

EUROPE

Former US Navy boats now help Ukraine patrol the Black Sea

By SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA

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Ukrainian sailor Roman mans a machine gun during a patrol on the Black Sea on an American-donated patrol boat on July 23, 2026. (Svetlana Shkolnikova/Stars and Stripes)

ODESA, Ukraine — For one boat commander in the Ukrainian navy, the main advantage of the American patrol vessel he pilots is its maneuverability.

It's small, fast, hard to spot from a distance and a stark contrast to its bulky Soviet-era predecessors.

“You can do a lot with it,” said Sgt. Oleh, speaking on the condition that only his first name be used, in accordance with Ukrainian military rules.

That nimbleness proved pivotal on a recent overcast morning on the Black Sea as Russia fired three Onyx missiles at the Odesa region amid a stepped-up air assault this summer on Ukraine's southern coast.

Oleh, his crew and a Stars and Stripes reporter were on the open water when he received word that the anti-ship cruise missiles were headed their way.

To dodge a potential direct hit, Oleh threw the boat into a series of evasive maneuvers, sending the vessel veering sharply through the waves.

The missiles struck inland moments later with a series of thunder-like claps, sending plumes of black smoke into the air. They missed the boat and what navy personnel said was the missiles' intended target: Ukraine's battered port infrastructure.

Oleh sped away to a nearby dock, where the crew disembarked to wait for the air raid alarm to end and joked that a typical day in Odesa began not with coffee as a local coffee chain proclaimed, but with rockets and drones.

It would be difficult to imagine vessels inherited from the Soviet Union operating in such an environment. They were so big that they were dangerous to maneuver quickly, said Oleh, 27.

The delivery of patrol boats built for the U.S. Navy has allowed the small Ukrainian navy to transform into a more agile force.

The U.S. sent Ukraine six of the Navy's Metal Shark "40 Defiant" patrol boats a few months after Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022 as part of a security aid package to guard Ukraine's river and coastal areas.

Several remain in heavy use four years later near Odesa, mainly helping keep the waters around Ukraine's largest port city safe for commercial traffic but also clearing mines and assisting with air defense.

Lately, the crew led by Oleh has been exceptionally busy shooting down relentless swarms of Russian Shahed drones and fishing their destroyed fragments out of the water.

"There has been an escalation and for the past month it's been nonstop," said Roman, a 30-year-old machine gunner on the boat.

Two different machine guns are typically needed to down one of the Shaheds — the 7.62mm M240 tends to be too weak on its own so the 12.7mm M2 Browning at the stern has to be fired as well, Roman said.

The work has become riskier now that many of the drones are equipped with cameras, said Yevhen, a junior lieutenant in the navy.

The security situation in the Black Sea has been deteriorating precipitously. In late July, for the first time since Ukraine drove back Russia's Black Sea Fleet to secure a shipping corridor in 2023, traffic into Ukraine's ports halted.



(Noga Ami-rav/Stars and Stripes)

“The Russians put in a lot of effort to stop the operation of the ports,” said Oleksiy Goncharenko, a member of the Ukrainian parliament representing the Odesa region. “They attacked and attacked and attacked until the vessels stopped moving.”

Russia's intensified bombardment of port infrastructure, grain silos and commercial vessels has threatened Ukraine's ability to export the agricultural products that power its economy and feed millions around the world.

The attacks come as Ukraine pursues its own campaign against Russian oil tankers and other ships in the Black Sea and the adjoining Sea of Azov, seeking to isolate Russian-occupied Crimea and disrupt Moscow's shipping routes.

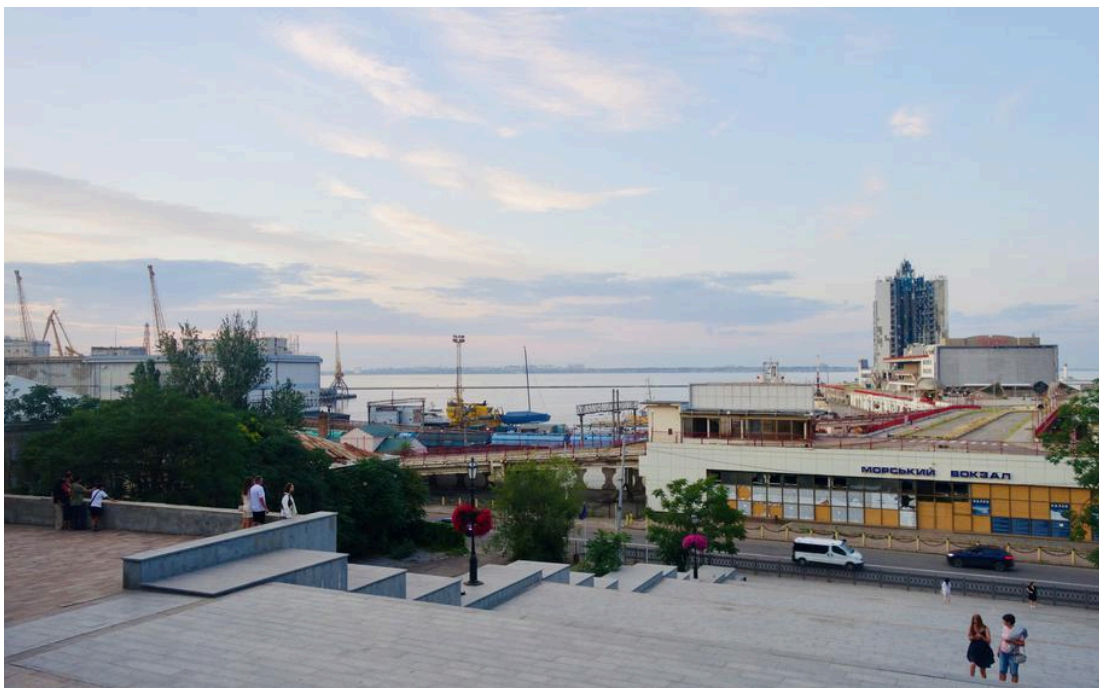
Ukraine relies on an arsenal of long-range drones to wage battle at sea. Its navy lost about 70% of its fleet when Russia annexed the Crimean Peninsula in 2014 and seized Ukrainian naval headquarters at Sevastopol with it.

Since then, the U.S. and other countries have contributed vessels to help the navy rebuild, including four former Coast Guard Island-class patrol boats. One was sunk by Russia in 2022, but the other three remain in use, according to Yevhen.

Retired U.S. Navy Adm. James Foggo, who was serving as commander of Naval Forces Europe-Africa when Ukraine received the first batch of Coast Guard cutters in 2019, said a more conventional Ukrainian fleet cannot be restored until the war ends.

He lamented that the Black Sea, a waterway that borders three NATO allies and two U.S. partners and has “all of our interests at heart” as a global trade route for grain and energy, had become a major theater in a war.

The sea is considered one of the world’s most strategically important bodies of water. Until December 2021, a U.S.- or NATO-flagged warship operated there about 240 days a year, said Foggo, now the dean of the Center for Maritime Strategy think tank.



The damaged marine passenger terminal in Odesa, Ukraine’s largest port on the Black Sea, as seen from the Potemkin Stairs on July 24, 2026. (Svetlana Shkolnikova/Stars and Stripes)

Its geopolitical significance prompted the first congressional visit to Odesa this February since the war began. Sen. Jeanne Shaheen of New Hampshire, the Democrat who led the

delegation, said it was vital to counter Russian President Vladimir Putin's ambitions to project power in the region.

"The Black Sea is critical because Putin sees it in his orbit. Some refer to it as his lake," Shaheen said in 2023 as she pushed for a U.S. strategy toward the region. "He sees it historically and strategically as an important part of his empire."

Today, Ukraine is maintaining a constant presence on its Black Sea waters with a "mosquito fleet" of small and fast boats that have, for the most part, managed to evade Russian attacks.

"We are very thankful for them, we use them and it's nice to know that they're alive," Goncharenko said of the vessels received from the U.S.

Russian strikes in four years of war have damaged or destroyed more than 1,000 port facilities on the Black Sea, hit more than 230 commercial ships and killed or injured more than 300 civilians, according to Ukrainian Foreign Minister Andrii Sybiha.

In June and July, Russia attacked nearly 50 cargo vessels, killing more than 30 people, Ukraine told the United Nations Security Council last week after calling an emergency meeting in response to Russian attacks in the Black Sea.

The boat commanded by Oleh is out at sea "24/7, 365 days a year" in an effort to ensure freedom of navigation.

The Ukrainian navy has kept the vessel in nearly the same condition it arrived in. The only modification has been the addition of netting to help protect against loitering munitions, according to Oleh.

At the bow, 24-year-old Hryhoriy keeps vigilant watch, scanning the horizon for enemy activity. His primary responsibility is operating defensive fire as well as manning the boat's grenade launcher.

The job can be grueling — leaving him exposed to the elements while facing an ever-growing threat of attack.

"But there's no other way," Hryhoriy said. "It's for our safety."