

## A SHORT TRIP TO UKRAINE

*Chris Leptos AO*



*Figure 1: Handing over the ambulances, Lviv, Ukraine*

I have just returned to Melbourne after being part of a convoy that donated and delivered 5 ambulances full of medical supplies to Ukraine.

Our convoy departed London before dawn on Sunday 19th November – it was a short trip across the Channel Tunnel (nearly 2,000 km), but a world away from my life in Australia.

I didn't know much about Ukraine. I only started reading about Ukraine in February 2022 as I followed the daily news reporting of the Russian invasion. The Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 didn't mean much to me – although it should have. But when Russia stormed across the Ukrainian border in 2022 targeting Kyiv, I could barely believe it was happening in my lifetime. Putin had decided to take the whole of Ukraine by force. It deeply unsettled me. How could an entire nation, a land mass the size of two thirds of NSW, be extinguished by the whim of a murderous dictator?

Then, I got a call. I was contacted by an old friend (let's call him 'Frank') in the US who asked for help. He was a former US ambassador to Singapore, and we had previously worked together on a number of overseas projects, including some time on the island of Mindanao in the Philippines – infamous as the home of several active terrorist groups.

Frank was raising funds to buy ambulances for Ukraine. And he was planning to drive an ambulance from London to Kyiv as part of a humanitarian convoy. I thought the idea was pretty crazy, but Frank's

not a crazy guy. I decided to help Frank, and before long I saw the need to join Frank as a volunteer driver.

I was overwhelmed by the generosity of my Australian friends, family and colleagues who supported the Ukraine Crisis Appeal (managed by the Australia Federation of Ukrainian Organisations and Rotary World Community Services). Within a few weeks we had raised A\$160k, enough money in Australia to buy 4 low-kilometre second-hand ambulances in the UK, and to stock them with medical supplies (crutches, tourniquets, etc) that are needed in hospitals across Ukraine, at a cost of A\$101k. The remaining funds will be used to kick off fundraising for the next convoy of Aussie ambulances in 2024.

I arrived in London a few days before the convoy was scheduled to leave and spent that time with volunteers packing and preparing the ambulances. I also needed to get over the jetlag, as there was a lot of driving ahead of us. Each volunteer driver was expected to do at least six hours of driving, and at least six hours in the passenger seat navigating, each day of the convoy.

Day one – we disembarked the Eurotunnell train in France, ready to start the long drive to Ukraine. However, we first needed to navigate through French Customs – we had all the paperwork in French, English and Ukrainian. They say an army runs on its stomach, but a humanitarian convoy runs on paperwork.

We decided to take the northerly route: France – Belgium – Netherlands – Germany – Poland – Ukraine. The weather was terrible, cold and non-stop rain. At the end of the first day, after 14 hours on the road, we stayed the night in Germany near the Polish border. It's best not to provide too many details about the logistics in case future convoys are targeted.

Driving in a 5-vehicle ambulance convoy has its challenges, because every truck driver in Germany and Poland wants to overtake you, no matter how fast you are travelling.

Day two – another 14 hours on the road, except the weather was worse. We stayed overnight in Poland near the Ukraine border. The driving part was largely completed, and it was a relatively short drive over the border into Lviv the next morning.

Day three – navigating Ukraine customs took many hours – but I could understand why it was necessary to check and double-check all of our paperwork and the contents of our medical supplies.

When we arrived in Lviv we were directed to a secret location where the medical supplies and ambulances were formally handed over. I was elated and exhausted.

Lviv is a beautiful European city, and on the surface, life is normal – nightclubs, restaurants, bars, opera, etc. The air-raid sirens went off once while I was there, and I immediately headed to the basement of the hotel. The locals were unfazed – they said they could tell it was a false alarm – however I didn't linger to find out how they knew.

I stayed overnight in Lviv and spent the next day (day four) visiting two rehabilitation centres. Sadly, Ukraine has become the prosthetics capital of the world, due to the extensive land mines laid by the Russians to disrupt the farms and to wreck the Ukrainian economy. It will take decades to remove the land mines, but that clearing process is proceeding apace.

The lifespan of an ambulance in Ukraine is about six months, not because they break down, but because the Russians target hospitals and ambulances. I know that's hard to believe, but such is the horror facing the people of Ukraine.

During my time in Lviv I met with a Ukrainian rescue team from Sevastopol. They convinced me that in addition to the ambulances they need a mobile crane to rescue people under the rubble when buildings are bombed. We are working on getting a crane to them.

When I left Lviv I had 24 hours in Krakow to decompress – I slept for 12 hours straight – and then back to Melbourne.

Going to Ukraine was a crazy idea, but I have no regrets, and I plan to do it again – perhaps with a crane! Ukraine is facing an existential threat, and while they are laying down their lives for freedom, we should be prepared to support them with humanitarian aid – it's the very least we can do.

**Chris Leptos** AO

*The November 19th 2023 ambulance convoy to Ukraine was a collaboration of [Ukraine Crisis Appeal](#), The Australian Federation of Ukrainian Organisations (AFUO), [Rotary Australia World Community Service \(RAWCS\)](#), and [Medical Life Lines Ukraine \(MLLU\)](#)*