

## ‘Your typical Aussie cricket boy’: Why Oscar Jenkins went to fight in Ukraine

By [Sherryn Groch](#) and [Ashleigh McMillan](#), Sydney Morning Herald, December 23, 2024

On the cricket field, Oscar Jenkins was “your typical Aussie”, his former Melbourne teammates say: a formidable all-rounder, easy to chat to – though perhaps more deep thinking than most.

Some had seen him as recently as this year, at a cricket reunion during a visit home – from teaching in China, they assumed.



Oscar Jenkins, pictured (left) playing for Toorak Prahran Cricket Club, was captured by Russian forces while fighting for Ukraine (right). *Credit:*

But those at Jenkins’ old Toorak Prahran Cricket Club were stunned on Monday when they learnt he had been [captured by Russian soldiers](#) on a Ukrainian battlefield.

In footage that began circulating online on Sunday, Jenkins – with his hands tied – is paraded before the camera by Russian soldiers. The 32-year-old is seen being slapped across the face and questioned.

In broken Ukrainian and English, he explains he has been fighting in the Donbas region to help Ukraine. It’s unclear how long Jenkins – who left Australia to teach and travel in

China in 2015 – has been fighting with Ukrainian forces. He is the first Australian known to have been captured by Russia.

Matt Gobbo played cricket with Jenkins for years and hadn't heard about his friend's efforts in Ukraine until the start of this year.

He described Jenkins as intellectual – “supremely talented but so humble at the same time”.

The Jenkins family are not Ukrainian, but “he always wants to help people”, Gobbo said. “I'm sure it's why he is over there – just trying to help.”

Maurice Clayton played cricket with Jenkins for more than a decade, recalling the “great” Jenkins would often help out coaching juniors at the prominent Melbourne club.

Toorak Prahran Cricket Club president Neil Gumley coached Jenkins for years and played with him in their premiership win about a decade ago.

He says Jenkins has “a heart of gold”. His late father, Scott, a dentist, was also a well-loved player, and the family remained close to the club, Gumley said.

“He's your typical Aussie cricket boy – he helped us win that premiership. He's maybe a bit smarter than average, more deep thinking. Thoughtful.

“He rode his bike to China, through Australia, up through Vietnam and places. On an adventure.”

Jenkins studied biomedical sciences at Monash and had been working as a lecturer at Tianjin college in China.



*Oscar Jenkins with his former Toorak Prahran Cricket Club teammates, captured by Russian forces in Ukraine, and running in a cross country race in 2017. Credit:*

He graduated from the prestigious Melbourne Grammar in 2010, where former school friends said he was well liked and kind. He was vice-captain in his final year, and a talented football player too.

Steve Zayler has known Jenkins since he was young, playing footy and cricket together in Prahran, where their families still play.

“He was always quiet, but such a talented guy. Very generous. A great dry sense of humour,” he said.

Jenkins’ former science teacher and cricket coach Marcus Richards also spoke of his smarts and athleticism.

“He was a very academic, terrific young man,” he said. “He was just a lovely kid to have in the class. Very, very well behaved.”

One ex-school mate who did not wish to be named said Jenkins was “quirky, but a really great guy”.

“But after school, he lost contact with many of his friends,” they said.

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Jenkins moved away from “that sort of Melbourne Grammar upbringing”, the friend said, focused on veganism and sustainability in China.

In one YouTube video last year, discussing his efforts to “force” people to turn vegan, Jenkins said he had lost touch with most people, apart from his mother.

**Ukrainian-born Kateryna Argyrou, who runs the Australian Federation of Ukrainian Organisations**, said the video of Jenkins’ capture brought her to tears on Monday morning.

“I felt sick when I saw the Russians abuse Oscar. But I was also surprised and touched to hear him speaking Ukrainian,” she said.

“He’d really made an effort to learn the language. He wasn’t afraid to say all he wanted to do was help Ukraine. We need to bring him home. He’s one of our own.”

At least eight Australians have been killed since Russia [launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine](#) in 2022, including Victorian man Joel Benjamin Stremski, and Queenslanders Brock Greenwood and Matthew Jepson, who died while holding off Russian troops in the country’s east in October.

Dozens of Australians are believed to still be fighting, often paid as part of the foreign legion.

They largely stick together, says Australian Asher Robinson, whose efforts on the ground co-ordinating aid in Ukraine often puts him alongside them in the line of fire.

Footage of Jenkins' capture was first shared by Alexander Sladkov, a Russian military propagandist, who said the Australian would face trial and prison as a Western mercenary. But he added that Russians were actively hunting for foreign fighters, potentially to secure prisoner swaps, often listening for foreign accents and language on Ukrainian radio intercepts.

Russians commonly target foreign troops, said Argyrou, who visited the frontline in the Donbas last month and met Australians fighting there. "They see them as trophy prisoners of war."

Online, Australian-run accounts, including some collaborating with Russian military bloggers, have been running their own campaign against those fighting in Ukraine – "doxing" Australians by posting their names, photos and personal details, and calling for their capture or "extermination" if they return home. Their families have also been harassed.

Those accounts include the "Aussie Cossack", belonging to [Australian pro-Putin propagandist Simeon Boikov](#), who has been [holed](#) up in Sydney's Russian consulate for the past two years to avoid jail time after the assault of a 76-year-old man.

Gleeful at news of Jenkins' capture, Boikov has already demanded a "prisoner swap" – himself for Jenkins.

The government – on guard for Russian misinformation – says it is seeking more details about Jenkins from Moscow and has warned Australians not to travel to Ukraine to fight.

The Russian embassy in Australia has been contacted for comment.

Robinson, briefly home in Australia this Christmas for the first time in more than two years of fighting, says Russia's attacks had been amped up recently. That included in the Donbas, where Jenkins was fighting, as Moscow looked to snatch territory before winter froze fighting into a slower crawl.

"It's awful out there – what they're dealing with," he said.

**With Rob Harris and Melissa Cunningham**