

First, the alarm goes off. Then my iPhone starts talking in an American accent



[David Crowe](#), Sydney Morning Herald, December 8, 2025

Lviv, Ukraine: The air raid alarm goes off when I am sitting at my desk. First, my mobile phone starts talking to me in an American accent to tell me to seek shelter. Then I hear the neighbourhood sirens in the distance. Then a Ukrainian voice comes over the speaker system in the ceiling.

It is 1.23am on Saturday in Lviv. I am about to sit in a bomb shelter and witness a routine night for millions of people across Ukraine.

The shelter is a storage area one level below the residence, with a floor of polished concrete and a row of storage cages along the walls. The long space is filled with office chairs, benches, a few lounge chairs and a table. I head for the table with my laptop.

My fellow residents come down the stairs and shuffle into the room without saying a word. Some arrive in groups with pillows and blankets, wearing pyjamas and plastic sandals. They've done this before. They know their preferred parts of the room.

I marvel at a young man with a blue doona when he stakes out a place on the cold, hard concrete beside me. He stretches out and prepares to sleep, placing his beige Crocs by his side. He turns away from the fluorescent light and faces the wall.

This is a student residence at the Ukrainian Catholic University, which has kindly allowed me to stay while I interview professors and health experts. The students are likely to know each other, but they do not chat. The only sound is the water in the pipes that run down the wall.

I know from [the app on my iPhone](#) that all of Ukraine is going through this. The map shows every region is red.

The all-clear sounds at 2:05am. I like the attitude of the iPhone app: "May the force be with you," says the American voice. Only now do the students talk a little as they walk back to their rooms, perhaps a sign of relief.

If there is any relief, it is not for long. The alert sounds again at 2:25am. I walk down to the shelter and observe the same drift of young men and women into the room.

When the all-clear comes at 3:03am, I join almost everyone else in leaving the shelter. But the blue doona man remains on his personal piece of concrete. Only now do I notice he has a thin camping mattress beneath him. Smart move.

I get a little sleep back in my room, but I'm woken by the siren at 4:58am. We do not know the details as we return to the shelter, but Russia has sent Tupolev bombers into the air to prepare to launch missiles. The *Kyiv Independent* reports that [a railway station near the capital](#) has been bombed.

One young woman curls up in a tub chair like a cat, while another unrolls a yoga mat on a wooden bench. A third sits on an office chair and reads her phone. Nobody says a word. The loudest sound in the room is the noise of my pen scratching the paper.

Not everyone goes to a shelter. When I waited at the railway station on my way into Ukraine, I spoke to a young psychologist who told me she checked the news on Telegram before deciding whether to get out of bed when the sirens go off. Many rely on social media to judge how bad an attack might be in their area.

At a medical clinic, however, I spoke to a mother from the Dnipro region who was walking past a hotel with her husband when the building exploded. She lost her husband and is now recovering from the amputation of her lower left leg. Her eyes welled up, and so did mine. Death is random here.

Lviv is in the far west of Ukraine and targeted less often than Kyiv and other cities, but drones and missiles have struck its energy systems, warehouses, universities and apartment buildings.

I am a visitor here, leaving soon, and I don't think for a moment about the odds of a direct hit. That would be melodramatic and irrational. But everyone around me will need the water, electricity and transport operating in the morning.

And the students in this residence come from all over Ukraine, so they could have families in cities suffering much worse. The anxiety in a bomb shelter can be about the sheer scale of attack. We all know that someone, somewhere, is being killed or wounded.

"As I write, highly civilised human beings are flying overhead, trying to kill me," wrote George Orwell during the Blitz.

This quote is on the bingo card for everyone who writes about a bomb shelter. But things are a bit different now.

In this war, human beings are pushing buttons a long way away to deliver [death by drone](#), so it is even more impersonal. And the machines are quickly turning into lethal flying robots.

Some of the students keep coming in, even 30 minutes after the alert. I wonder if their parents were texting them. “Are you in the shelter? Go there!” That is what I would be doing.

My colleague Rob Harris, who was Europe correspondent before me, wrote beautifully of his thoughts in [a shelter in Kyiv earlier this year](#). My thoughts do not add much to what he wrote. But I feel something needs to be said about the people around me because there are so many like them.

A psychiatrist and professor at this university, Oleh Romanchuk, tells me about the way people learn to cope with the air alerts.

One trick is “strategic sleeping” because the nights are interrupted. He knows people who gather to sing songs during the air alerts. He tells me of a father with five children who made a thermos of tea and loaded the kids into the car in the garage, their safest place, and told them family stories.

Ukrainians share lessons from what works. Romanchuk tells me of a mother who took her daughter into a dark shelter and switched on some music so they could dance to a flashing light from her mobile phone. When the all-clear sounded, her daughter did not want to stop.



Oleh Romanchuk says people learn to cope with the regular overnight air alerts, with one trick being “strategic sleeping”. *Credit: David Crowe*

The alert on this morning never seems to end. It is past 7am, then past 8am, and most of Ukraine is still red on the map. But there is more news about the strikes on rail and energy systems. Some of the students shuffle back to their rooms with their pillows and blankets in their arms.

After a while, I can see only two left. The blue doona man and the woman on the wooden bench. Then it is suddenly 9am and a voice comes over the loudspeaker to mark the minute of silence for those who have fallen in the war. I stand as a clock ticks and a church bell rings in the distance.

The young woman rises from her bench, but the young man appears to sleep on. I'm not judging.

Only at 9.45am do we hear the all-clear. It takes several more hours to see confirmation that Russia launched 653 drones and 51 missiles against Ukraine during the night, damaging railways and energy systems in eight regions including Lviv. Three people are wounded. It is incredible the toll is not greater.



I'm astounded at the calm of these young people. I think of how hard it would be to sustain this routine, week after week. No young student with their life ahead of them deserves this.

When I see them at breakfast in the cafeteria, they laugh and gather around long tables to share their meals. Outside the shelter, I've met several students who tell me of being forced to move because of the war, or being separated from their families, or going abroad and choosing to come back.

I see them in the cafeteria and think the world is in good hands. And then I worry again about their nights.