

OPINION

Have our Bushmasters helped the Ukrainians? I asked Hannah Hurava



[Chris Uhlmann](#)

Former Nine News political editor, December 8, 2023 — 11.30am

The combat medic sat in the back of a blood-stained armoured vehicle as we hurried through an interview. Our film crew had arranged to meet Hannah Hurava in the early afternoon, a handful of kilometres from the Eastern front of Ukraine's war for survival. But a wrong turn by the lead car in our small convoy turned into a disturbingly long detour into twilight on an ever-narrowing dirt track. We were somewhere in the Donetsk region but not quite sure where. Nor did we know if this track was a road to nowhere.



Ukrainian combat medic Hannah Hurava is an Australian-built Bushmaster in Eastern Ukraine.

All day we had heard the sound of nearby artillery fire. And on either side of the goat track were fields once occupied by Russians and likely littered with landmines. By the time we found Hannah it was dark. Our security adviser's mood was even darker and everyone was keen to tape the interview and go. We had already seen how drones equipped with thermal and night vision had extended the eyes of armies and everyone warned us against gathering in large groups for too long.

As a drone technician told us, “enemy sees you, enemy can send something to kill you”.

As setting up lights in the open was out of the question, Hannah, along with a journalist, cameraman, interpreter and sound technician piled into the back of a Bendigo-made Bushmaster that was supposed to be the backdrop for our conversation. It might be designed to carry nine soldiers, but this cabin was an awkward, crowded space for a documentary crew.

It was made more uncomfortable by the soldiers who pointed out the dried blood on the floor of the troop carrier.

Hannah’s face was drawn, she looked exhausted but patiently answered our questions in a monotone rush of words. Our footage shows her constantly wringing her hands and, if eyes are a window to the soul, hers were a shield.



An Australian-born Bushmaster, used by combat medics, in the battlefield in eastern Ukraine.

We had come in search of stories about the Bushmaster, the most visible of many Australian links to this conflict. [Canberra has committed to sending 90](#) and pledged another 30 in July.

Hannah said its design made it ideal for retrieving the wounded from battle. It performed well on rough terrain, its V-shaped hull deflected the blasts from landmines and its armour offered more protection than most similar vehicles. It was saving lives on the battlefield.

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But no amount of armour could shield Hannah from the rote horror of her job.

“You must see some terrible things?”

“Tak,” she nodded. Yes.

Asked how she coped with daily exposure to death and mutilation she said she served with her husband, who was her driver, and that was a “great comfort”.

Hannah stood as testimony to the truth that people have one radical freedom: the right to choose how they respond to the ordeals of life. As John Milton said the mind is its own place and can make a heaven of hell, or a hell of heaven.

War is an unrelenting terror, but it has not robbed Hannah of her hope.

“My husband and I have been married for a long time and we never thought about having children,” she said. “Now, with the things I have seen in war, I have been thinking about making sure the family survives. About the value of life. And the need to ensure there is another life after me.”



Artillery damage to a Bushmaster which is being used by Ukrainian combat medics.

Surrounded by death, Hannah was determined to give life.

We went to Ukraine in search of war stories and found stories of hope. Like the civilian supply chain from Australia that supports troops and refugees; the thriving local rugby league community heartened by a message from a grand final winner; and the doctor using a Melbourne-designed medical marvel to speed the healing of burn and trauma victims.

About 700 kilometres from the eastern front in Kyiv, the President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky, told us of the hopes of his people and the determination not to bend or be broken by a tyrant.

“What is life without any freedom? Any rights? Any democracy?,” he mused. “When you can’t [say] what you want. Can’t choose how to live. What is it? It is nothing.”



Olena Zelenska, wife of President Volodymyr Zelensky, in a still image from the Forged In Fire documentary. *CREDIT:*

Asked if Ukraine should heed the growing chorus to stop fighting and negotiate with Vladimir Putin's regime, Zelensky's wife Olena Zelenska pointed out that the war began in 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea and much of Donbas. The full-scale invasion of 2022 was just the next phase in a campaign of extermination.

"If the enemy lays down their weapons the war will end," she said. "And if we lay down our weapons we will cease to exist."

Ukraine's leaders reason it is wise to believe an enemy who he says he is bent on erasing them. It is hard to fault the logic, given Putin claims there is no such place as Ukraine.

"It is an inalienable part of [Russia's] history, culture and spiritual space," Putin said in a speech just before the invasion began.



Chris Uhlmann visits Ukraine to discover whether Australia's efforts to help are making a difference

But there is no escaping that this is now a war of attrition. We met Australians who have volunteered to fight who spoke of the terrors of trench warfare in a way that would have been familiar to their great-grandfathers: living among rats and within snipers shot of the enemy. Progress is counted in metres and dozens of lives.

Ukraine fears it will be abandoned: that Putin will force his way through the emerging cracks in Western unity. That the support of allies and the flow of weapons will dry up. This failure of will is evident from the US Congress to the European Union.

And if the will of the West fails Ukrainian leaders believe the balance of the world order will shift from democracies to despots. They believe they stand on the front line in a world-wide battle over values. If Putin's unprovoked war of aggression succeeds then no country is safe.

As Olena Zelenska said, "Australians know the danger of fire. And you understand that you need to work with it in advance, that it's better to stop a fire far away from your home."

The documentary *Forged in Fire* screens on Nine at 9pm on Sunday, December 10.