

# EX-ARMY MAN ASKS COMRADES FOR GEAR SO WAR ISN'T FOUGHT IN GYM KIT

EXCLUSIVE by RICHARD BROOKS

IT was an immense field covered with a mass of yellow and blue — hundreds of flags billowing in the summer breeze to mark the graves of Ukraine's fallen.

"I simply looked, prayed and kept a respectful silence," says Will Blackburn, who procures and transports vital Army clothing and medical kit to soldiers in the war-torn country. Recalling his trips to the Donbas region — scene of the heaviest and bloodiest fighting against the Russian invaders — he describes the devastation of trees reduced to splinters by artillery and vehicles ripped to pieces strewn over the roads.

The occasional surviving elderly civilian would catch my eye in their new Stone Age existence as we zoomed past in our convoy of vans," says Will, 53, a Cheshire-born software salesman who for two years has been taking supplies to Ukraine, where under-armed troops faced going into battle wearing just casual clothes and trainers.

Until Putin's invasion Will and his Polish wife of 14 years Julia, 49, had been living a quiet life, first in London then, from 2015, in the Baltic coastal town of Sopot, Poland.

They moved there to look after Julia's grandmother Babcia, who has since passed away. Will continued to work remotely from Poland, though he regularly returns to the UK.

The day after Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022, he and Julia noticed their local park packed with unfamiliar elderly men, while its benches were filled with young women crying into their phones.

### 'Relentless combat'

They were refugees, Will recalls: "It was catching the eye of one young lady wrestling with an energetic toddler while FaceTiming her now uniformed partner which brought home the gravity of the situation."

Back then, some young Ukrainians were going to war in their gym kit. I got Will thinking he was in the Territorial Army from 2000 to 2006 and did a six-month tour of Iraq from late 2003. Julia remembered he had kept his old kit in the UK. "And if he had his, then other TA veterans would surely have theirs," she says.

After coming across an unofficial website for Army veterans, Will contacted members asking for kit. Within weeks, parcels from across the UK began arriving at their London flat, where the tenants, coincidentally Ukrainians, became impromptu warehouse managers.

As the volume increased, supplies moved to Will's parents' garage in the Cotswolds. He then engaged a Pole called Gregorz, who had assisted them with moving to Sopot, to transport the kit to Poland. Another Polish native, logistics expert Igor, was to drive it from Sopot to Ukraine.

Will and Julia discussed the potential dangers of him heading to the destination too. "You have fears, of course, about your loved one," says Julia. "But Will was naturally not scared at times but 'kept busy' to counter his worries."

On December 16, 2022, he set off on his first, five-day journey. He still recalls Julia waving goodbye until she was a tiny dot," he says. There were five vehicles with

WAR HEROES ... soldiers on the Donbas front line



"It's hairy when you are like a couple of kilometres from the front line. You feel the artillery more than hear it. You feel it in your feet as the earth beneath you shakes, and in your chest"

# One Brit's mission... to equip Ukraine soldiers with proper uniforms



READY FOR ACTION... Will on one of his missions

trailers, plus a generator for a hospital. Once over the Ukrainian border they drove south east to the Donbas, which was under attack. "We stopped at a children's charity, then dropped off some body protection," Will says.

"It was freezing and near blizzard conditions." That evening Will dodged a nasty injury when he slipped down an icy ladder before being saved by a local. He partly blames himself as he weighed 187lb.

By July it was trip number four, the most memorable and dramatic, including the field of Ukrainian flags marking the fallen. This particular area of the Donbas looked like a lunar landscape, where house after house lay swept into the road. "We

met one Ukrainian woman, Tania, and had lunch with her," Will says. "Elderly women like her are strong in mind and body, having grown up in the shadow of Stalin's induced famine. Walking through a ruined town, with the Russians a few kilometres away, a local called Dimitri pointed to the devastated school where he had taught."

"Smell of human decay" "We clambered up the building to see abandoned trenches and dugouts, while body armour and boots lay ripped and strewn. "The smell of human decay hung in the baking summer sun, alongside destroyed Russian Army personnel carriers."

Scattered around were half-eaten tins of food, abandoned when

Russians attempted escape in their motors. Instead, they just died. Dogs were scavenging after many owners were killed or fled. Most gruesome were the hordes feeding on human bodies. "It's why we now take tins of dog food," Will says.

Will returned to Ukraine last September and also a few weeks ago, coinciding with the second anniversary of the invasion. He has faced terrifying moments during his visits, the worst being in February.

"It's hairy when you are a couple of kilometres from the front line, or zero line as it is often called," he says. "You feel the artillery more than hearing it. You feel it in your feet as the earth beneath you shakes, and in your chest."

"We were delivering to a town close to the zero line. Artillery

landed about 200 metres away. I was scared, but it is best to be scared and be careful."

Will's employer has always allowed him time off for his trips. But, for safety, he is never allowed to reveal his precise locations.

For Julia, a carer, it is a worry, but she can speak to him using the basic phone he carries.

"He has a secure number, different from his usual one, in case the Russians track him down," she says. "I don't talk for long, usually just to ask if he has eaten."

After speaking to soldiers and civilians, Will is convinced the war is a matter of national survival. "For the soldiers it is 'win or bust, where they know there is a good chance of dying," he says. "It must continue to fight to remain

free of Russia. Victory is a must." Will appreciates Ukrainians are disappointed by what they see as a weakening support by some in the West. Many were angry with Pope Francis's recent remark about negotiating a peace deal.

But they still have a soft spot for Britain — and Boris Johnson in particular. "They are mystified why he is no longer Prime Minister," says Will.

Last March, Will and Julia were back in the UK to stock up. They collected equipment from Paula Massey, of the Guardians for Heroes charity in Wales, which has regularly provided medical kit including bandages, intravenous equipment and paracetamol.

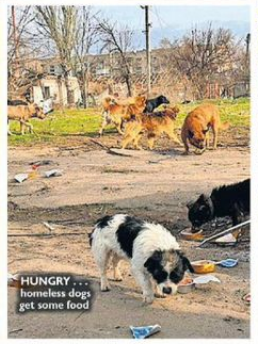
Then they picked up more Army supplies from Will's parents' garage

for another journey to Ukraine, planned for early this month. Will, who has written a book about his experiences, says: "My parents have been very supportive of my trips."

"The stores are usually only in their garage for a week or so then they are taken to Poland."

Will recalls one particularly poignant chat with a soldier at a firing range, who was about to return to his unit after sustaining several injuries and who offered to buy him and his colleagues burgers. "We told him to save his money," Will says. "But he looked me in the eye and said, 'I've already been wounded three times. I want to spend my money when I still can.'"

●The War Next Door: My Journeys Into Ukraine, by Will Blackburn (Marble Hill Publishers) is out now, £12.99.



MISSION OF HEROES... Will and Paula load charity supplies

WELCOME... soldier greets Will, centre, and convoy

VITAL KIT... Julia with bundle of bandages

HUNGRY... homeless dogs get some food