

MedivactruckstoUkraine

TRIP SUMMARY

“On this trip, we delivered 11 pickup trucks (with a 12th in transit), one Volkswagen Passat and some £100,000 worth of aid. What we bring out is responsive to what the various brigades and our contacts ask of us. We don't buy blind. We check what's needed, and try to supply. The bulk of it is medical and non-pharmaceutical. Tourniquets are probably the single biggest item. There's been a huge problem historically in the Ukrainian army being supplied with third rate Chinese made tourniquets. The ones we get are absolutely top of the range. Each tourniquet can save a life, so it's a good investment. We also provide chest seals, Celox gauze, which helps with blood clotting and a whole range of equipment from sleeping bags, to backpacks, stretchers and the like.

We also provide some more sophisticated medical equipment for various hospitals, in particular to Lviv Military Hospital, where we provided an ultrasound worth £21,000 needed for eye surgery. The second most needed category of item is generators and batteries for field hospitals to give them power at the frontline. On this trip we were asked to buy two large batteries for a field hospital and they were in use within 24 hours of being delivered, which is fantastic. I say to people who are kind enough to donate that if you donate even right before we leave, it can be saving lives in Ukraine within a week.



UKRAINE'S STRUGGLE CONTINUES

A week is a long time in a country at war, particularly at a time of seismic political change. Against the backdrop of the Munich security conference, the eighth MedivactruckstoUkraine aid mission to Ukraine, consisting of 24 drivers successfully delivered 12 vehicles and over £100,000 of aid directly to medics, military units and volunteers from Lviv to Sumy. Our hosts were immensely grateful – but no one is under any illusions that this will be over soon. That means the need for additional vehicles and supplies remains as great as ever, and our fundraising efforts must continue.



The military cemetery in Lviv; it has greatly expanded

Why do I do this?



I just felt the Russian invasion was such a huge wrong and everyone should try and do their bit. I'm not a soldier, I'm going to be 70 this year. But raising money and driving vehicles is something I could do. Then I saw how hugely our efforts were appreciated by Ukrainians. Back home, I found numerous people who said they wanted to do something similar so that was the genesis for the second, third, fourth trip. This one is the largest by some distance, with 24 of us and already we have some people lined up for the May trip. More are welcome!

We're delivering tangible aid, but also there's the intangible. The Ukrainians feel to a significant extent, abandoned by the west - especially now. The fact that we and many others come and see them gives them a sense of not being forgotten. And that is of huge value in itself.

From conversations I've had with lowly troopers and junior officers the feeling is that they don't want to give up what they've been fighting for. There's no prospect of Ukrainians accepting an unjust peace without security. And unless that can be produced this war is going to go on for some time yet, I'm afraid. I'm pretty convinced that our services will continue to be required."

Paul Parsons

To the casual eye Ukraine is a picture of normality; coffee shops and restaurants are open, there are still billboards for the latest iPhone. But it doesn't take long for the reality of the war to make its presence felt.

In Lviv, we are shocked to see how much the military cemetery has expanded since our last visit in September - 60 new graves alone since December, the latest having died since we set off on February 8th. For those accustomed to visiting war graves from the First or Second World Wars, this is an altogether different experience. The youthful, smiling photos of the fallen, many the same age or younger than our children, stare back. At the top end, a pile of fresh earth waits for new arrivals.

Other reminders assail from every quarter; an amputee passes us on crutches, our phones sound with air raid sirens, the frequency increasing the further east we travel. At first it is slightly alarming; but it doesn't take long to become immune. Outside Kyiv the road signs remain blacked-out; in Sumy GPS jamming means navigation by phone becomes an interesting - and hopeless - experience.



One of the donated EcoFlow batteries: in use within 24 hours



Local MP Sarah Bool sees us off in Northamptonshire



Convoy briefing: Poland



Our fastest border crossing ever



At the Lviv Military Hospital with eye surgeons Volodymyr and Paul Runge

In Kyiv we walk past the beautiful baroque-styled St Michael's golden-domed monastery, the headquarters of the orthodox church of Ukraine; its blue facade and golden domes brilliantly reflecting the Ukrainian flag. But it is also home to a memorial wall to thousands of fallen and missing soldiers. For 150m we walk past their names and photos trying to digest that everyone here died *before* the invasion began – it is a memorial to the fallen from 2014 to 2022. Around the corner, in Mykhailivska Square lies a shot-up civilian car from the massacre of Bucha, a stomach-churning memento of indiscriminate Russian army violence.

But our tour is not one of sights – it's an endless run of engagements and meetings with Ukraine's people, some planned, others not, dispensing cars and aid. Everywhere, we meet genuine gratitude for our fundraising efforts. Walking up one of Lviv's cobbled streets, a woman hears our English and comes over to thank us. "Anyone who speaks English is helping us," she says. "Thank you."

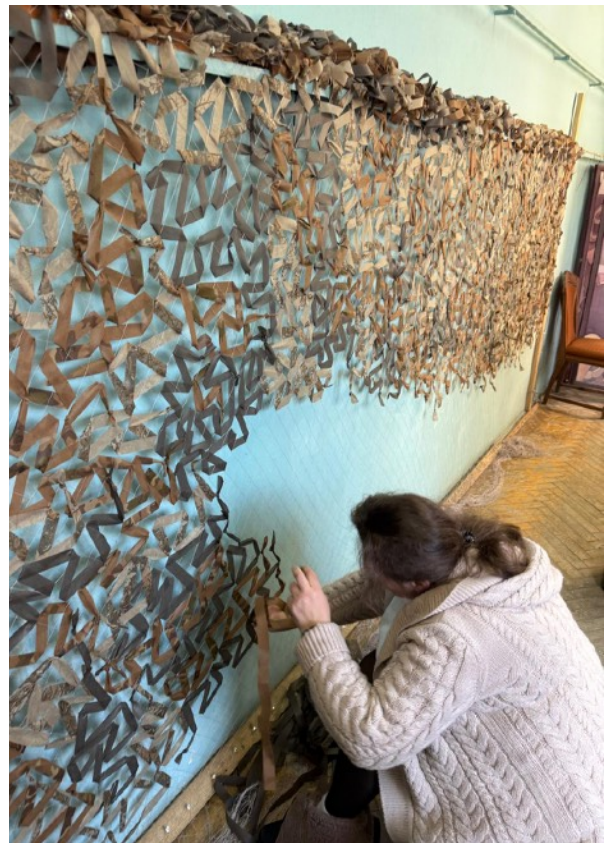
At the Lviv military hospital eye surgeon Volodymyr thanks us for an ultrasound which UK manufacturer Keeler sold us with a generous discount. It will allow him to see deep into the retina for signs of haemorrhage.

In Sumy, soldiers with fatigue written across their faces – but resolute and firm handshakes – thank us for their vehicles before driving straight back to the front. Anastasia, a combat medic, talked of a 29 hour shift and having to deal with 80 casualties with just seven staff. "If I can save one life, it's worth it," she says, before also thanking us all for the delivery of a truck and returning to her unit. On our final night, we stay with soldiers from the 36th Marine Infantry Brigade, just 30km from the frontline. They give us their camp beds, cook up a feast of Ukrainian borscht soup, fried potatoes and homemade sausages. They tell us of their resolve, despite everything. That night we go to bed to the sound of small arms and anti-aircraft fire rumbling in the distance. It seems incredible that only a few days earlier we had gathered in the early hours in Northamptonshire on a cold February morning to be waved on our way by Sarah Bool, MP for South Northamptonshire. The drive across Europe is surprisingly straightforward. Our British passports work their magic and French customs show no interest once satisfied that we are not transporting drones or, surprisingly perhaps, flak jackets. The first day is a 275 mile run from Calais to Dortmund via the low countries. With signs to Eindhoven and Nijmegen, we are reminded of a previous war, this being "Bridge Too Far" country.

In Dortmund one vehicle decides this is as far as it wants to go – these things happen – and it is put on a low loader. By the time you are reading this report it will have hopefully reached Ukraine to be patched up there before heading on to Iziium.

Day two is a long one for the drivers, 575 miles to Gliwice, Poland, almost ten hours behind the wheel including stops. Apart from Dresden, which we only glimpse from the bypass, there is precious little to catch the eye. My passenger Mike, a former Royal Marine, proves excellent company however by the end, I know how to parachute out of an aeroplane at low altitude with a boat, rendezvous with a submarine and then dive through an air-locked hatch to come aboard, presumably dressed for dinner.

In Poland the landscape doesn't improve much – endless pine forests and long straight roads. But as the country opens up so does the spirits of my new passenger, this time Niall, a former officer with the 4th Royal Tank Regiment. "Great tank country, great tank country!" he beams.



Making camouflage netting by hand in Lviv

The border crossing into Ukraine takes some time but poses no real obstacles and I am told is the quickest yet. I sheepishly confess to a Russian visa stamp from before the war started.

"When was that?" Oleh, our Ukrainian fixer asks.

"In 2020, just before covid," I reply.

"That was six years after the war started," he rebukes. For Ukrainians, this war has gone on since 2014 far longer than most of us appreciate. By mid afternoon we are all through and standing in somewhat awe and apprehension beneath a Ukraine sign.

By the end of the third day we are finally across Lviv's famous bone-shaking cobbled streets, which poses little problem for the 4x4s but the overloaded VW Passat suffers. As we finally pull into a secure car park I see that I've driven 1,350 miles, my last drive in a car that has been my workhorse for the past ten years – I can't help feeling a twinge of sadness.

Before eating, we visit the Lviv Military Hospital hospital to donate the ultrasound – a remarkably light and portable device that connects with any laptop to see deep into the retina. Dr Paul Runge, a well known American specialist in the field of neonatal ophthalmology and retinal pathology is also at the hospital, having decided retirement was not for him. This is one of several visits, training staff. He quotes the Chinese adage. "If you give someone a fish you can feed them for a day, but if you teach people to fish you can save the world." At their suggestion, Keelers had organised Dr. Runge to provide the training - what a good example of international cooperation.



On the road east



Marine Yura and cat Shilka



Fishing nets used to protect against drones go to the 25th Separate Assault Battalion, Sumy

On the way to dinner, Richard, a fellow former officer reveals the latest battlefield numbers posted by the Ukrainian General Staff. Today nine Russian tanks have been knocked out – bringing the total to over 10,000 destroyed Russian tanks. It's an astonishing tally, and one that impresses the tank drivers. Dinner is at a cavernous Ukrainian nationalist themed restaurant, Kryivka, which has a firing range in its cellar where diners can fire a replica MP40 at a target of Putin's head. By the evening's end, there's not much left of it.

In the morning we awake to an air raid siren, set off by a cruise missile that hits Poltava. It's a few hundred miles away but it would have only taken another 15 minutes to reach us in Lviv. I fear many of us would have been caught still putting our socks on.

We spend two days in the historic city, a whirlwind of engagements with various individuals and organisations engaged in the war effort. At the Lviv Centre for Veterans we hear from its director Andriy Zholob, a remarkable and charismatic combat surgeon, rock singer and sports announcer. Today he heads up what is one of Ukraine's pioneering veterans' clinics, helping traumatised soldiers re-integrate into civilian society – not an easy task with some 40,000 amputees in the country. Soviet attitudes that stigmatise the injured still persist. "Every veteran needs a psychotherapist – a bridge from one hell to another kind of hell that is civilian life," he tells us, only half joking. "Every country has its problems with veterans. Veterans and civilians are from different planets and we're learning how to live with each other." That can be challenging, he tells us. Some well meaning members of the city authorities offered him tickets to the ballet for his men.

"My veterans don't want ballet tickets, they want beer and tattoos." He says veterans are like teenagers who should be encouraged to pursue their youthful dreams and passions. "What do I need in my life? I need a red Harley Davidson!"

The centre has a staff of 45 and aims to connect veterans with other veterans. They provide sports, mental health services and they're opening a shooting range in March. They also help former combatants find work with businesses, and to improve access issues in the city. "We tell kids that veterans are not from world war two with medals across their chests; we're young funny guys not ashamed to show our prosthetics."

Also present is an amputee Volodymyr Rudkovsky, who duly obliges, pulls off his prosthetic leg and passes it around the room. It's surprisingly heavy.

It's not an easy ride for anyone who comes through the doors, adds Andriy. "We tell them there is no free apartment, you need to work for money."

He also has his own mental scars to bear. "I know that four times I should be dead – minimum. I'm thankful for anything I do now, I'm happy to have survived, and thankful for those guys I saved, but like every doctor, I carry my own internal cemetery for those who did not."

That evening, we learn of the efforts of Yuliya and her colleague who have pioneered a popular wilderness therapy programme, taking traumatised soldiers into the Carpathian mountains. One of our next fundraising efforts is to source a four-wheeled drive minibus for the team.

After Andriy, our next appointment is with the Greek Catholic priests, fathers Orest and Vasyl, at the Nativity of the Holy Virgin Church. Construction only finished in 2000 and the following year Pope John Paul II visited, meeting a crowd of half a million pilgrims. Fr Vasyl apologises for the incomplete frescoes. “The painter, one of my parishioners, is a drone pilot in the east,” he explains.



The group inside the Nativity of the Holy Virgin Church, Lviv

Outside, the pair bless the vehicles. At lunch we meet old friends including Tatiana and Toma, who set up Mothers of Ukraine, a charity that produces four tonnes of food per month for soldiers on the front line. Four enormous cakes are presented to us. As delicious as they are, after the third portion, I'm ready to surrender and somewhat envious of my neighbour Anthony White's gluten intolerance. Anthony has been an integral part of MedivactruckstoUkraine and has been on most convoys. As a thank you for all his efforts, he is presented with a Russian rucksack by another old friend Ihor our friend from the 3rd Brigade who returns to the front the following day. The name of its previous owner is still visible.

After lunch we hand over the much-needed vehicles and aid requested to men from the 36th, 16th, 65th and 47th Brigades. Ihor from the 3rd has to return to Izium by train as his Ford Ranger is on a low loader somewhere in Germany.

The story of Ukraine's struggle against the Russian Goliath is a story of innovation and improvisation that military observers and historians will study for years to come. In the absence of a well developed arms manufacturing base, their response has been more cottage industry, relying on tech entrepreneurs – and homemade solutions. In the afternoon we meet two of them. At a nondescript industrial park, we're introduced to chief engineer Myron. He wears grey tracksuit bottoms and a light jacket that cannot possibly offer any warmth. Even inside it's below freezing but he doesn't seem to notice.

He was making unmanned vehicles for warehouses in Nürnberg Germany when he answered the call for country. Now he makes unmanned and remote-controlled tracked vehicles (or UGVs) with a small team for as little as €20,000. (Coil springs used in the suspension are sourced from China for \$7 a go.) The vehicles can be used to supply cut off frontline troops and also to evacuate the injured. With a top speed of 7km/h they are not fast, but they can move over any terrain, from rocks, deep mud to snow. The military chaps in our group are deeply impressed. “MOD procurement should be here taking notes,” Niall remarks.

Our next stop sees us witness another uniquely innovative response in this new warfare of unmanned drones and vehicles – this time at the opposite end of the spectrum. To defeat AI enhanced observation from enemy drones, Ukrainian forces have turned to an unlikely weapon in their arsenal – women. Machine made camouflage netting is easily recognised by drones. To counter that, students and volunteer women now hand-make camouflage using fishing nets and ribbons. Because there is no pattern, it is not recognised by AI. A skilled pair of hands can make 2m² per hour. One woman proudly tells us her husband and three sons are all at the front. Our English-speaking camouflage guide turns out to be a professor of economic science when not making netting.

If there’s one innovation that characterises this war it’s the drone. They have become the central weapon in this war. At the end of last year Zelensky claimed the country was capable of manufacturing four million drones annually. Up to 30,000 might be in use on a single day, we are told by Victor, who gives a presentation to us at our hotel in Lviv. There are about 100 different types of drone in operation in the war, ranging from small off-the-shelf models that a soldier can retrieve from a rucksack to scout ahead to FPV (first person view) drones piloted by soldiers wearing goggles well behind the front that that can drop a grenade, anti-tank warhead or light glide bomb. At the top end Ukraine's fixed wing drones can fly over 1,000 miles and carry a 250kg bomb. On the other side the Russians use the Iranian Shahed drone, which carries a 40kg payload. At a checkpoint east of Kyiv we spot a destroyed one beside the road. It’s guarded by a pack of stray dogs.



The long straight road to Sumy

Sumy is the culmination of this expedition. The long drive is broken up by a long wait at an internal security checkpoint. We are only allowed on after Paul manages to summon the local mayor on the phone – its effect is immediate and we’re ushered through, the guards practically saluting us. Sumy is the end of our 3,000km journey and it’s where we hand over the trucks and aid to various brigades and units engaged in the region. They’ve deployed over the border into Kursk and we meet soldiers who’ve come up against North Koreans. “They are yet to adapt their tactics to modern warfare,” one soldier dryly notes.

We hand over a vehicle and Irish made fishing nets to the 25th Separate Assault Battalion, a new combined arms warfare unit that includes infantry, tanks, APCs and a drone unit. They’ll repurpose it as anti-drone netting. While there we hear the unmistakable scream of anti aircraft fire in response to a glide bomb which we are later told that kills five people.

To Svetlana, a combat medic we hand over two trucks for evacuation of the injured and much needed medical supplies including the latest combat tourniquets that stop arterial bleeds with the efficiency of a tap. Later Anastasia, another combat medic tells us of their desperate need for 4x4 ambulances – another focus for our next fundraising drive.

Our final vehicle delivery goes to Loza, a lieutenant in the 67th brigade. We first met Loza last year when delivering a truck to Peter Fouché, a South African born combat medic and fundraiser with the 67th who was killed on the frontline in 2024.

Over lunch next to a florist selling imported roses for Valentine’s Day, he gives an eye-opening account of modern warfare against an enemy that doesn’t care for the niceties of the Geneva Conventions, telling us the Russians have used Lewisite poison gas many times. “If you inhale directly you’re dead in ten minutes.”



A memorial beneath the Ukrainian flag, Sumy; the team and Fr Orest outside the Holy Virgin church in Lviv

He tells us of a comrade who was fatally injured by the gas – similar to mustard gas – and he couldn’t kiss him goodbye at the hospital. “My eyes were streaming not from being upset but from the gas.”

Drones are a constant threat. “The problem is once they see you they go after you. It’s much easier to deal with artillery or mortar fire.” Afterwards he shows us a thermal poncho – like a silver space blanket – which gives some protection against heat-seeking cameras – an invisibility cloak, as one of the group dubs it.

Despite Trump’s betrayal, he holds an upbeat view of Ukraine’s ability to take the fight to Putin. “America fears Russia but they are pussies. Ukraine is the first country to capture territory from a nuclear country and they didn’t do anything. We need to strike back. Russia will not stop here – it’s the same situation as before World War Two. Give us the weapons and we will finish this.”

However, he was only too cognisant of the realities. “If the US stops helping we will not be able to fight for a long time.”

Like many people we speak to in Ukraine, he wants peace and an end to the fighting, but only with real guarantees of territorial integrity. “We want to rest, but I fear we will not like the peace.”

Until then, he knows the only option is to fight on. It’s a view echoed by other soldiers we meet. The previous night, at the safe house for soldiers recuperating from the front, Marine Yura defiantly tells us: “We will never give up.”

Tarquin Cooper

THE AID MISSION IN NUMBERS

Product	Quantity	Price
Bolin Chest Seals	200	3,858.54
Walking aids	10	341.50
Soft stretchers	20	559.20
Power banks	50	1,249.50
Sleeping bags	5	299.75
Generators 2.3kw	10	3,200
Generators 3.5kw	14	3,835.02
SAM Junctional Tourniquet	1	339
LCD Monitor	1	433.20
Tourniquets CAT	950	23,198.28
Israeli Bandages (Emergency Bandage 6")	40	227.52
Ecoflow DELTA Pro 3.6kWh	5	12,345
EcoFlow DELTA 2 Portable Power Station	16	12,309.02
Ecoflow River 2 Max	7	2,943
Ecoflow River 2 Pro 768 Wh	9	5,691
Celox Gauze	100	3,257.70
Fishing nets (8m x 100m)	5	4,623.66
Keeler sight box ultrasound and scan probes	1	21,404.77
	TOTAL	£100,115.66

GET INVOLVED

The next convoy leaves on the 10th of May. To join, we ask you to raise funds or donate a vehicle. For more details, contact paul@southfieldshouse.co.uk

THANKS TO ALL DRIVERS

Christopher Hopton, Paul Parsons, Jane Andrewartha, William Romer-Ormiston, Elliott Fielding Miller, Richard Close-Smith, Ed Leigh, Archie Hainsworth, Oleh Nadia, Peter & Kate Ainslie Williams, Kevin Sims, Anthony White, Laura Fearon, Janet Rowe, Peter & Juliet Fenton, Michael & Squeeze Baines, Charles Hastie, Charles Prickett, Richard Hickson, Niall MacNaughton, Tarquin Cooper, Mike Hitchcock