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Hell in high definition: Inside front-line aerial unit surveilling battle of Bakhmut

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by Francis Farrell January 3, 2023 11:06 PM 12 min read



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Editor's Note: The Ukrainian soldiers featured in this article are identified by first names and callsigns to protect their identities.

BAKHMUT, Donetsk Oblast – On the screen of a large handheld remote control, a Ukrainian drone operator scans a gray, washed-out landscape of ruined houses and muddy trenches.

It isn't long before movement is spotted. A small Russian **assault team** is advancing on a Ukrainian trench in a field, just past the last line of houses on the edge of the city.

“Look, he's shooting now,” says the drone pilot, pointing to a shabby gray figure with a rifle raised. “And another, just over there, he just threw a grenade.”

The Russian and Ukrainian soldiers are now less than 30 meters from each other.

“We don't have anything to shoot at them with, but at this point it would be too dangerous anyway, we could hit our own guys,” says the pilot.

Caked in the mud of their landscape, the Russian soldiers disappear from sight as soon as they appeared. The pilot takes note of the spot and pans away, looking for other targets.

The remote is in the hands of "Rem", a former car dealer from Dnipro. Rem belongs to **Skala**, a separate battalion in the Ukrainian army tasked with aerial reconnaissance and assault operations that has been posted in Bakhmut since late autumn.

Sitting in the corridor of an industrial building inside Bakhmut city in the eastern Donetsk Oblast, Rem and his senior officer Duke are operating a high-end DJI quadcopter drone, prized for its great zoom capabilities.

In coordination with several different Ukrainian units in their sector, the pair identify targets, correct artillery fire, and provide general reconnaissance support with their high-definition broadcast.

Not far from where fighting was earlier seen, Rem has spotted something. “It's an automatic grenade launcher position, providing cover for the assault.”

“Pions with clusters,” Rem calls into the radio, specifying his weapon and munition of choice for the target. Firing 203mm shells, the 2S7 Pion, a formidable Soviet-era self-propelled artillery wielded by both sides, is the largest caliber howitzer used in the war.

“It's perfect for an enemy gathering of this size,” he says, “but we will hit them with whatever we have.”



Christmas decorations hang in the corridor where Rem and Duke operate their drone in Bakhmut, Donetsk Oblast, on Dec. 29, 2022. (Francis Farrell/The Kyiv Independent)

Commercially available drones have carried out a multitude of functions on both sides of the war, with much of them developed right on the battlefield.

As Russia continues to assault Bakhmut and its outskirts, the site of some of the heaviest hostilities along the entire front line, drone teams like Rem's are not short of work.

Bakhmut lies at the intersection of several major roads crucial to Ukraine's defense of northern Donetsk Oblast. After a series of major Russian battlefield defeats over autumn, the accent on Bakhmut is also political, to achieve even just one small military victory and counter concerns at home that Russia is losing the war.

Under cover of artillery and grenade launcher fire, small Russian assault squads are making slow and steady advances, capturing Ukrainian positions and doing their best to defend themselves against counterattacks.

Observing the work of the Skala drone unit for three hours, the Kyiv Independent gained a rare, real-time look at the fierce battles for Bakhmut unfolding less than two kilometers away.

"What hurts is the understanding that they are already in this forest here," says Rem, pointing at a tactical map. "From there they have direct line of sight, even a tank could hit us here."



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Eyes of the artillery

Flying out with a fresh battery, Rem gets the word that the Pions are ready.

To his frustration though, the howitzers have taken aim at a different target, a warehouse about a kilometer away where Russian soldiers were spotted earlier.

Rem repeats his request to strike on the grenade launcher position, but the crew says they have already dialed in the massive Pions to hit the warehouse. With a sigh, Rem gives the “all clear.”

“Fire,” comes the word over the radio, followed immediately by “I’m watching” from Rem. The lurching boom of the huge weapon comes with a delay, easily distinguishable from the rest of the fighting.

A tense silence hangs in the corridor while the shell flies through the air. The first shot lands about 20 meters short of the target, while the second overshoots, sending a cloud of smoke up from behind the building.

Having placed two shells on either side of the target, the Pion crew splits the difference, landing the third right by the door where seven Russian soldiers were earlier seen entering. A fourth also hits nearby, raising the likelihood of casualties inside.

“Thank you for your fire,” says Rem over the radio.



A cloud of smoke rises from a warehouse building after a strike by a Ukrainian 2S-7 Pion howitzer, as seen on the remote of a Skala Battalion drone in Bakhmut, Donetsk Oblast, on Dec. 29, 2022. Coordinates of the drone's position have been blurred out to protect the pilot's location. (Francis Farrell/The Kyiv Independent)

In ideal conditions, with artillery at the ready, it can take as little as five minutes between the drone pilot spotting a target and Ukrainian artillery engaging it.

“We sometimes see videos of Russian soldiers complaining about how easily and quickly Ukrainians are able to call for artillery strikes,” says Duke. “It’s much harder for the average soldier to do the same across the Russian chain of command.”

Finally, a new artillery crew is free to engage the grenade launcher position Rem wanted to hit earlier. This time, it’s a Polish-built Krab, firing 155mm NATO standard shells.

The 155mm artillery pieces are highly praised in the Ukrainian army, with a reputation for superior accuracy over Soviet-era weapons. This time, something goes wrong, as the shell overshoots its target by over 100 meters.

“Not bad, not bad,” says Rem sarcastically to the Krab crew, “but nowhere near where we wanted to hit.”

The second shell is a great improvement, but the third is once again way off.

“I guess they probably won't hit,” he says quietly.

The crew tell Rem they're firing one last shell. The ground explodes right in the middle of Rem's crosshairs. A direct hit.

"This one was beautiful," he says. "That's what I wanted, straight in the ravine. I'm happy."

As winter drags on, ammunition shortages, especially of 152mm and 122mm howitzer shells, are plaguing both sides.

Reportedly filmed near Bakhmut sometime late in December, a [video](#) emerged on social media of Wagner Group soldiers saying that they had run out of artillery ammunition in the area, berating the Russian General Staff in an address full of expletives. Wagner Group, a Russian state-controlled paramilitary organization, has been playing a major role in the offensive on Bakhmut.

Speaking to the Kyiv Independent, Ukrainian soldiers from different units around Bakhmut noted the drop in Russian artillery intensity in recent days, but warned against optimistic conclusions.

Meanwhile, Ukraine's ammunition problems are well-known, as supplies of Soviet-era shells in Europe run low and few facilities are capable of producing them. It wasn't until December that Ukraine [announced](#) the launch of domestic manufacture of the shells.



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'Presents' from above

Starting in summer, both sides began to modify commercial quadcopters for a particularly gruesome task: dropping improvised bombs on enemy trenches.

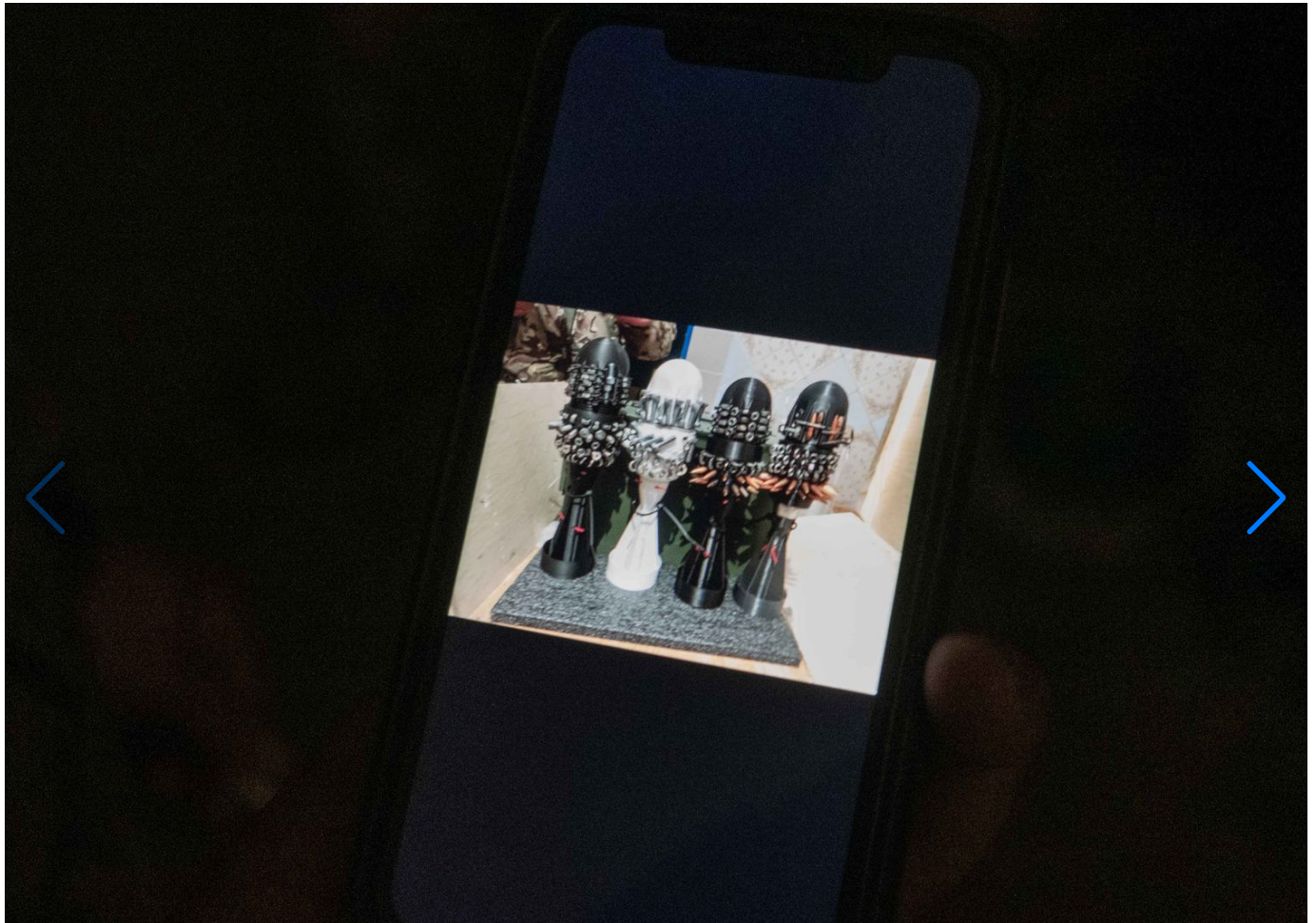
One young pilot specializing in this brutal new form of warfare is "Contrabass," who joined Skala in May, when the group was posted near Iziium in Kharkiv Oblast.

Terrifying enough to watch on a screen, the scenes of the bombs slowly falling onto unwitting infantry can be devastating for soldiers' morale.

Often, the wounded are abandoned in fright by those still able to move, writhing in pain in the mud before another bomb arrives to finish them off.

"In one area in Kharkiv Oblast," Contrabass told the Kyiv Independent at the Skala base in Bakhmut, "we were dropping the bombs so much that their infantry and tanks apparently

refused to fight.”



The phone screen of Skala Battalion pilot Contrabass shows Ukrainian improvised bombs of the kind dropped by drones on positions around Bakhmut, Donetsk Oblast, on Dec. 29, 2022. (Francis Farrell/The Kyiv Independent)

With a more static front line and a higher concentration of troops as is the case in Bakhmut, the role played by drone-dropped bombs is nonetheless reduced.

“The role they can play depends a lot on the situation,” said Contrabass. “When you bring them a ‘present’ like that, the chance of losing your drone is over 50%, they can be shot down fairly easily by small arms fire.”

“Right now we are going through a lot of drones, not everybody understands that here they are an expendable resource,” he said. “One can work for a month or two, or we could lose it on its first ever flight, and this is rarely the fault of the pilot.”

The constant need for drones is understood at the highest level of the Ukrainian leadership, evidenced by the Army of Drones initiative. **Launched** by the state fundraising platform United24, the drones initiative was promoted by international celebrities such as “Star Wars” actor Mark Hamill.

Contrabass is confident that the money is being well spent.

“These things on average can cost around \$2,000, so to lose it on the first flight is always a shame,” he said.

“One commander told me that yes, it's a lot of money, but if you spotted just one successful strike, if you dropped just one bomb on those bastards, you have saved lives.”



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Behind friendly lines

Just as the Krabs are finishing their work on the grenade launcher, Rem gets a call from the commander of an infantry battalion holding the line in his sector.

The commander has lost contact with four of his soldiers who had been in a trench just across the last street of houses on the city's eastern outskirts. His voice is apprehensive.

“I need to check to the right of the petrol station,” the commander says to Rem. “My people were there, I need to know if the Russians crawled in.”

Rem scans the area. Here, every house has been destroyed beyond recognition, and little is left of the trees that once grew in between them.

Just across the last street, a haphazard line of trenches and foxholes marks the most forward Ukrainian positions. Beyond stretches a pockmarked field across which the Russian squads creep forward relentlessly.

The commander's voice breaks the silence. “Maybe they retreated,” he says with a sigh, “the last thing they were saying was that their ammunition was running out.”

Suddenly, movement. Rem spots four soldiers in a shallow ditch on the Ukrainian side of the trench.

“It looks like they're probably ours, he had some kind of grenade thrown at him and he's got his back to us,” relays Rem to the commander, referring to the soldier that moved first.

“They aren't shooting yet, I need to come home and charge and I'll be back.”



Skala battalion service member Duke replaces the battery pack on the unit's quadcopter drone at a base in Bakhmut, Don Oblast, on Dec 29, 2022. (Francis Farrell/The Kyiv Independent)

The drone takes just a few minutes to fly back to the base from the zero line. In a lightning-fast operation, Rem swings himself onto the roof and passes it to Duke, spending as little time as possible in enemy line of sight.

With a new battery pack fitted, the drone takes off from the same roof, ready to fly for another 20-25 minutes.

Upon return, the unidentified soldiers are seen throwing grenades into the trench, which is now understood to be Ukrainian-held.

“It seems like those are ours in the trench actually, which means that's the enemy in the forest,” says Rem. “Can we call a mortar or something in?”

Confident that the four soldiers are not those the commander was searching for, Rem contacts a 120mm mortar team nearby. Just as they are preparing to fire, an explosion can be seen near the trench entrance.

“Was that you?” Rem asks them. “If not, it looks like enemy mortars are already at work.”

Just as with the howitzers, the mortar team fires and waits for Rem to correct the hit, but no explosion can be seen in the vicinity.

“They’re struggling to aim at this target,” says Rem. “It happens often that we find our targets but there is nothing to hit them with. We here have done our job.”

Speaking later over the phone, Rem told the Kyiv Independent that two of the four Russian soldiers were wounded over the next few hours. One was evacuated by his two able-bodied comrades, while the other was abandoned in the field.

There was no word on the fate of the Ukrainian soldiers that were missing.



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Death at close quarters

There are few who can judge the progress of the Battle of Bakhmut better than people like Rem, who watch the brutal firefights from above every day.

“Since we first arrived (in early November), we have lost a fair few positions,” he said. “It's not critical though, all of it can be taken back.”

According to Rem, the Russian soldiers advancing on the city have a clear method to their tactics, going far beyond the image of mindless human wave attacks often popular in social media discourse.

“Yes, of course they are fighting effectively, they are advancing after all,” he said. “I can't count their losses myself, obviously they are taking casualties but there is also a result to show for it.”

On Dec. 4, Ukrainian military spokesperson Serhii Cherevatiy had [said](#) that Russian forces were suffering around 50-100 casualties daily in the battles around Bakhmut. Speaking to the Kyiv Independent on Jan. 3, Cherevatiy reported 189 dead in the same area over the last day, with over 200 wounded.

With the offensive on Bakhmut largely the responsibility of the infamous Wagner Group, mobilized regular troops are seen more rarely here.

“I watch how they advance, they are calm and collected,” said Rem, “and maybe some of them even think they are fighting for some kind of beliefs.”



Assault troops of the Skala Battalion return to base after a mission in the outskirts of Bakhmut, Donetsk Oblast, on Dec. 29, 2022. (Francis Farrell/The Kyiv Independent)

Looking ahead at how the battle will develop over winter, Rem is frank, but far from panicked.

“At the moment, it seems like the forces are pretty evenly matched here, and to conduct a successful offensive, you need a bigger advantage,” he said. “Whichever side can gain that advantage first will be successful.”

This is not to say that the Russian’s won’t have more tactical success in their endless squad-level assaults, Rem warned.

“If things stay more or less the same they will most likely advance bit by bit over the next few winter months, until they reach the Bakhmutka River,” he said.

“If there won't be any radical changes in the quantity of forces, I personally don't think they will make it any further than that.”

At the Skala base, the interview with Contrabass is interrupted by the return of an assault team from a mission to take back a lost position.

The dark corridor is filled with adrenalin, as helmets and rifles are tossed to the side as the men all find their own way to decompress.

“I am no hero here,” says Contrabass, standing quickly to vacate his seat. “You cannot begin to compare my work to what these guys do every day.”

Note from the author:

Hi, this is Francis Farrell, who wrote this piece from on the ground in the middle of Russia's neverending assault on Ukrainian cities in Donetsk Oblast. The Battle of Bakhmut is hell on earth, but it can be difficult to understand what is actually happening on the ground, so we watched it for ourselves. Ukraine achieved stunning victories over autumn, but the way Russia is able to keep up their attack shows that this war is far from over. [Please consider supporting our reporting.](#)

Francis Farrell

Reporter

Francis Farrell is a reporter at the Kyiv Independent. He has worked as managing editor at the online media project Lossi 36, and as a freelance journalist and documentary photographer. He has previously worked in OSCE and Council of Europe field missions in Albania and Ukraine, and is an alumnus of Leiden University in The Hague and University College London.

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One night in Bakhmut: Civilians wait for the end as Russia draws closer

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by Francis Farrell February 4, 2023 3:16 AM 17 min read



A view of a building destroyed by Russian shelling in the center of Bakhmut, Donetsk Oblast, on February 4, 2023 (Diego Herrera Carcedo/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images)

Register

Editor's Note: This piece tells the story of the lives of civilians and first responders in Bakhmut, Donetsk Oblast, directly through the personal experience of a Kyiv Independent reporter who stayed overnight in the embattled city in January, traveling together with a colleague from Moldova.

BAKHMUT, Donetsk Oblast – Moments of quiet are few and far between in the near-empty city of Bakhmut. Not only is the sound of incoming and outgoing artillery fire constant, but the variety in volume and texture of the sounds shows just how much firepower is being brought to the battle on both sides.

At times, long bursts of rifle and machine gun fire ring out from the eastern outskirts of Bakhmut.

Just two kilometers from the center, Russian Wagner mercenaries continue to inch forward toward the city in costly but methodical squad-sized assaults.

As we swung into a nondescript courtyard behind a Stalin-era apartment building in central Bakhmut, we found Hryhorii Ostapenko right where we had left him three days before. Sitting on a bench next to the garage, he was hacking away with a little axe at broken window frames, salvaged to fuel the wood-burning stove inside his home.

We had met residents Ostapenko, 63, and Valentyna, 59, who declined to give her last name out of fear, on a previous trip into Bakhmut a few days earlier, asking for permission to stay the night in their building's basement with those residents who remained.

After having exchanged seasons' greetings and handed over a bag of food and hygiene products we brought from Kramatorsk, our accommodation was confirmed.

“Not a problem at all,” said Ihor Selenov, a 50-year-old neighbor with a boisterous manner and a Cossack-style haircut, coming out the front door to greet Ostapenko. “Pop in later and we’ll have some tea.”



A tree destroyed by shelling on the central square of Bakhmut, Donetsk Oblast, on Jan. 3, 2023. (Francis Farrell/The Ky Independent)

As we headed back to the car, promising Ostapenko to return before sunset, a Ukrainian soldier came out from behind a gate, walking slowly and deliberately toward us with arms crossed in front of his rifle. We told him of our plans to spend one night here with the remaining residents.

“You can if you want, I just wouldn’t stay with these people,” he replied quietly, directing a contemptuous glance over our shoulder.

“Most of them say openly that they’re waiting for Russia.”

We thanked the soldier and went on our way. There was little time to find a new host. The sun would be going down in just a few hours and our colleagues were taking the car with them back to Kramatorsk. Walking the city aimlessly while shells and drones flew ahead was unwise at best.

Besides, if the people in Ostapenko’s building were waiting for Russia, whose artillery worked day and night turning their city into rubble and forcing them into a cold and dangerous life in and out of basements, I wanted to understand why.

Russia's invasion overwhelmingly united Ukraine against the aggressor, sweeping aside the old pro-European/pro-Russian divide that dominated politics before 2014, and was still present to a lesser extent after.

A September 2022 Gallup poll [conducted](#) across Ukraine showed that only 0.5% of the population viewed the Russian leadership positively.

Absurd as it seems, it is often places like Bakhmut, the very settlements which have endured the most suffering from Russia's onslaught on Ukraine, where people belonging to this rough 0.5% can be found.

In Ukrainian slang, these people are sometimes called zhduny, meaning "those who wait" in Russian.

For older generations here, nostalgic for the area's flourishing industry in Soviet times, and who largely voted for former president and Kremlin ally Viktor Yanukovich, the reality of months of brutal war can be difficult to process.

According to Ukrainian police, around [5,900](#) civilians are understood to still be in Bakhmut as of Feb. 2, including over 200 children.

Starved of any information on the outside world, and with no savings or connections to help them if they evacuate, the remaining residents of Bakhmut are frozen in inaction as the fighting draws closer.

Whether out of apathy, hopelessness, or dreams of the made-up propaganda idea of the "Russian world," many make the simple but often deadly choice: to wait.



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Last bastion

Before settling in for the night, we pay a visit to the local fire station, officially the headquarters of the Ukrainian State Emergency Service in Bakhmut. With barely anything else working in the city, this proud white building just off the central square is one of the few functioning arms of the civilian state left in Bakhmut.

With a large wood burning stove and generator, the sunken main hall of the fire station is a refuge of warmth and relative comfort.

Christmas lights and a signed Ukrainian flag do more to lift the mood, while a large dog, jokingly named Skabei after the Russian propagandist Olga Skabeyeva, greets visitors with enthusiasm.



First responders rest in between missions at the fire station in Bakhmut, Donetsk Oblast, on Jan. 2, 2023. (Francis Farrell/The Kyiv Independent)

Deputy commander Artur Spysyn, 31, and his colleagues complete various chores around the building while waiting for the next call.

“Our first task is to protect the lives of the team and the residents,” he said, “and by now there is little reason to care about property.”

“We don’t cross the (Bakhmutka) River anymore, there is very little left unruined on the other side.”

Almost if not all the first responders still working at the fire station are locals, from Bakhmut and the surrounding villages.

When not on shift, they return to home lives which often differ little from that of the other residents.

In homes with blown-out windows, there is no water, electricity, or gas, only a choice every night between the relative comfort of the apartment or the relative safety of the cellar.

Volodymyr Hruienko, a 42-year-old fire truck driver, took me around the back of the fire station to an apartment building that was hit on Dec. 26. Several apartments were burnt out in the place where the shell hit, and only a handful of windows remained unbroken: nothing out of the ordinary for Bakhmut.



A resident of Bakhmut, Donetsk Oblast, cuts firewood for heating, on Jan. 2, 2023. (Francis Farrell/Kyiv Independent)

A group of half a dozen residents, mostly of pension age, were milling around the entrance: some chopping firewood, some cooking on makeshift brick stoves, and some just standing in silence.

A younger man approached Hruienko, asking for urgent help finding water. Hruienko advised him to take a large plastic tank that still stood behind an abandoned supermarket about half a kilometer away.

“It fits around half a ton of water, four of you should be able to carry it over,” Hruienko said. “If you can do that, we can fill it up for you.”

Maintaining regular contact, and trying his best to help with basic necessities like the water, Hruienko has gained the trust of many of the residents on the block, but not all. As we returned to the station, a middle-aged man in a black leather jacket passed opposite.

“Thank you,” he said, sarcastically, looking Hruienko in the eye and pointing at the building’s devastated facade. “Thank you for this.”

“Some certain percentage of people left probably love Putin,” said Spysyn of the so-called “zhduny” living in Bakhmut.

“Personally I had nine friends before Feb. 24 who thought 'it wouldn't be bad' if Russia arrived, but now there is only one such person left.”

Unwanted

The winter sun was already setting by the courtyard where Ostapenko, Selenov, and Valentyna lived when we returned. Nobody was outside and the doors were locked shut. Circling around to the front of the building, we got the attention of a blurred face, dimly lit by candlelight, sitting by the window.

It was Iryna Ostapenko, Hrihorii's wife. Coming outside to meet us, she called Valentyna up to let us into the basement.

We quickly realized there had been a misunderstanding. There was a place to sleep for us in another, empty basement, but not where Valentyna and her son, Dmytro, were staying.



The interior of an unheated basement shelter in Bakhmut, Donetsk Oblast, on Jan. 2, 2023. (Francis Farrell/The Kyiv Independent)

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I want to help you but I hope you understand it’s very hard to trust strangers here,” she said to us.

Valentyna lit a candle and led us down to where we would be staying. Clean and orderly, the cellar had two beds, a table, and a shelf with some stored food supplies. Lacking a stove of any sort, the space was cold, and the bedding available damp throughout.

Frightened and emotional, Valentyna declined to show us her basement or introduce us to her son, but before she left, we spoke by the flickering light of her candle.

Before the full-scale invasion, she lived with her son in Yakovlivka, a village 15 kilometers northeast of Bakhmut that was taken by Russian forces in December. The area was the scene of heavy fighting, the prelude to the assault on [Soledar](#), Russia's first capture of a major Ukrainian settlement since summer 2022.

“Friends from my village tell me, crying,” Valentyna recalled, “‘Valya, we would go back to our ruins, if only just to kiss the bricks, but let it be home, we only want to go home'... but there are no homes left.’”

Valentyna did not come straight from Yakovlivka to Bakhmut, instead first spending several weeks in the central Ukrainian city of Kropyvnytskyi, where she says she was treated with suspicion because she was from Donbas.

“Everyone was looking at us like wolves,” she said.

“My friend told me how when she went to the hairdresser's and told them that she was from Donbas, they kicked her out angrily, saying 'Our guys are dying because of you, go back, you can be killed instead'.”

The discrimination in Ukraine of people from Donbas due to language or political prejudice is a cornerstone of the propaganda narrative used by Russia to justify the invasion of Ukraine.

While frequent Russian claims of a “genocide” of the people of Donbas or bans on speaking Russian in Ukraine are complete fiction, the full-scale war has raised some internal tensions.



Refugee Valentyna opens the entrance to a basement shelter in Bakhmut, Donetsk Oblast, on Jan. 2, 2023. (Francis Farrell/The Kyiv Independent)

Valentyna's case, of having fled to safer parts of Ukraine only to return to an active war zone, is not a rare one.

According to the latest UN [figures](#), 5.9 million people have been internally displaced within Ukraine by Russia's invasion. Many of these people have been able to settle and begin to build new lives in cities all over Ukraine.

But with meager monthly government assistance of only Hr 2,000 (\$54) per person and Hr 3,000 (\$82) for a child or person with a disability, those without any savings or support networks often find it impossible to make a new start.

"I am afraid, but now I feel that judgment must come on my own land," she said. "May whatever happens happen, we are not wanted anywhere else anyway."

Sobbing and overwhelmed, Valentyna politely excused herself, taking the candlelight away and wishing us a good night.

Those who wait

Locked up alone in the basement, we were deciding on our next move when someone started shouting at street level.

"Press! Where are you?" came the male voice, followed by "ratatatata!" a poor imitation of a rifle burst. It was Selenov.

It was hard to tell what kind of mood he was in, but we had little choice but to come out and meet him.

Energetic as ever, Selenov dragged his wife Olena, drunk and half-asleep, out of a parked black 4x4, and together the four of us climbed to his second-floor flat for tea.

Plastic plates and cutlery, some adorned with leftover beetroot salad, were cluttered in between shot glasses on the family's living room table. The apartment was homely, but had seen better days, with the windows blown out and no water or electricity to speak of for months.

Olena, calling for more to drink, was in a provocative mood, making expletive-laden requests for us to leave.

"Tell me," she said with a snarl, "how much are the Americans paying you?"

In Olena's worldview, any journalist working in Ukrainian-controlled territory must be on the payroll of Washington.

Embarrassed, Selenov manhandled her to bed, where she stayed.



Resident Ihor Selenov in front of his apartment building in Bakhmut, Donetsk Oblast, on Jan. 3, 2023. (Francis Farrell/The Kyiv Independent)

With a rough but loving touch, Selenov stroked a young ginger cat as we sipped black tea by the light of a portable LED lamp. Outside the window, the sounds of artillery and rocket fire rolled on.

“If you are sober, maybe you start thinking that's the end,” he said of the constant shelling of his city, “you wonder where you can hide, but if you've had a few, you can sit back and enjoy the ‘concert’.”

Selenov was open from the beginning about his position on the war.

“We are one nation, we are all Slavs,” he said of Ukrainians and Russians, repeating one of the most popular narratives of Russian propaganda. “They (the U.S.) are training us to kill each other like rats, making Ivanov, Petrov, Sidorov (Russian surnames also common in Ukraine) fight against Ivanov, Petrov, and Sidorov.”

With soldiers and civilians situated close together as the urban warfare intensifies, tension naturally builds between those defending the city and those watching their homes being destroyed in the battle.

“At first we got on well with the soldiers,” Selenov said, “and now they look at us, speaking Russian, and ask openly, 'why did we travel a thousand kilometers to fight for you?’”

“I answer them, 'Why are you fighting for me, why are you destroying my city?’”

Civilians here are repeatedly encouraged to evacuate and given the means to do so.

Those who choose to stay are caught in a world where laws, trust, and social norms quickly start to crumble, together with the buildings themselves.

Selenov holds that Ukrainian soldiers tried to loot the apartments in his building, thinking they were abandoned.

“The day after they first came, we were hit closer than ever, my garage was destroyed,” he said, “and then they checked again to see if we had gone yet.”

Imitating the soldiers, Selenov, who like most residents of the area is a native Russian speaker, tries with difficulty to speak Ukrainian. “‘We are searching... clearing the area, we know that the Muscovites had a secret weapons dump here,' they said to me.”

“Then they broke down my neighbor's door and started looking for gold and other valuables.”

In almost any war, soldiers often have to use empty dwellings as frontline accommodation, sometimes breaking in forcefully.

Though it is possible that what Selenov described was the truth, there have been next to no documented and verified instances of Ukrainian soldiers looting homes or businesses for profit, one rare example being the Kyiv Independent's own [investigation](#) into alleged misconduct in the International Legion.

In contrast, practices of mass looting have accompanied the advance of Russian forces throughout Ukraine, with countless well-documented cases of theft of Ukrainian property, from washing machines to entire [museum collections](#).



An apartment building destroyed by a Russian missile in Bakhmut, Donetsk Oblast, on Jan. 2, 2023. (Francis Farrell/The Independent)

For people like Selenov, existing biases against Ukraine are often made worse by the situation.

Failing to connect the destruction of their city exclusively to the Russian invasion, conclusions are instead made based on what they can see.

“When the battles started for Popasna and Lysychansk, our city started to get hit from our side, from Chasiv Yar,” he said. “Later of course, the Russians started shelling as well, but at first, this city was messed up by our own.”

Russia’s assault on Donetsk Oblast has practically destroyed dozens of settlements with artillery, rocket, and tank fire. In over six months on the front line, Bakhmut has joined the likes of Volnovakha, Popasna, Sievierodonetsk, and most famously Mariupol, as cities ruined beyond recognition by Russia’s war.

“There are people who just don't have the intellectual capacity to understand what's going on,” first responder Spytсын said of beliefs like this.

“Propaganda has destroyed any ability to see what is happening in front of their own eyes, which cannot tell who is shelling their city.”



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Understanding Russia's relentless assault on Bakhmut

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City of the living

Excusing ourselves from Selenov's apartment, we returned to the freezing basement Valentyna had opened for us, and quickly decided it was no place to spend the night.

Reluctant to bother any more of the residents at this hour, our only option remaining was to return to the fire station.

On foot and wearing bulletproof vests and helmets, walking around Bakhmut in the evening was a dangerous prospect, with Ukrainian sentries likely on the lookout for suspicious activity. Luckily, the fire station was only three blocks away.

The streets were empty, but lit brightly by a near-full moon through the clear skies. Sticking to the shadows, we hurried.

Just as we stepped onto the central square, the sound of incoming Russian Grad rocket launches made us crouch close to the wall. The sky briefly glowed orange as the rockets thudded in not far behind the Palace of Culture.

We arrived at the fire station to find it empty and locked. Only Skabei answered our banging on the large doors.

For 20 minutes, we sat on the steps like children waiting to be picked up after school, listening to the Battle of Bakhmut. Finally, the noisy Soviet-era fire truck lurched into the driveway, back from an evening job.

Acknowledging our presence, the helmeted silhouettes emerging from the truck walked past us and opened the door. Within minutes, the truck was back inside, and the firefighters had undressed, bathing with a bucket of hot water left on the stove.

The crew had been out fighting a fire near Ivanivske, a settlement on the way to the recently captured Klishchiivka to the south, that has since become the next target for Russia's advance. One elderly woman reportedly died, her home burnt to the ground.



Ukrainian first responders extinguish a fire after shelling on the Bakhmut front line in Ivanivske, Donetsk Oblast, on Jan. 02, 2023. (Diego Herrera Carcedo/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images)

As the firefighters decompressed, a middle-aged man with a puffy red face paid an unannounced visit. Funeral services worker Oleksandr, 57, who wished to keep his full identity private, was no stranger, greeting the men with a familiar smile.

Having spotted the fire himself, Oleksandr had come to alert the team, only to find they had already done their job.

Oleksandr did not wish to speak about his profession. “What do you think it’s been like? I’ve worked alongside the first responders, I’ve pulled corpses from the rubble,” he said. “Ask me about anything else.”

Oleksandr’s children are living safe in a village near the city of Dnipro, where he said they are treated with respect and care. Still, he was also saddened by the treatment he has faced personally in other parts of Ukraine.

“I don’t understand, they all shout all the time in the west that we are a united Ukraine,” he said, “but when you arrive and say you are from Donbas, they can call you a separatist without knowing anything about you.”

“I am Ukrainian, we all live in Ukraine, there needs to be this human understanding.”



First responder Volodymyr Hruienko inside the fire station in Bakhmut, Donetsk Oblast, on Jan. 2, 2023. (Francis Farrell/The Independent)

Oleksandr eventually left for home, and the others slowly retired to their quarters. Only Hruienko remained, fixing something under the gearbox of the truck.

“Check this out, I found this song just yesterday on (Russian social network) VK,” he called to me.

The track from 2012 was an amateurish but warm ode to Artemivsk, the old Soviet name of Bakhmut, before decommunization returned the city’s original name.

Entitled “City of the Living”, the song’s optimistic Russian-language rap lyrics rang out through the empty hall of the Bakhmut fire station:

There are fewer troublemakers these days, culture is developing;

Everything is being sorted out, but some people are stuck in the previous century;

They sit in their chairs and never change anything, but at least the rest of us are thriving!

People, let’s show them our city of the living!

Don't hide in your apartments, it's time to show our city to the world;

Not just a spot on the map but the pride of our country.

Approaching storm

Protected from both cold and shelling in the basement, the night at the fire station passed calmly.

As we waited to be picked up by colleagues the next morning, small teams of journalists and volunteers mingled in front of the fire station building. In one van, two British volunteers were traveling with a Ukrainian priest.

I spoke briefly to one of them, a softly-spoken forty-something man who introduced himself as Andrew. He had been working for months in and around Bakhmut, evacuating dozens of civilians from some of the most dangerous front-line areas.

Just two days later, the news broke that British volunteers Andrew Bagshaw, 47, and Chris Parry, 28, had gone missing in Soledar, caught up in Russia's assault on the town while on a mission to evacuate an elderly woman. Photographs matched the face of the Andrew I had briefly met.

On Jan. 25, their families **confirmed** that both men had been killed, though the exact circumstances of their deaths remain unknown.



A resident pushes his bicycle across ruined train tracks in Bakhmut, Donetsk Oblast, on Jan. 2, 2023. (Francis Farrell/The Kyiv Independent)

On the road out of Bakhmut, excavators could be seen digging fresh trenches on the western edge of the city.

The fate of Bakhmut is far from predetermined. Russia's reported losses are staggering, with the Ukrainian military [estimating](#) around 150 are killed and as many wounded on an average day of Russia's grinding attacks on the city.

Even with heavy casualties, Russia has so far failed to make significant inroads into the urban area of Bakhmut.

To the north and south of the city, the picture is very different. The mercenary Wagner Group's capture of Soledar in mid-January has brought the northern highway into Bakhmut under Russian control, while the capture of Klishchiivka in the south has placed the last main Ukrainian supply route under serious threat.



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With the loss of Soledar, Ukrainian positions in Bakhmut jeopardized

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While the battles rage for the territory of Donbas, stories like those of Valentyna, Oleksandr, and even Selenov show that a separate struggle continues, no less difficult, for the hearts and minds of its people, even in the face of Russian brutality.

While most of the first responders plan to leave if Bakhmut is occupied, Hruienko vowed to stay in his hometown.

“I won't go anywhere, even if they come,” he said, smoking a cigarette in the winter sun.

“I was born here and I will stay. Who will help people here if we all leave? I'll take my car and start bringing people water... maybe I'll even fight some fires.”

Note from the author:

Hi, this is Francis Farrell, who wrote this piece from on the ground in the middle of Russia's neverending assault on Ukrainian cities in Donetsk Oblast. The Battle of Bakhmut is hell on earth, but it can be difficult to understand what is actually happening on the ground, so we watched it for ourselves.

Ukraine achieved stunning victories over autumn, but the way Russia is able to keep up their attack shows that this war is far from over. [Please consider supporting our reporting.](#)



Francis Farrell

Reporter

Francis Farrell is a reporter at the Kyiv Independent. He has worked as managing editor at the online media project Lossi 36, and as a freelance journalist and documentary photographer. He has previously worked in OSCE and Council of Europe field missions in Albania and Ukraine, and is an alumnus of Leiden University in The Hague and University College London.

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'They crawl forward 24/7:' On the zero line with Ukrainian infantry north of Bakhmut


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by Francis Farrell April 11, 2023 8:17 PM 13 min read



Ukrainian company commander Bohdan walks through a trench on the frontline in Donetsk Oblast, Ukraine, in April 2023. (Francis Farrell/The Kyiv Independent)

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DONETSK OBLAST – Climbing to a firing position through trenches dug into black Ukrainian soil, the relative quiet in the air is only reassuring to an extent.

At the most forward point, a Soviet-era recoilless rifle stands watch, dug into a shallow depression in the ground.

Bohdan, a company commander of Ukraine's 10th Mountain Assault Brigade, rests casually in the dirt on one side by the weapon. Compared to a deep, narrow trench, the choice of location provides little protection.

Around 500 meters to the left, a line of poplar trees on the ridge opposite marks the nearest Russian positions.

"You can stick your head up and have a good look at them," Bohdan said, "just not for too long."

To the right, a washed-out landscape of no man's land opens, where neither side holds the high ground, and understanding where the trenches run is more of a challenge. In the distance, a faulty shell bursts in the air, sending a trail of smoke slowly falling to the ground.

Bohdan points out settlements on the horizon, the names of which are not disclosed here to protect the location of the unit. One town across the valley, marked by a proud cement plant rising among the houses is now occupied, he said, while another further to the right remains under Ukrainian control.



Ukrainian company commander Bohdan crouches at a firing position on the frontline in Donetsk Oblast, on March 23, 2023. (Francis Farrell/The Kyiv Independent)

A reserved man in his early thirties who prefers not to speak to the press himself, Bohdan agreed to bring the Kyiv Independent to this zero-line position in a rare period of calm, to speak to the infantrymen of his unit.

Located somewhere north of the destroyed salt-mining town of Soledar, these positions are, in theory, some of the most vulnerable of the Ukrainian lines in Donbas, containing one flank of the bulge in the map where Russian forces have made their greatest gains since summer last year.

Here, battles are fought at close quarters, as Russian forces, primarily those of the notorious **Wagner** paramilitary group, mount daily assaults on Ukrainian lines in an effort to overrun the northern flank of the Ukrainian stronghold of Bakhmut, around 20 kilometers to the south, and push deeper into Donetsk Oblast.

“You can’t see them from here,” said Bohdan, a native of Kryvyi Rih who has served in Ukraine’s Armed Forces since long before the full-scale invasion, “but there are dozens of their (Russian) bodies rotting in these fields.”

High Russian casualty figures aside, Ukrainian units in this sector, including the 10th, have suffered high attrition rates of their own.

Against all odds, the infantry positioned here have held firm: the front line in their sector hasn't moved since the end of winter.



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Endless storm

The drive to the 10th Brigade's positions from the larger city of Sloviansk is a long one, across dirt roads and through tiny villages, as the larger highways in this area were cut off by Russian gains over the winter.

In this in-between zone, the war has at once both arrived and remained in the distance so far.

While diggers carve new trench lines into the high ground, local farmers continue to herd cows and drive their tractors among columns of military vehicles.

As the world fixated on Russian forces' assault on Bakhmut, the battles that would arguably prove more decisive for this phase of the war took place further north of the city.

Having taken the nearby village of Yakovlivka around Christmas, Wagner troops quickly stormed **Soledar** in mid-January, from where they soon reached within fire control range over the last Ukrainian-controlled roads into the "fortress city" of Bakhmut.

Speaking off the record, several servicemen of the 10th Brigade said that they believed that their rotation from positions near Yakovlivka were at least partly responsible for the fall of Soledar, as the brigades replacing them failed to hold the same lines.

Founded in 2015, the 10th Mountain Assault Brigade is one of Ukraine's most celebrated, with its servicemen known for undergoing intense physical fitness training in the Carpathian Mountains in the country's west.

On Feb. 14 this year, President Volodymyr Zelensky officially granted the brigade the honorific "Edelweiss" after the alpine flower.



Ukrainian infantryman Oleksandr Rashchupkin inside a dugout on the front line in Donetsk Oblast, on March 23, 2023. (Fr Farrell/The Kyiv Independent)

In a dugout just behind the hill from the recoilless rifle position, the infantrymen shelter underground, waiting for the enemy's next move.

School childrens' drawings share the insulated walls of their home with military jackets, one of which has been torn up by shrapnel from a recent mortar hit.

"The situation is tense," said 30-year-old Oleksandr Rashchupkin to the Kyiv Independent, "they shell us constantly, over 100 times a day, and they crawl forward 24/7."

"First they creep through in groups of 3-4 people. Then they send more people and try to surround us on the flanks, to look for our weak points and come at us from the rear."

With eight soldiers huddled together in the cramped space, the interview with Rashchupkin quickly becomes a round-table discussion.

"If only we had more drones we would do our work a lot better," came the excited voice of Roman, a 29-year-old infantryman in a beige woolen sweater who goes by the callsign Lysyi ("Bald").

"Eyes in the sky are everything," he said.

“When we have drones with thermal vision, it's great, the commanders can see what is happening and plan our orders precisely to counter the enemy, but without them it's harder, nobody can see what's going on at night.”



Ukrainian infantryman Lysyi (L) and a comrade on a bed inside a dugout on the front line in Donetsk Oblast, on March 23, 2023. (Francis Farrell/The Kyiv Independent)

Since late autumn, Russian **assaults** in and around Bakhmut have been characterized by the unique tactics of Wagner, which has used tens of thousands of men from Russia's prison system to creep forward without regard for high casualties.

According to military expert Rob Lee, some Wagner units operate only at night to keep up constant pressure on Ukrainian defenders.

“We call them single-use soldiers,” said Rashchupkin, “they can fight with quantity only.”

“They attack in three lines: if the first line retreats, they'll be shot by the second, if the second (retreats), they'll be shot by the third, and so on.”

Facing off against the assaults at close range, many infantrymen claim that the Wagner assault squads are given drugs, perhaps amphetamines, to enhance their performance on the battlefield.

“I don't know what it is, but they are definitely given something,” said Lysyi.

“I've seen soldiers take heavy shrapnel wounds to the leg, even 30 rifle rounds to the body, and still refuse to go down.”

So far, although other media [outlets](#) have reported similar claims from Ukrainian soldiers, there has been no independent verification of such widespread drug use.

The soldiers report that recently, Wagner units in the area have also been completed by Russian proxy forces from occupied Luhansk Oblast, as well as Chechen fighters more commonly known as Kadyrovites.

On April 11, Wagner founder Yevgeny Prigozhin said that both flanks of the Russian offensive on Bakhmut, including the sector currently held by the 10th Brigade, had been “handed over” to forces of the Russian defense ministry.

“Thank god, we have our bravery, we have our fighting spirit, and it's not working out for them,” said Rashchupkin. “It's hard but we have no choice, because we are fighting for everything that we have.”

Asked about the hardest moments in the life of an infantryman, Rashchupkin answers first: “During battle, of course.”

Oleksandr Niniovskiyi, a 23-year-old infantryman sitting opposite Rashchupkin, disagrees.

“The hardest part is taking out the bodies of your friends,” he said. The others in the dugout murmur in concord.

“It can be just five minutes between when you are sitting and chatting with someone, and when you have to cover his body and put it in the truck,” Rashchupkin added.



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First point of call

Half an hour's drive from the zero line, an unassuming village house marks an important landmark for those unfortunate enough to need to visit it.

Here, a small team of the brigade's medics operate a so-called "**stabilization point,**" where wounded soldiers are brought from the front line to receive essential treatment before being taken onwards to larger military hospitals in the rear.

The purpose of the building is clear from the outside.

Half a dozen old army stretchers stand stacked up against the front fence, while a leafless grapevine nearby is adorned with used tourniquets.

Up by the neighboring wall, a makeshift covered area that looks like it could have once housed livestock has in fact been purpose-built, as a temporary morgue.

Boots, jackets, and a blood-stained helmet are scattered around the empty shack, and in the corner, a small table hosts a small collection of playing cards, pocket knives and single-use vapes that belonged to the dead that came through here.



Stretchers stacked up against a wall at a medical stabilization point near the front line in Donetsk Oblast, on March 23, 2023 (Francis Farrell/The Kyiv Independent)

Small arms fire cracks in the background as another Ukrainian unit holds some light target practice into the hillside behind the house.

Incoming artillery fire is rare further back from the zero line; the medics here are listening out for something else.

“We’re always waiting for the sound of cars,” said Oleksandr Prymachenko, a 29-year-old native of Borodianka in Kyiv Oblast.

“There’s always a sigh of relief when you hear them come, come, and then keep driving by.”

Escaping across fields and dirt roads, Prymachenko barely managed to evacuate his family from Borodianka before Russian forces swept through the city with destructive force in the first days of the full-scale invasion.

Having reached safety, Prymachenko joined Edelweiss in Ivano-Frankivsk, a city in western Ukraine, where he spent nine months working as an instructor of combat medicine without ever practicing it himself, before finally being sent to Donbas in January.



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With the sun beginning to set and no wounded brought in yet, the medics mill around the entrance of the house, smoking.

Work usually begins in the evening, as Wagner troops increasingly direct their assaults under cover of darkness, taking advantage of the shortage of thermal vision equipment among Ukrainian units.

“Often there is no chance to sleep at all at night,” said Prymachenko. “It's like a conveyor belt, they just keep coming and coming.”



Ukrainian medics Oleksandr Prymachenko (L) and Taras Harasym (R) pose for portraits at a medical stabilization point near the front line in Donetsk Oblast, on March 23, 2023. (Francis Farrell/The Kyiv Independent)

Even if wounds are suffered during the day, evacuating them immediately during battle is often impossible.

“Sometimes they don't get a chance to give any proper first aid in the field,” Prymachenko said.

“One time a pickup truck arrived, one wounded soldier was in the back seat, and another was in the back (cargo bed), together with a dead soldier. No one had any tourniquet on or anything, they couldn't say who was more heavily wounded, they had no idea what was going on.”

The interview with Prymachenko is interrupted as a van pulls up at the house from the direction of the front line. The team kicks into action, ready to receive what has come their way.

“A 200,” one of the medics says without emotion, immediately upon spotting the end of a long white body bag through the window of the van.

With the number comes a collective exhalation: a 200, military code for a dead soldier, is a routine occurrence here, and does not demand the urgency required for the wounded.

The team moves the bag, with the soldier’s military ID taped prominently on the outside, from one car to another, and sends it on its way.



Ukrainian medics retrieve the body of a fallen soldier from a van near the front line in Donetsk Oblast, on March 23, 2023. (Francis Farrell/The Kyiv Independent)

The number of dead and wounded that pass through the stabilization point depends on the nature of the fighting at any given time, but not a day has passed without work.

“It comes in waves,” said Taras Harasym, a 36-year-old medic who worked as a dentist before the war, but has served in the 10th Brigade since the earliest days of the war, when it fought near Malyn in Zhytomyr Oblast during the Battle of Kyiv.

“Sometimes there are periods when there are many many wounded, up to 50-60 per day, sometimes there are not even 10.”

With the sheer volume of pain that comes through their doors, the medics force themselves not to let emotions get in the way of their work.

“I was worried at the start, I didn't know how I would handle seeing dismembered limbs, seeing people die in front of me,” said Prymachenko.

“Then you realize the most important thing is not to think, not to think about the fact that this is someone's son, husband, or father.”



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'I work, then I cry': Exhausted medics near Bakhmut fight for every life

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Tired but resolute

As difficult as the conditions are now for the 10th Brigade, every chance remains that the next few months of fighting in the spring will be even more challenging.

If Ukrainian troops eventually make a controlled withdrawal from Bakhmut, the odds are high that Russia will refocus its attacks to the north of the city.

“Civilians around here say if Bakhmut falls, the road is open to Kramatorsk, to Sloviansk, that that could be it for all of Donetsk Oblast,” Harasym said.

As spring enters its latter half, Ukraine and its partners eagerly await a much-touted Ukrainian **counteroffensive**, which hopes to achieve a strategic breakthrough and decisively shift the war's momentum back in Kyiv's favor.

In the **Bakhmut** sector, the momentum has been Russia's.

A localized Ukrainian attack in the area could do a lot to reverse Russian gains over the winter and relieve pressure on the units fighting here, but the resources needed for such an operation continue to be held back, as analysts expect the most likely axis of a future Ukrainian counteroffensive to be further south.

“We are waiting and hoping for a Ukrainian counterattack, so we can finally go home,” said Rashchupkin.

“We hope it will happen all over the front,” he added, before Niniovskiy interrupted with a more sober view.

“Well, it would be good to see some big success in at least one direction.”



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Bakhmut-bound infantry assault troops: 'We are holding on, ready for any scenario'

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In the meantime, the soldiers hold out hope for something else they long haven't seen in the area: the chance for a rest.

"We could use a bit of rotation," said Niniovskyi quietly.

"Our brigade has been in Donetsk Oblast since May 25 without leave."

Until then, the men have no doubt in their ability to continue to follow whatever orders they are given.

"We have our legal borders and we will hold them," Rashchupkin said.

"They are drawn on the map in blood, so much has already been lost for them."



Ukrainian infantrymen of the 10th Mountain Assault Brigade stand to receive awards from local authorities on the front line in Donetsk Oblast, on March 23, 2023. (Francis Farrell/The Kyiv Independent)

Taking advantage of the relative quiet, Bohdan calls his men out of the dugout for a special occasion.

Rashchupkin, Lysyi, Niniovskyi and the others stand in line as, one by one, their commander presents them with awards from the local administration in Kolomyia in the Carpathian foothills, where the 10th is based.

“All of the guys out there are heroes, every one of them, what they go through is beyond belief,” said Prymachenko at the stabilization point.

“The absolute worst thing, the greatest injustice, is that we are losing our best people, and on their side, it's all kinds of trash.”

What is happening in Bakhmut and what does it mean for Russian-Ukrainian war?

Note from the author:

Hi, this is Francis Farrell, who wrote this piece from front lines just a few hundred meters from Russian positions, where rank-and-file infantry are holding the line in conditions of unimaginable physical and mental hardship. With the campaigns over 2023 looking to be decisive for the long-term course of the war, it's vital that the world keeps paying attention. [Please consider supporting our reporting.](#)

Francis Farrell

Reporter

Francis Farrell is a reporter at the Kyiv Independent. He has worked as managing editor at the online media project Lossi 36, and as a freelance journalist and documentary photographer. He has previously worked in OSCE and Council of Europe field missions in Albania and Ukraine, and is an alumnus of Leiden University in The Hague and University College London.

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