

From her NSW coastal home, Liz saw the Russian invasion. And launched a battle plan

Desperately short of medical equipment, Ukraine's hospitals can't afford to wait out the bureaucracy of formal aid channels. An Aussie solution: supplies organised by one woman in a tiny NSW town, delivered by an eclectic band of volunteers.

By [David Crowe](#), Sydney Morning Herald/The Age, September 17 2022 edition of the Good Weekend



Former hospital chief executive Liz Paslawsky is sourcing supplies for front-line hospitals. "If you want to do something fast in a war, you do it with civilians because they're nimble and fast." CREDIT: ALEX ELLINGHAUSEN

The white delivery van is knocked to the right when an oncoming vehicle smashes its side mirror and forces its driver, Shaun Hopkins, to swerve to the edge of the road. It happens so fast that Hopkins, a Welsh volunteer in the war in Ukraine, cannot see who sideswiped his Ford Transit while he was on the radio to his friend, Yaroslav Kolodiy, who is driving a van in front of him. The two men could do without surprises like this on the road to Kyiv. They have a hospital to get to and a load of medical supplies worth about \$7 million.

“They say these things happen in slow motion but that was so quick,” says Hopkins. We’re standing on the gravel beside the highway after pulling over. Dirt swirls from passing trucks as Hopkins inspects the damage: a smashed indicator, a brown mark on a side panel, a missing mirror. “It’s not too bad,” the 44-year-old says in the melodic lilt of southern Wales, sounding a little surprised. He walks slowly around the van on his crutches, the legacy of a workplace accident seven years ago, and looks satisfied by the time he gets back to the driver’s door and hauls himself in.

Kolodiy, meanwhile, is pacing on the side of the road, talking quietly in Ukrainian on the phone. The 48-year-old is trying to track down a replacement mirror from Wheels of Victory, a charity he set up in his home city of Ternopil in western Ukraine in May. The Wheels mechanics spend their days refitting four-wheel-drives to carry soldiers around the frontline, so a spare part for a Ford Transit delivery van like this one should not be too hard to find. Tall and athletic, Kolodiy is missing his daily swim on this journey to Kyiv but is making up for it with his relentless activity on the phone. He’s still murmuring into his hands-free when he gets back into his van and pulls out onto the highway.



“You’ve just got to really focus on what you can do,” says Shaun Hopkins, a tech worker from Wales. He regularly drives from his hometown to Ukraine with his van packed with donations of urgent medical supplies from Australia. *CREDIT: BRENDAN HOFFMAN*

The two men relax after confirming the damage will not slow them down. This is a complication, not a setback, in the unusual job of helping a country at war. Hopkins usually runs a tech services company out of his home town of Tredegar in Wales. Kolodiy, meanwhile, owns a clothing and folk art business in Ternopil. Now they run medical supplies into Ukraine. This is not a job they trained for but a mission that consumes their days. Outraged at the Russian invasion of February 24, they suspended most of their other work in order to help Ukrainian soldiers and civilians in the best way they could. For Hopkins, who had no connections in Ukraine, that meant becoming an expert in managing freight across the English Channel and driving long hours across Europe. For Kolodiy, it meant building a network that could distribute supplies to wherever they were needed.

“If you know you have an enemy – not a virtual one – you understand you have to organise to bring victory closer,” says Kolodiy.

I have car-hopped and am in the passenger seat of his Renault van while he leads the way to the capital. He looks across at me and gestures with his hands to hammer the point home while steering with his knee. Within hours of the invasion, he was on social media asking for help getting supplies into Ukraine; he was flooded with offers to drive or donate. “It was crazy, incredible,” he says in staccato English. “It was like a dream society. Everybody trusted each other. The opposite was to live in fear. But if you live in fear, you are not trusting nobody.”

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Kolodiy has an iron belief in the power of volunteer networks to rise above the grief of war. “Sometimes you begin to cry, and it’s crazy,” he says. He has friends and neighbours who cannot bear to talk about the death and ruin, but he believes the only way to cope is to push through the endless stream of awful news. His answer is relentless work.

He and his son, Miroslav, were in Kyiv to sign an export deal the day before the invasion – their family company, Koza Dereza, sells dresses embroidered with Ukrainian designs – but the deal was cancelled and sales have slowed. His wife, Viktoriya, took their daughter to safety in Austria. Kolodiy turned all his energy to the war effort.

The highway is so busy with trucks that drivers in old Ladas overtake on the outside edge of the road. As we drive east, we pass a young man walking a horse westward. We slow to zigzag through a checkpoint of concrete blocks, sandbags, old tyres and tank traps. Two young soldiers give us a quick glance. We pass a forest where women gather blueberries to sell from the side of the road; any income helps in these times.

The phone – ringtone *Bad to the Bone* by George Thorogood – interrupts again. Kolodiy talks to the workshop in Ternopil about the broken mirror, then picks up the radio to contact Hopkins in the van behind and ask a question from the mechanics. Did the mirror have any heating or electronics?

“Negative,” says Hopkins. “It’s manual. That’s all we could afford.” No cruise control, no air-conditioning – just a four-cylinder turbo diesel bought second-hand in Wales. There are no luxuries at this end of the international aid business.

I flew to Poland in late July to join this journey and see the final links in a chain of support that stretches from a village on the NSW South Coast to the hospital wards of Ukraine. [Thousands of Australian donors are funding the operation](#) and dozens of volunteers are helping pack and distribute the medical supplies. The structure is lean and the workload intense, which means this war is a stress test for new ways to mobilise aid.



Yaroslav Kolodiy (centre), who usually runs a clothing company, unloads the van in Kyiv, with Hopkins at rear. “You have to organise to bring victory closer,” he says. *CREDIT: YAROSLAV KOLODIY*

Most of the members of this network have never met face-to-face and rely instead on mobile apps to organise weekly deliveries. The work starts with Liz Paslawsky, the daughter of Ukrainian migrants and a member of the Australian Federation of Ukrainian Organisations. From her home in Austinmer, on the Illawarra coast about 90 minutes south of Sydney, she calls Australian healthcare companies to convince them to help Ukraine with any supplies they can spare. Sometimes she finds bandages, sometimes defibrillators, sometimes ultrasound machines. Qantas helps by sending everything by air to London free of charge.

Another link in the chain, Andrii Gubar, stores the deliveries at the Ukrainian Catholic University in Lviv, a city of cobblestone streets, beer gardens and churches close to the Polish border. University volunteers sort the packages and distribute them across Ukraine using their own networks or relying on Kolodiy to transport them to Wheels of Victory in Ternopil, where his volunteer drivers split the supplies into deliveries for the front line.

About six million people have fled Ukraine since the invasion, but 38 million remain. Ordinary life continues in the western regions of the country while parts of the east and south undergo daily obliteration from Russian artillery. Even towns thought to be safe can wake to a sudden missile strike; when three rockets landed on homes and offices in [Vinnytsia](#), south-west of Kyiv, the 23 casualties included three children. A country at war sweeps away the jobs it doesn't need, so Ukrainians are finding new and essential work. If they're not in the armed forces, they're part of a war economy that puts a premium on any task that stops the Russian army.

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Hopkins and Kolodiy would not normally drive together on this highway to Kyiv. Hopkins would usually minimise risk and cost by ending his drive in Lviv and staying a night at the

university before returning to Wales to prepare for the next shipment. But this delivery is different. Inside the Ford Transit are metal trays stacked with precision medical equipment that can repair bones with titanium plates and screws. Every kit is encased in metal and ready to be sterilised for surgery, with brand names like Zimmer Biomet and Johnson & Johnson. The kits are the first of their kind to be sent from Australia to Ukraine and were supplied by Sydney company Device Technologies, after months of persuasion from Paslawsky, who estimates their market price at about \$7 million. In the right hands, they'll help hundreds of patients.



Medical kits, the first of their kind to be sent to Ukraine from Australia, that contain tools to repair bones with titanium plates and screws. CREDIT: BRENDAN HOFFMAN

Supplies this valuable have to go to those who need them most. Paslawsky used her contacts in the Ukrainian government, starting with the Ukrainian ambassador, Vasyl Myroshnychenko, and deputy head of mission Volodymyr Shalkivskyi in Canberra, to find hospitals with leading specialists doing orthopaedic surgery on soldiers and civilians wounded in Russian artillery bombardments and missile strikes.

The donation in Sydney was divided into shipments to go to the most urgent destinations: first, a military hospital near Kyiv where patients from around the country are sent for treatment; second, a hospital in Dnipro that is closer to the fighting in the east and south. This has left room to help other surgeons, but the priority is confidence in supply. That means that Hopkins and Kolodiy have to guarantee delivery to the hospital door.

The highway widens into two lanes, and Kolodiy accelerates to 110 kilometres an hour. The phone rings again and he glances over and smiles. “Everyone needs a little attention,” he says. He takes the call and talks softly in Ukrainian. It turns out a donor has a Mercedes-Benz van ready to collect in Germany; it’s a useful vehicle for moving supplies and soldiers. Except Kolodiy does not call them soldiers; he calls them warriors.

What makes him put all his energy into this war? His memories are surfacing as we head toward Kyiv. Kolodiy was in the capital’s central square, the Maidan, during the protests that began in November 2013 against the decision by the country’s then-president, Viktor Yanukovich, to reject an agreement with the European Union and turn for support to Russia

and its president, Vladimir Putin. Millions of Ukrainians saw this as a betrayal of the country's 1991 declaration of independence, a statement endorsed by 92.3 per cent of voters in a referendum after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Orange Revolution of 2004, in which people took to the streets against electoral fraud, confirmed this desire for democratic independence.

Kolodiy was in the Maidan when police fired on the crowd on February 20, 2014, killing more than 100 protesters. He worked at a triage centre to take victims to doctors, who saved some of those who were shot. "We didn't have enough painkillers," he remembers. One young man was wounded in the legs and was given the last dose of morphine. "He survived. And nobody died in our medical point. But there was a lot of death."

He recalls taking an American reporter to a corner of the square hours later to show him bullet fragments and the body of a victim, only to hear the journalist wonder whether police had really fired on their own people. The reality sank in over the next few days when witnesses gave their accounts of sniper fire from the Berkut, a police force loyal to Yanukovich. The Ukrainian parliament voted to impeach him on February 22, and a new president, Petro Poroshenko, won the next election with a pledge to defend the country against Russia. (Yanukovich, later convicted of treason, now lives in Russia.)

Kolodiy recalls the Revolution of Dignity, as those events are known, as a pivotal moment when his country asserted its independence. It came at a cost. Russia annexed the Crimea in March that year and launched a war for territory in Luhansk and Donetsk, the regions in eastern Ukraine that are together known as the Donbas. In July, Russian forces and their local allies shot down Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 with a Russian surface-to-air missile, killing all 298 people on board. For some Ukrainians, talking about this year's invasion can overlook the fact that this is a new phase in a long war; they date the invasion to 2014.

A thousand years of history shape this conflict. Yes, the weapons are frighteningly modern: missiles guided by satellite, drones controlled from a computer screen and rockets designed to find the weakest point of a Russian tank. A mobile phone app tells Ukrainians the regions at risk from a missile strike. When the siren sounded in Lviv at 10.45pm, I could retreat to an air-raid basement equipped with Wi-Fi. But there's an ancient demand behind every atrocity. Putin has based his invasion on the lie that Ukraine has always been part of Greater Russia and that his claim over fields, rivers and forests nullifies the wishes of the Ukrainian people. For Kolodiy and others like him, Ukraine was and will be its own nation.

Some of the volunteers at Wheels of Victory were also in the Maidan eight years ago. Khrystyna Fetsitsa was a student when she joined the protests in 2014. Now she spends at least two days a week driving repurposed four-wheel-drives, and any supplies they can carry, to the war zones near Luhansk and Donetsk.

One recent delivery was a defibrillator from Australia. Fetsitsa comes from a family who spoke Russian, as do about a third of the population, but this changed after she returned from the protests. "We started to speak Ukrainian," she says. "We started to buy Ukrainian clothes. We started to donate to Ukrainian projects. Our family was changed by the Revolution of Dignity. I think we found our Ukrainian dignity inside of us."



“We found our Ukrainian dignity inside of us,” says Khrystyna Fetsitsa, who drives supplies to war zones at least twice a week.

Kolodiy remembers a Russian empire that ruled by fear. In Ukraine, he says, every family has a history of pain.

The uprising of 2014 led Kolodiy and his volunteers to help soldiers in Luhansk and Donetsk long before the Russian army widened the battle this year. In May, however, he turned the group into a formal charity, and says the Australian deliveries make up a small part of what he does. As we travel from service stations to fast-food outlets, I see his frustration with any part of Ukrainian life that looks east. He frowns when he hears people speaking Russian. He tells me how the Soviets killed his grandfather, how the communists seized his family farm, how he had to join the Soviet youth organisation, the Pioneers, as a boy, to pledge loyalty to the legacy of Lenin. He remembers a Russian empire that ruled by fear.

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A dirt track through a valley of eucalypts takes Liz Paslawsky to a small waterfall that fills a pool surrounded by tree ferns and sandstone. She’s bushwalking in the Nattai National Park, part of the wilderness between the NSW Southern Highlands and the Blue Mountains. She sees a wallaby, then an echidna, and brings out her mobile phone, so she can send pictures to the WhatsApp group chat she shares with her friends in Ukraine. Hopkins and Kolodiy marvel at the spikes on this odd animal.

Bushwalking helps Paslawsky find some distance from the war. She usually wakes early at her Austinmer home to talk to contacts in Ukraine during their afternoons, then she turns her attention to Australian healthcare companies and other potential donors during business hours to persuade them to provide money or medical supplies. When night falls in Australia, she’s on the phone to Ukraine again. “Working at the emotional level, we need to keep grounded,” she says. “That’s what bushwalking does for me.”

It only takes a few minutes with Paslawsky for her background as a healthcare executive to come through. She talks of delivering aid to Ukraine like a task from her days as the chief executive of NSW public hospitals. Trained in science, and with an honours degree in psychology and a PhD in commerce, she worked in London for emergency health provider International SOS before returning to Australia in 2018 and setting up her own company to mentor health executives. She is only one member of a committee at the Australian Federation of Ukrainian Organisations that's raised more than \$1 million for medical supplies through the Ukraine Crisis Appeal, but she's the organiser-in-chief for getting supplies to a network that can move through war zones.

An earlier war echoed through Paslawsky's childhood in the western suburbs of Newcastle, NSW. German soldiers took her mother from western Ukraine at the age of 15 during World War II, when the Nazis overran Ukraine as part of Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, and they took her father as well and put him to work in a camp. Her parents met in Germany and were granted passage as refugees to Australia, where her father found work as a boilermaker in the Newcastle steel mills and her mother served customers in a fish and chip shop. They called their daughter Lesia – pronounced “Lasha” – and spoke Ukrainian at home. When the headmaster at Jubilee Road Public School struggled to say her name, he decided she would need another one. “Guess whose photo was on the wall above the headmaster's desk?” she says wryly. A young queen had been crowned in London. Lesia became Liz.

Only decades later did Paslawsky go looking for her extended family. She was divorced by then, with two daughters out of school, and she travelled from an office in London to search the records in the districts around Lviv, where she found aunts and uncles and cousins in a village near the Polish border. She became a visiting professor at the Ukrainian Catholic University in 2016 and secured World Health Organisation funding to run courses to train hospital managers, which gave her an insight into Ukraine's health system. She did not belong to a Ukrainian aid organisation, but everything changed after the February 24 invasion. She started work the next day to set up a supply chain that could help.



The daughter of Ukrainian migrants, Liz Paslawsky started working the day after the February 24 invasion to set up a supply chain to help replenish Ukraine's hospitals. CREDIT: ALEX ELLINGHAUSEN

The first delivery of tourniquets and bandages left Australia in early March and was driven from London to Ukraine as part of a convoy of four-wheel-drives manned by volunteers including Hopkins and Kolodiy. Asking the Australian federal government to help took time, so Paslawsky found champions inside Qantas, DHL and Mainfreight to convince their companies to offer rapid assistance without charge. She set up three parallel chains over time, with help from Rotary International, the Scout movement and friends from the Ukrainian community. Wary of money being misused, she only worked with those she could trust.

“If you want to do something fast in a war you don’t do it through governments,” she says. “You do it with civilians because they’re nimble and fast.” Later, when the volunteers had proved they could ship Australian supplies to the distant war, the Australian government added its help by flying Paslawsky’s donated medicines and equipment to Poland on Royal Australian Air Force C-17 Globemasters.

At least [\\$US100 billion has been pledged globally to assist Ukraine since February 24](#), according to a funding database at news site Devex, but there is a passionate debate about the best way to deliver rapid help. When Germany’s Kiel Institute added up all the military, financial and humanitarian aid from January 24 to July 1, it found the promises were generous but help was too slow to arrive. “What is striking is the large gap between pledged and delivered support,” it said in a [July 6 report](#).

The first days of the February invasion were so chaotic that most international charities withdrew their workers to Lviv, or took them out of Ukraine altogether. Humanitarian Outcomes, a research group based in London, says home-grown organisations filled the gap by setting up quickly to help their fellow Ukrainians find shelter, food and medical support, but did this without much funding.

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“In general it is more effective to fund directly to organisations that are up and running on the ground and able to reach people in need,” says Abby Stoddard, a partner at Humanitarian Outcomes in New York and the lead author of the June report that revealed the funding gap. She says that out-of-date rules prevented international groups sending money to workers who were closer to the conflict. Global agencies are steadily returning to Ukraine, with an estimated 68 currently supporting aid projects themselves or with partners, but Ukrainians are deeply frustrated with overseas aid groups that are slow to spend their funds inside the country.

Everything is decentralised in the civilian response to the war. Small groups can start quickly, meet by accident and learn to co-operate. They know, however, that bandages and medicines will never be enough to win the war. When I ask volunteers what Ukraine needs most, they have a common answer: “weapons”. The best way to stop a war crime, they say, is to stop the Russian army.

Shaun Hopkins thought global charities would rush to help Ukraine with money and volunteers after the February 24 invasion. Watching the news coverage from Wales, and seeing a convoy of Russian tanks which stretched for 64 kilometres on the highway to Kyiv, he itched to do something useful, but had no experience in war zones. His background as a volunteer was his work with his partner, Toni Senese, in running the local scouts. He had also worked on deliveries into Europe as part of his business and knew how to manage freight across the English Channel. With Senese in charge of logistics, he explored the idea of driving to Ukraine.

His workplace accident seven years earlier was a complication but not a barrier. Hopkins was bed-bound for 18 months after having a photocopier land on his back while moving office furniture with two colleagues. “It ended up just basically squishing me,” he says. “Unfortunately, the weakest points on your spine are your discs, and they all went pop. I’ve never known so much pain.” He underwent three operations, one of them unplanned because he picked up an infection in hospital, but kept running his tech business. “The only thing that kept me sane was the fact that I worked throughout.”

The scout group was the unexpected link that connected Hopkins to Ukraine. He learnt of others who were taking four-wheel-drives into Ukraine, joined their convoys, and met Kolodiy on one of the first journeys. A connection to the Ukrainian Catholic University in Lviv put them both in touch with Paslawsky. Soon the medical supplies from Australia were making up about 60 per cent of every load. Hopkins kept his business operating in Wales – he can fix a client’s computer network from his laptop whenever he is online – while also driving 4000 kilometres on regular round trips to Lviv.

I ask him why he puts so much of his time into helping a country at war. “Because this war has the potential to affect every free, democratic country in the world,” he says. “By helping and supporting the Ukrainians, I hope that I will also help and support my own family.” But it becomes obvious to me, as we talk for hours on the road, that there’s more to it than that. Other people would click on a website and make a donation; Hopkins is compelled to get into his van and drive. There are few moments when he is not active: he can navigate a turn onto a freeway while switching on the BBC, offering me an apple and asking if I need the code for the van’s Wi-Fi network. He’s a born multitasker. Given nine jobs, he would add a tenth.

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“I think you would crack up if you sat there worrying about how big the problem is and the task and all the rest of it,” he says. “You’ve just got to really focus on what you can do, and get that done, and focus on the next thing, so it’s a gradual progression. You know, you put your suggestion to the right people and try and get traction. And then, if no one supports you, you just do it yourself.” He laughs. “I’m literally burning money by putting gas in this truck every week. I just burn money, basically.” But he speaks with total seriousness about doing something, even if it is small, to stop Putin. “We can pay now or pay later,” he says. “Pay financially now, or pay in blood later.”



A hospital orderly moves the orthopaedic supplies down a hospital corridor in Kyiv as journalist David Crowe (centre) talks with surgeon Volodymyr Grygorovskyy (right). CREDIT: MIKHAIL PALINCHAK

Kolodiy pulls open the door of the van to reveal the packs of equipment stacked in their metal trays. It's late Friday afternoon and the sun seems to touch the tips of the trees beside the road. The two vans have arrived at the car park of a military hospital on the outskirts of Kyiv. Volodymyr Grygorovskyy, one of the hospital's principal surgeons, emerges from a wall of sandbags and walks slowly over to shake hands and see what's arrived. He looks into the van and his face opens into a broad smile. "This is good stuff," he says at his first sight of the Zimmer Biomet kits. "This is what we need."

Dressed in a blue medical shirt and trousers, Grygorovskyy is using crutches; his right leg is recovering from a fracture and torn ligaments from a fall and he's been doing surgery from a chair pulled up to an operating table. He looks young, but has worked in arthroscopic surgery in Chicago, Munich and London. Before the war, he was planning a holiday with his wife, a lawyer, to the whisky distilleries of Islay, off the coast of Scotland. Within days of the invasion, he was sleeping at the hospital beside an AK47 assault rifle and a rocket-propelled grenade launcher because the army had found Russians in the surrounding forest.

"Unfortunately, my dreams came true only because of the war."

Grygorovskyy leads us through the hospital entrance into a Soviet-era elevator and slams the iron doors. We emerge on the second floor, where a woman steps out of a ward and a young girl skips behind her. Grygorovskyy says 90 per cent of the hospital's work since February has been treating gunshot wounds, shrapnel injuries and the effects of rocket attacks and artillery fire. He'd always dreamt of working in Ukraine with the very best medical equipment from the West, including titanium plates and screws like those we've just delivered. "Unfortunately, my dreams came true only because of the war."

A young man, barely into his 20s, lies on a bed in one of the wards. He was shot by a sniper in Mariupol on April 8 and evacuated to a small hospital for a week before being taken to the Azovstal iron and steel works during the long attack on the plant by the Russian army. He lay in a makeshift bunker with a gunshot fracture to his femur, with the minimum of medical treatment, until the siege ended with the removal of the defenders to Russian territory. After an exchange of prisoners from both sides, he was taken to the Kyiv hospital, but his recovery has been slow; an infection spread during the delay.

Next to him lies an older man who was wounded in an explosion in Mykolaiv on July 11 and left with shrapnel injuries to his left tibia and soft-tissue damage. This is a fresher injury than the younger man's, says Grygorovskyy, and the soft tissue should not present as many challenges. Over time, the leg can be healed with a nail or plate from the kits that have been stacked downstairs.

"Mission accomplished," says Hopkins. "Well, one mission, anyway."



Despite a leg injury, Volodymyr Grygorovskyy is still doing surgery on gunshot and shrapnel wounds. CREDIT:MIKHAIL PALINCHAK

We walk out of the hospital and into the sun with Grygorovskyy, who has changed into a black T-shirt celebrating Ukrainian folk music. One of the reasons he came home after his time in the United States, he says, was his concern that the health system would be in crisis if too many doctors left the country; like so many others, he is motivated by a sense of Ukrainian identity. “Big souls make big history,” says Kolodiy as we head toward the vans.

Later, there will be time to talk to victims of the war in the suburbs of Kyiv, where apartment buildings have been reduced to blackened rubble and church walls have been pockmarked by gunfire. There will be anxious calls between Hopkins and Senese about a shortage of funds. There will be confusion when the Polish border is closed and Hopkins has to make a quick detour through the countryside to find another border crossing out of Ukraine. There will be a call from Paslawsky about the need to avoid burnout from the stress of the work.

For now, however, there is a short drive to the centre of Kyiv to visit the square where the Revolution of Dignity began eight years ago. Success for this chain of volunteers will be marked by a meal at an outside table at the KFC near the Maidan, just before the streets empty for the nightly curfew.