

CONFESSIONS OF A FIGHTER



BONDO DOROVSKIKH

Bondo Dorovskikh
Confessions of a fighter.
Revelations of a Volunteer

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Аннотация

When you believe in something, you have to act. Bondo Dorovskikh set off as a volunteer to the Donbass, because he could not do otherwise. He went to fight for his ideas and to defend people, but in the end he saw that this war was “false”, though the bullets and mines there were completely real. If you know about the Donbass from the media, read, but try to read between the lines and make out what is really going on there..

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Confessions of a fighter Revelations of a Volunteer

Bondo Dorovskikh

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About the author

Bondo Borovskikh was born in 1974 in Dushanbe (Tajik SSR) into a traditionally military family. His great-grandfather on his mother's side had fought, and his grandfather on his mother's side was an air force pilot. All the men in the family had been involved in military matters in one way or another. It was not surprising that Bondo should want to be where it was dangerous, where a war was going on, where people and states defended their interests to the death.

Before the war, he led a normal life: school, faculty of chemical technology and cybernetics in an institute. Business. Yes, Bondo started his own business as long ago as 1992. First they sold cloth, then organized cotton deliveries from Central Asia. Since 2000, an oil business has been added: a gas station, a petroleum storage depot...

In July 2014 the family tradition made itself felt. As a member of the "Phantom" Brigade, Bondo took part in armed conflict in the south-east of Ukraine, and later in battles in defense of Nikishino village while in the First Slavonic Battalion of the Donetsk People's Republic.

Bondo Dorovskikh told of what he had seen and how it all was in a Radio Liberty interview in 2015. Subsequently he spoke out in various media, commenting on the situation in the Donbass.

Since October 2015, Bondo has been recruiting volunteers

to support the Kurdish operations against ISIL (an organization banned in the Russian Federation). And on his Facebook page, he solemnly warns of the possible consequences of doing this. “You should remember that to go to help other people, risking your life, is a serious decision. The conflict is relatively intensive by modern military standards, with a death rate of over three per cent. If you are wounded, there will be no medical evacuation to an up-to-date military hospital. There will be no military pension or support. ISIL sets a high price on your head: \$250,000 for each volunteer from abroad. And if you’re taken hostage, your chances of survival are very low.

“You will return home alone, with a few photographs to recall your everyday combat life, you may meet new friends, you may have to spend the rest of your life with post-traumatic stress disorder or you may suffer intense depression.

“Think about it. Do you really need this? Is this really your calling??”

At present, Bondo Dorovskikh is living in Russia but working abroad. The international crude oil trade, mostly with the countries of West Africa, takes up all his time.

However, the theme of war has not gone from his life: his interest in it has not only remained, it has increased. But the author cannot write about that, not yet anyway.

Patriotism in its simplest, clearest and most indisputable meaning is, for rulers, nothing other than a weapon to achieve their power-seeking and selfish ends, and for the

governed, a rejection of human dignity and conscience, and a slavish subordination of oneself to those in power. That is what is preached everywhere that patriotism is preached. Patriotism is slavery.


Leo Tolstoy: Christianity and Patriotism.

Prolog

The desire to defend my country arose in me way back in the days when our forces were in Afghanistan. At that time, when I was still a boy, I dreamed of being there, where I would have the honor of being an international warrior. In Dushanbe, where I was born, everything was dominated by the fact that the Tajik SSR bordered on Afghanistan. One could often see columns of Soviet troops coming down from the mountain valleys and into our city, and though still a child, I felt an unusual interest in this. Soldiers often came into our school to tell us about Afghanistan, and we listened to them, fascinated. Many friends of my parents went there to work. Once when I woke early, I saw an army pistol, and it was a wonder I didn't take it to nursery school with me. But to my great regret, our forces were withdrawn before the time came for my military service.

In the spring of 1992, when I went to the draft office, I asked to be sent to a war zone somewhere. The warrant officer shrugged his shoulders and said there were no conflict zones with Russian involvement apart from Yugoslavia, where we had a peacekeeping contingent, and only conscripts who had finished their time in the Army could be sent there. There was no internet then, and I was living in a small town in Tver province. Nothing had been written about this in the newspapers, information was not as available as it is now, so I did not know that a warrior

could always find a place free at any time. All you needed was the desire and the money. But then, in 1992, the only thing I could do was enter a chemical technology institute, because serving in an army which was not fighting seemed a waste of time to me.

		Copy No. 1
Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation Internal Affairs Department of Ivanovo Province Directorate for Combating Organized Crime		To Mr. B.V. Dorovskikh, Managing Director of the Ivanovo Oil Products Company INCO
153000 Ivanovo, ul. Lezhnevskaya 4 tel. 32-63-36 No. 74/850 4.09.2002		
Esteemed Bondo Viktorovich!		
Due to the lack of financing from the Federal Budget, the Directorate for Combating Organized Crime requests you to provide non-repayable sponsorship to equip the DCOC group being sent to the armed conflict in the Chechen Republic.		
30.01 Head of DCOC KM UVL Ivanovo Province	<i>(signed)</i>	V.I. Nikonov <i>(Department stamp)</i>
Traduit de la langue: FRANÇAIS/RUSSE Certifié conforme à l'original Paris le 24 FEV 2009 NE VARIETUR sous le numéro VISE PAR MOI 0902 A (circular red stamp, "Vladimir Naumov Expert O.A. Paris" round rim, address "10, Rue Stephenson, 75018 PARIS" in center)		

Request from DCOC KM MIA Ivanovo Province, 2002.

In 2000, I set up a business selling refined oil products. Every month my companies sold thousands of tons of oil products, as a result of which I became able to provide sponsorship, including to the security forces.

The cost of a barrel of oil at that time, in 2002, was only 25 dollars, so entrepreneurs in Russia carried the State's burden of debt in the form of covering the activities of some state organizations.

Almost all the district internal affairs departments of the city of Ivanovo ran on my gasoline, and during the second Chechen campaign, I more than once financed the sending of SRRU (Special Rapid Reaction Unit) fighters to armed conflict zones.



**Ministry of Internal Affairs
of the Russian Federation**
Internal Affairs Department of Ivanovo Province
Directorate for Combating Organized Crime

153000 Ivanovo, ul. Lezhnevskaya 4
tel. 32-63-36
No. 74/850 ..2002

Copy No. 1

To Mr. B.V. Dorovskikh,
Managing Director of the Ivanovo
Oil Products Company INCO

Esteemed Bondo Viktorovich!

On behalf of the staff of the Directorate for Combating Organized Crime of the Criminal Militia Service of the Ivanovo Province Internal Affairs Department, I wish to express heartfelt gratitude for your provision of material assistance in connection with the 200th anniversary of the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

30.01
Acting Head of DCOC
CM IAD Ivanovo Province
V.A. Koltsov

Militia Lt. Col. V.A. Koltsov (signed)

(Department stamp)

Traduit de la langue: FRANÇAIS/RUSSE

Certifié conforme à l'original

Paris le 24 FEV 2009

NE VARIETUR sous le numéro

WISE PAR MOI 0902 A (circular red stamp, "Vladimir Naumov Expert O.A. Paris" round rim,
address "10, Rue Stephenson, 75018 PARIS" in center)

With an RPG-7, 10 km. from Ivanovo, 2002



With a PK (machine gun), 10 km. from Ivanovo



With an RGP7 grenade launcher, 10 km. from Ivanovo

In gratitude, these fighters arranged training for me in certain weapons, namely the PKM (a modernized version of the AK-47)¹, the RPG-7 rocket launcher², the SSR³ sniper's rifle, the original AK-47 and others. Some of them also served as my bodyguard.

We also helped the FSB Directorate for Ivanovo Province

¹ A 7.62 mm Kalashnikov automatic rifle modified by Kalashnikov as the only standard automatic rifle for the USSR Armed Forces.

² A Soviet/Russian reusable anti-tank missile launcher to fire cumulative ammunition, For use against tanks, self-propelled guns and other armor. Can be used to destroy enemy troops under cover and also against low-flying aerial targets.

³ A sniper's silenced rifle for Special Forces.

with money. The head of security of my company was an FSB lieutenant-colonel. We also had some other FSB Directorate agents working for us.

As a result of this, I received dozens of letters of gratitude from the heads of various sub-units of the All-Russian MIA and FSB.

Preparing for war

Back in February 2014, watching Russian television, I could not take my eyes off the screen. All the media, with the exception of the “Culture” channel, were constantly showing the events in Ukraine. The evening news was extended from thirty minutes to an hour or more. If it had not been for my job, which I had started not long before this, I too would have been there in April, when Russian citizens were in Slavyansk. On waking the next morning after the first reports, I looked and myself in the mirror and told myself: “Don’t think about going there. It’s none of your business”. For the last few years I had been living in Moscow, and I must admit that they were not the best years in my life. A few months previously, I had been offered the post of Director of Development in a construction company which built housing, as well as industrial and commercial property. After having sold petroleum products worth millions of dollars every month, it was not an enviable prospect to work for my uncle, even if it was as a director. So work took second place, particularly as even from the beginning, it had not interested me. “We have to finish off the Banderites⁴ because our grandfathers didn’t” was the thought inspired in me by what I heard on some channel or other.

“Good morning”, I say to the guard who opens the door.

⁴ Banderite: A member of, or one who subscribes to the ideas of, the political movement of Stepan Bandera; more generally, a nationalist Ukrainian.

“G’day”, he replies.

“Have you seen what the nationalists are up to in Ukraine?”

“Can you believe it? Maybe we are too trusting?”

“What are you talking about? The Ukrainians have sold themselves to the Americans, a long time ago.”

“Maybe...” I reply, but thinking my own thoughts.

I enter the office, switch on the computer and immerse myself in the internet, seeking the latest news on events in the newly-hatched New Russia, where Strelkov is in charge.

At the beginning of April, an armed group of his people seized administrative buildings in Slavyansk, Donetsk Province. On 13th April 2014, Ukraine’s National Security and Defense Council took the decision to commence anti-terrorist operations, involving the Ukrainian armed forces. On the same day, a group of Ukrainian security troops was ambushed and fired on. Some of them were killed and wounded. That was how the war began in the south west of Ukraine, where those behind it were Russian citizens. This anecdote appeared after this:

A grandmother goes up to her grandson and asks:

“Hey, what’s going on in the streets of Slavyansk? What are these barricades?”

“It’s a revolution, granny.”

“Who against who?”

“Our people against the criminal authorities.”

“Really, darling? I don’t see any of our people there, no-one but incomers...”

I arrived home that evening and watched the TV again. People dying... Russian people being killed...

I'll soon be with you. Hang on!

Next morning I washed, looked in the mirror and said: "Don't think about going there. No, of course not. I'm not that much of an idiot. Of course I won't go. There's nothing for me to do there..." Every day I felt more and more involved. All I was thinking about was the Donbass and all things connected with it. I began to admit to myself that perhaps I would go there after all. But this thought frightened me, and I insistently pushed it away. I couldn't find any information on how to get to Slavyansk without falling into the hands of the Ukrainian authorities. I was not ready to go there on my own. I was deaf to the arguments of my common sense, which was shouting at me: "Where are you taking me?" But there was a voice in my heart: "Do it! It's your duty!" And so strong was this voice that the concepts of common sense became irrelevant...

It was the end of May by the time I had found the email of the Slavyansk campaign office. I immediately sent an email saying I wanted to go there. In reply I was told: "You have to get to Slavyansk and come to our office." I realized it would not be easy to do this, because the Ukrainian authorities were turning all Russian men between 18 and 60 years of age off the trains, to reduce the flow of volunteers pouring into Ukraine.

"What the devil can I do?" I thought. "How can I get there?"

I remembered a friend who lived right on the Ukrainian

frontier at Donetsk, in Rostov Province. After the Chechen war, he had been demobilized from the Army and was now smuggling various goods from Russia into Ukraine. I had to find him urgently and ask his help, so that his colleagues from Ukraine would take me to Slavyansk. But – wouldn't you know it? – my friend seemed to have disappeared off the face of the Earth. After spending several fruitless days looking for him, I returned to my internet searches for information to help me.

I could of course take the risk of going into Ukraine on my own, but there was one thing against this: the debts I had incurred were an obstacle to me moving beyond the bounds of the Russian Federation. I could only see one possibility: crossing the frontier illegally, for which I needed a “window”.

On one of my days off, I went to Ivanovo, where the 98th Division of the Airborne Forces was stationed on the other side of a friend's fence.

“Max, I'm trying to get to Ukraine”, I told him.

“Why do you need to do that?”

“I don't want to make a speech about it. I don't know... I feel drawn there...”

More days off passed by. Everyday, it was all still the same. Morning, the mirror... Don't think of going... the office... reports about the war... “No, I'm not going anywhere...” I bought a bulletproof vest, a camouflage cloak, combat boots, an assault vest, radios, a knife, medicine, a combat suit and a balaclava. I tried all this gear on in the office, and looking

at myself in the mirror, said: “You’re beginning to look like a fighter”.

I thought it over, wondering where all this would take me, and my soul still resisted, I told myself I wouldn’t go. It was hard to imagine that you might simply not exist after this trip. All this has to be pictured in the imagination, and it had to be agreed that it was possible, and you are ready for any situation.

The working day came to an end, and I was still in my bulletproof vest, viewing my new image.

“Hey, where are you off to?” the guard asked when he saw me. To Ukraine, to fight», I replied.

“What? Seriously?”

“Yes”.

“Good for you! I’d go too, but my son is ill and there’s no-one else to look after him.”

He began talking about his service in the Army, and of course was excited by the idea of fighting. Sitting through each 24-hour shift and looking at the screen, nipping out for a smoke occasionally – who would find that interesting?

He wished me luck and to hit the enemy hard.

“Luck? Thanks, a bit of that will come in handy.”

When I was buying the armor and equipment, I got the impression that everyone was going to Ukraine: anything to do with the military was flying off the shelves at a rapid rate.

On another day off, I go into Ivanovo. The 98th Division is on the march, with all its kit and equipment, towards the Northern

airfield. I jump out of the bus. I try to get through to a captain of the Airborne, shouting:

“Where are you going? To Ukraine?”

But my pal Max won't let me through.

“Yes, that's where they're going, but you don't have to”, he says.

I am burning inside. They're off to fight, and here I am, stuck in the rear...

I call into a little store a hundred meters or so from the military base. Here it is usually full of 98th Division troops, but now it is empty. I ask the storekeeper:

“Where are they all?”

“The guys have gone to defend us. And have you paid your debt to the homeland?”

“I did that, in Chechnya”, says Max.

“Good for you, I envy you”, I reply. “And what's it like there, in a war? Will I be muddy and freezing in the trenches?”

“Of course. What do you expect?”

“Fine, I'm ready for everything”, I reply.

“But what if I'm killed?” I think to myself. “And incidentally, how does the body get brought back if you die?”

I look it up on Google. They take it to Rostov-on-Don and the relatives pick it up from there. I don't want to cause problems for anybody: funeral, tears... No, I won't give my relatives' details when I join up. If it comes to it, they can bury me there...

At the beginning of June, reports start appearing on the

net on how to reach the recruiting point in an organized manner. “Russian National Unity”, the “Interbrigades”, the draft office of the Donetsk People’s Republic, the Cossacks and other organizations are doing an excellent job of sending off the volunteers. All I had to do was send an email to these organizations and wait for replies. They came telling me to state my full name, my city of residence, my citizenship, military specialty (if an ex-serviceman), combat experience, when I would be ready to travel, and a contact telephone number. All the applications were approved without exception, including mine. And I wrote to all of them I could.

I decided to call in at the church to request a blessing for this trip.

“How can you help them?” asked the priest. “You’d do better to try to overcome your passions. I won’t give you a blessing.”

I thought about his words. Really, how could I help those engaged in this conflict?? But I was already burning with the desire to fight.

When I was getting ready to go to Rostov, someone from the FSB rang me and asked me to call in at their Ivanovo Province office.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“You wrote to us that to want to join the Ukrainian National Guard?”

Now I remembered. Yes, a few weeks ago I had written to them and asked if any punitive measures would be taken

against me if I took part in the war on the side of the National Guard.

“So that’s it! I’m on my way to join up now. I was just going out the door.”

“Where exactly are you going? To the Donbass? Could you come to our office now?” he asked, in a quite different tone.

“I’ll come right away. I am right here in Ivanovo.”

“Come in, we’ll be expecting you”, was the reply.

I called a cab and went there. The cab driver was thinking his own thoughts, but I was talking non-stop.

“No, look,’ they told me, ‘You mustn’t go to the National Guard.’ And when I said I was joining the militia, that really put the cat among the pigeons”, I said.

“Are you out of your mind?? Two guys have already been brought back from there in caskets”, he said in amazement.

Indeed, two volunteers from Ivanovo had died in May in the storming of Donetsk Airport.

“That’s war, what do you expect?” I replied. “You can get killed.”

The FSB asked me to sign a declaration that I refused to answer the question.

“I understand”, I thought. “It’s a tricky business for you.”

But that was not all. They asked me under official interrogation where exactly I was going and how I intended to get there. I refused to testify anything. To which the officer objected:

“It’s simply better to testify here than later in Rostov, where

our people will deal with you. They know about you anyway”, he said.

“You won’t betray me to the Ukrainian side? You aren’t passing information to them?”

“Why do you think we would share information like that with them?”

“Anything’s possible. One lot in power today, another lot tomorrow, and you would drop us right in it. Today we’re freedom fighters, tomorrow we’re terrorists.”

But they assured me that this information would not be given out, and only then did they ask:

“But why did you write us such a query about taking part in the Ukrainian National Guard?”

I replied:

“It’s hard to understand clearly just what our state’s policy is. Maybe I didn’t get something.”

“Do you get it now?”

“Oh yes. I get it all now.”

“What impels you to make this journey?”

“I want to defend our fellow countrymen. This amounts to a war against Russia, and the forefront of it is there. Ukraine is just a platform for the West to wage war on us.”

“It’s good that you understand that. There are very few people like you just now, unfortunately. Good health! And good luck!”

Rostov-on-Don

The instructions I'd been sent from the Donetsk People's Republic draft office in Moscow asked me to get to the railroad terminal in Rostov and when I got there, to ring a number they gave me.

“Hello. I was given your number to call.”

“Hi. Where are you now?”, a male voice replied.

At the railroad terminal.»

Take a No. 75 bus to Megamag. Then walk towards Left Bank Street to the Smirnov café, or take a cab. Then call this number.»

It wasn't far to go, only one stop, then I walked one or two kilometers and asked myself: “Where am I going? Why do I need this? I could get killed.”

I stopped, sat down on my backpack, thought a bit, then got up and went on. This way it took me two or three hours to cover a distance I could have done in half an hour. It was hard for me to decide to fight, doubts overcame me, my commonsense was beside itself with its failure to understand or accept what was coming. But I went on slowly... After reaching the appointed place and dialing the same number again, I realized the boathouse was right opposite me. I went on about fifty meters and saw DPR flags fluttering. Lonely exhausted people were walking round the building. You couldn't mistake these sad sacks. It was obvious they were going there too.

I entered the yard and approaching the kiosk, asked:

“Who’s the senior?”

“Sova”, they told me. “She’s taking a break. Tea, coffee, something to eat – help yourself.”

It was an old wooden building, rising about two meters above the ground. On the street there were two large tents, for six men; the boathouse, a wooden toilet and a shower. There was a punch-bag hanging up. By the kiosk was a large table, to seat about ten to twelve people. They were watching a film on TV.

For the first few minutes, I felt out of place here. They were such different, strange people. Some were in military uniform, some in a sports outfit or beach garb. But they were all friendly, and I soon felt at home. Some people had come with experience, they stood out at once: kitbag-size or assault backpacks on their shoulders, shooting mats, beards and military uniforms. They were Cossacks, all well over forty.

The main building contained two dormitories with 30 beds each. The mattresses lying at the exit were like those in old hospitals, worn-out and covered in spots. There were stretchers here too. I could not bear to look at them, they made me feel ill. Looking at these stretchers, I smelt the stench of war for the first time. One of the journalists once asked me: “What does war smell of? What is it like? The smell of gunpowder or what?” Gunpowder smells natural, but war smells of something rotten and cold. Are there words to describe this smell? Hardly. You have to smell it yourself.

I saw some wounded by shrapnel from an AGS⁵ and some by bullets. They were getting about on crutches. “There they are, the first casualties of the war.”

One of the wounded advised us to hide our weapons when we put them down in combat zones. In Donetsk, they were selling at a thousand dollars for an automatic rifle and 300 for a Makarov pistol. This seemed wrong to me. I had come here not for money, but to fight and help.

Sova woke up. She was a likeable girl aged about thirty. She noted down all the new arrivals. She was the senior in the camp while Alexey and Nikolai were away getting the volunteers through the border.

I went up to her and told her I had arrived from Moscow. The girl looked at my passport and asked:

“What’s your callsign?”

“Thirty-seven, from the number of my district in Ivanovo Province”, I replied.

After taking down my details and other information about me, she issued me my bedding.

I was in a tent on the street, with some Ossetians and Russians. I quite soon became friends with them. They already had experience of combat operations and told me a lot about it. We were lying in the tent. It was nearly midnight. From the

⁵ AGS-17 Plamya: a large 30 mm. automatic grenade launcher. Intended to hit enemy personnel and artillery not under cover, in open dugouts (trenches) and behind natural folds in the landscape (in gullies and ravines, and on the reverse slopes of heights).

other side of the river came noises from a restaurant: shouting, merriment, music. But we were going to war... Turning to Alan (as my new friend was called), I said.

“They’re having fun over there. I’d kind of like to look in there myself.”

“Tomorrow, if we don’t leave, we must go there.”

“Alan, did you tell your parents when you left?” I asked.

“No, I just called my brother this morning. He told my mother I’d gone to work in Moscow.”

And a guy from Suzdal, a former scout, said:

“It’s better that we help people rather than working for those Muscovites there. It makes more sense.”

I was proud and happy to have so many, brave, unselfish and good people alongside me. Many of them led a completely sober life and had no bad habits. Each one was unique in some respect. One had even hitch-hiked all the way from Vladivostok.

Our food was prepared by those who had gotten this far but didn’t want to go any farther. For example, a Yakut of about twenty, whom the Cossacks often made fun of. He came over to us and asked:

“Do I have really to go there?”

He was a strange guy. He hardly socialized with anyone; he was fat, soft and wore spectacles. It was surprising that he’d ever decided to come, but he probably had the same reasons that we did.

“Stay here and have a good think about it”, said someone.

In the morning we had breakfast, drill and roll-call. Then, in principle, free time, no obligations.

A Russian guy had come from Iraq with his whole body covered in scars. I don't remember his callsign, but over the past twenty years he had been in practically all the armed conflicts on Earth.

"I'll cover your ass, Bondo, you can rely on me", he said. "Don't worry, it's only scary the first time, then you get to like it. When we've finished over there, we'll go to Syria."

That day, up to a hundred people had gathered there. Various people from all over Russia, and not just Russia. There were some from Israel, Italy, Spain and Canada. Some arrived in our camp and some left it.

In the evening some more young Ossetians arrived, and we sat down that night on the river bank to a small picnic. It was carefree and jolly, we were impatiently awaiting the morrow.

More Russian guys came from the Donbass. They worked with drones. I looked at them with envy: they'd already been there and were on their way home...

Next morning we were formed up, and about forty men were taken to the border in two minibuses. We chatted occasionally along the way, but we all felt apprehensive. Each of us was intensively thinking his own thoughts as we approached this war, speeding away from our peaceful life. When we approached the border, we saw self-propelled guns all along it with their barrels pointing towards Ukraine. We traveled for about two hours,

on rural roads and bypasses, until we reached the Kuybyshevo border crossing.

We were all glad to get out onto the street. We began to look towards where the artillery was firing. Our cannon, on Ukrainian territory about five hundred meters from us, were blazing away. I heard the sound of guns for the first time in my life. Russian units had pushed the Ukrainian troops back from our borders. That was what the border guards told us.

Everything felt tight inside me. There was no fear, only new sensations which I noticed at once. You won't experience such feelings anywhere else, only in war. Your organism is in shock, every cell is horrified by what is happening. But then some of you begin to like it, and will cherish dreams of another war.

No-one else was being let through this border post, only us and the military. The senior of our group, a man of about fifty, went up to the border guard and said:

“They should have called you. I'm Alexei.”

“Yes, go on through”, was the reply.

We crossed the border a few at a time. The roar of the guns rang in our ears. In fours and fives, we approached the barrier, where our passports were checked.

Twenty meters or so further on, they examined our things too.

“Any sharp objects? Weapons, ammunition?”

“No”, we replied.

“Where are you going?”

“To see a girl I know in Ukraine”, answered the guy from

Suzdal.

“How about you?” He asked one of the Israelis.

“Me too, to visit people I know there.”

We had been warned in Rostov not to talk at the border crossing. So we were all quiet as mice, though both we and the border guards thought it was funny.

“Where are you all going?” asked the captain. You must have children at home, families, wives? What about them?”

This got home to me. I privately agreed with him. We’d left our own people and gone to strangers.

A big shot-up bus followed us from Donetsk. Only one or two window panes were intact, all the others were covered in cardboard. There was no doubt it had been in battles. A few days previously, a group of volunteers like this from Russia on the way to Donetsk had been ambushed and subjected to a hail of fire. Only a few survived.

While we were passing through this post, military vehicles – Ural-type trucks, other trucks, without license plates – were moving along a rural road to the left of us. People in uniform were sitting in them.

While I was traveling from Moscow to Rostov, I had seen these vehicles without license plates, moving through the territory of Rostov Province in big kilometer-long columns. I reckon everyone passing through that area in the summer of 2014 must have noticed them. Later, I often saw the like on Donbass territory.

But the three Ossetians and I were not allowed through, on account of restrictions on travel abroad imposed by officialdom. And they had only begun implementing them that very day. Before that, all had been let through. The officer in charge of the border crossing said:

“You’re out of luck, guys. New orders from today. You’ll go through with Alexei. He knows all about it, he’ll take you through.”



Alexei Mozgovoy, one of the eminent leaders of the armed units of the Lugansk People’s Republic, killed by persons unknown on 05.23.2015

We returned to Rostov, on the one hand with relief, the internal tension became less, but on the other hand with

disappointment that we were not going with all the others. We spent the night in the camp, where a new lot had already arrived.

Next day, those of us who'd had problems crossing the border were divided into two groups. Fifteen of us went to Mozgovoy, the commander of the "Phantom" battalion⁶, and the others to the Cossacks.

The Ossetians came over to me.

"Bondo, are you really going with Mosgovoy?"

"Yes."

"Watch out, they say he doesn't care about people, he sends them off under fire."

"No worries, bro, if anything like that happens I'll retreat."

⁶ The "Phantom" battalion of the People's Militia of Lugansk, was an armed unit. It took an active part in the armed conflict in eastern Ukraine, in particular in the battles in the Debaltsevo region. The battalion commander was always Alexei Mozgovoy.

Belenkoye village

We arrived in Donetsk in Rostov Province, which borders onto the territory of Ukraine, and spent about an hour there. People in passing cars stuck their heads out, looking at us with interest – we were almost all dressed in camouflage cloaks. The recruits arrived in a minibus painted a spotty green color. The senior man was called “Mechanic”. It was his job to take volunteers across the border, and also humanitarian goods, which were addressed to the Phantom battalion.

I was still wondering, “Where the hell am I going?” But my legs carried me of their own accord, not allowing the head to think...

We crossed the border in a field, went on for a hundred meters so that the minibus would not get stuck, and found ourselves in Belenkoye village, Krasnodon district of Lugansk Province, a thousand meters from the Russian border.

The recruits were housed in the local club. There were about thirty of us.

We unloaded, and the first thing we saw was a fight between two of the militiamen, heroes of the defense of Slavyansk. A week later, one of these two stole a Makarov pistol from a retired GRU captain⁷. The retired GRU group consisted

⁷ The GRU (Main Intelligence Directorate) is a special service for external intelligence of the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, the central control

of three men, and was going to Russia. They did not conceal who they were, although they did not draw attention to themselves. One of them was from Moscow, one from Nizhni Novgorod and I don't recall where the third one was from. But I remember the senior of the group. It was obvious he was an officer. Five foot nine, well built, commanding voice and military bearing. He had fought in the First Chechen War and stormed Grozny. He knew how to handle guns and knives, and had basic medical knowledge, including about what kinds of wound there might be and what medicines to use. He was 100% prepared: a real professional. I didn't meet many of those in the Donbass.

From a few snatches of conversation over ten days, I'd formed a picture of these officers, although they didn't tell us everything. They had already been in Ukraine three months. They went in armed only with knives. Two attempts were unsuccessful because they encountered large numbers of the enemy. As one of them said: "You would never have known about us if we hadn't lost contact with Russia, They thought we'd already been killed, so we didn't get any help." After a month wandering about, they came to the militia and attached themselves to the humanitarian column.

There had been four in the group at first, but their commander was shot by the militia. They were taking his body to be buried in Russia – or to be precise, the body was somewhere else and they were waiting at the border to escort it.

“Why did they kill your commander?” I asked.

“For no reason at all”, one of them replied. “They just shot him, that was it.”

It seemed out of place to inquire any further.

Two hours later, a column from Alcheyevsk⁸ joined us. They all looked really impressive. Some wore bulletproof vests, anti-shiprapnel goggles and Kevlar helmets. Nikolayich, the deputy commander of the battalion, got out of his Land Cruiser with a pistol in his hand.

“Why haven’t the two fuel tankers gone where they should?” he shouted.

“We had no such orders, we were only told to wait here”, replied one of the drivers.

“I could have you shot on the spot! The tanks are stuck, they can’t move! Where’s the other driver?”

“I don’t know”, replied the bewildered man.

“Arrest both of them! Take them to battalion headquarters”, ordered Nikolayich.

One of the guys I had just arrived with came up to me.

“Something here sets my heart pounding, though I fought in Chechnya”, he said.

Another one came up and agreed.

“Yes, it’s no joke any more.”

I was also concerned. Up to now, I’d had no idea that you could

⁸ Alcheyevsk: A town of provincial status in Lugansk Province of Ukraine, de facto from 2014, a city of republican status in the Lugansk People’s Republic.

simply be killed by your own side here. We had rapidly found ourselves in a different reality, and I started looking towards the Russian border.

It was already dark, and this column was supposed to take us to Alcheyevsk, where the Phantom battalion was deployed. Some of those we had arrived with were tank troops, and this was where they were formed into tank crews (engineer-drivers, gunners, gunlayers and tank commanders)

Fougasse, who had come with me from Rostov, suggested:

Stay behind, Bondo, we'll teach you to be a gunner or gunlayer, you'll be a tank man then!»

I was in an apprehensive mood, and I didn't want to travel any farther, not that day anyway, so I decided to stay where I was. When the column had gone, we all sat at the table with the commander. They started interrogating us, asking who had served where, what specialty and so on. I hadn't served anywhere, but my comrades said that I was a hunter and could shoot a squirrel in the eye from three hundred meters. The commander gave me the callsign "Hunter". and promised: "When we get back from Rostov, you'll be our sniper." I had no objection, in fact that was the very position I had been hoping for.

After we'd been allocated to crews, we decided to have a bite to eat. Although we'd been offered food as soon as we arrived, somehow we felt it would have choked us. We took what we had from our bags, ate something, and I went out to the street. It was night time, quiet, there were bats about. The only light came from

the open door. I was calm. “Fucking hell!” I thought.

About one in the morning, Fougasse called me.

“The column, Bondo! Look, our guys have arrived.”

About a hundred meters away, a column of military vehicles was moving along the road: Grads⁹, APCs¹⁰ and loaded tank transporters were proceeding from the Russian border towards Krasnodon¹¹.

“Here they are at long last”, said one of the militiamen.

We would see this picture every night right up to our August advance.

We were staying in the club building, sleeping on the floor. We just threw the mattresses down and slept as we were, in our clothes. With the exception of the new arrivals, everyone had combat experience – they were almost all locals, from the Donbass. They were all about the same age, from forty to sixty-five. Their faces were coarse, not always pleasant, not like those we were used to seeing in peacetime.

The next day the militiamen under Batya’s command arrived.

⁹ 9K51 “Grad”: The 9K51 is a Soviet multiple 122mm rocket launcher. It is intended to hit personnel in the open or under cover, non-armored equipment and APCs (see next note) deployed in concentrations, artillery and grenade launcher batteries, command posts and other targets, and for other tasks in a variety of combat situations.

¹⁰ APC: armored personnel carrier. An armored combat vehicle, a troop transporter, intended to transport personnel (riflemen), motorized units, infantry, motorised infantry, airborne and other units and materiel to required positions for combat missions and to evacuated wounded and injured from the combat zone.

¹¹ Krasnodon: a provincial status city in Lugansk Province of Ukraine. Since April 7th 2014 it has been under the control of the Lugansk People’s Republic.

As I understood it, until a week ago he had been Mozgovoy's deputy commander. He was a middle-aged man, about fifty-five. They arrived in expensive new Jeeps confiscated from civilians for the cause of "the struggle against fascism". As he got out of the vehicle, Batya asked: "Who'll join me? I'm creating a new battalion. If you come to us, there won't be any tanks, Mozgovoy won't give us anything like that. I'll send all the tank crew lists to Russia."

We new arrivals, of course, looked blank and didn't understand anything. A few did go over to him though, five or six of our party.

The militiamen did not yet have weapons, they had all been disarmed back at Alchevsk, because they were supposed to be going to one of the tank training grounds in Rostov province for initial training and exercises, and to be given the equipment they'd need in combat operations.

One with the callsign Rost had already been there, and told us how the training went. "One to three weeks, from five in the morning till late evening, on the tank training ground. Then a test. Get fully clothed and shod, get weapons. They even give you brand new assault rifles, still with oil on them." I had nothing against taking a ride to Rostov-on-Don and riding in tanks. I was in no hurry to get to the war.

We agreed to ring Mechanic at once if Batya and his comrades came back.

We did not have long to wait. The very next day, Batya got us

fallen in and said:

“You realize, don’t you, that you’re like a flock of sheep, you can’t make your minds up to anything? Anyway, there’s an order from Phantom to shoot looters, because whatever town you go in, people are suffering from looting.”

Then Mechanic turned up with the reinforcements, We were between two armed groups. The situation had become tense. One of the drunken militiamen switched his gun’s safety catch off, which couldn’t go unnoticed.

“Hey, calm down, Don’t do anything stupid”, they told him as they disarmed him.

“I remember how as soon as I thought about going from Mozgovoy to Batya, I was cut by a knife, in his presence, in his office”, shouted one of those who had come with Batya, and showed us the scars of his ordeal. “And how many businessmen has Mosgovoy shot because they didn’t want to cooperate with him?”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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