

CATHERINE PHILP | DISPATCH

Echoes of Stalingrad as casualties stream from battle for Bakhmut

As a savage and symbolic struggle rages, Catherine Philp meets the medics saving Kyiv's soldiers



Ukraine's soldiers have endured a muddy winter in Donetsk that has almost brought the front line to a standstill

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[Catherine Philp](#)

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The flash of blue lights cut through the darkness, speeding towards the battlefield. As the ambulance braked, the lights were turned off and paramedics

jumped out, grabbing a stretcher on which an unconscious soldier lay.

“Go, go, go!” screamed the driver as the team slammed shut the doors and set off back down the pitted road. The blue lights flashed again as the ambulance sped towards Druzhkivka, the nearest hospital to the killing streets of near-ruined Bakhmut.

Less than an hour before, the soldier had been fighting metres from Russian forces in Bakhmut when a volley of bullets ripped through his abdomen, tearing upwards to puncture a lung before exiting through his back.



Soldiers carried their wounded comrade under gunfire to a military vehicle that carried him to a stabilisation centre just outside the city. At the centre it was civilian doctors, all volunteers from hospitals across Ukraine, who stanching the bleeding, injected morphine and administered infusions to counter shock.

It was volunteer doctors as well, clad in armour and helmets, who transferred him to the ambulance where he lay clinging to

life, unconscious as his chest cavity filled with blood, and who worked to stabilise him on the jolting journey to safety.

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“F***ing move!” the driver screamed as the ambulance nearly collided with a military vehicle at a checkpoint. Other cars swerved to let it pass.

Bakhmut has been the focus of the battle for Ukraine’s east during a muddy winter that has brought fighting almost to a standstill along the front line. Russia has poured in men, mostly convicts working for the Wagner mercenary group, in its effort to take the city. Their casualties have run into the tens of thousands, according to western estimates.



Ukraine is planning new attacks this spring to reclaim territory in the east of the country lost last year

SOFIIA GATILOVA/REUTERS

Ukraine's military hailed Bakhmut as a golden opportunity to kill as many Russian troops as it can as it [prepares for a spring offensive](#) to claw back territory lost last year. Yet the toll on the Ukrainian side has been devastating, leading to questions from some about the wisdom of expending some of the country's most highly trained soldiers in a block-by-block street fight for the near-deserted, all-but-destroyed small city.

Such is the strain on Ukraine's military that it is increasingly reliant on volunteer organisations such as the First Voluntary Mobile Hospital (PDMSH) to provide medical support for its wounded warriors. Western officials estimate that Ukraine's military is three times more successful at saving the lives of its wounded than its Russian counterparts.

The PDMSH was formed in 2014 when Russian troops fomented a separatist conflict in eastern Ukraine, starting an eight-year war that culminated in last year's full invasion. As a trainee doctor in Kyiv, Olena, 29, saw many casualties of that conflict, soldiers "terribly wounded, without arms or legs. So I wanted to help with that."

However, born and brought up in the capital, she had "never been here in the heart of it". Then [the Russians invaded](#) and in November she took leave from her job in a private oncology clinic to volunteer on the front line.





Paramedics treat an injured serviceman in Bakhmut. Doctors have volunteered from across Ukraine

ANATOLII STEPANOV/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

“When I saw what it is happening here, it broke my heart,” said Olena, whose call sign is “Oduvan” (dandelion). “I decided I can’t stay in a good job with a good salary in a safe place when I have the knowledge that can help save our soldiers’ lives.”

Unable to get further leave from her job, she resigned and moved to work in the former civilian hospital in Bakhmut, operating under shelling and gunfire until it was destroyed by Russian airstrikes. Three other stabilisation points — “stabs” — around Bakhmut have since been destroyed by the Russians, who have also targeted the organisation’s evacuation convoys.

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The locations of the stabs, where casualties are triaged before evacuation, are now kept secret. Russian forces have repeatedly targeted civilian and military installations alike, in defiance of the Geneva conventions.

Irina, 32, a cardiology intern from Kyiv, assisted with evacuating the wounded from Irpin and Bucha, the suburbs around the capital the Russians reached before being forced back. What she saw there inspired her to come to Bakhmut last June with the first civilian team. “In some way [Kyiv] was harder, because we were operating on children that were being pulled from the rubble after bombings,” she said. “We would be performing surgery while everything around us was exploding.” At the stab outside Bakhmut, there is rarely time for such surgery. “We try to save everyone but we have to make decisions,” Irina said. “The main purpose is to get them somewhere else as fast as we can so they can get the treatment they need.”



Some in Ukraine fear that the street-by-street fighting in Bakhmut is costing too many lives

ANNA KUDRIAVTSEVA/REUTERS

That time is known as the “golden hour”, but in Bakhmut, evacuating the wounded is far from straightforward. “The main problem is getting people out,” said Maksym, the organisation’s director for the eastern front. “It is constant shelling, gunfire and bombing. And even we are the targets.”

The single road into Bakhmut still controlled by the Ukrainians comes under daily shelling and attack by the Russians. Bringing in supplies and taking out the wounded, it has become known as “the road of life”.

Ukraine forbids the reporting of casualty figures, although last month western officials gave a figure of 120,000 killed and wounded, against 200,000 from the Russian side. Kyiv is said not to share the true figures even with its allies, meaning the Pentagon may have little idea of the true toll.

During the week of Orthodox Easter the fighting reached a new intensity. “The Russians like their calendar,” Olena said wryly. “They have special treats for us each time there is a holiday.”



Relatives of Ukrainian medics who have been captured by Russia have been pleading for international help

ALINA YARYSH/REUTERS

For months doctors around Bakhmut mostly treated injuries from blasts and shelling in a bloody artillery duel across the city. In recent weeks, however, the fighting has descended to street to street, with Ukrainians and Russians fighting only metres apart, often in adjacent ruined buildings and sometimes for control of the same one, inviting comparisons with Stalingrad.

“Patrick”, whose call sign reflects his pale skin, blue eyes and red hair, took leave from his job as an anaesthesiology intern to volunteer on the eastern front. “I’m a big fan of anaesthetic, it stops them complaining,” he joked with the black humour of a battlefield veteran. On his first tour he was stationed at Soledar, north of Bakhmut, as the Russians captured it. “There were huge numbers of casualties,” he said, before being warned not to give figures. “The worst are sent to us, the ones with the worst multiple injuries.” Do many survive? Patrick hesitated. “The outcome is usually negative,” he said flatly.

The worst casualties, Patrick said, are “when the body is alive but the person is gone. You know you won’t bring them back but you always carry on.”

Miracles can happen, though, even on the cramped, bumping ambulance journey to the emergency room. Olena recalls a soldier who “died” four times on the 30-minute trip. Four times she and her team-mate, Scholz, brought him back to life, using only manual CPR. “It is very, very rare that someone comes back like that,” she said. “And when it happens, it is a joy.”

Ukraine

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