

May 4, 2023 email about my friend Artem Ryzhykov

Run, don't walk, to read this in-depth interview with my friend Artem Ryzhykov: [The Diary of a Ukrainian Filmmaker-Turned-Soldier](#)

He was the reason I made my first donation to Ukraine nearly a decade ago: he was protesting in Independence Square in Kyiv during the [Revolution of Dignity](#) and was shot by a government sniper, severely injuring his hand. Unless advanced surgery was done (only available outside Ukraine), his career as an award-winning cinematographer, working for my friend Chad Gracia, would be over, so Chad sent out an appeal that both Bill Ackman and I made substantial donations to.

Artem received the necessary surgery, continued his great work with Chad, and I didn't hear from them again until the war started last year. As you'll read in the interview, Artem immediately grabbed his camera and a gun, joined the Territorial Defense Force, and helped defend Kyiv. Ever since he's been on the front lines, fighting (mostly as a drone pilot now) and filming, narrowly escaping death too many times to count (he's been to 36 funerals of his friends and comrades).

I had never had the pleasure of meeting him until he traveled with me for three days during my visit in March. Here's a picture of us visiting TAPS Dnipro:



Here's what he texted me today:

Our team was sent to hold the western part of Bakhmut. Very tough situation. Very dangerous. Many of my colleagues got injured. Thank you so much for your help. The four thermal drones you provided us with were very useful! I came to Kyiv to fix one and am going back in a few days.

Now, go read his story: [The Diary of a Ukrainian Filmmaker-Turned-Soldier](#). It's so honest, raw, beautiful and powerful! Excerpt:

I visited their commander in Kyiv and asked how I could join.

“What can you do?” he asked. I said I could make videos. “I don’t need a filmmaker,” he said. “Can you do anything else?” I told him I speak English — that got his attention, because the battalion has several foreign fighters. I told him I’m also a decent cook and an experienced long-distance runner.

Minutes later, I signed a contract as the battalion’s translator, courier and cook. The next day, without any training, I was sent to Irpin as part of the second wave against Russia’s assault on Kyiv...

My whole unit went to join the fight and left me alone with a crazy junkie. He had shot himself in the ass to avoid fighting. There was no food there, only dirty water. But I couldn’t go back to normal life. On the third day, a special forces unit arrived at the school to take a rest. They fed me and introduced me to their commander, called Phantom, and we sat down to talk. I told him that I hadn’t used my gun yet but that I speak English and came to this war to be useful, to help the army and kill Russians, and maybe make a movie.

Phantom took me with his crew to the front line, and I started helping with communications. I had some experience shooting video with drones, so one day I gave some advice to the drone guys about their settings. These were simple drones, just for surveillance, no weapons. I shot some video and edited it and Phantom liked it, so we made a video of their drone operation. I started to gain Phantom’s respect, and when a French fighter showed up, a guy from Lyon who had fought for two years in Mali, the commander put him under my responsibility because we both spoke English. We called him Apo.

Around this time, my father died. He had a stroke while planting potatoes. He would’ve survived if somebody had been around, but he lay there alone in the field for a long time, probably in pain. Apo went with me to the funeral, and when we came back east I started getting messages from other international guys.

“Come join us,” I told them. “But don’t tell anybody I invited you. Just say you got lost after a battle and found our battalion.” The next guy I accepted was an Iraqi medic; we called him Baghdad. Then another guy, Miami, a computer genius. We welcomed a 19-year-old woman from Israel, a sniper named Mamba.

Our little foreign legion took on a few more volunteers, and after they had all been vetted we started building our own drones and flying them on missions to find Russians. We'd send the coordinates to the artillery, who would send the Russians some gifts. Now I have my own military vehicle and sometimes I'll just make a suggestion to the commander — "Hey, I think I'll take these guys and go find these Russian positions" — and he'll give me a thumbs up.

Everything's different when you have your commander's respect. When I first joined the military, they called me Director, because I make movies. Phantom told me that when something bad happens it's a good idea to make a change and start over. "Let's give you a new life and a new name," he said. "Let's call you Canon." I told him I always shoot video with a Sony camera. "No one fucking cares," he said. "We'll call you Canon, because [with a variant spelling] it also means 'big gun.'"

So now I'm Canon the drone expert. I'm teaching other guys to use drones and working with Miami and the security services to upgrade the drones and make them invisible. Now we have to always be aware of Russian radars. Each time we send up a drone, the Russians geolocate the launch signal and shoot rockets at those coordinates. It's very dangerous. When you push that button to send up the drone, you know the Russians will send gifts to the spot that's home for the drone. So I put down the drone about 400 yards from the car, launched it and then ran, knowing the Russian artillery was coming. You're running through the forest and feeling bombs explode behind you, sometimes just 20 yards away.

The worst bombardment we faced was in a village called Tsyркuny. The town had been held by Russia for 70 days before we drove them out. Our mission was to go in, get the locals out of hiding and evacuate them fast, because we expected the Russians to bomb the village as they left the area. So we arrived, and these people were in a terrible state after more than two months in basements. The women had been raped. Elderly people could barely walk. Children hadn't eaten anything. First, they thought we were Russians. Then we spoke Ukrainian, and I had so many hugs and kisses from the babushkas. They almost fell to their knees, saying, "thank you, thank you so much for saving us."

That's when Russia decided to throw all its artillery at Tsyркuny. We had to grab civilians as fast as we could and get back to Kharkiv. The bombs were coming closer and closer to our location and we barely made it out of there. I did my best not to show any fear, but you never get used to that sound. The scariest part is actually not when an artillery strike explodes, it's the sound it makes in the air.

It's the scream of the devil. It lasts maybe two seconds — eeeeEEEEEEERR! — and then it's buh-BOOOM. And you never know where it will land. It could be right in front of you. All you can do is fall to the ground. I've hurt my arms and legs jumping away from bombs. Twice, I broke my camera. I've jumped into cow shit and broken glass. I shit my pants twice. I even jumped onto a grandma. You have to just dive as quickly as you can.

Facing all this, I finally told my wife what I was doing. I told her that I decided to join the military, that there was no other way. I told her I was working with drones, but I didn't tell her how dangerous it was...

That was when I understood that there had been a change in the war. Before, the Russians would send hundreds of artillery bombs every minute and we'd shoot a few back. Now, because of all our new weapons from the West, everything changed. Now we could send hundreds of "gifts," and sometimes we'd only get a few back...

Bakhmut has been a nightmare, reminding me of the Irpin-Bucha days. There are street fights, but much, much bigger than before. They have bigger weapons, we have bigger weapons. Every day, we're feeling shelling from all directions, especially at night. We were there for about three months, then rotated out. There's always fresh blood coming in, new battalions arriving to keep morale high. Volunteer fighters and media from around the world are here in Bakhmut. I've hosted some media visits, given them tours and answered questions. In the meantime, we see local girls coming and shooting their TikTok and Instagram next to damaged buildings. It's crazy...

Still, now I feel more confident, more relaxed. I don't have an official title. Sometimes I'm a media officer, sometimes I'm working online, sometimes I go on missions. And I've decided to be more involved in the war and handed my filming duties to volunteers. I came to the war to make a movie, but now I think movies are shit. You can never be honest — even a documentary is a lie, a compilation of moments. And if my camera is telling me what to do, that's not right. Should I save real lives or film them? It's an easy choice...

You can never see what I see and feel what I feel. ... basically, it's been the best year of my life. Of course, if I'd been injured or killed, I'd have a different view.

Unfortunately, many of them are now dead. I went to 36 funerals in the past year. At the last one, I decided this was enough, I will not go to any more. It was the funeral of my commander Medic — the one who taught me so much. I closed myself off from those emotions because I just can't go through more death.

I said from the beginning that this war would last at least a decade and I still feel that way. My fellow soldiers see it differently — they think the war's going to end soon. They read the news and see that we are winning. If you read the Ukrainian news, we are always winning. But we will win when Russia is destroyed and we control Russia. Or they control us. And this is why this war could last 10, 20, even 50 years. It's already been going on for almost 10 years. They hate us, we hate them. There's no way we could be friends again. My generation and the younger generation will remember this for a long time.

His last two paragraphs are especially beautiful:

Now I know what war is. It's the smell of blood. It's the smell of shit. It's very dirty — you're always dirty. It's homeless dogs missing legs. It's the cries of girls who were raped. It's grandmas who can't walk. It is tragedy everywhere. It is seeing brave civilians who took guns and stayed on the very front line. War often brings the worst out of people, but it also brings out the best.

Even if we win this war, even if Putin is dead, I will never stop fighting. Right now, I'm with the most beautiful people in the world. They are honest, they support and care for each other. We are family. That's what Putin did in this war: He helped us, helped bring out this unity. Until the last moment, we will defend this democracy. We will fight to live the way we want until our last breath. I'm honored to be a part of it, to be Ukrainian.