

## Fearless Aussies put lives on Ukraine frontline



[Two ex-Australian Army mates are heading to the frontline in Ukraine after having their dreams to fight in the Australian Army taken away.](#)

- By [LIAM MENDES](#), The Australian, SEPTEMBER 6, 2023

Josh Norman\* is in daily pain from a shoulder injury he sustained during his time in the Australian Army.

Fellow former soldier Damien Solomon\* was medically discharged after losing much of the hearing in his right ear.

Yet both men are on their way to [the frontline in Ukraine](#), determined to help in the fight against Russia, despite the fear they could be punished by Australian authorities for choosing to make what they believe is the only ethical decision.

“I’d like to think that if Australia were invaded we’d have a lot of foreigners come over and help us, guys just like us just like us from a different country,” Mr Norman told The Australian, before travelling to serve in a [Ukrainian](#) unit with other foreigners.

Mr Solomon said Australians had a vested interest in discouraging regional superpowers, such as China, from territorial ambitions.

“If Russia were to be allowed to get away with (the invasion), it would signal to other players more relevant to Australia that that kind of behaviour is okay. And that could lead to more problems for us domestically.”

The medically-discharged veterans are fearful of speaking publicly – not because of potential repercussions from Russia – but for fear of being government repercussion upon their return.

About an hour from the Russian border, sitting in what used to be a primary school classroom in Ukraine's east after being the target of a missile, the duo explained how they believe in the country's cause and that Ukrainians should "be able to live their lives".

Seeing the classroom full of pink school desks and chairs, and young children still living among destroyed dwellings across the country, reminds Mr Norman of his young nephew safely back in Australia.

"Seeing those kids around makes me want to fight," the east coast resident said. "If Australia was invaded, other people would be trying to help my nephew out, which I truly believe. I really believe in the cause."

After spending many months in [Ukraine](#), the pair have been struck by the war's impact on the most vulnerable in Ukrainian society. Every day there are rocket attacks, aerial bombings, explosions. Air raid sirens ring out across the country.

"I think people aren't really that aware of what's actually happening and how wrong it is ... but the people that are really suffering, a lot of women, a lot of children, a lot of the vulnerable people, the elderly," Mr Norman said. "They should be able to just get on with their life, they shouldn't have to be fighting against an invading army to try and protect their families and get their land back, it's just the right thing to do."

The shoulder injury has left Mr Norman with debilitating daily pain despite having a ketamine infusion, multiple surgeries, ongoing physiotherapy and stretching, and a cocktail of pain medication – which he will be on for the rest of his life.

Even with the medication, he is often in serious pain. And that's when he's not wearing his body armour. "I stocked up on enough medication to last me until next year," he said. "If I was to run out of that, or if I was to lose that medication, it would be very much a mental game, I would be in a lot of pain. But it's a decision I'm happy with that I made. I know the risks, I know how it is, and I'm still happy to be here."

Mr Solomon, whose grandfather was a Yugoslav Partisan in WWII fighting Nazis and whose great grandfather was a soldier in the Austro-Hungarian Army, lost a "high degree" of hearing in his right ear during his five years in the army.

"I really look up to my grandfather, one of the most important people in my life, so I always wanted to be in the army," he said.

The pair both say they didn't get the experience they were hoping for in the Australian Army, but firmly believe the skills they learnt can be utilised on the frontline to help bring an end to the invasion.

In the past few months, the two mates have been training hundreds of Ukrainians from all walks of life – accountants, teachers, retail workers – in infantry tactics at a top-secret training facility, run by a former British army soldier, called Trident Defence Initiative.

Mr Norman says he doesn't believe Australians realise just how much Ukraine is relying on the West, but he concedes the West is suffering "war fatigue".

"If you lose Western support, the war is pretty much done," he said. "I'm here for the cause ... I believe innocent people should be free; the problem here is that the women, the children, the vulnerable, can't really do anything for themselves."

“There’s certainly war fatigue, all over social media I see people talking about that we shouldn’t be in Ukraine, who don’t know anything about anything.

“Most people on social media that make these comments are just peanuts who’ve got no idea what they’re talking about.”

As they prepare to head to the frontline, they manifest youthful enthusiasm. It’s clear they’re looking for adventure.

They’re joking, they’re humorous, they’re excited. It’s endless banter. They’re not scared of death. At least, not at the moment.

Every day thousands of foreigners are fighting the brutal war on the frontline. Among them are around 100 Australians fighting.

Last week, a 22-year-old British fighter, Sam Newey, died in combat. “We hear about people dying,” Mr Norman said. “It’s very real but it’s not something that we really dwell on or think about too much. I don’t think I’d get anything done if I was really worried about dying.”

The pair say they’re expecting “a lot of artillery”.

“Pretty much every day – there’s nothing that you can really do about that,” Mr Norman said.

“I’ve heard other dudes who have just been getting shelled the entire time that they’ve been around, so it really does just depend where they are and what’s happening,” Mr Solomon said.

At the moment, their families know they’re in country training soldiers. As for telling their loved ones they’re heading to the frontline? “I’ll let them know – possibly,” Mr Norman said. “The big thing about not telling them isn’t to keep it hush for the sake of it, but I think it would be detrimental, them knowing that I’m fighting, because then they would be waiting every day for a message.”

Mr Solomon said: “I’m in the same boat, I think I’m maybe blissfully unaware, but I sort of think more about the good that I’m going to do than the chance that I’m going to ... die,” he said.

“It’s definitely a real possibility, but I don’t think I’d get anything done if that’s all I thought about.

“Whatever happens, happens.”

(\* Names are pseudonyms)