

EUROPE

‘America’s finest people are right here’: Ukraine pays tribute to US fighters

By SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA

STARS AND STRIPES • July 30, 2026



Oles Sanin visits Christopher James Campbell's grave at Lukianivske Cemetery in Kyiv, Ukraine, July 19, 2026, where he replaces the American flag every six months. Sanin said it was important to preserve the memory of Campbell, who died fighting with Ukraine's International Legion in 2023. (Phillip Walter Wellman/Stars and Stripes)

KYIV, Ukraine — The former U.S. soldier believed to be the first fallen American fighter buried in Ukraine rests in the Alley of Heroes at the historic Lukianivske Cemetery, flanked by Ukrainian and American flags.

A placard written in Ukrainian marks his grave: Christopher James Campbell, Dec. 18, 1995-April 6, 2023.

A veteran of the Army's 82nd Airborne Division who had deployed to the Middle East, Campbell arrived in Ukraine shortly after Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022. He initially

worked as a military instructor and eventually enlisted in the International Legion, a formation of foreign volunteers.

“He was kind of an idealist; he just really believed in the mission,” said Alex Peterson, a fellow former American soldier who recruited Campbell to train Ukrainian troops. “He always kept saying, ‘It’s the right thing to do.’ ”

Campbell repeated those words before deploying to Bakhmut, a city in Ukraine’s eastern Donbas region that saw some of the war’s heaviest combat. A few days later, he was killed in an assault by the Russian paramilitary Wagner Group, according to Peterson.

His portrait in the cemetery is draped in a rushnyk, a traditional Ukrainian cloth used to mark life’s most significant moments, from birth to death. This one is for the grave; another was meant for his wedding to his Ukrainian fiancée, Ivanna Sanina-Wininger.

Before he died, Campbell told her that if the worst happened, he wanted to be buried in Ukraine. It was his home now, he said, and he wanted visitors to his grave to see an American flag flying there as a reminder that Americans supported Ukraine.

“This for me was the most American thing,” Sanina-Wininger said. “You fight for freedom and show it even after your death.”

Every Sunday, her family visits Campbell’s gravesite to tidy it, replace or water the flowers and pay their respects. Her father, Oles Sanin, replaces the American flag every six months so it doesn’t fade.

“You have to do something to preserve and build upon what he fought for. That’s important,” said Sanin, a prominent filmmaker in Ukraine. “Graves are necessary for the living as a conscience.”

A range of tributes

Numerous efforts are underway in Ukraine to recognize and commemorate foreign combatants, many of whom are Americans.

Kyiv observed U.S. Memorial Day this year with a ceremony at St. Sophia Cathedral, where both countries’ national anthems were sung and the estimated 118 Americans who died

fighting for Ukraine were remembered.

The National Museum of the History of Ukraine in the Second World War opened an exhibition last year to tell some of their stories.

Many of their personal belongings — medals, flags and photos — were provided by the R.T. Weatherman Foundation. The U.S. nonprofit helps wounded foreigners fighting in Ukraine, returns the remains of deceased soldiers to their home countries and tracks those missing in action.

The “For Freedom” exhibition, initiated by the foundation and featuring fighters from several countries, was supposed to be on display for six months but proved so popular that the museum has extended it at least through the end of this year, said museum spokeswoman Lyudmyla Melnyk.

“It’s very important to us,” she said. “We also feel that the public still wants to see it. We see the interest.”

Nearly 120,000 people last year visited the exhibition, located at the entrance to the museum beneath the towering Mother Ukraine monument, a Soviet-era landmark overlooking Kyiv. More than 60,000 visitors have passed through so far this year, according to Melnyk.

Among them are other foreign service members or their relatives, who often ask that they or their loved ones be included. The display is fixed, but the museum accepts their donated items and records their stories.

“As long as the museum exists, we’ll keep these items here on our premises,” Melnyk said. “And of course we’ll use them for various exhibitions, not only in Ukraine but also abroad.”

At Ukraine’s new National Military Memorial Cemetery, modeled after Arlington National Cemetery in the U.S., foreign fighters are given the same ceremonial burial with full military honors as Ukrainian service members.

“What matters is not a person’s citizenship but their contribution to the defense of Ukraine,” said Lesya Kachor, a cemetery spokeswoman. “If a person stood up to defend our

country and took direct part in combat operations, they may be honored at the National Military Memorial Cemetery alongside other defenders.”

Since opening last August, the cemetery has held burials for fighters who were born in the U.S., Brazil, Poland, Portugal, Hungary, Russia and other countries, she said.

Global solidarity

In 2025, the war museum estimated through open sources that around 120,000 foreigners had fought or were fighting in Ukraine’s military. But exact figures are difficult to determine.

David Malet, an associate professor at American University who researches foreign fighters, said Americans appear to have served in greater numbers than any other foreign nationality.

Many countries that have fought wars with foreign manpower have tried to downplay it, Malet said. Israel, for example, took decades before fully recognizing and memorializing the contributions of thousands of foreign volunteers who fought in its 1948 war of independence.

But Ukraine has been different. Facing a much larger enemy, it issued a call for foreign volunteers in the opening days of the war and continues to celebrate them, promoting their service on official social media accounts.

“That’s something that I think is fairly unique in the modern era,” Malet said.

He expects that public recognition to carry over into postwar remembrance and memorialization, especially as Ukraine seeks greater integration with the West through membership in the European Union and NATO.

“Ukraine’s leadership is really trying to keep the world invested by showing that there is this ongoing contribution,” he said. “I think they would want to keep the narrative going that Ukraine is so closely tied to the rest of the world that people were willing to sacrifice for it.”

A precursor to that may be the overflowing flag memorial on Maidan, or Independence Square, in central Kyiv, where patches of ground are dedicated to the fallen members of specific military units and nationalities.

A spot teeming with American flags and photos of Americans who died fighting for Ukraine has become a draw for those who fought alongside them in the International Legion.

David, a 60-year-old Russian-born Israeli citizen, walks through it three or four times a week. He treads a well-worn path: first the French, then the 2nd International Legion, then the Belarusians and finally — his favorite, he said — the patch with the Americans.

He lights some candles for them, or if driving by on the way to work, he salutes them. He was joined on a recent evening visit by a former comrade, a Georgian-Ukrainian named Vakhtang. They declined to provide their last names.

Vakhtang, 48, said he had fond memories of serving with Americans and had been surprised to meet so many who cared about a war so far from home.

Both said they were proud and honored to have gone into battle with them.

“I think America’s finest people are right here,” David said. “On this little peak.”

EUROPE



SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA

Svetlana Shkolnikova covers Congress for Stars and Stripes. She previously worked as a reporter for The Record newspaper in New Jersey and the USA Today Network. She is a graduate of the University of Maryland and has reported from Estonia, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Poland, Russia and Ukraine.

Subscribe to Stars and Stripes Just 99c a week!

SUBSCRIBE

STRIPES TOP NEWS



NAVY

Navy awards contracts for 14 new attack and ballistic missile submarines