

VWEEKEND

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star is making
better choices

Political sacrifice
Anika Wells'
courage and
conviction

CHARLES MIRANDA

FRONTLINE ANGEL

Victorian mother Halleshia Rumler's anguish for the people of Ukraine, under siege from invading Russian forces, was so compelling she left her children and husband at home and headed to the war zone to lend a hand



Story CHARLES MIRANDA

MERCY

DASH

Despite no personal connection with Ukraine, a rural mother of two decided she had to help and travelled to the war-torn country to teach first aid

As she watched the harrowing scenes on the TV nightly news, not for the first time Hallelshia Rumler instinctively – almost protectively – looked over to her children with a gnawing in her stomach. Night after night in live-cross news reports she would see mothers dragging their children across drifts of snow, or was it ash from nearby burning buildings, fleeing the fighting in war-wracked Ukraine.

She noted their tear-streaked and fear-stricken faces and the desperation of their mothers tightly gripping their hands then looked over at her own children Stella, 6, and three-year-old Casey playing and laughing happily.

“I have to do something,” she thought to herself before vocalising the declaration to husband Ashley.

Here they were with children, very similar in age, safe on the other side of the world in a regional town in Victoria while people like them were being killed.

Ukraine was not a country she had ever been to or really heard much about before but what the local postmistress from Rokewood, 130km west of Melbourne, did next was stunning. She would lose friends, split her local community and shock her bewildered family as she left them to travel to Ukraine’s frontline armed with little more than her farming background nous and a determination to make a difference.

“I just needed to go, I couldn’t stand by ... I needed to do something,” Rumler says now without a hint of regret or apology.

“It was definitely, definitely worth it, you can’t just stand by. And I would do it all again.”

For the fair-haired 30-year-old this was not about holding a misguided idealist view of the world or harbouring a sense of adventure, far from the tough life on the land on which she lives with her family.

It was, she says, just the drive of maternal instinct and a sense of duty to help someone in need any way she could. Even if it came at a cost.

As the local Australia Post agent and news agency/general store owner and avid beekeeper, she couldn’t really escape that instinct as she stacked the newspapers for sale emblazoned with headlines about Russian President Vladimir Putin’s rampaging forces. In her break she would flick through her device, where social media chatter was about the disturbing scenes of displacement.

The loose change in the collection jar she put out on the corner of her bench for donations for Ukrainians caught up in the conflict was nice but not going to cut it.

“You see the children and the families and people that don’t have a choice,” Rumler says.

“They are fully displaced through Europe and with the bridges being blown up and those images of women carrying their children, carrying their children for kilometres in the middle of winter, I kinda thought, ‘Imagine that was us, imagine that was my husband who picked up arms and that was me carrying children across that bridge,’ that side of things in a weird sense hit home pretty hard.

“I have no connection to Ukraine, I was just one of these people who watched it all unfold through the media and social media and kinda



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said to my husband, ‘No I need to go’.
 “He thought I was crazy because we have two young children but he was still very supportive and my mum and dad were extremely supportive, maybe because if they were a bit younger they would have done the same thing.”
 When Covid arrived in earnest in March

2020 Rumler had just started university as a paramedic and nurse student but then had to put her course on hold to stay home with the children as the world held its collective breath for that unfolding crisis.

She would not resume her study to pursue what she describes as a deep passion for first aid and health care and instead just kept her thoughts local, focusing on what the pandemic would mean for her family and community.

Then in 2022 another global crisis emerged when Putin amassed 200,000 troops on the Ukrainian border before ordering the invasion of his neighbour and the indiscriminate slaughter of its people including women and children. The war has now been raging for nine months with no end in sight.

Through social media Rumler made contact with a Washington-based, non-governmental organisation United Help Ukraine which, since 2014 – Putin’s first invasion of Ukraine’s eastern region and annexing of the Crimea peninsula — has been supplying combat-grade first aid kits, survival equipment and other humanitarian aid.

Mother of two Halleshia Rumler, opposite; and with troops in Ukraine where she trained frontline fighters in combat first aid.



“I’ve got a pretty broad skill set as in I’m a country girl, off a farm so I’m used to firearms and big noises, I can operate machinery and I had first aid training,” she says.

Her parents were brought in, new schedules written as they took on parenting duties again, school runs, lunches, homework and chores and looked after the postal service which Rumler had had since 2010 and which was next door to their own takeaway shop.

Ashley kept the management of the farm, the sheep, the cattle and the crops going.

Calls home and parcels would become cherished events.

On arrival in-country she was taken to a military base, handed combat fatigues and began training frontline fighters from regular, reservist and conscripts’ forces, in first aid.

Tactical Combat Casualty Care (TCCC) would normally take several days if not weeks. Rumler was told she had four hours to teach as much as she could, through a translator with demonstrations before the men deployed back to the frontline.

Mostly she was dispatched to various



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military bases including in towns now synonymous with Russian atrocities such as Bucha, Irpin, Vinnytsia Oblast and of course Kyiv. Sometimes her demonstrations were with 60 battle-weary troops at a time and continued as sirens wailed and missiles exploded in the fields and towns around them.

“We were doing a class and the sirens went off and you were sort of complacent but not complacent and they were like, ‘Oh, you happy to keep teaching?’ and, ‘Yes, it’s fine’ then the word came back that there was a hit not far from us and quite a few people died.

“We really pulled up our socks and thought we’ve got to go harder and train them harder

in that four to five-hour bracket.”

Her planned two-week stay stretched as she cancelled multiple booked return flights, then after three and a half months she flew home to Australia. Her kids were troubled by their mum’s longer-than-expected stay.

“That kind of affected them more,” Rumler says. “We had told them mum has gone to help some really good people that need some help. Kids adapt well to situations especially when they are young but what they understood was mum had gone to help and there were baddies and it is a good thing mum is doing. But I stayed longer. I sent back some parcels with Ukrainian English books and little vyshyvanka (traditional Ukrainian embroidered clothing), little things to tie in what I was doing and they could show their friends and be proud of what was happening.

“He (Ashley) is fantastic and I think he kinda knew he wasn’t going to get much of a say in it when I wanted to go but by the end of it he was saying, ‘I need you to come home, I need a rest’.”

Others in her circle were not as understanding or forgiving.

“Most people have been surprised but not surprised. I think more so because they don’t quite understand. It was like, ‘Why would she go, she is a mother, she is really stupid, she shouldn’t be going.’

“My family members reacted like that ... some really close friends as well who unfortunately I don’t really have much to do with anymore. But when they understand that



Halleشيا Rumler, from top left, points to her ‘humanitarian medic’ flag; with husband Ashley and children Stella, 6, and Casey, 3, back home in Victoria; in a bomb crater near Irpin; with troops.

you are not going over there to run amok, it is not a joke, you are going there for the right reasons then they kind of change their attitude a little bit and become a bit more open to the idea.

“But from a community perspective it was just, ‘Well, she is crazy.’ You know it always came back to, ‘She is a mother why would she do this, why would she put herself in that situation.’

“I do explain to them, and Mum and Dad would explain to them, ‘If this was us we would want good, genuine people to come and help.’”

Speaking now, having just returned from Ukraine, Rumler’s reflections on her time there are raw, almost personal and are leading her to consider a return. There is a Ukrainian mother who migrated to Australia a few months ago with her three children who, after arrival to a safe, new life learned her husband had been killed. She is flying back with her children for the funeral, and Rumler is considering escorting her. Again it’s a maternal thing.

“I would do it again in a heartbeat,” she says.

“Ukrainians would say to me, ‘Why on earth would you come here,’ and for me it really comes down to that I know my kids are safely tucked up in bed and that’s exactly where everyone else’s kids should be, tucked up in their beds with their families.

“It is pretty important I think. If as much of the world can pull up their socks and stick together and put themselves out there I think it would be a better place and we’d all be much better off.” ■

