

Operatsiyi Perelyv by Davis Alexander Beaudoin

I'm in Ukraine.

I had to stop asking myself *why* I was here, because it just made me feel worse.

Why am I here?

Don't answer. There's no answer. There's no good answer.

I was a soldier once, but it was years ago. My big achievement in the Canadian Forces was peacekeeping in Bosnia.

But I was in my early 20's and the fighting in Bosnia was largely over by the time I got there. My mission was finding cute European girls. It was Operation *Srodna Duša*.

This is different. I'm in a village called Davydiv Brid, in Kherson Oblast, southern Ukraine. I'm part of a 32-man platoon of foreign fighters attached to the 7th Ukrainian Army battalion.

There are no women here, just a guy who dresses like one. He's our machine gunner, named Kyrylo Kuzmenko, or as we call him, "Klinger." He wears a knee-length olive drab skirt and black leather high heels. Not trans, nor gay, Kyrylo is just a 50-something year-old crossdresser. He's growing some facial hair and can't speak any English except the word "man." He had to learn that word quick because the North Americans were asking for his pronouns. He didn't want any confusion.

"Hi, I'm Alex," I told him the first time we met, reaching for a handshake.

"Kyrylo," he said, and then emphatically added, "*Man*."

I've been hiding out in a bombed-out house with Klinger and 8 other guys for almost two weeks. I say "hiding out" because I don't want to give you the wrong idea about what's happening here. We are not in the fight. We're hiding because we were cut off from the rest of our platoon during a Russian air strike. As the bombs fell, our platoon retreated north to Bila Krynytsya, leaving us stranded. Now the Russians have surrounded the village, and if we try to escape, we'll be outnumbered and outgunned.

The Russians either don't know we're here or don't care. They haven't bothered to come into the village, because street fighting is messy. But they're watching.

Our new mission, therefore, is to wait it out or be rescued.

In the meantime, let me show you around the place and introduce you to my housemates.

We have sleeping bags, rucksacks, and other supplies all over the place. And as much as I know we're all trying to play it cool, things are not cool. The place smells horrible, and so do we. We

have no electricity or running water. Our bathroom is more of a holding tank at this point, with the tub, sink, and toilet all full.

All the furniture is propped up against the walls, windows, and doors for extra protection. Our rations are gone. We raided the cupboards a long time ago, and all that's left is vegetable oil and ketchup – and we're drinking the ketchup. I had some green bananas that never turned yellow. They just stayed super-green, like somebody played a joke on me, selling me *NeverReady Trick Bananas* ®. Then they went right from green to rotten.

Upstairs on watch we got Stan and Dan, both ex-U.S. Marines who did tours in Iraq. Lord knows why they'd want to come here, but they seem like good guys despite being a bit creepy-quiet.

Downstairs there's the rest of us, eight dudes. Rusty is watching the kitchen-side window, and Bhupesh is watching a window in the living area.

Rusty, real name Rostyslav, is in his forties, and is the only other Ukrainian in our section besides Klinger. He weighs about 300 pounds, farts constantly, and jabbers in Ukrainian incessantly even though none of us, besides Klinger, can understand him. The dad strength is real though.

Bhupesh is from Manitoba. He's a good soldier, but he's been gathering pop cans into plastic bags and keeping them in the corner of the living room - and there's just not enough space for that. He says he's going to recycle them. If you ask me, he's losing it a little. A block away from here there's a wrecked Ukrainian armoured personnel carrier. That's like half-a-billion crushed pop cans. And even if we make it out of here, those cans have to get transported to a processing plant in Germany or something. And then those plant employees get into their cars and drive to work, and then the plant uses an extraordinary amount of energy to crush and melt those cans. And then some company sends trucks to pick up the raw materials and transport them halfway around the world for re-manufacturing.

Or we can just bury them in a pit. But hey, whatever makes Bhupesh feel better at this point.

The six of us not on watch are a mix of Canadian and American miscreants, a few of whom have dubious warfighting qualifications, myself included.

Jenkins, a thirty-something year-old ex-army reservist from Burnaby, B.C. has been sick with food poisoning since eating some tofu he found at a grocery mart before the air raid. "Varied sources of protein are essential," he said. We haven't been able to get the puke smell out of the hardwood floors. He spends a lot of time lying down.

Terry, in his late twenties, from Buffalo, N.Y. is more concerned about COVID than our predicament. He's been wearing his balaclava and trying to maintain his social distance since we moved in. His breath coming through that balaclava smells like death, and he can't wait for his R&R in Kyiv so he can get his second booster.

Min Ho is our section commander. An ex-U.S. Army Ranger and Afghanistan vet turned banker, he doesn't talk much, preferring to lead by example. A bit socially awkward though. His way connecting with us involves talking about interest rates, inflation, and how to make smart investments during a recession.

Victor and David are ex-U.S. Army National Guard from Fort Knox, Kentucky. Country boys with positive attitudes. David has managed to keep his Bluetooth speaker and phone charged this whole time, subjecting us to as much country music – mostly Eric Church, Chris Janson, and Walker Hayes, or as he calls them, “the holy trinity” - as he likes.

Finally, there's Bucket, our second-in-command. He's an ex-U.S. Army officer, and veteran of two tours in Iraq. Small and wiry with a thin moustache, he takes this whole affair quite seriously, which I suppose is a good thing since I'm an eternal skeptic. He has degrees in political science and says this whole fight is going to lead to nuclear war – not only that, but it's *designed to*.

“There's so much propaganda,” he says, “you would never know if the economy crashed. You'd never know if you lost a war, or if you were in the midst of one – especially a biological one. You'd never know if the global order and the nation-state as you knew it was being remade right in front of you.”

And yet here he is.

I heard a mortar land in the distance.

Bucket looked right at me, and I understood. Here I was too.

Another mortar. The house went so quiet I could hear heads turning in collars.

“Stand-to” was whispered throughout the house. “*Stand-to... Stand-to... Stand-to.*”

We waited for what came next. Moments passed, then more mortars landed. These ones sounded closer.

In a moment of dead silence, I heard a *slluurpp*. I looked over and saw Rusty sitting cross-legged on the floor with a bowl of soup filled to the brim. *Slluurpp*.

“Where'd you get that?”

He looked at me doe-eyed, yellowish soup dripping from his lower lip.

Min Ho, incensed, pointed at Rusty, and then at Rusty's rifle on the floor, as if to say *pick it up!*

Rusty got up, slung his rifle, and shuffled to the bathroom. When you gotta go, you gotta go. Rusty had bad nerves.

The mortar fire intensified, but it seemed to be directed to the south, where most of the Russian forces were located. Maybe this was our rescue. We heard vehicles coming from the north.

Rusty was still doing up his belt as he shuffled from the bathroom back to his position below the window. He picked up his bowl of soup. *Slluurrpp*.

The *crack-thump* of rifle fire now. More mortars landing to the south. The grinding sound of armoured personnel carriers in the streets around us. *Slluurrpp*.

For a second there was silence. Just my heartbeat. Then came the sound of doors opening and closing outside, and footsteps.

From upstairs we heard Stan call out, “the cavalry’s here!”

I heard a *clink* as Rusty put his bowl of soup on the floor. It still looked full, and I wasn’t sure if I was more grateful for being rescued or the end of his *slluurrpping*.

Klinger and Min Ho cleared furniture away from the front door and opened it. A gaggle of Ukrainian soldiers were gathered in the front yard. We trickled out of the house, weary.

One of our rescuers laughed as he watched us come out one by one.

“*Skil’ky vas tam? Wow, wow.*”

There was no time for greetings. We had to hustle out of there.

The ten of us piled into a single armoured Kozak personnel carrier like it was a clown car. The engine revved and we bounced down a dirt road through the countryside, headed north at high speed. Jenkins turned green like he was going to puke. Rusty gleefully yammered in Ukrainian while Klinger sat with his legs open, his beige underwear clearly visible under his skirt. Bucket was telling Stan and Dan this was all part of the plan. David started playing *The Reel Bass Pro* by Chris Janson on his speaker, and Victor lit a cigarette, ensuring we’d all have to breathe it in. I sat across from Terry, who breathed right into my face.

Bhupesh was sitting beside me with his overflowing bags of pop cans piled as high as our knees. He looked at me, smiling, and patted me on the leg.

You can see why I had to stop asking myself why I was here.

