task was to observe the edge of the field where the guys were working through a thermal imager. I am very sorry that it happened. When he was leaving for the mission, I asked him: "Don't go this time". He said this phrase then: "I will get closer to the orcs, it's more dangerous there." It gnaws at me because I could have taken him with me. Though there was also a risk to be wounded where I was because we were heavily shelled. After Dmytro went on a mission, I saw a damaged Ural coming back without a wheel. I wondered where he was. I couldn't

get in touch with him. We called the sergeant who was with him on the flank. He said he was wounded. We quickly evacuated him from that field. I got into a confrontation with the medic. We agreed on an evacuation zone but there was none, they ignored it. I had to go to the base to get a car that could transport him to a safe zone.

– “We have a heavily wounded soldier,” I shouted with all my might.

– “We don't have orders, we can't do anything about it now,” they replied.

I fed a cartridge in the chamber:

– “Your driver will get into the car and and evacuate the wounded man otherwise I'm going to shoot you all down here!”. The driver got into the car. We drove to the hospital. His leg was torn off. The thought was running through my head: we have an hour of time and after that the leg is usually amputated. We managed to do it in that time. We loaded Dima and drove him to Kurakhovo. There were a lot of wounded, everything was covered in blood, the whole mobile hospital was covered in blood. There were fierce battles in Maryinka, which is nearby, so all the wounded were brought to Kurakhovo. He was lucky, they sewed his leg back on. We stayed in that hospital all night until four in the morning, until the doctors told us that his leg was saved and he would be able to walk. It was really scary.

How did locals meet the military?

– In the Donetsk region, before the full-scale russian invasion, locals rarely greeted Ukrainian soldiers in a friendly way. Children follow the example of adults. Only the blind cannot see which side the truth lies. Now children watch TV, see checkpoints and repeat the actions of adults. They are building checkpoints along the route of the Ukrainian military. They set up boxes, put on uniforms and armor vests. They run out to meet them, wave their hands. The soldiers stop and treat them with snacks. Children's romance. Children are patriotic now, shouting “Glory to Ukraine”. It never happened during the times of the ATO. And now every second one is patriotic. And the elders also stand for Ukraine. They want to help liberate their native lands from the russians.

What is the job of a sapper like?

– We have to quietly enter and quietly leave the areas of operation. If there is any contact with the enemy, you are spotted by the enemy, everything goes wrong. Contact means a failed mission. You won't be able to lay mines in that area tomorrow or the next day because you've been spotted. You have to wait. During a mission, we are covered by 3-5 people. It is hard to trust them. Sappers do not perform tasks without cover, the enemy can take us with their bare hands. The specifics of my work depend on cooperation, and only on cooperation, without cooperation I cannot do anything. There is a very high risk. I need manpower and recourses, I need cover, I need to know the routes and roads, I need information provided by the unit I am working with. Sapper will not be able to work without all these factors. How can I go into the field when there is no one there to protect us while we are working? It is impossible to work like that. We have make a solid plan, it's a must.

I am most afraid of cowards and fools in war. Because they are the reason why normal guys die, the guys who do their job and do it well. A coward will escape, leave you alone without cover and you won't even know about it. A fool will come up with some "bullshit" and make sure that the enemy spots you. War is fortune. It is impossible to predict the situation in war. But there must always be a plan. There is an algorithm of action and we work from there. There is an emergency situation, and there is a contingency plan for such a situation but it comes with experience, through the analysis of mistakes, your own, others' and the people you work with.

What was the most difficult task for you?

– Entering the gray zone about a kilometer from our positions and placing a hundred mines. At night. It is not an easy task. Someone can always meet you there. We worked in such conditions for two weeks. When I saw the daylight for the first time in two weeks, it was wild. We lived at night, we existed at night, we traveled at night and worked

at night. We drove without headlights otherwise we would have been spotted. We recorded GPS tracks on a tablet and followed them at night, memorizing the road in such a way.

***What was particularly memorable
in the Kyiv region?***

– What is memorable there? People adore you, it's really cool there. When you go to the shops, as soon as they see a military uniform, they meet you halfway. It's a completely different attitude than, say, in the east, where everyone helps you. I had to fight in an atmosphere of love, when people love you and support you in every way.

We operated in the Chernobyl forest. We were looking for mines, there were many of them there. There was an abandoned village on the border with belarus, there were only paths, one continuous vast forest, a little left of Chernobyl. I had time to walk in the forest, enjoy nature and peace.

How professionally do russians do their job?

Not all of them are stupid. There are specially trained people who know sapper job well. I have been watching various russian channels for a long time where their experts share their experience. I study my opponent. It is interesting to see how the enemy thinks and analyzes. This is a strong adversary with a well-established military philosophy, its own worldview, its own ideology. When you analyze the enemy's actions, you think soberly on the battlefield, think through your work and this increases your ability to survive in critical situations. Why we didn't lose this war because their biggest mistake was to break into our territories in a parade march. You should never underestimate your enemy. Our enemy underestimated us and paid for it very severely and was driven out of our territory. You should always take the enemy seriously. You have to assess the enemy and destroy them. We will kill them more if we take them seriously.



SERHII, 31 years old

Awarded the medal "For Military Service to Ukraine"

What did you do in civilian life?

– Before I joined the military, I worked as a security guard for a private security company. Since childhood I have cherished the dream of becoming a military man, my father Anatolii was my role model. He is a military officer, a senior sergeant, and served in the GDR during the Soviet era. My father told me various stories from his military experience, which particularly fascinated me and encouraged me to choose my profession. Every person in life makes their own choice, realizes what they want to do, comprehends, looks for their place in the world and throw their heart into their favorite work. I have made my choice as well: I have been serving in the army for three years now. And I have no regrets. In three years, I have already seen a lot. I served my first rotation in the Joint Forces Operation, and all the subsequent four – during the full-scale russian invasion.

***When you signed the contract,
did you choose the area of military service?***

– I deliberately signed a contract with a specific military unit, I wanted to serve in the Demining Center. However, I did not fully understand what I could expect during my service. At first, I was a driver and saw myself in the army in this profession but later I changed my mind. This choice was influenced by the authority of my commanders.

The commanders taught us demining professionally. During the lessons, they constantly emphasized: read because you will need it, learn because you will need it, ask because you will need it. How right they were! The experience I gained contributed to my professional growth. From the position of a driver, I moved to the position of sapper, after that I was promoted to an instructor and I was going to my next rotation as a team leader.

You'll be promoted to a general in no time.

– (Laughs) To a general? I would like to, but it will be a little later. The main thing is to strive for the goal and confidently go towards it.

***Tell us about the specifics of your work in the Joint
Forces Operation, what was your first rotation like?***

– In 2021, I went in my first rotation to the city of Kramatorsk. It lasted five months and from there we were redeployed to Popasna. We performed tasks in Soledar, Kostiantynivka and Bakhmut. It was difficult, perhaps because it was the first time. I didn't understand a lot of things yet but the experience of the commanders quickly helped me to get into the swing of things. Our task was to clear mined areas. As a combat element, we cannot work separately, we were always subordinated to one of the military units, one of the brigades deployed at a particular combat position, defending our homeland. Sapper teams are usually attached to the units and our primary task is to detect explosive devices. And when the enemy

approaches our positions, we make the right decision to protect the soldiers holding the line, inform them of the enemy's approach and deny it to the enemy. It is our job to lay minefields, clear the territories and mine area behind and in front of combat positions. The life of a sapper, whether we like it or not, is always fraught with risks, as deadly explosive devices pass through our hands.

How did the full-scale war begin for you?

– The large-scale war caught me in our city. At four in the morning, my friend Oleh woke me up with a phone call:

– “Hello, Serhii, are you sleeping? Turn on the TV. The muscovites are bombing us, a full-scale war has begun. Get moving!”

There was no time to think. I quickly packed up and went to the military unit. On the same day, February 24, a group of us left to defend the capital. At six in the morning, we were ready, received our weapons and moved to defend Kyiv. At ten in the evening we arrived in Brovary. We were immediately subordinated to the 72nd Separate Mechanized brigade. Our task was to prevent the enemy from attacking the capital from the Brovary direction. We were engaged in mine clearing operations and our superiors did not inform us of any other tasks. Kalynivka, Pukhivka... I don't even remember all those settlements where we placed explosive devices. Over the entire period, we probably laid more than three or four thousand anti-tank mines, laid a large number of anti-personnel minefields, and, thank God, by joint efforts we prevent the enemy's attack on the capital. You may have seen the video of how a column of enemy tanks could not get through to Brovary near the village of Velyka Dymarka. This is also our merit. At the very time when our artillery was firing at the enemy, we were mining the fields. The artillery and sappers did a great job to turn the column of tanks around and prevent them from moving towards the capital.

Did you usually perform your missions under fire?

– It was not always like that. Our commanders decided to start sapper's work only when the fire stopped. We usually worked from the very morning or when it was already dark, when the enemy could not see us. We deliberately chose a time when there was no fire so that we could do our job well and return safely. We worked for a month on the left bank of the Dnipro River, near Velyka Dymerka. We performed tasks in the settlements of Liutizh and Katyuzhanka. We never reached Ivankiv as another team from our military unit was already working there. Then, together with the 72nd Brigade, we spent two months clearing the right bank. In the morning we would get ready, get into armored vehicle and go to clear the area. We also participated in night marches.

How is the area mining tasks are conducted?

– This business is taught by the instructors at training centers and the books. But the best way to learn is through the situation, the experience gained and the ability to think logically and make the right decision. There is no room for error. This is the unspoken motto of a sapper. First and foremost, professionalism is the success of our business. There are people who, for example, are engaged in medical treatment, they are able to professionally perform complex interventions in the human body to save lives and there are people who cross-stitch. Each profession is in demand. We know how to mine and in this way we take care of the safety of citizens, stop the insidious enemy and prevent it from moving deeper into our country. The job of a sapper is not easy as we handle particularly dangerous items that can cost lives if handled carelessly.

The first rotation was in Kyiv and where was the second one?

– We went on a rotation in the Izium area in September. We were engaged in demining tasks there for almost three months. Of all the

previous rotations, this one was the hardest for me. We suffered losses in our unit. The group was demining the areas near Balakliya and while moving from the task place we came across an enemy mine that was placed haphazardly, outside the minefield. As you know, the enemy's haphazard mining of our territories makes the search for explosive devices less effective. In addition, the enemy uses prohibited methods with additional booby-trapping.

Right before our very eyes, the team was blown up. A sapper-driver, Yurii Batsan, was tragically killed. This is a guy I've known for a long time, we've been talking to him for a long time as we were neighbors from the same village. He used to serve in a supply battalion for some time. Once I met him after a rotation from Kyiv and he said he wanted to serve in the Demining Center. He didn't see himself serving in a battalion any more, he wanted to be useful where the war was, he was ready to repair vehicles there, not here on peaceful territory. After this conversation, I addressed the unit commander with this question. I said: there is a good guy, an experienced sapper-driver who has professional qualities and a desire to serve and learn. The issue was resolved positively. Yurii Batsan had basic sapper training at the Combined Training center and at a certain time he went in a rotation. As a result, there were three seriously wounded, one of them was in a very serious condition, and Yurii Batsan was killed. Unfortunately, the irreparable happened. This loss still hurts a lot.

During our rotation to Balakliya, we also performed tasks near Barvinkove and Izium and saw the terrible destruction there. We saw the equipment that the orcs left behind when they retreated. Tanks, self-propelled artillery systems, KrAZ and KAMAZ trucks. There was a lot of equipment, we helped to pull it out of the places of direct contacts with the enemy, made passages, checked whether the equipment and the approach to it were not mined. We counted about thirty to forty units of vehicles that were not burnt and could be taken away for use. Some vehicles started, others did not. In two

or three days, the equipment was already near Lyman and we saw with our own eyes how it was being taken to the front line. We were happy to have contributed to our long-awaited victory.

Our detachment was engaged in area clearance. During our stay in Balakliya, there was not a single day when we were not called to do demining. Everything around was mined. People had been under occupation for a long time and it's hard to put into words the moral trauma they suffered. I had to communicate with them and I could see fear, pain and disappointment in their eyes. They were not under the occupation any more but the feeling of anxiety, despair and pain did not leave them. We, the military, tried not to wear armor vests too much, tried to hide our weapon in order to adapt the population to peaceful life. The enemy retreated and we made every effort to ensure that civilians were not worried about the war. Occupation has a number of meanings, its own senses. For those who survived the occupation, it was very, very difficult to return to their previous life.

They say that there are different people on the side of the enemy, the Russian side. You can hear that there are normal people among them, not all of them are the same. But the fact remains that no matter how good or bad they are, they are invaders for Ukrainians forever. Local citizens tell stories that some of them gave food to the locals during the occupation. But most of them turned their weapons and fired at the city and then came to that city and told that it was the Ukrainian Armed Forces that were shooting at civilians. People were not stupid, they understood who was really doing it. There was only one question to the occupiers: why did you come here, for what purpose, we don't want to see you here, leave our territories, leave us alone, there is no need to liberate us, everything was fine before you came. Their answer was: we came to liberate you, to free you. But from whom, from what, for what? No one understood.

During the occupation, Balakliya suffered severe damage and the neighborhood was completely destroyed. The cement plant was

located within the city limits, people worked there, had stable jobs and salaries and now the plant is gone, destroyed by the occupiers. They brutally destroyed everything in their path without hesitation. When we were driving through the liberated Balakliya, we saw sincere smiles and joy on the faces of the locals. They are finally home!

During that period of time, we talked to musician and actor Kolia Serha several times. He serves in the Territorial Defense Forces and takes an active part in the liberation of Ukraine from the moscovian enemy. He made friends with the guys from our unit, expressed a desire to communicate with us, took pictures and even signed a book for our commander. He is a very interesting guy, easy to talk to. He gave us his chevron as a souvenir and we gave him ours. We asked him, as a public figure, to post a message on social media that would warn and alert the locals about mines in the surrounding area. Yet the area was mined and there was nowhere to go. The fall of 2022 was warm and rainy. A lot of mushrooms appeared in the neighborhood forests, and people, maybe because they didn't have money or because they were under occupation, rushed to pick and sell mushrooms at markets along the main road. They walked into the forests, which was extremely dangerous. A lot of locals got blown up then. We, the sappers, did our best to help people, first of all, we warned civilians against going to the forests. We installed signs "Danger! MINES".

There were many ignorant people who did not respond to our warnings and put their lives in mortal danger. A tragic incident occurred there in our presence. An ambulance was hit by a mine, the medic was completely burned out, the driver suffered numerous burns and the car itself burned to the ground. The ambulance arrived to help a man who was lying 150 meters away in a forest plantation without a leg. Due to negligence, that person had hit a mine and was bleeding to death. The ambulance crew wanted to evacuate the man from the blast site. In the end, they were also blown up and they died. That's why we tried to inform the local population

about the fatal consequences of such negligence and indifference through Kolia Serha's influence.

Local residents said that during the occupation they had survived four rotations of enemy troops. Everything around was mined. Buryats, Russian military personnel and representatives of other nationalities did their best to mine everything. Each enemy rotation contributed something new there. The largest number of mines was laid on the approaches to the water purification plant and there was no place left unmined in its vicinity. The enemy laid MON-50 type mines but did it in a wrong way. Our experts paid attention to this, consulted and decided to blow them up in situ as there was no other way out. As it turned out, these mines were laid in a cascade, one was placed so that it was visible and then it was followed by landmines buried in the ground. This is prohibited according to International standards. If we had not noticed it... the consequences would have been tragic. The professionalism and experience of the Demining center's specialists is evident.

What kind of mines did the enemy use most often?

– Having repeatedly talked to experts, we have come to the following conclusion: the enemy uses everything they have. For example, we don't have booby-traps but they do. They are actively using ammunition prohibited by the Geneva Convention including anti-personnel mines and victim operated mines. As our practice and experience show, the enemy places PMNs that remain in place for many years. They have been trained in this business since the Soviet Union. The enemy uses literally everything in their arsenal and we have to solve their riddles. We operate according to International standards, we laid only command operated mine, we do not use victim operated mines. I've talked to the locals in Balakliya more than once and I tell them: "You realize what the katsaps have done, don't you? The mines they've placed on the tripwire will remain there for a year or two, five, ten, fifteen or twenty years, until someone hits the tripwire and it explodes".

Once, together with a colonel of the EW service, I was picking up an "Orlan-10" drone that our guys had landed. We walked about five kilometers, picked it up and on the way back we saw many PFM scatterable mines, "petals" as the muscovites call them. Luckily, everyone came back safe and sound, with legs and arms (laughs). But we might not have returned. We moved there and back along a very dangerous road. We were moving like sappers should move. We were shown the point and were told that the "Orlan" was "somewhere there" and we had to look for it on the spot. We went into a field where no one had plowed or sown anything for a year, got out through impenetrable thickets, found a tripwire, took the drone and returned safely to our assembly area. And the consequences could have been very unpredictable.

I was on rotation in Kyiv and Kharkiv regions but I did not go to Donetsk due to family reasons. In a few days I'm going to Kherson region. I could have gone to Kharkiv or Kyiv again but I had already been there, I wanted something new. Kyiv during my rotation, when Bucha, Irpin and Gostomel were under occupation, was particularly memorable. There was nothing around, no people, no cars, no traffic jams, you had to move from one end of the city to the other and you were free to drive. I associate Kyiv with the 72nd Brigade – the "Black Cossacks". They held the defense of the capital and many of the guys I knew are no longer with us. That time we worked under the command of a major with the call sign "Lefty". I will never forget his words:

– All cars stop, listen to the combat order, we are going to clear the area, everyone get into the cars.

It's night, dark, everyone gets into the car. I can not tell whether it was fear or adrenaline. So we got in and drove:

– "The sappers from Kamianets had to be in armored vehicle," he said.

The enemy is very cunning, resorting to unpredictable methods of mining. They mined a large number of roads, power plants, entrances to power plants, power grids and power lines. In effect, they stopped life. To prevent losses among power engineers we had to do our job conscientiously and return the normal rhythm of life.

Kherson was particularly impressive, the city is close to the sea. Until now, it seemed that Kherson was far away from us, but in fact, it is very close. It's right in the heart of Ukraine. I wouldn't mind going to Crimea either. I vacationed there in 2007, when I was a kid. I would like to go on a rotation to the Ukrainian Crimea. When I go on rotation, I always reassure my parents: "I was defending Ukraine from the first day of the full-scale war and now I'm going to end it". My mom and dad smile sadly. I know it will all end soon, the war will end in victory. The enemy is exhausted. We are not them, we are defending our country, fighting for our territories, our people and they are fighting for unknown reason.

What did the war teach you?

– The war taught me to love Ukraine above all else, to value freedom. We are its daughters and sons, and it is ours alone. We are fighting for it. This is a war for a free Ukrainian space, which we must defend and preserve.



OLEKSANDR, 51 years old

*Awarded the Order "For Courage", III class,
Medal "For Military Service to Ukraine"*

What made you choose your profession?

– Since childhood I was interested in military affairs and dreamed of a career in the military. The authority of my grandfather Mykola had a significant influence on my choice of profession. I talked to him a lot, he started his service from the first day of the Second World War, was a military officer and rose to the rank of major. Also, communication with my friends at school, whose parents were in the military, had a significant impact on my decision to choose the military profession. Repeatedly watching the feature film "Officers" influenced the formation of my worldview and encouraged me to choose my profession.

What was your first combat experience?

– I gained my first combat experience in the ATO zone in 2015 where I was on rotation with the deceased Lieutenant Colonel Serhii Koval. We worked with him in close cooperation, fulfilling all assigned combat tasks. He was a very experienced officer, an expert in his

field, a man of moral duty and honor. He was acting as a team leader of an Improvised explosive device disposal detachment. At that time, we were based in Kramatorsk and, depending on the tasks assigned, went to different locations in Donetsk and Luhansk regions. We mined the territories and reinforced minefields in front of the front line. The impressions of the places where we performed combat missions are terrible. There were ruins all around and the people who remained lived in basements without food or water.

My first combat mission was to inspect the area near the village of Luhanske, where a tractor was blown up. The tractor driver unknowingly drove into a mined area during the agricultural works. After we checked the area, we found an unknown minefield that was not recorded in any documents. It is not known who laid it. This is a border area and the occupiers were very close by. The mines were laid on our side. We cleared the field of mines, found and neutralized all the explosive devices. Fortunately, the driver survived, we even met him. He was happy because this was the third time he had been in such a situation. He was blown up three times and all three times he was lucky to survive. He was born under a lucky star. After the third time he hit a mine, he got very scared, ran away from the scene, and... got drunk. We barely found him. He told us that he was very lucky as some higher power was constantly protecting him. The first time a sniper almost hit him while he was plowing, hitting his front window. The second time a rocket struck nearby. He was working in the field at the time. On the third occasion, he hit a mine. Three incidents and all three were successful ones, thank God. If he wasn't blown up then, we would not have discovered this minefield and someone couldn have been blown up there. And this tractor driver was born under a lucky star.

***How many rotations did you have
within your memory?***

– Since 2015, when I joined the military, I have been on rotation twice a year. I performed tasks in Donetsk and Luhansk regions.

Until 2020 our rotation lasted for two months and after 2020 – for four months. Of course, the situation was not the same then as it is now. There was no such intensity of hostilities as during a full-scale war, there were no air or missile strikes and other weapon systems were used. At that time, we were conducting positional military operations. We were in our positions, the enemy was in theirs and we were shelling each other from our side. And we were doing very different jobs. Here is the most memorable story. Under ceasefire agreement with the enemy we were checking the power line that ran across the field between our and their positions. A truce was declared but the enemy did not always observe it. We checked the area for explosive devices. After our inspection, electricians would come by, remove defective parts, take pictures of the damaged areas and then restore the facilities. Once during such an inspection we met face to face with sappers from the enemy side, who, like us, had come to inspect the facility. They were so-called militias from the fake “DNR” or “LNR”, I don't remember where they were exactly from. We had a conversation. Talking to them was a one-way street. They didn't accept any arguments, didn't want to hear anything, they were extremely brainwashed.

They were not interested in our opinion and did not want to listen to it; they justified their actions and their rightness. They voiced well-known narratives: we are Banderites, and Russia is our brothers. The conversation about nothing in high tones lasted for 15-20 minutes, then they went their way and we went ours. No one shot each other in the back. We didn't feel afraid, there were four of us and four or five of them... The forces were almost equal if we had to fight.

***Where and under what circumstances
did you find yourself in a full-scale war?***

– February 24. A full-scale war caught me during my regular duty in the Joint Forces Operation as part of a consolidated unit in the city of Kramatorsk. We were at the facility where the Russian Federation launched its first missile and air strikes. Before the invasion

we had training in enemy actions in case of an attack. In particular, we practiced the "Attack on the airfield" and "Rocket attack" exercises. The day before, the Chief of the base called and said that tomorrow there would be a "Rocket Attack" rehearsal. "Don't ignore the alert, go out, put on your protective gear and go down to the shelter," he ordered.

At 4.45 a.m. we received a "Rocket attack" alert from the headquarters. We got dressed, went outside and were close to the shelter. At exactly 5:00, the first strike occurred a hundred meters away from us. I could not believe that the war had already started until the last moment. My first thought was that it was a drill, a serious drill using imitation means. The guys took off and ran to that shelter. I still kept convincing myself that it was a simulated explosion for training purposes. But when the second strike occurred, closer to us, my opinion changed dramatically. We started moving to a more secure shelter. And when the planes appeared – it was clear that this was no longer a training exercise.

How did the events develop further?

– Panic, of course, gripped us. We started calling the headquarters in Chasiv Yar but it was impossible to get through. There was no connection. We could not contact our leadership too. But we quickly came to our senses....

There was a group within our unit that was supposed to perform tasks in the village of Paraskoviyivka, Bakhmut district. There was an arsenal of small arms of the Armed Forces of Ukraine there and they were ordered to damage it so the enemy might not get the benefit of it. This group went there and we went to the village of Novotroitske.

On the way to Novotroitske my group was ordered to execute another task. We had to prepare for mining the engineer ammunition depot located in the city of Kramatorsk at the "Sarmat" military airfield. We stayed in Kramatorsk ready to blow it up. But after a while the ammunition was distributed to the units and brigades, we left

this place and went to our unit, which was located in Novotroitske, near Pokrovsk. The main tasks were to prepare bridges, dams, and roads for demolition and to blow them up. We were attached to a mechanized brigade that was defending the settlements of Novomykhailivka, Maryinka and Kurakhovo in the Volnovakha direction. We were engaged in mining areas in front of the front line of defense. We worked mostly at night and moved only in the dark because it was only at night that it was calm. Heavy fighting was going on all day, artillery and tanks were firing. It was impossible to execute any task.

Laying mines in front of the front line worked. When we came back for the next rotation, we saw the results of our work. The enemy's offensive was slowed down. Russian tanks were blown up on the mines we had laid. There was even a video on a YouTube channel and I have photos from the scene.

Did you have any other rotations after February 24?

– We returned to the place of our permanent deployment. We rested for a month and then went on another rotation. At first, we performed tasks in the Kharkiv region. We were subordinated to the 72nd Separate Mechanized Brigade. We stayed there for up to two weeks and went with them to the Lysychansk-Sievierodonetsk area. It was just before the enemy seized Lysychansk and Sievierodonetsk. There we worked with the Brigade's units, laid minefields in the villages of Mykolayivka and Vrubne, Stepne.

What were the living conditions like?

– We lived in a dilapidated building in the former Kostiantyniv psychiatric hospital. Realizing the danger, we deliberately lived in the basement of this institution because we could expect enemy attacks at any time. Everyone there was looking for a place to live. One military man helped us with accommodation. He knew the head of the 81st Separate Airmobile Brigade and arranged accommodation

for us. He said: "There are several places in the psychiatric hospital (laughs), you are wellcome". The beds were there, someone had already lived there before us. People also lived on the floors but it was extremely dangerous; it was safer in the basement. A week later, after we had rotated and left, a rocket hit that place. The group commander said about it: "God still wants us to live." Those who were on the upper floors of the building were all killed and those who lived in the basement were only rescued two weeks later. It was a stroke of luck. Only a week of time but many lives were saved.

Tell us about your third rotation.

– During the third rotation we performed tasks in the Ivankiv district of Kyiv region, not far from Chernobyl. It was in late October and November. We checked areas in the forests, cleared the territories where the russians placed explosive devices. It was a completely different situation, heaven and earth, compared to what we had to see and experience in Kharkiv, Donetsk and Luhansk regions. It was like a pioneer camp (laughs), but in reality it was a calm, quiet job of a sapper. At the end of the rotation, we were sent from Kyiv region to the border of Belarus. We were supposed to conduct reconnaissance and mine the area but we had to leave to the other place so we conducted reconnaissance, handed over all the documents and mining tasks were executed by other sappers.

We hardly communicated with the locals. Chechens, Buryats and russians were active in that area but no such crimes as they committed in Bucha were recorded there. Having occupied the Kyiv region, the katsaps seized local property. Most of the locals left and only those who could not leave stayed. They couldn't take their property with them as they were leaving in a hurry in order to primarily save their lives. The occupiers were hunting for vehicles: they seized MAZ, KAMAZ trucks and tractors and transported to belarus. A local forester told us the following story. A russian bought a motorcycle from his son for 100 dollars (!). It's strange because usually they just took what they needed by force. Once their Buryat commander,

a major, came here. The locals started complaining to him. Some of his subordinates stole their cars and household appliances. He made them return everything and this kid, just imagine, got his motorcycle back. The kid earned a hundred dollars for renting his motorcycle (laughs).

Which rotation was the hardest?

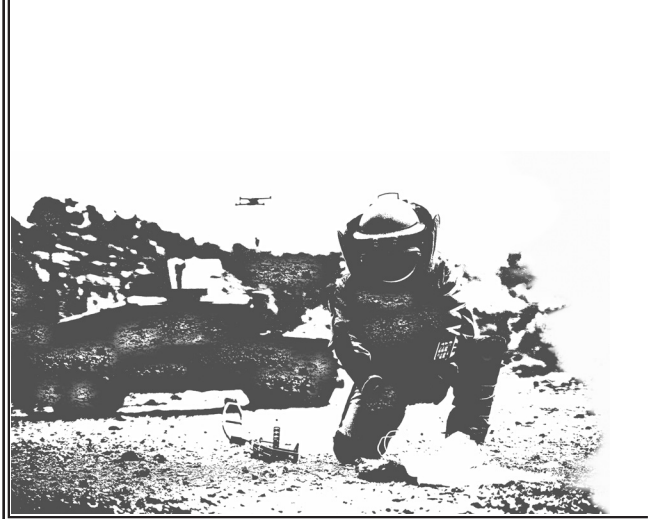
The first rotation was the hardest. When the ring was closed around the Donetsk region, we had only one road left – from Pokrovsk to Pavlohrad. Iziium was closed from the Kharkiv direction and the roads from Zaporizhzhia were also cut off. At that time, the enemy was already fighting near Kyiv and Chernihiv. There were thoughts that we might not get out of there... The intensity of the shelling in Lysychansk and Sievieronetsk was horrifying, there was heavy fire, it was very dangerous. There was a dangerous moment near Lysychansk. When we arrived to the task site, we were attacked by planes and artillery, everything was exploding around us, we barely had time to run for cover and it was very dangerous to hold the line. Another tragic incident occurred in the same Lysychansk. The National Guard of Ukraine withdrew from the checkpoint and the 72nd Brigade took its place for defense. A medical center was set up there and the wounded were brought there. There I met Illia from the engineer brigade, a friend of my eldest son. They mined the bridge and kept it under guard. We talked to him. He got off his shift and I went about my business. Soon Colonel Makhachyk arrived at the checkpoint. The shelling started and everyone who was there was burned to death. The colonel was also killed. It is true that God wants us to live.

***Was it possible to communicate
with the civilian population?***

– There was no direct communication with the locals. Everyone was doing their job. In Kramatorsk, a fairly pro-Ukrainian city, people were pro-Ukraine. Wherever you went – to a store or somewhere

else – everything was for the military, people were ordering pizza for us, giving us food. People believed us, sympathized with us and helped us as much as they could. When we got closer to Lysychansk the picture was completely different, they didn't really want to see us. This rocket strike at psychiatric hospital was their doing. The guys repeatedly heard civilians who lived near the hospital saying: "Don't russians know that there is a unit located here? Why don't they launch their rockets?" In any case, someone had transmitted the coordinates, the rocket did not hit it by chance. The situation there was different. Normal people left there long ago and those who thought that we, Ukrainians, were insane, stayed there with their children. They are being shelled, they are dying and they continue to love russia. A friend of mine met a random woman in Volnovakha. Her house was destroyed but she still blamed Ukrainian military for her misfortune. There are a lot of such people. The situation has not changed since 2015 and the majority of the population did not like us very much. Many did not support us, considered us enemies despite our help.

I had to go through a lot during this time. However, I have never regretted choosing the military profession. I have always had the feeling of achievement after combat missions. Was it scary? It's always scary but you stop thinking about it while executing tasks. However, you should never underestimate the enemy, the enemy is strong, they act professionally and you need to constantly take this into account in order to achieve results on the battlefield. We believe in our victory and we are doing our best to achieve it.



ANDRII, 41 years old

Awarded the Order of Bohdan Khmelnytskyi, III class

Tell us, how did your military career begin.

– I haven't taken off my uniform since I was fourteen. In 1996 my brother encouraged me to enter the former Suvorov School in Kryvyi Rih (now a military lyceum), which I successfully graduated from in 1999. I began my military service in 2004 in a supply battalion at the storage base of the former pontoon regiment. Then I served at the Demining Center.

What was your first combat experience?

– I started my military service in the ATC (Anti-Terrorist Center) in 2014 and then continued in the ATO. The ATC was stationed in Iziurm. I remember a parade with Prime Minister Arsenii Yatseniuk present. Russia's military aggression was just entering an active phase. State leadership often came to the place of deployment of our troops. For example, Petro Poroshenko visited Dovhenke and Iziurm as President. The war was gaining momentum.

The task of our group was to blow up bridge structures. At that time the enemy had already annexed Crimea. We were dealing with the facilities that were under the enemy's possible attack from the territory bordering the Russian Federation and Belarus. Our troops were preparing bridges for demolition on the border with Chernihiv and Sumy regions. Then the first conflicts began, the first military operations in Donbas, and Sloviansk was captured. Active hostilities were already underway on the border of Donetsk and Kharkiv regions.

At that time, it was the first rotation from the Demining center. A group was being formed. We traveled by bus to the territory of Izium to execute tasks. At the entrance to the city we were met by the former deputy chief of the engineer troops. He was in charge of the engineer units in that area. The first impression of what we saw was depressing. We saw a lot of ambulances. They were carrying many wounded from combat zone. That was the first time we came face to face with war.

Instead of two or three days, as expected, we were on rotation for over a month. We were clearing the bridge in Izium thus ensuring the advancement of our troops. We were subordinated to units that performed tasks of increased complexity together with units of the Armed Forces, intelligence troops, airborne assault troops and the "Alpha" unit of the Security Service of Ukraine. In the first rotations we ensured the advancement of our military columns, mined areas and placed charges in order to destroy facilities. Enemy recon teams were working nearby, coming close to our posts. It was quite dangerous. The platoon commander of the Air Assault Troops with the call sign "Bursuk" was holding the most important checkpoint at the crossroads in front of Sloviansk. Many TV programs were filmed about him later. Our group worked in his interests and we also worked with engineers from Okhtyrka. All the guys were motivated and charged up, and performed their mining tasks flawlessly.

Before that I was on a peacekeeping mission in Afghanistan (2012-2013) where I gained my first combat experience. When we returned the Maidan had just begun and the russians had already annexed Crimea. The next period of war with the muscovites resumed. The experience gained in Afghanistan and the tasks performed in the ATC were not particularly different. The number and regularity of the russian federation's troops was not yet the same as in 2015-2018. At that time, they were rather military groups that operated under the leadership of their staff officers. They carried out terrorist attacks, sabotage, acts of terrorism, used firearms and artillery. The masses came later. If I compare their actions with what I saw in Afghanistan, they are similar to how the Taliban behaved but without the use of artillery, tanks and mortars. However, the Taliban also used attacked our base with rockets but fortunately they failed. The signature of mining is almost similar, in general, terrorists' mining is similar in principles, approaches and tactics all over the world, including the russian federation. I didn't notice much of a difference so it was psychologically easy to switch from Afghanistan to the ATC.

What was the next rotation like?

– My next rotation was in late summer 2014. It so happened that all our rotations fell on the period of time when we were moving from one base to another. We were redeployed from Iziurm to Dovhenke. It was already the ATO. The intensity of the fighting was increasing. When Sloviansk was liberated the enemy already realized that they could not cope and it was necessary to bring in weapons from regular troops. The presence of the federal military forces increased, the intensity of the shelling increased and the muscovites' persistence also increased.

In the next rotation, we moved from Dovhenke to Kramatorsk. I call these rotations “wandering”.

I will tell you about the raid.

There were intense battles for the village of Myronivske. The 95th Brigade operated efficiently and quite quickly. The enemy was repelled and we entered the village. Colonel Zabrodsky was in charge of this brigade, he moved in front and the whole brigade moved behind him. He is an outstanding commander, a brave man, he took direct part in the fighting and did not stay in the rear. His merits in this war should be highly appreciated.

After the brigade drove out the enemy, there was a short-lived calm in Stepanivka. The soldiers could catch their breath for a short time, cleared the territory and collected the corpses in the village. It was summer and they were especially concerned about avoiding infection among civilians and soldiers. The casualties were predominantly on the enemy side but there were also losses on our side.

What was the reaction of the local population?

– The local population reacted with caution. There were signs in russian saying “Children”, “Children live here”. There were quite a lot of people in the village, they were hiding in cellars in private houses. I can't say that the village was empty, there were enough people left in it. Some houses, however, were empty. It is difficult to say whom they supported. First of all, they were very intimidated and you could read in their eyes: if only there was calm, if only there was peace, if only there was no shelling... Whether it was the DNR, the Ukrainian government or the Armed Forces as long as they did not shoot – that was mostly what you could read in their eyes. I didn't see any support for Ukraine either. People were in an information vacuum. We have to understand that they experienced an information blockade especially during Yanukovych's presidency. Anti-Ukrainian information was constantly injected into their ears and brains. russian propaganda was active here until recently and it was quite effective so I was not surprised by the mood of the locals

at all, their perception of the present and then Donbas. I would not say that they were hostile to us, but I would not say that they were happy about the Ukrainian Armed Forces either. They didn't greet us with flags, didn't meet us the way, say, the locals met us in liberated Kherson with tears of joy in their eyes. There was no such thing. The position of these people is not to be touched. Not to be touched...

Did you move from Stepanivka to Luhansk?

– We stayed in Stepanivka for several days. We survived several attacks by enemy artillery there. Our fellow soldiers from our unit joined us in this village. It was still relatively safe at that time but the enemy was already shelling Savur-Mohyla (Stepanivka is nearby) with “Grad” rockets and artillery. It changed hands several times. At that time this stronghold was still under our control but it was subjected to intense enemy shelling. Sniper teams and artillery were operating in the village at the time. But it was relatively calm. We lived together in the basement of a bombed-out club.

I don't remember which soldiers were in the unit at the time. It was a very warm meeting. I remember only Serhii and I remember him in a special way. Serhii had remarkable culinary skills and talents, he cooked very well. He treated us to food he cooked himself. One of our guys had a birthday at that time so he made a cake as a gift, baked cookies in a frying pan and smeared them with condensed milk. At that moment many of us had the feeling of home.

Closer to August 2, Air Assault units liberated the lion's share of Donetsk territory. Our Air Assault brigade went on a rampage on the day of its (Soviet, but true) Air Assault Forces' holiday. The enemy was in trouble.

We saw a lot of things then. One of our groups stayed in Stepanivka. The other was subordinated to the 95th Separate Air Assault Brigade. Together with them we moved to the next settlement Miusynsk in Luhansk region. We arrived in the afternoon and stayed there for several days. It was closer to the enemy so mortar and

artillery shelling was much more intensive. The units were assigned to patrol the streets. Our unit was assigned a section of the village to be on duty at night. Intense enemy artillery shelling began on the first night of our patrolling. During the night shelling enemy units were able to move closer to our positions. In the morning close fire began. The enemy used with firearms and machine guns. They were moving closer and closer. At 6 a.m. they opened fire from close range. Our units were at a loss. What to do, why no one was returning fire? We dug a trench and went for cover. There was no clear orders, no specific actions to return fire. Everyone was waiting for the orders but no one gave the order. The personnel was confused at the first stages of shelling. Sitting around and waiting to be shot was not an option either. We had to act, take some positions but it was unclear how exactly.

I started looking for leadership to interact with. The uncertainty was disconcerting. There was no coordination of actions, you didn't understand what was happening, you didn't know how to react, what decisions to make. At that moment, there was an explosion. There was a rocket strike and I was covered with earth. I looked at my body and was surprised: no contusion, no wounds. Only the smell of TNT around me. And Mykola, who was behind the car at the time, was wounded by a shrapnel. The guys from the 95th Brigade applied bandages to him, I ran to the paramedics, there was a medical center across the street from us.

– “What kind of injury?” they asked.

– “A fragment” I said.

– “We have half of the brigade with fragments, it's nothing to worry about. We will deal with it later”.

I have to do something, I don't like such excuses, I have a wounded person... I insisted and they put bandages on Mykola and injected him with butorphanol, an anesthetic. It is a drug that dulls the consciousness and encourages actions that are not typical

in a conscious state. Mykola had to be kept under control for some time. The medics put a bandage on his body but did not remove the fragment from his hip. Mykola traveled with the fragment for a while.

Soon we received the order to form a column and leave Miusynsk. We were leaving under fire. We were moving as part of the 95th Brigade and the movie "The Raid" was filmed about it. We exhaled a little when we entered Sloviansk. In the entire history of the military conflict, this was an extraordinary task that the commander of the 95th Brigade dared to undertake. They distracted the enemy in order to bring the units out of enemy fire. Before that, I did not realize what was happening. I realized it only when I watched the movie. No one told us the general situation, they just passed it on to the units that were performing the task. Many people died during this raid. Later we asked each other about it and found out that some of our friends were gone. There were casualties but the task was accomplished, the goal of the raid was achieved. This is a historical event. At the time, the raid was perceived as a remarkable event, it was on the lips of the media and discussed in military circles. Later, a documentary under the same title was filmed.

Where did the full-scale war find you?

– On February 24, I was in the city at the point of permanent deployment.

Later in April, when the attack on Kyiv was repelled and the groups had already started clearing the territories, we were sent to reinforce them. There were few civilians as local population had just started to return to their homes.

Have you just been to Kherson defense line?

– Yes, we were sent to clear the city's critical infrastructure as soon as Kherson was liberated from the enemy.

The groups cleared the critical infrastructure from mines. The area around was heavily mined. Areas under occupation and under our control were equally mined by our and enemy units.

The enemy had withdrawn but his supporters remained, who were citizens of Ukraine but were supporters of the “russian peace”. We did not communicate with them. There were all sorts of things in Donbas, they called us Makhnovists and Banderites. There was a case when we talked to a captured sapper instructor from the so-called “DNR” and took him prisoner. He was from Khmelnytskyi, 2nd lieutenant. It was during the ATO. I talked to him, tried to get information from him. All of them usually follow the same pattern: I didn't know, didn't understand what I was doing. He wouldn't say that it was his conscious choice. It's the same old story. I was more interested in where their groups worked, what ammunition they used, what pattern of mine laying they were using, how they laid minefields, how they destroyed facilities. I was more interested in the tactical side of the enemy's tasks than in any ideological things. He was constantly lying, lying and lying. When talking to him, we used NATO techniques that are used in such surveys, it did not help. He was lying. He seemed to be answering meekly, trying to make it look like he is answering honestly but in reality he was trying to cover his tracks. He gave out information but it was general information, when we approached the issue from other side – he slipped up, realizing that he was telling a lie but not revealing himself.

There is only one motivation – to drive these damned occupiers out of our land as soon as possible. We want our children and grandchildren to live in a free, independent, peaceful and powerful Ukraine. We want this war to be the last in the history of our country. And I am sure that our victory will be lightning fast. The main thing is our unity, joint work and faith in the Armed Forces of Ukraine!

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