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“You lie in a trench like in a coffin. If there is hell on earth, it is war. I have never seen anything worse”: a Russian who fought on the side of Ukraine

Monday 27 February 2023, by [MAZINA Natalia](#) (Date first published: 6 February 2023).

I don't believe him. He is a Russian. And although he brought a bunch of documents proving that he fought on the side of Ukraine, has certificates and a medal for sacrifice, I am suspicious.

Across from me at the table in the café is a heavily built 54-year-old man. He has a distrustful, spiky look in his brown eyes, a short skipper's beard with a bare chin. The black sleeve of his sweater has a neat hole in it: from shoulder to elbow, Vitaliy Zh. (name changed)'s skin is covered with a stylish spike device. Thanks to it, his left arm, which was shattered six months ago in a battle, is holding together.

About street “concepts” that are stronger than patriotism

Vitaliy's father is Ukrainian, but he left his son as a baby. And he grew up in Russia. He found his father, and they kept in touch. But when in 2019 the pensioner told him that he was dying, his son rushed to him in Kharkiv. He stayed to look after him, and then decided to settle in Ukraine himself. He had a business in Europe, and here he taught boys Thai boxing. Like many Russians, he was not interested in politics and considered the war in eastern Ukraine to be a local conflict.

“I did not think that Putin would start a (full-scale - ed.) war on February 24. He is too rich, smart and cunning a man, he could live like a honey-drinker, bending the whole of Russia. I even lost a case of cognac to the guys because I didn't believe in all this,” Vitaliy says.

The day of February 25 turned his life around. No exaggeration. He was traveling with a friend on the Poltava-Kyiv highway. At 3:30 p.m., a black, shiny helicopter appeared over the road from somewhere. And it started shooting fire in front of his car. Vitaliy stopped. Three Ukrainian military vehicles were burning in front of him at a distance of several hundred meters. People in uniform poured out of them: some were burning, some were being pulled out. Everything was happening at lightning speed. The flames were at the level of the second floor.

But the one closest to Vitaliy was a civilian car that had been turned around in the middle of the road. The driver was running along the highway covered in blood, shouting something. Vitaliy cautiously looked into the car. A young woman was half lying on the front seat without a part of her head.

“Nothing can be done,” he thought.

Suddenly there was movement behind me. I looked: a two-year-old girl. In the brains and blood of her mother. But she was safe.

"I'm not afraid of anything, I've seen everything, but then it started to throw me," Vitaliy recalls.

He took the man and his daughter into his car to drive them to Kyiv. But the man asked him to drop them off at a gas station. Their friends were already rushing to pick them up.

That night, the Russian man did not sleep, he was tossing and turning: the war, what to do next, where to go. He thought about the west of Ukraine. For a few minutes he fell asleep, and there was a girl covered in blood.

"Understand, I was raised by the street. I am a hooligan, tough guy. I was not tall enough, so I took up martial arts. It helped me defend my interests. But, as in every upbringing, we have our own" concepts". They are in my blood. You cannot offend children, the elderly, women. Even if they are acting stupidly and are not right. Smile and walk away. Because they are weaker," he says with pressure, his eyes sparkling. You can feel that this is important to him, and he repeatedly returned to his rules during the conversation. "And when a child's mother was killed in front of me, I couldn't step over it. Children must live, mothers must live. I have a mother... This girl was really a sign of fate. And I believe in fate. Otherwise, I would never have gone against Russia. I am a patriot, and I raised my children that way."

On the third day of the great war, Vitaliy, a Russian, enlisted in the Holosiivska terrorist defense.

About ground zero, running in his underwear under fire, and six surgeries

But, of course, he was captured first. "Spy," "Muscovite," "exiled Cossack." They checked him for a long time and probably wouldn't have taken him if it weren't for the unit commander. They sat down and talked like men. And he believed him, thinking that this "particular man" who fires all kinds of weapons would be useful. And his knife is like an extension of his arm. He could teach the youngsters. That's how he became a "Samurai".

Vitaliy boasts about the results of his first shooting range, showing a photo with a target. "There are 9 and 10 there. For the first month, the terrorist fighters guarded Kyiv, and for the next two months they were trained. Everyone realized that they were preparing for"zero".

One day in early summer, a Ural truck arrived, and the men were ordered to pack their things. At night they were already in Donetsk region. They were dropped off in the woods, and at the first sounds of war, they wanted to run away from the world. Then they got used to it a bit.

The soldiers of the military unit A7373 of the TRO forces held their positions on the Bakhmut-Soledar highway. They were shelled with all kinds of weapons for two months.

"The fire was heavy. During the day they were burning fields near us. And when they figured out where we were, they leveled the trench to the ground. The whole plantation was blown away, not a single tree or bush remained. You lie in that trench like in a coffin. If there is hell on earth, it is war. I have never seen anything worse," Vitaliy admits.

In the morning of August 5, he and his comrades were brought to the position. The night before, the machine gunner had dug a trench incorrectly. The ground in front of him made it impossible to see the terrain. The "Samurai" started to finish the job. And missed a shot from a tank.

"I was almost done - and then a shot! I fell over my head. My arm flew somewhere by itself. I picked

it up and did not feel it. I thought it was a stunner, no arm. It was good that at least it was the left one. The medic ran over, but when he saw the fountain of blood, he left," Vitaliy recalls.

Six months after the injury, the man tells the story as if it were an adventure - emotionally, in detail. How the guys put a tourniquet on him and stripped him down to his underwear, looking for more wounds. And how he ran for one kilometer and six hundred meters under fire with his three comrades. They insured him so that he would not fall from blood loss on the way. How they brought him to the hospital in Druzhkivka, and the city was just being shelled. He remembers the basement, the moldy walls, and the thought: how can they perform surgery here? Three doctors lean over him and the lights go out. They turn on their flashlights. Their words: "My arm, save my arm, please." And the abyss.

I woke up with the certainty that my arm had been cut off after all. But there it was, all covered in bandages.

"I was lying there naked and happy. It was such a bliss. I saw a gray piece of sky through the intensive care window. I would not have looked at it before. And now I fell in love with it!"

The man shows a photo of his arm before and after six surgeries in several hospitals. At the first one, the arm was a solid wound. The doctors did the incredible: they collected bone fragments, stitched together nerves and muscles, and restored blood vessels.

"They practically revived my dead arm. I bow low to all the doctors. I found them later and gave them 3.5 liters of vodka in turtle bottles. This is such an ancient symbol of health. They laughed, but took it," says the grateful patient.

Vitaliy is now being treated in a military hospital. His arm occasionally gets stiff, so he takes it down from the table and kneads it. When we leave the cafe because of the air raid, I offer to help him put on his jacket. Instead, he helps me with my down jacket.

On relations with fellow countrymen: "I can answer you like a kid, there are no Nazis here"

"If I lived in Russia, I would honestly be on its side. The propaganda there is fierce. But I am here. And I see ordinary people who went to defend their land. A 60-year-old friend of mine has replaced his granddaughter's father, and he is still fighting at this age. 19-year-old guys who are scared at first, then rush to fight for their mothers, for their loved ones. I tell them, I shout to all my friends that Russia is an aggressor, a terrorist. That I see with my own eyes how cities and villages are being destroyed. But they seem to have gone crazy. Although they seem to be smart guys. They should see where the dark side is," the man thinks.

Vitaliy assures his friends that he has not met a single fascist in the 11 months of war in Ukraine. That there are more of them in Russia. As for foreign soldiers, he has seen no more than a dozen of them. He convinces his brothers with street arguments.

"I answer like a kid, there are no Nazis here, so what's the point of me making a fuss? But they don't listen. My best friends abandoned me:"Damn you, fascist. Show us the swastika."The fact that I am fighting for Ukraine is beyond them."

The Russian's mother, a former communist and teacher, does not believe her son. She is ashamed of Vitaliy. The man's 21-year-old son is studying at a Russian university. There is a military department there, and in the spring he may be drafted as an officer. All his friends are on the other side, some are already fighting.

Vitaliy lets me listen to the message he recorded for his son. He urges him to go: *"I've never asked you for anything, but now I'm asking you in the name of Christ. Do not go to war. These people have done nothing to you."* He refers to his authority and love for the boy.

Vitaliy dreams of waking up his fellow countrymen. He says he managed to convince ten of them.

"I will not give up. I will give all the soul I have. I want to stop this horror."

On citizenship: "I feel more Ukrainian than any guy who has never smelled gunpowder"

In war, it is very clear who is who. Who is afraid and who takes responsibility and leads others.

"I never thought about how I was treated. If you're a tough guy, I'm sure you stand for the truth (and Ukraine is on the side of the truth), you don't care about these snotty words. Life will put everyone in their place. I didn't lag behind, I didn't let my comrades down. I'm not ashamed. When there was a difficult situation, I tried to run forward with an assault rifle. Although I was scared, very scared," Vitaliy admits.

The words of Staff Sergeant Vitaliy Zh. are confirmed by his characteristics and certificates of merit: "brave and courageous", "impeccable service", "intelligently follows orders", "proved himself in a heroic way", "influences people with business and moral qualities".

The Russian did not develop feelings for Ukraine immediately. It took months of reorganization in his head to say *"Glory to Ukraine!"*. But one day I was walking past a checkpoint, and there were little kids, and they saw a man in a military uniform: *"Glory to Ukraine!"* And their eyes are pure and clear. And he is one-on-one with them. That was the first time he answered: *"Glory to the heroes!"* Another time, a girl of about seven years old came up and said the same thing: *"Glory to Ukraine!"* And the look was so clear.

"Well, if kids are brought up like that, how can we defeat this nation? Now I believe that I am one hundred percent Ukrainian. Because I fought for Ukraine, defended its children. I shed blood. I feel more Ukrainian than any guy who has never smelled gunpowder. My brothers-in-arms are really my family now. And Ukraine is my homeland. Only here did I feel what freedom is. This is the sweetest feeling in the world. When there was an acute threat that they were coming from Belarus, I called my commander: "Even though my left hand is not working, get my assault rifle ready. If they come to Kyiv, I can handle it with one," the man says.

Vitalii Z. wants to become a citizen of Ukraine officially. He started the procedure in 2020. He received a temporary certificate for two years, during which time he had to renounce his foreign citizenship. His lawyer in Russia collected the necessary certificates.

Everything changed after February 24, 2022. The Russian consulate, where he could submit a declaration of renunciation, closed. Vitaliy cannot go to Russia because *"they will just cut me to pieces there."* Over the past few months, he has been writing applications to the State Migration Service of Ukraine one after another. He asks them to accept his declaration as a person who is doing military service in the Armed Forces. This possibility for foreigners is clearly spelled out in the law "On Citizenship of Ukraine".

"But I'm being turned away. I have already knocked on every door. I am perceived as a civilian because I filed my first request in this status. And there is a long procedure. I write a new application as a military man, and they say that repeated applications on the same issue by the same person are not considered. And another time they say: let the Zaporizhzhia office consider the application, because I wrote there for the first time. I decided to file a lawsuit. I believe that the

truth will be on my side, because how else?" - the man is hurt. He puts his palm to his forehead. This is how he hides his feelings.

Now he lives on a military ID. But this does not give him a reason to stay on the territory of Ukraine. He could be deported. Vitaliy decided that he would rather die. He hides from people and is afraid to say an extra word. His Russian is immediately recognized.

"I found the man from the highway and his daughter. It will soon be a year since we have been friends. Anatoliy has not yet recovered from his wife's death. He says he is going crazy with pain. I comfort him: "Hold on, my friend. You are now responsible for your mom and dad." "I feel very sorry for this family, they suffered for nothing. If the Russians had felt his pain, there would have been no war. Soon my daughter Veronika will be three years old, and I want to go to visit them in Poltava region. To accompany the girl through life, to help her. I survived for some reason. So I am needed here."

In parting, I admit that I did not believe Vitaliy at first and apologize.

"I don't need an apology," he says sharply. "I really hope that Russia will one day apologize to all Ukrainians. I am very ashamed of it."

And he left. Distrustful, proud, independent. A warrior without a Ukrainian passport, but with a Ukrainian heart.

"There is a great demand in Ukrainian society not to see"good Russians"

hromadske asked the State Migration Service of Ukraine for a comment. We were told that foreign fighters who have signed a contract with the Armed Forces and have significant merits can obtain citizenship under a simplified procedure. Then the president can grant citizenship. But in any case, the soldier must give up his previous passport and present the appropriate document. The migration service did not give any advice on how to do this in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war.

"There are 750,000 citizens in Ukraine who have applied for citizenship. And right now they are all in limbo. They are waiting. Most of them are ordinary people who have been living here for 20-30 years and never thought that such a situation would arise. When their residence permits expire, they will be staying on the territory of Ukraine illegally. The term is not automatically extended during martial law. They can be deported to other countries. And that is what is happening. And here is their family," says Oleksandr Pavlichenko, executive director of the Ukrainian Helsinki Human Rights Union.

He advises civilians who want to acquire Ukrainian citizenship, including the military, to lay low.

"It's bad advice, but we advise them to stay quiet. The services have actually received instructions from the top not to consider cases of Russians and Belarusians. This discrimination started after the invasion. This is one of the ways to stop people with Russian passports crossing the border. As for the military, they have grounds for citizenship. They need to go to court. But there is a problem. A person becomes visible and starts a conflict with the system. But there is no other way," Pavlichenko explains.

The Right to Protection Charitable Foundation helps to resolve migration issues. Their lawyer did not give his last name because his parents are in the occupied territory, but he shared important information about the military with hromadske.

"A person who fought can renounce Russian citizenship without going to the Russian embassy. They

do not need to go to Russia. It is enough to notify the migration service and attach his military documents, which is what the hero of the article does. He is given excuses because they can do it. Not working where you can't work. There is a great demand in Ukrainian society not to see either "good Russians" or "bad Russians," neither one nor the other. But in fact, there are Russians who fought for us, who fought for us. And they should be granted citizenship. There are at least a thousand of them. The only way out is to go to court. We have such cases, and we have every hope that they will be successful."

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