

American veterans race to train Ukrainian soldiers as war with Russia sweeps more troops into battle

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KYIV, Ukraine — On the last day of February, four days after the start of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, former U.S. Army Ranger Patrick Creed walked up to the Ukrainian Embassy in Washington, D.C., and knocked on the door.

He said he felt nervous and stupid and didn’t quite know what to say, but when a woman behind bulletproof glass asked what he wanted, Creed responded, “I’m here to volunteer for the army.”

A Ukrainian colonel at the time warned the five other Americans filling out paperwork at the embassy with Creed enlisting them in a new international legion for foreign fighters that they were signing up for something they had never experienced in the U.S. military, the former major remembered.

“You’re not going to fight in an American war,” the colonel told them. “The Russians have control of the air, we don’t. The Russians have 10 times as much artillery.”

“You will get hit with Russian rocket artillery,” the colonel emphasized.



Patrick Creed, a retired U.S. Army major, guides members of the Ukrainian Territorial Defense Forces as they clear a stairwell at a training site outside Kyiv, Ukraine, on Nov. 2, 2022. Creed is a member of the Mozart Group, private security company of mostly military veterans who traveled to Ukraine to train that country's troops. (J.P. Lawrence/Stars and Stripes)

Creed, 54, was unfazed.

"I didn't join the Army for the dental benefits," he said. "I like the zing."

For two months in the spring, Creed found that rush on battlefields around the Black Sea, where he mainly fought in a "static trench warfare kind of situation."

Today, Creed said he finds it in the remains of a half-constructed, Soviet-era sanatorium in a village outside Ukraine's capital city Kyiv, where he trains Ukrainian soldiers for urban combat.

Nine members of the Territorial Defense Forces, Ukraine's equivalent of a local militia, milled around the abandoned property on a recent November afternoon. They ran up and down cement stairs with no railings, broken glass crunching under their feet, as they practiced clearing rooms, securing areas and throwing grenades.

On breaks, trainees share the outdoors with a flock of geese and a tabby nicknamed Combat Cat. Sometimes the neighbor's goats get to their lunch before they do.



A member of the Ukrainian Territorial Defense Forces on Nov. 2, 2022, holds Combat Cat, a feline companion that lives next to a military training site outside Kyiv, Ukraine. (J.P. Lawrence/Stars and Stripes)

Creed and Fred, a former Marine Corps sergeant who declined to provide his last name, have been teaching this group — almost all of them related through blood or marriage — for a couple weeks.

Their efforts are part of a broader crash-course training program created by the Mozart Group, a U.S. veteran-led private security company founded in March by retired Marine Col. Andrew Milburn. Named as a dig at the Russian mercenary organization the Wagner Group, the Mozart Group also performs evacuations at the front lines and has grown its staff to nearly 30 personnel of highly experienced trainers made up of mostly former American service members.

“We give them what we can as fast as we can, but they really need six months,” Fred, 44, said of the training. “There’s only so much you can do, and that’s the real struggle.”

The last four units that he taught went to the front lines just three days later. The Territorial Defense Forces are meant to guard checkpoints and provide other local security, but a June law made it possible for them to be sent into battle, said Erik, director of training for the Mozart Group and a 54-year-old retired Army Special Forces lieutenant colonel.

“These [Ukrainian trainees] are the guys who were pharmacists yesterday,” he said, also declining to provide his last name for security reasons. “This is the most underfunded, under-resourced and undertrained organization.”

This particular group of trainees might have had a more close-up view of the war than many in Ukraine. They reside about 5 miles from Irpin and Bucha, towns that have become synonymous with Russian atrocities committed in the early days of the invasion.



Andrey Kashlakov, a member of the Ukrainian Territorial Defense Forces, rushes through a mock building as part of room clearance training provided by U.S. military veterans at a site outside Kyiv, Ukraine, on Nov. 2, 2022. (J.P. Lawrence/Stars and Stripes)

Andrey Kashlakov, 25, said he evacuated more than 1,000 people, including about 20 Ukraine National Guard soldiers and hundreds who were injured, from neighboring towns as Russian forces advanced on Kyiv in March. Blood pooled in the bus that he once used to transport construction supplies, he said.

Later, Kashlakov drove out to villages up to 90 miles away and delivered bread and other food to grateful grandmothers. He said he was running on adrenaline and never scared, finding some security from the gun he carried and a stint five years ago in the Ukrainian army.

He had kept all his military-issued clothes and equipment knowing that a larger war was coming. Today, he patrols his home village Horenka for marauders but waits for something worse.

“Maybe the Belarusians will attack so it’s best to be prepared,” Kashlakov said, pointing to a renewed military buildup in Ukraine’s northern neighbor. He happily volunteered to throw a blue training grenade when Fred offered the opportunity.

The Ukrainian trainees reveled in the loud bang of the dummy weapons.

“They went boom!” they said, laughing.



Patrick Creed, a retired U.S. Army major, evaluates members of the Ukrainian Territorial Defense Forces as they rush through the hallway of an abandoned building and clear potentially dangerous rooms as part of training outside Kyiv, Ukraine, on Nov. 2, 2022. Creed traveled to Ukraine in March of 2022 to use his experience as an Army Ranger to instruct troops fighting Russia forces. (J.P. Lawrence/Stars and Stripes)

Creed said instructors try to keep the mood light and do their best to instill confidence. Some of the soldiers trained by the Mozart Group have been killed fighting the Russians, and the burden is heavy, he said.

“We want to leave them feeling not like Superman but maybe like Batman or Robin,” said Erik, who teaches military decision-making procedures.

At a National Guard military base 15 miles away, two American veterans instructed soldiers on how to move as a team and react to gunfire as they inched toward a low-slung building painted in camouflage. The sound of soldiers shooting rocket-propelled grenades echoed in the background.

Every morning at the training site begins with basic weapons handling and medical drills so the act of reloading a gun or using a tourniquet becomes muscle memory, said Chris, a 27-year-old former Army specialist from Ohio who served as a medic and arrived in Ukraine a month ago.

“I feel like it’s making a difference,” he said, declining to provide his last name. “Every day these guys show up they’re motivated to learn, and every day you see some semblance of improvement from previous days.”

Ukraine’s National Guard is operated by the Ministry of Internal Affairs, not the Ministry of Defense, and as a result receives a fraction of the Western support that flows to the regular army, Erik said.

The Mozart Group has trained every branch of Ukraine’s armed forces, but its strongest relationship is with the guard members, especially the National Guard’s 1st Presidential Brigade, he said. A Russian missile hit the unit’s headquarters within the first 24 hours of the February invasion, killing a staff duty officer, Erik said.

A crew continued working on repairs to the building’s damaged cafeteria in early November.

Soldiers here are taught by U.S. veterans and Ukrainian instructors who interpret and adjust American tactics to fit a Ukrainian fighting force that is still shedding its Soviet past.

A 27-year-old Ukrainian soldier and instructor who goes by the call sign “Legion” said his country is waging war on the battlefield and within its own ranks, constantly hunting for saboteurs and informants for Russia. The communication methods championed by the American veterans are not very employable when there are enemies within the ranks, he said.

“You cut off one head and two more grow in its place,” Legion said.

Other incongruities also crop up, including some techniques that seem geared for younger and more experienced soldiers, and most guard members and Territorial Defense soldiers are neither, he said. Americans are also offering input on a type of war that they have not fought in many years, he said.

“Fighting against terrorists is easier than fighting against those lobbing artillery,” Legion said. “Americans have never encountered an enemy willing to level towns and forests. This opponent is different ... he will use civilians and civilian infrastructure to fight.”

American vets training Ukrainian soldiers

Members of the Mozart Group, a U.S. veteran-led private security company founded in March, provide combat training to Ukrainian soldiers throughout the country. The map shows the cities where instructors have traveled to teach a variety of Ukrainian service members, including those pulled from the front lines.



The nature of this conflict, one that is reminiscent of World War II, has been one of the main draws for American veterans working in Ukraine.

“I think for a lot of us, it’s kind of like the good war we’ve been waiting for,” said Roman, a 46-year-old former Army infantry captain who declined to provide his last name.

“Afghanistan and Iraq were a lot more ambiguous — whether we should’ve been there, or as long as we were, and we were always living among people we were not sure wanted us there. This is very morally unambiguous. I wouldn’t say it’s good versus evil, but it’s normal people with all their problems and complexities against evil.”

Roman deployed twice to Afghanistan and once to Iraq with the 82nd Airborne Division before moving 10 years ago from his native New York to Ukraine, the birthplace of his parents. He was in the process of returning to the U.S. when war broke out and briefly thought of staying to fight.

A desire to stay out of danger for the sake of his wife and two young children ultimately kept Roman out of the fight. After settling them in the U.S., Roman joined the Mozart Group last month and is now teaching planning, patrolling and command and control.

“This training opportunity was about the right size for me,” he said, looking around at the dozens of guard members performing exercises in front of him. “Even though you don’t get the immediate satisfaction that you might from doing an operation on the front, you are influencing a lot of people.”

Creed also wrestled with the pull of the battlefield. He left Ukraine in late May and spent the summer at his home just outside Philadelphia fighting the urge to go back. A fellow American volunteer he knew — Marine Corps veteran Willy Joseph Cancel — was killed in southern Ukraine, and another — retired Marine and Iraq War veteran Grady Kurpasi — went missing. His survivor’s guilt was strong.

“You want to go back and keep fighting,” Creed said. “After three weeks in Ukraine, I have and will probably always have such a deep and visceral hate for the Russians.”

In a compromise with his family, Creed agreed to return to Ukraine as a trainer in September.

It doesn’t have the thrill of combat, but he finds fulfillment in it for other reasons: the fun of swapping dark military jokes with Fred and other vets as they ride in a van, and the novelty of teaching in a strange, graffitied building with unfinished windows and Ukrainian school books strewn on the floor.

“I like working with soldiers who are enthusiastic like this, even though I don’t speak the language,” Creed said.



Alla Golumbiivska, a member of the Ukrainian Territorial Defense Forces, prepares for training on how to clear potentially dangerous rooms as part of instruction provided by U.S. military veterans at a location outside Kyiv, Ukraine, on Nov. 2, 2022. (J.P. Lawrence/Stars and Stripes)

Alla Golumbiivska, 28, followed Creed as he showed Territorial Defense members how to carefully move up a stairwell and cover each other as they cleared floors of the building.

“Nyet,” Creed told her in Russian when she forgot to conceal herself at the cutout of a window.

Golumbiivska worked as a dog groomer before dressing in fatigues and carrying an Airsoft rifle. She fled to Poland with her 8-year-old daughter in early March, leaving behind her husband, the commander of a local defense unit, to patrol their village.

Ten homes were destroyed on their street, Golumbiivska said, but the town of Horenka was spared the worst of Russia’s spring offensive in the north as invading forces sought to capture Kyiv.

She returned to Ukraine after six months, fearless and with a hunger to learn how to protect her loved ones.

“I don’t want war, I don’t want to fight but I want to defend my home, my land, my child and my husband,” she said. “I want to be ready.”

Training with the Mozart Group has become a family affair, and Golumbiivska was joined on recent sessions by extended relatives, including Kashlakov’s father and mother.

“Whenever there are tough moments in life, we come together,” Golumbiivska said.

Kashlakov said it can be difficult, and weird, to learn alongside his elderly parents “but they have the will, and that’s important.”

Fred, one of the U.S. trainers, peered out at the odd group as another day of training got underway recently and asked what they wanted to learn.

“Do you have specific things that you want to be trained on today, related to any topics?” he asked. “Shooting and fighting around vehicles? Procedures for using grenades? How to secure a building? Anything at all?”

“All of them,” the trainees replied. “All the topics you mentioned are interesting for us.”



A member of the Ukrainian Territorial Defense Forces on Nov. 2, 2022, clears a hallway as part of training at an abandoned building outside Kyiv, Ukraine. (J.P. Lawrence/Stars and Stripes)