

What caused your joining of volunteers?

How were your activities reflected on the world outlook?

What does the everyday life of a volunteer look like?

Chapter 6. When war is more than simply a word. History of my volunteering

Whom do such organizations help?

Is there a “limit” showing that volunteering has exhausted itself?

*How does volunteering influence the maturity of
society?*

Volunteering as a style of life

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My war started with volunteering. At one moment I simply understood that there are people who need help, and I have no right to keep aside. Then, at the beginning, it all seemed to be a nightmare. And hope glowed in my soul that everything will end so quickly and imperceptibly, as it started.

The turbulent 2014 year I met as a 16-year-old girl. I did not burst to go to the front line, because I understood that I would not be taken. I did not want to leave for ever my favourite sport – rhythmic gymnastics, to which I devoted many years. The more so that the possibility to train in the first in Ukraine “School of Deriugins” in Kyiv fell to my lot. I still believed that the conflict in Donbas was not for long. It should end until the end of the year. How much more grief will befall for our country to live through? When I had inspiration, I put down extracts of my recollections about everything that was taking place around me.

...Cool rain pours over the capital city. People are in a hurry to wrap in coats and run to their homes. I remain alone on the bus stop near the underground station “Campus” – a fragile girl wearing a thin sports suit of the Ukrainian national team. The wet blue and yellow ribbon is waving on the old sports bag. My feet are surrounded with four huge sacks of humanitarian aid. Raindrops are running down my face and mixing with tears. I feel powerless and helpless. But it seems that the problems of unhappy people are not important for the shining megalopolis. Of those people who left everything and fled from the shellings. People from megalopolis feel all right.

The old trolley-bus drives me to Puscha-Vodytsia. Dark streets ominously smile through the curtain of the autumn downpour. I go out at the turning and go ahead through the forest several kilometers more, to the former sanatorium “Dzherelo” (“Source”). It is an old two-storyed building that could soon fall to pieces hidden in the thick forests. No one sees *them*. Nobody hisses after them: “Damned separatists!”

Inside there are walls covered with blue and yellow flags and children’s pictures of the Ukrainian soldiers. Yes, here the resettlers from Donbas live. But not those “advocates of Novorussia”, who drove from there in shining foreign cars and now are hiding in Lviv region. Here live those people, who left their Motherland in the last moment, when their towns were falling to pieces under the powerful artillery shellings. They all love Ukraine and agree to do everything in their might for it. But it seems that Ukraine has forgotten about them. Besides me and several other volunteers nobody comes to the old sanatorium hidden in Puscha-Vodytsia.

...At first I was gathering things for the resettlers in the Internet jumble sales where people give away free of charge clothes and everyday life objects which they do not need any more. Later on the people from my surroundings saw what I was dealing with and also started bringing things. During the time of volunteering I had to change more than five rented rooms in the capital. No one of the hosts could endure that my room always turned into a store where almost every day I accepted, sorted and packed things. And I could not afford to rent a separate flat, because all money I gave to the frontline. Sometimes I left for myself only copecks – a bun, bought in an underground passage for 5 hryvnias was just enough for a day in order not to starve. I worked with the humanitarian aid mostly at night, because I spent eight-ten hours a day in the gym. Later I put aside the assistance for resettlers and began dealing with the soldiers of the “Right sector”, to whom we passed the aid to Pisky.

It was indifferent for Kyiv. Men in expensive suits were walking along Khreschatyk like always, and they did not pay attention to a girl in sports clothes with heavy bags. Nobody offered to help me. Even simply to carry things to the underground station. The shining megalopolis which I always loved so much, became more and more alien. It as if pushed away everything that reminded of the war. And I accepted its challenge, quite unexpectedly for myself.

Once at sports competitions I felt something strange. Instead of the usual anxiety – an obsessive thought about the war. And when I was singing the Ukrainian anthem on the pedestal of honour, there appeared in my mind the image of the stained with blood small Ukrainian flag on the armored vehicle, which I saw on the photo several months ago. And then I could not stand it any more.

At the age of 16 no military unit would take me to the frontline. That is why for the beginning I signed up with the information center of the Right sector, which also worked in the East of Ukraine. I hoped to get to the frontline from there. At first I was sent to the training center of volunteers in Desna, because although we are journalists, anything might happen to us at war. I had to lie about my age – I said I was 18, otherwise I would have been refused pointblank.

Like I planned, I started my way in Donbas as a military correspondent. I simply felt that it was an honour to be beside those people who were defending my country. Just to sit with these people of whom I am endlessly proud. To make a film about their hellish toil. To tell about those people, of whom television would never tell. To help them in their everyday life and support them morally. But the fate judged differently.

In the information department, where I was lucky to get, journalists were not sent to the frontline. Only sometimes, accompanied by the battalion commander who came for a couple of hours, and then flaunted his photos on the background of ruins in the “full battle image”. Simple soldiers did not have

such an ammunition, like commanders. They silently did their work, and did not come to get a portion of PR in the company of the information department. I badly wanted to be with them. Even not to film them and write about them, I agreed to help them with anything. And destiny smiled at me.

I got to experience the real war with medical professionals. I had not passed medical training and understood that medicine was not my calling, but there was not left another choice for me. I fell out with the information department, nobody wanted to take a minor girl without any experience to an operational battalion, I did not have any money for renting a room in the capital, and I was afraid of staying alone in a frontline town. However, I did not stay there for long – only one week, before the commander of the medical battalion learnt of my age.

In a month, also with the aid of my friends, I got into the scouting group. The boys simply took me to the village, the outskirts of which they were defending, and said: “You will be staying at home”. In the first month I tried to prove in different ways that I could be useful. For old time’s sake I asked for the help of volunteers through Internet, bought the necessary small things and wrote reports. One of the commanders began teaching me to work with the sniper rifle – I suppose, more out of interest, than with the aim of making a real sniper of me. But I liked shooting so much that I started spending almost all the time learning to be a sniper. Boys-reconnoiters already took me to the operating sites and to battles, trusted me with weapons and put me on duty on the responsible posts. So, already on the frontline I learnt to be a real soldier and parallelly provided the group with the volunteer aid. Simply because I was good at it.

Some time later I had to leave that military unit, also because of my age. I stopped being afraid of Donbas, so I rented a flat in Kramatorsk and began going to the frontline to other units. Many of them refused, but some of them agreed to take me. Those were hard times, but I had decided for myself that I wanted to be on the frontline, that is why I did not give up. I had to fulfill different tasks during that time – to be an automatic rifleman of the infantry (I simply went on duty in the trenches with others), to get a sniper rifle and deal with my favourite work, to go and gather information. Once I even tried to collect and head a volunteer group, although not very successfully – for a month and a half we defended two positions and a check point, and after that a part of soldiers went to the Armed Forces of Ukraine and the rest went home. As time passed I left Kramatorsk for Avdiyivka – the town which is small and cosy, although on the frontline. During that short period of time that I lived here, I started loving it. Especialy I loved patriots of Ukraine, of whom there are few in Avdiyivka, but they are real, because it is difficult to be a patriot living ten minutes of driving from Donetsk. A big part of inhabitants are unfortunately pro-Russian, the others do not care under which flag to live. Only a small percentage of inhabitants of Avdiyivka are the patriots of their

country. And they help the military men considerably – fix their cars, collect volunteer aid, simply allow to come to their homes to warm oneself and take a shower.

The town lives with its own life, with the usual cannonade of explosions and exchange of gunfire on the outskirts. Thanks God, now shellings come rarely to the densely-populated districts, mainly to the outskirts, to the old part. There is the private sector of the city and the frontline close to it. But all people have got used to it. There is a nice quarry on the outskirts of the town. On the way to it one can see Yasynuvata from the hill, those houses where the positions come together. The splinters of shells lie in the nice white sand, and close to it shells fly, because hostile positions are near. But all the same we go to bathe there, because we got accustomed to it and perceive the war as something commonplace. Both military men and local inhabitants.

Mass media often exaggerate. For example, when this year in winter the town was shot at, various terrible things were written in press, like “Avdiyivka is being levelled with the ground”. Then a shell also flew into my house, because of that I spent some time in the town. It all was not so terrifying as journalists wrote. Yes, there were shellings and people were killed, but not on such a big scale as it was informed. The journalists also come often to the frontline, film the traces of the old shellings and then write: “Today we have seen a big shelling”. And sometimes vice versa: we ask them to film the traces of the new shelling, and they go around and film cats. It seems that mass media often cover things that are ordered and not the truth.

I celebrated my 18th birthday on the frontline. I can remember some bits and pieces – whole day I was running in trenches full of mud and collected the lists of needs, and of course, presents from the colleagues – cartridges and grenades. At that time I had already been in the Tactical group “Byelarus”, which agreed to take me, disregarding my age and gender.

On the frontline I was also writing about extracts from my life which I want in future to collect into a book. Here is one of them, for example: “Bullets cheerfully whistled above. It was good that on the day before we managed to put the sacks on the new defensive post a little higher than human height – one could only hear then, how the bullets hit the sacks or whistle over the head, flying to the road. I have placed my machine-gun in the narrow loophole and was getting ready to shoot as a response. The whistling of bullets changed into explosions. 50 meters from us the grenades exploded. I will have to receive the grenade-launcher attachment tomorrow and launch grenades in response.

When everything calms down, it seems that eternity has passed. And when one looks at the watch – only twenty minutes have passed. One has to be on guard another hour and a half, to listen attentively to the illusory silence, to look attentively at the fanciful ruins which are looking more sinister in the greenish light of the night vision device, and to wait. To wait patiently if

the next bullet will not whistle above one's head. If one wouldn't look into the narrow embrasure just at that moment. But, one does not think like that being on the guard – one simply sits, sipping hot tea in order not to freeze completely and waits what will happen next. More than likely, it will be completely silent and one would hand over one's guard to the new soldier, who has just arrived to the war and does not hold quite confidently his machine-gun in his hands, and one will go to the warm house. Who knows, what will happen during his shift. I also was like him. No one had fired at me yet. All people tried to help me, and I only raged from it. That is why I leave him in the trenches, and get to my bed by groping.

It is cold. The boys have forgotten to throw firewood into the stove. Making light with my smartphone I'm looking for thin logs. There are no logs. Lest I woke up anyone with the sound of axe, I simply crawl into my sleeping-bag wearing my jacket. It is not winter yet, I will not freeze.. ”.

This year I have opened a charitable fund in Avdiyivka (Charitable Fund “Stars of hope”). There is often cease-fire on the frontline and one has nothing to do, so I go home and do good deeds. On holidays and on rotation, in order not to be idle, I organize charitable fairs where I collect costs for my military unit. We are still volunteers without documents and have no salaries, that is why thanks to the charitable foundation we are supplied almost with everything and we seldom turn to other volunteers, because they have difficult time even without us. And I sell the painted cartridges on the fairs which I make in the free from work time. At first I started painting on cartridges simply for fun, but now it has turned into a serious charitable project. I am also dealing with the ATO museums – here one can often come across interesting exhibits, we give them to museums. There are now four new ATO museums, for which I am gathering artefacts. I dream of continuing to deal with charity after the war: at first to help with rehabilitation for the grievously wounded soldiers, and then I will see what will come next. The war is an honourable cause, therefore I am still here. And, in general, I like doing good deeds, so I will be busy with them in the future.

I am sorry for the killed and wounded friends. About those, whom this war has left without home. War is always negative, it brings death and ruins. But, on the other hand – we have become different during the war. More courageous, determined and self-confident. It may seem strange, but just thanks to war I have become like I am now. And the painful recollections about the irreparable losses only add me strength to go ahead in life and stop before nothing...

I am only a piece on the firing line: story of a military psychologist

Karyna Saifudinova

Lviv

I am sitting in the military hospital all alone. At last I have time for gathering my thoughts and having a good weep. I feel relieved when I am writing about all things that bitterly overwhelm my soul. This stream of letters, words, phrases chaotically pour over the yellow, salty from tears piece of paper.

I am thinking, and it becomes only worse. If I had no time for it, I would be stronger. I would act, instead of crying unnecessary tears. I should not sit here, in a closet of the hospital, I should be with those who need my help. But I can not. Yes, I am such a psychologist, who needs therapy herself.

Although our world is so colourful and it blooms in spring with apricots, it smells of sour-sweet apple jam made by the granny, I feel here, among people, superfluous.

They do not understand. They do not know. They do not realize.

People do not want to understand that the war is going on. That warm deep-red blood is shed. I feel disgusted among them. They are greedy, selfish persons. Everyone, who is outside ATO, who lives his/her own life, enjoying it and laughing, taking care only of oneself. They drink coffee in the morning, and the war is continuing. They go shopping, and treat themselves to the next portion of vanilla ice-cream. They watch soap operas, and the war is going on.

Here it is quite different. Certainly, volunteers can get coffee and ice-cream for themselves, but we do not need them. Here one does not care about it. One wants silence, quiet, peace. Yes, we want peace.

My mission is definitely not so great. I am only a piece on the firing line. In the hospital, when young boys torn to pieces with hot unconquerable hearts arrive to us, I, a psychologist with 8 years of experience of work in the Ministry of Emergency Situations, am at a loss and panick. From their stories, destinies and confessions I even do not have strength to cry. I simply sit silently and listen to them. But it is so important for them. They need to get it off their chest. They need support.

Recently a boy without two legs has been brought to us. He will remain an invalid for the whole his life. He could have led a normal life, as a usual man who has to provide for his family, protect his wife and take care of his children. But he does not complain. He has endured the operation manfully and now is doing the rehabilitation course. I cannot speak to him in a sincere, tet-a-tet conversation. He is hiding somewhere deep inside himself, closes for the outer world the door into his inner world.

In my eyes he is a hero. Undeniably, he is a hero in reality. A real, courageous and unconquerable hero. A defender of our mother-Ukraine, of every of us. Even of those greedy and selfish persons who drink coffee and watch soap operas, degrading in front of the TV, while he here, in the military hospital is compelled to reconcile himself to the thought that he is no more full-valued bodily. But spiritually and morally he is higher than us all. He is a real hero.

Right now, when I am sitting alone in the cold dusk of the closet in the military hospital, I understand that if I go out and walk along the corridor, glancing from time to time into the wards, - I will be honoured to speak to tens, and even hundreds of young and not quite young men, whose proud name is a defender of Ukraine.

I start feeling ashamed. I am in the constant fear of disclosure. I am afraid that all the heroes whom I admire so, for whom I am so necessary will understand that I am helpless against their problems. I will not give them back those parts of their body which they had lost, I will not make them forget the terrors of war. How can I help a soldier who has been left without an arm? His comrade-in-arms, the best childhood friend, exploded on a grenade, and his girl-friend left her hero and found someone else instead of him, a defender of Ukraine. I am helpless here.

I want to give up. To go from here immediately. To return to my parallel reality where there are no horrors of war, where I would not wake up at night from the roar of shootings, from the sound of artillery.

I cannot. I should not. I have no right to do so. My soldiers need me here.

Nobody visits some soldiers. They are lonely in their grief, lonely on the firing line. They are lonely among those selfish skinflints, who stuff themselves with vanilla ice-cream and live their own lives with tender apricot smell and sour-sweet apple taste, while the heroes are forced to spend their best days hopelessly on the old Soviet mattresses, thinking about chances, possibilities, prospects of which the war deprived them.

Then I come to their aid. Dark nights and not less dark days I spend beside my soldiers, trying to soothe their pain at least somehow. I speak to some of them very much. Sometimes I manage to call forth a smile in them, but much more seldom - laughter. It is such a tense, not quite sincere, strained laughter. But it still is laughter! They refuse to cry. They would not force one tear out of themselves. While I can be sobbing, overwhelmed with my own pain, when they confess to me, brick by brick destroying that wall of pain in their soul.

Some of the soldiers do not need conversations. They need silent support, so that someone is near them, who is not indifferent to them. Who will not betray them. We are sitting in silence. Seconds, minutes, hours, days drag by and we are silent. Not a single word. Silence. Tense, immensely hot

silence. It seems that if only a match was fired – and a flame of misunderstanding, blame, pain, hate will devour us, take into its firm hugs and will burn down to a pile of regret and unrealistic expectations.

The war changes people. The war has changed me.

It is time for me to go. I should end this manifestation of faintheartedness. I have to gather the remains of strength, to swallow bitter tears, to open my burnt to the core soul for the confessions of those, who feel thousands of times worse than me. My fighters, my defenders, my heroes.