

# ‘One of the most honorable things you can do’: How a Marine vet’s remains were brought home from Ukraine

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Teresa Irwin, left, sister of former Marine Capt. Grady Kurpasi, watches as Marine 1st Sgt. Timothy La Sage, center, and Port Authority police officers place his remains into a waiting car at New York’s John F. Kennedy International Airport on May 19, 2023, in New York. The remains of the Marine veteran who had been missing in Ukraine for more than a year were returned to his family in eastern North Carolina. (Mary Altaffer/AP)

The search for Marine Corps veteran Grady Kurpasi had gone cold until former Army paratrooper Meaghan Mobbs stepped into a safe house in the northeastern Ukrainian city of Kharkiv.

It was January, and Mobbs and her team of veterans and humanitarian workers with the private Romulus T. Weatherman Foundation had already spent months trying to find out what happened to Kurpasi after he went missing in a battle with invading Russian forces near Mykolaiv in the south.

The Weatherman group had arrived at the house in Kharkiv on an unrelated mission, meeting with another American veteran fighting alongside Ukrainians to discuss weapons and logistics. An unexpected breakthrough came a short time later.

“Do you have any Americans with tight lips down in Mykolaiv or Kherson?” the veteran wrote in a text message to Mobbs, asking if what he was about to tell her would remain confidential.

He explained how his unit in Ukraine’s legion of foreign soldiers had been tasked last year with recovering the body of a fallen American but the area had become overrun with Russian troops.

“Holy hell,” Mobbs wrote back. “Are you talking about Grady?”

Kurpasi, 50, had traveled to Ukraine shortly after the Russian military stormed the country in February 2022. He first assisted with evacuations and training Ukrainians for combat and then took up arms himself.

He was motivated to fight after witnessing atrocities committed during Russia’s failed attempt to seize Ukraine’s capital Kyiv, his family and friends said. He had racked up 20 years of valuable military experience before retiring from the Marine Corps in September 2021, including three deployments to Iraq and service as an infantryman, scout sniper and captain with multiple awards for valor.





Marine Capt. Grady Kurpasi in January 2019 speaking to elementary school students in North Carolina when he served as commanding officer of the Headquarters Company of the 2nd Marine Regiment. (Aaron Douds/Marine Corps)

He was “inspiring, selfless, and constantly endured hardship and difficulty with a smile on his face,” Kurpasi’s family wrote on a [GoFundMe page](#). Due to the intensity of the war, there was a need for people such as Grady, they said.

Kurpasi was last seen April 26, 2022, as he left an observation post to investigate the source of incoming gunfire with a British volunteer, Andrew Hill. Two other members of their unit were killed in the ensuing attack and Hill was captured by the enemy.

Rumors swirled that Kurpasi had been taken prisoner by the Russians too or was lying injured in a hospital but Mobbs said she knew in her gut that he was gone. She brought Kurpasi’s case to the Weatherman Foundation in August 2022, eager to find and bring home a fellow recipient of a military scholarship from the Pat Tillman Foundation.

“Our value system within the organization is deeply steeped in service,” said Mobbs, the foundation’s president. The group’s director of operations, Joe Norbeck, is also a veteran “so it mattered to us,” she added. The foundation considers itself “the last-mile convener of humanitarian assistance,” Norbeck said, and is dedicated to protecting children, defending human rights and promoting democracy.

The organization followed multiple leads that went nowhere until that meeting with an American fighter in Kharkiv. The man provided a six-digit grid coordinate of a potential search site where Grady’s remains might be found. It was a large area, Norbeck said, but it was something.

Norbeck, a 27-year veteran of Army Special Forces, led the recovery effort in Ukraine and worked discreetly without notifying Kurpasi’s family of the mission to avoid giving false hope. He, however, had no doubt that his team would succeed.

“I was not going to quit, no matter how many dead ends we hit or how many roadblocks we hit,” Norbeck said. “We were — I was — very determined to make sure that we returned him home because I knew it was possible.”

He enlisted the help of an explosive ordnance disposal team to comb through the designated search area, which was occupied by Russians until a successive Ukrainian counteroffensive last fall, and found medical specialists who could perform remains identification.



Army veteran Joe Norbeck with the remains of Grady Kurpasi on the border of Ukraine and Moldova on May 18, 2023. (Joe Norbeck)

The Ukrainian military loaned a mine clearance team after it returned from the monthslong struggle for the now-destroyed eastern city of Bakhmut and the Ukrainian government provided the scientific experts, Norbeck said.

The five-member group, along with a dog and a drone specifically designed for locating remains, had five days in late March to clear and search the area. They identified several sets of remains after three days.

One of them was Kurpasi.

His partial skeleton was found several hundred meters outside the grid coordinates in woods close to a road in Oleksandrivka, a small frontline village between Mykolaiv and Kherson. Kurpasi's helmet, body armor, boots and backpack were dug up near the bones, Norbeck said.

In early April, testing of the remains matched the DNA sample that the State Department had collected from Kurpasi's 14-year-old daughter and Norbeck finally notified Kurpasi's wife. She then gave the Weatherman Foundation permission to begin the complicated process of transferring the remains to the family's home in Wilmington, N.C.

The journey involved moving the remains to another province of southwestern Ukraine, opening and closing a criminal case, obtaining a coroner's report and a death certificate, and turning over documents to the U.S. Embassy in Kyiv to receive a consular report of the death of an American citizen abroad, Norbeck said.

Kurpasi's remains left Ukraine in mid-May, accompanied by Norbeck. They traveled to Moldova, then Turkey, then on to New York, where Kurpasi's family and friends held a ceremony to honor him. A private jet then flew the remains, covered by an American flag, to North Carolina, where Kurpasi's wife and daughter were waiting.

"It was extraordinarily bittersweet," Mobbs said. "It's a moment that I'm proud of but it's also tinged with sadness and grief and means all hope is extinguished that he will be found alive."

She said she has been fascinated by the act of repatriation since learning about the duties of a mortuary affairs specialist during her officer training at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, N.Y.

"One of the most honorable things that you can do, in my opinion, is bring someone home to be laid to rest on American soil, to give closure to a family," she said.

Norbeck said there was a need for repatriating Americans killed in Ukraine and the Weatherman Foundation was trying to fill it. The organization had previously supported the repatriation of former Navy SEAL Daniel Swift, paying for his funeral and helping move his remains, and sent monetary support for Pete Reed, a former Marine who died while working as a frontline medic, Norbeck said.

Mobbs anticipates taking on more repatriation cases as Ukraine attempts to take back land occupied by Russian forces in a highly anticipated summer counteroffensive.

“I hate to say it, but I imagine there will be more that are killed and so someone’s going to have to do it,” she said. “I want nothing more than my organization to have the honor of bringing Americans home in the way that they should be, with honor and attention, back to their families.”