

‘I spend my youth losing friends’: Ukrainian soldier on the true cost of war

[Bimini Plessner](#), The Australian, 1 September 2026

Before Russia invaded Ukraine, Viktoriia Savkiv was making the most of her youth. She spent her days travelling her beloved homeland, partying at festivals, meeting new people and trying new things.

Now, the 25-year-old spends up to 10 days at a time fighting in the trenches on the frontline.

On a brief visit to Australia for the 35th anniversary of Ukraine’s independence, Second Lieutenant Savkiv wants Australians to know “what the war in Ukraine is really like, and the human factor behind what is happening on the frontlines”.

For Ms Savkiv, everything changed in February 2022.

With [Ukraine under siege](#), the then 21-year-old volunteered as a combat medic. After two years spent desperately trying to stem the bleeding, to save her injured comrades, to help, Ms Savkiv decided she needed to do more.

Desperate for some agency, she trained to become a soldier in the Ukrainian armed forces. Before long, she was a first-person-view drone pilot, carrying out strikes on enemy artillery and equipment. Six months ago, she was made a Second Lieutenant and given command of a 25-person platoon in the 214th Separate Assault Battalion.

One of the smallest people in her unit and one of just two women, Ms Savkiv’s fast-tracked promotion defied the odds, but her tenacity and dedication made her an obvious candidate for leadership.

Ms Savkiv says the hardest part of serving on the frontlines isn’t going days without a shower or proper bed; it isn’t being far away from her loved ones; it isn’t even the fear of putting her life on the line for her country.

The hardest thing is when she can see her comrades suffering or the enemy making successful strikes but she’s “unable to change the situation, unable to help”.

“The second is losing my brothers and sisters in arms with whom I stand shoulder-to-shoulder in combat,” she told The Australian.

The young soldier attends far more funerals than weddings or christenings, her life now a far cry from her carefree adolescence.

“It is unfortunate that I have to spend my youth losing my friends and worrying about my parents and family who are worried about me,” she said.

“I would love to be able to live a different life in a different way, to be able to go to a physical university, to attend classes, to be able to speak to my professors, to other students.

“But, unfortunately, Ukraine has an aggressor neighbour, the Russian Federation, that decided to take from Ukrainians the ability and the right to have a peaceful, normal life.”

During her visit to Australia, she has met with Australian Ukrainian community groups and politicians in Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne.

“I would like to thank Australia for all the help and aid that has already been delivered, and to [ask them to continue](#), especially with the ability to protect Ukrainian skies, for our civilians to feel some kind of safety and normality, and to be able to live their day-to-day lives,” she said.

“I would also like to highlight and emphasise that the outcome of this war will dictate the ability or inability of other nations to attack neighbouring nations in the future.”

Ms Savkiv will return to her position on the frontline in the Donetsk region as soon as she flies back to Ukraine on Wednesday.