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THE SUNDAY TIMES

Pinned to the ground by blizzard of bullets

As Ukraine's new president prepared to meet Putin in Paris, Mark Franchetti joined a militia flushing out a border post in the east. Then all hell broke loose

Mark Franchetti Published: 8 June 2014



Mark Franchetti of The Sunday Times: 'We had fallen into a deadly trap'

My face is pressed so hard into the ground I can taste the dirt. I am wearing a brand new flak jacket and helmet, but I feel completely exposed.

Around me a fierce battle is raging between Ukrainian soldiers defending a border crossing with Russia and pro-

Moscow separatists fighting to capture it. Dmitry Beliakov, a photographer for this paper, and I are caught in the middle.

Bullets whizz around us, cutting the air with a distinctive whistle and a metallic ping as they repeatedly

hit an armoured personnel carrier (APC) a few yards away from us already riddled with holes.



The ground shakes as rocket-propelled grenades are fired from behind our backs; rockets send a succession of heat waves towards us.

In faraway Paris, as world leaders mark the 70th anniversary of D-Day,

Petro Poroshenko, the new Ukrainian president, and Russia's Vladimir Putin prepare for a meeting that might eventually lead to a diplomatic solution to the West's most serious confrontation with Moscow since the end of the Cold War.

Here, on the border between the two countries, it is chaos. There is shouting, screaming and swearing, drowned out by a relentless exchange of heavy blasts from mortars and anti-aircraft guns and the crackle of at least 200 AK-47s. Most distinctive of all is the swish of snipers' bullets.

The firing is so intense that we are pinned down. Whether or not we get hit is purely a matter of luck. The longer we stay put, the more likely it is that one of us will get hit. But move and we risk being caught in the crossfire or picked off by a sniper.

For Dmitry it is a photographer's worst nightmare: in the thick of it but unable to take a picture. Raising his head only a few inches would be suicide.

"I hope you're getting some good pictures of the grass," I joke. He is not amused.

Behind us bullets ricochet off an armoured steel plate the separatists have welded to the front of a truck. There is a loud hiss as a tyre is struck.

The fuel tank of an abandoned truck a few yards away is on fire, spewing black smoke into the bright blue sky. Fearing it will explode, one of the separatists risks enemy fire to clamber into an APC and ram it away from us.

Inch by inch we begin to slowly crawl back, our movements hampered by the thick flak jackets. We roll into a ditch next to Alexander Khodakovsky, the commander of Battalion Vostok, the pro-Russian militia we have followed into this battle.

A former special forces officer, he is one of the few members of the battalion with any military training.



He seems relieved that the two journalists with him are still alive. "You okay?" he shouts.

"Oh sure, all fine, no problems, and you?" I'm struck by how absurd my words sound.

"You wanted to see something

interesting. There you have it," he replies.

The barrage of gunfire is getting worse. I stand up and sprint 100 yards down the slope, hurling myself behind thick shrubs. I slide into a deep ditch, joining several Vostok fighters armed with machine-guns and grenade launchers.

Their faces are covered in sweat and grime. One, who has been hit in the hand, lies in the dirt as a comrade ties gauze around his wound. Another stabs a wounded friend in the thigh with an anti-shock syringe.

To my left Lyudmilla, the only woman to join the fighters, a trained nurse now in combat fatigues, is desperately using both her hands to stop a fighter called Sergei from bleeding to death.

He was hit in the groin by a sniper's bullet that smashed his artery. He is howling in pain and his face has turned yellow. "I can't feel my legs," he moans.

"Hang on in there, you'll make it, you'll make it," Lyudmilla keeps telling him, her hands smeared in his blood.

As the fighting rages around us I can see Khodakovsky, crouching behind shrubs on the edge of our ditch, frantically shouting into a mobile phone, asking someone in vain for help to get his wounded men across no man's land and over to the Russian side of the border.

Dmitry, his forearms covered in deep scratches, crawls into the ditch. Two fighters shout at him as he points his camera at Sergei, now in agony. "Put that down now, mother f*****, or I'll shoot you," barks one.

More than two hours in, the firefight shows no signs of dying down. Behind us the grass and shrubs are on fire. The heat is searing. My mouth feels like sandpaper.

A noise in the sky announces my worst fears. "Planes, planes!" shouts Mamai, a burly volunteer from

the Russian region of North Ossetia, who rarely leaves Khodakovskiy's side.

The day's mission had seemed straightforward enough that morning at Vostok's base on the outskirts of Donetsk, the regional capital.

The separatists had received intelligence that Ukrainian border guards at the Marinovka crossing point with Russia — 90 miles to the east — were demoralised, disenchanted with the government in Kiev and ready to abandon their post without a fight. All that was needed was a show of force.

The task fell to Vostok (East), which was founded two months ago by Khodakovskiy and made up mostly of pro-Moscow civilians from eastern Ukraine and volunteers from Russia.

Khodakovskiy, 41, who until recently had headed a Donetsk anti-terrorism special forces command, was sent with his unit to Kiev in January to help quell pro-western demonstrations against Viktor Yanukovich, then president.

"I saw with my own eyes how extremist those demonstrators were, attacking the police and hurling petrol bombs at them," he recalled.

"When Yanukovich was ousted, I understood they would come here to the east to fight. So I founded Vostok to fight them back."

The battalion, which has fewer than 400 men, first attracted attention last month when it lost some 50 men — mostly volunteers from Russia — in a fierce battle for control of Donetsk airport. Last week's firefight at Marinovka was only its second battle.

As Khodakovskiy barked orders, 200 fighters — brave, enthusiastic but without basic training — lined up in the yard of Vostok's base.

"I couldn't just sit at home and do nothing when I saw the violence spreading," said Viktor, 36, a car mechanic.

"We're protecting our homes from a bunch of fascists who are backed by the West."

A bearded Orthodox priest in black robes and carrying an icon blessed the fighters who, after several false starts, set off in a convoy of 15 vehicles.

Khodakovskiy led the way at the wheel of a four-wheel-drive. Mamai sat next to him, cradling an AK-47. Dmitry and I were in the back.

Following us were an APC, three military trucks, vans and a few Ladas crammed with fighters, mortars and crates of ammunition. Then came two trucks mounted with anti-aircraft heavy machineguns. One had to be push-started by dozens of men and broke down after a few miles on the outskirts of Donetsk, bringing our ragtag military column to a halt.

"You f***** son of a bitch," Khodakovskiy shouted into his mobile phone to the man who had supplied the truck. "You've given me a piece of shit! Any man we lose today is on your conscience."

The men pushed the truck onto a petrol station forecourt and offloaded the gun on to another vehicle.

As we drove, we were waved through several separatist checkpoints and did not encounter any Ukrainian government forces — proof that, despite the recent escalation of its "anti-terrorist campaign", Kiev has lost control over large parts of the east.

Dmitry and I knew little of Vostok's mission when we set off. We had asked Khodakovskiy to let us see his men in action and he had suddenly called us, giving us time only to grab our flak jackets and rush to

the base.

Nearly three hours after setting off we stopped in a deserted country lane and our convoy was joined by a group of local armed separatists.

Khodakovsky donned a flak jacket and helmet and reached for his automatic weapon and pistol. He ordered us to put on our protective gear. A few miles down the road he parked his car and we joined him on the back of the APC.

On the horizon, on top of a gentle hill surrounded by vast open countryside, the Marinovka border crossing soon came into view. The men took the covers from the two anti-aircraft guns. Leaving the road we squeezed into three trucks that took us across farmland towards the post.

“We’ll approach it from the side, moving right along the border,” Khodakovsky told his men. “They’ll think twice before sending in any fighter planes as they’d be hitting the Russian side of the border.”

From my vantage point behind Khodakovsky on the back of the lead vehicle, our slow approach through open fields seemed suicidal. A single airstrike could take out the entire convoy.

From afar the border post seemed abandoned. The APC smashed through two lines of barbed wire and roared on into no man’s land. A few seconds later I spotted a few Ukrainian soldiers calmly walking away and vanishing behind shrubs.

We had fallen into a deadly trap. The intelligence Vostok had been fed by the locals could not have been more misleading — whether deliberately or not remains unclear.

Far from relishing the chance to surrender, the Ukrainian border guards had been reinforced with professional soldiers — including at least two snipers — and their post beefed up with heavy machineguns.

They had been expecting us since early morning. A single shot from an AK-47 rang out — but from the Ukrainian side. “Who’s shooting?” demanded Khodakovsky, baffled.

The shot set off a fierce firefight, which lasted nearly four hours but surprisingly killed only two Vostok men and wounded several.

Several Ukrainian soldiers were wounded but it is not clear if any were killed in the fighting, which all but destroyed the post.

Three hours into the firefight, following Mamai’s plane alert, Dmitry and I took our chance to sprint across the open fields deeper into no man’s land, as did dozens of Vostok fighters.

Further on we met several fighters who had dragged the injured Sergei across the tarmac and into a ditch. It was there that he died.

Lyudmilla broke down in tears. “Don’t cry, sister,” one of the other fighters told her. “He’s gone to heaven.”

Suddenly the sky echoed to the sound of a fighter jet launching rockets that blasted the ground further up the hill.

“Retreat! Retreat!” yelled fighters scattering away from the Ukrainian border. “Towards the Russian side!”

Bullets were still whizzing by a few minutes later as I ran down the gentle slope of the field towards the Russian positions.

The jet — this time clearly visible only a few hundred yards from the ground — reappeared, screaming across the bright blue sky.

It flew into Russian airspace, then turned sharply towards the Ukrainian side, aiming low as it launched several rockets at the fields.

Four hours after the firefight had begun, Dmitry and I, accompanied by 80 Vostok fighters — several of them wounded — finally reached the Russian side of the border.

We were met by Russian border guards, who now had a problem. The Kremlin has repeatedly been accused by America and Ukraine of taking the side of the separatists whom, it is claimed, they allow to move with weapons across the porous border.

The border guards at this, the Kuybyshevo crossing, may have sympathised with the Vostok fighters, but did not welcome them as heroes.

Instead they were disarmed at once. The wounded were taken to hospital. The others, including us, were taken to a hangar where we spent a sleepless night being questioned by law enforcement officers.

One exhausted fighter who had been close to Sergei wept in a corner as his comrades tried to comfort him. Many were seriously concussed and deafened by the explosions. One fainted, hitting his head hard on the cement floor.

Yesterday, in response to calls from G7 countries, Putin ordered the FSB security service to tighten border security to stop illegal crossings.

The move followed attempts in recent weeks by the Kremlin to distance itself from the separatists. But could our misadventure have also played a part in the decision?

Dmitry and I were released the next day; Russian authorities did not prosecute us for crossing a border illegally as our lives had been in danger.

The men from Vostok were not so fortunate. Earlier one had told me they planned to smuggle themselves back into Ukraine. Instead they were loaded onto coaches. Russian authorities said they were being sent to a remand jail.

The fighters' anger was intense. "We were set up, it was a f***** trap," said one. "We were sent head first into a meat grinder."

@STForeign

Olive branch

Petro Poroshenko, sworn in as Ukrainian president yesterday, offered political concessions to the Russian-speaking east in an attempt to bring his country back from the brink of civil war.

Poroshenko, 48, a confectionery billionaire known as the chocolate king, declared: "I don't want war. I don't want revenge, despite the huge sacrifice of the Ukrainian people."

But he also stressed that the Crimean peninsula, annexed by the Kremlin in March, would "always be Ukrainian".

Mikhail Zurabov, the Russian ambassador to Kiev, was among dozens of dignitaries, including Joe Biden, the US vice-president, who attended the ceremony.

Zurabov called the address a “promising declaration of intent” but urged Ukraine to end its military operations in the east.

Separatist groups dismissed the speech. “The fight will continue,” declared Fyodor Berezin, one of their leaders.

9 comments



Christian Mueller

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SK Au-Yeong

10 days ago

I would expect almost all the Kalashnikovs in this story to be **AK-74s** rather than AK-47s!!! Even the Ukrainians who prefer the power of the 7.62x39mm round over the smaller 5.45mm round of the AK-74 are more likely to have AKMs rather than pre 1959 AK-47s.

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Dmitry Vanin

11 days ago

I have downloaded this piece for further reading. Meantime, new president declared he would use Polish model for reforming of regional and local power in the country. People in Poland speak distinctive accents and even languages on different internal territories and it does not create problems for the whole country.

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AdamD

11 days ago

@Dmitry Vanin Poland has been comprehensively ethnically cleansed of its Jews by the Nazis then of its Germans and Ukrainians by the Soviets, and is now an almost totally homogenous society comprised of Polish speaking Poles. The problem that Ukraine has of people speaking Russian but not Ukrainian has no counterpart in Poland, where the second language is now English.

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Jez

11 days ago

@AdamD @Dmitry Vanin

Don't worry, i'm sure the EU will be changing this outrageous

homogenous blight on their landscape, first opportunity they can.

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Dmitry Vanin

11 days ago

[@AdamD](#) [@Dmitry Vanin](#)

Polish language has five to six distinctive regional dialects- eastern Polish close to Belarussian, for example. Plus southern Poland speaks Kashub language which is not Polish at all. I refrain from enumerating non-Polish minorities: Gipsies, Jews etc.

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Andrij Halushka

9 days ago

[@Dmitry Vanin](#) [@AdamD](#) Kaszubs live in the North of Poland not in the South

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Jez

12 days ago

Probably one of the most level headed and informative reports about the Crisis relayed in the UK media so far. This is an excellent peice and respect to the team that risked everything to get this back.

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Andrij Halushka

9 days ago

[@Jez](#) Also shows Russian involvement very clearly

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vladimir vereshchagin

4 days ago

[@Andrij Halushka](#) [@Jez](#) Yes man, and i hope some more will come.

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