

# War Diary: Texac Reminisces about His First New Year's Day in Donetsk

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= War Diary by Russell "Texac" Bentley =

My First Battle. Troishka, New Year's Day 2015



Our correspondent Russell Bentley has been filing his dispatches from Donetsk for over a year now. In the process, and chiefly due to the fact he often does his writing literally from the frontlines of the war in Eastern Ukraine, as a regular soldier in the Novorossyian Armed Forces (NAF), the priorities in the publication of his materials have sometimes shifted. This is a report filed by him about one year ago, and subsequently modified. Passages may have been published before. But what he has to say—as always—remains

relevant, fresh, and inspiring. –PG

SEE ALSO RELATED ARTICLE: [THE SERPENT AND THE CROWN, MY FIRST COMBAT POSITION](#) / We wish to acknowledge Daniel Wirt's editorial contributions to the final presentation of these materials. Any deficits or shortcomings the readers may encounter are surely not his fault. –PG

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I woke up on New Year's Day 2015 without a hangover though the night before I had drunk some champagne and a fair amount of vodka. Not a lot, but about as much as I would have drunk on a regular NYE back in the States. I was always pretty careful in that respect, I never got a single DWI. But I didn't wake up back in the States, I woke up in a convent in the middle of a graveyard in Southeast Ukraine that was a major battlefield in the opening salvos of the Third World



War.

Inside my sleeping bag, I was fully clothed in the Russian Army winter fatigues I had bought, along with the sleeping bag, in Rostov before crossing the border into Novorussia. Disrobing for sleep the night before had consisted of removing

my boots, steel Class IV armored vest and kevlar helmet and hanging my AK-74 on a hook with my webgear. Across the room from me, in the frozen pitch black darkness, snored the two Italian volunteers, Spartak and Archangel. Below me, Lataishik, the sniper, and in the bunk next to his, Bielka, the PKM machine-gunner. Above them, the only guy on a top bunk, lay Texas, the New Kid on the Block, who wasn't from anywhere around there. That would be me, your humble narrator...



Left to right: Spartak, Archangel, (Italy) Texac, (USA) Alfonzo (Spain) and Orion (Russia)

IT WAS PITCH DARK, totally dark, and it was freezing. The temp was not so bad as long as I only stuck my nose out of the bag. The bag itself was rated for the Arctic, and that, along with my heavy Russian uniform, kept me pretty warm. Except for my nose. The windows were filled with sandbags, to the point that they were almost airtight. They were certainly light tight, and pretty good protection against bullets and artillery shrapnel, which was the main idea. The doors were covered, inside and out by heavy rugs nailed in place over the doors. They too were pretty much airtight. The walls of the building were almost 18 inches thick, including the interior walls and

doorways. Airtight, light tight, freezing cold, it was almost like being in a crypt. The only difference was I had to take a piss.

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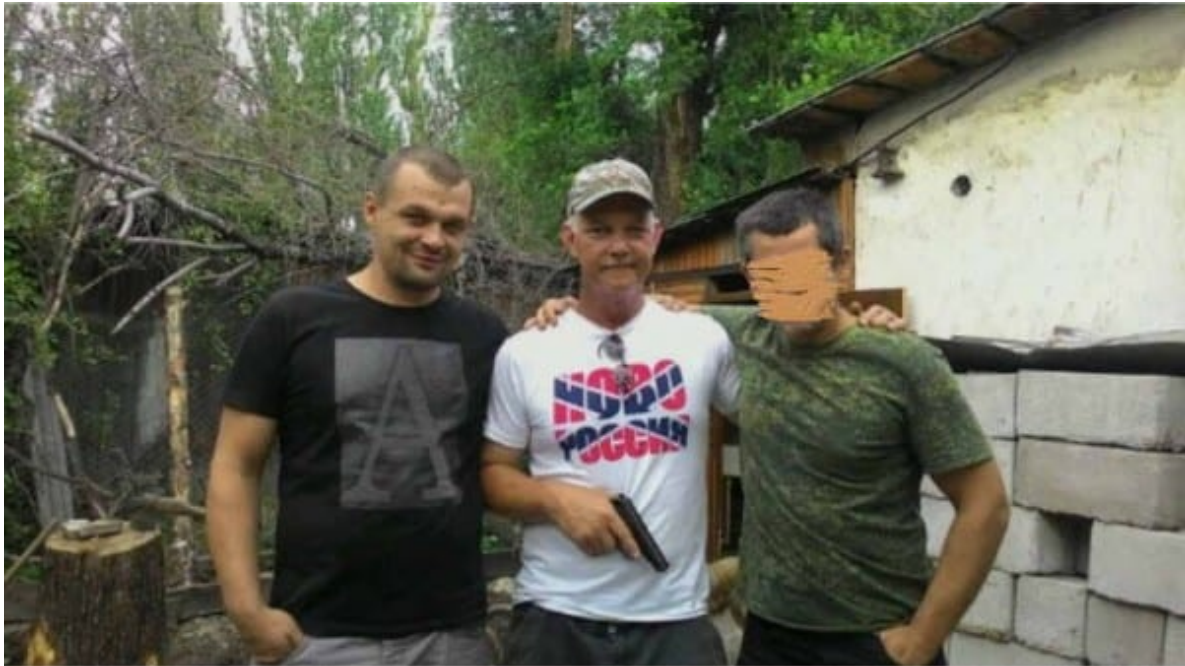
I reached around and felt for my flashlight. Besides guns, food and bullets, a flashlight is one of the most important things you can have at the Front. I'd been in some pretty primitive situations before, and I had an idea about what to bring. I brought three. Two were the kind you wear on your head, and another handheld that could be charged by cranking. I found the one I was feeling around for and turned it on. The wood stove below me was cold and dark. I climbed down and lit a candle, the only source of illumination, besides flashlights. Since I was going outside to piss, I donned my steel vest and grabbed my Kalash. I walked to the end of the hallway and walked down the stairs. There were a few openings in the windows on the first floor, and the dim light of dawn filtered through. Which meant the snipers could see me.

Our position, our building, faced enemy positions on two sides – to the North, straight ahead, the Donetsk Airport control tower raised its head like a ragged viper, 400 meters away. About halfway between was a woodline that was the launching site for the almost daily Ukrop attacks. To the right, to the West, in the direction of Freedom and Prosperity, the New Terminal of the Donetsk Airport was held by the “Cyborgs” a supposedly elite unit of the Ukrainian Army, backed by Pravy Sektor Nazis and Western mercenaries. Our toilet was a small building about 50 meters across open ground, covered by Ukrop sniper fire from the control tower. I asked the guy on guard duty (in sign language, of course) if that was where I had to go to piss. It turned out that I could piss on the floor in one of the downstairs rooms, it was only if I had to take a shit that I'd have to brave the sniper fire. I decided to try that later, and settled for a piss.

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[dropcap]T[/dropcap]hat morning it occurred to me that I was among true Freedom Fighters, men who were defending their own homes and families from foreign invaders who were bent on nothing less than enslavement of the locals. These men were not “defending freedom” by going to a foreign country and shooting people there, they were defending their own freedom, literally in their own backyards, and doing it quite well. We faced 150 infantry, Pravy Sektor and Regular Army, armor and artillery, including Grads (rocket batteries). There were never more than 20 of us there at once, usually a lot less. Firefights every night, and almost every day. Thousands of rounds, each way. Artillery every few days, fifty to a hundred rounds, incoming. But we held our own.

I returned upstairs, where things were starting to stir. The first stove to be lit was in the kitchen. Ammo crates were the preferred firewood, and the majority of what we had to burn. Coffee, nyet, but there was tea, “chai” black and strong, with too much sugar. Breakfast was the leftover potato soup from the night before. As the morning progressed, I began to interact with my comrades, and take stock of them, and them of me. The two combat commanders were Reem and Mir (“Chrome” and “Peace”.) The following equation may not make sense to the civilians or mathematicians among us, but combat vets will know what I mean – Reem was worth any 10 regular soldiers, and Mir was worth 5, but together they were worth 30, and there were plenty of times when 30 Ukrops were scared to go up against just those two. They ran the [“Utes”](#), and they ran it heavy. The Utes is a heavy machine gun, equal to the US M-2 50 cal. Reem was the gunner, and Mir was his sideman and spotter. Reem was a big man, but he seemed even bigger. Mir was a short guy, but the scarier of the two.



“Reem” means “Chrome”, and “Mir” means “Peace” or “Earth”. (Mir’s face blurred for the safety of his family, which still resides in Kiev controlled territory).

Reem didn’t say much, and everything that Mir said to me seemed somehow tinged with a threat. When Mir told me he was a dentist, I figured he really meant “dentist” in the mafia sense – he knocked people’s teeth out with his fists for a living. He wasn’t the kind of guy who needed pliers. That evening, over dinner, Mir peppered me with questions, what I knew about Russian history, Russian culture. Well, I knew a bit. Come and See by Elim Klimov, Eta Vso by DDT. The Sacred War. Reem just sat back and listened. He didn’t say much, but like E. F. Hutton, when Reem talked, everybody listened. I did too, of course, but the only difference was I couldn’t understand anything he said. He was that kind of guy, a big, dark Russian with a rumbling voice like the sound of distant artillery that was slowly coming closer. He could say “Merry Christmas” and it would sound like the voice of impending doom. But I could tell he liked me, even if I was pretty sure Mir didn’t. After dinner, Mir invited me back to the Commander’s Room, at the suggestion of Reem. Of course, I went.

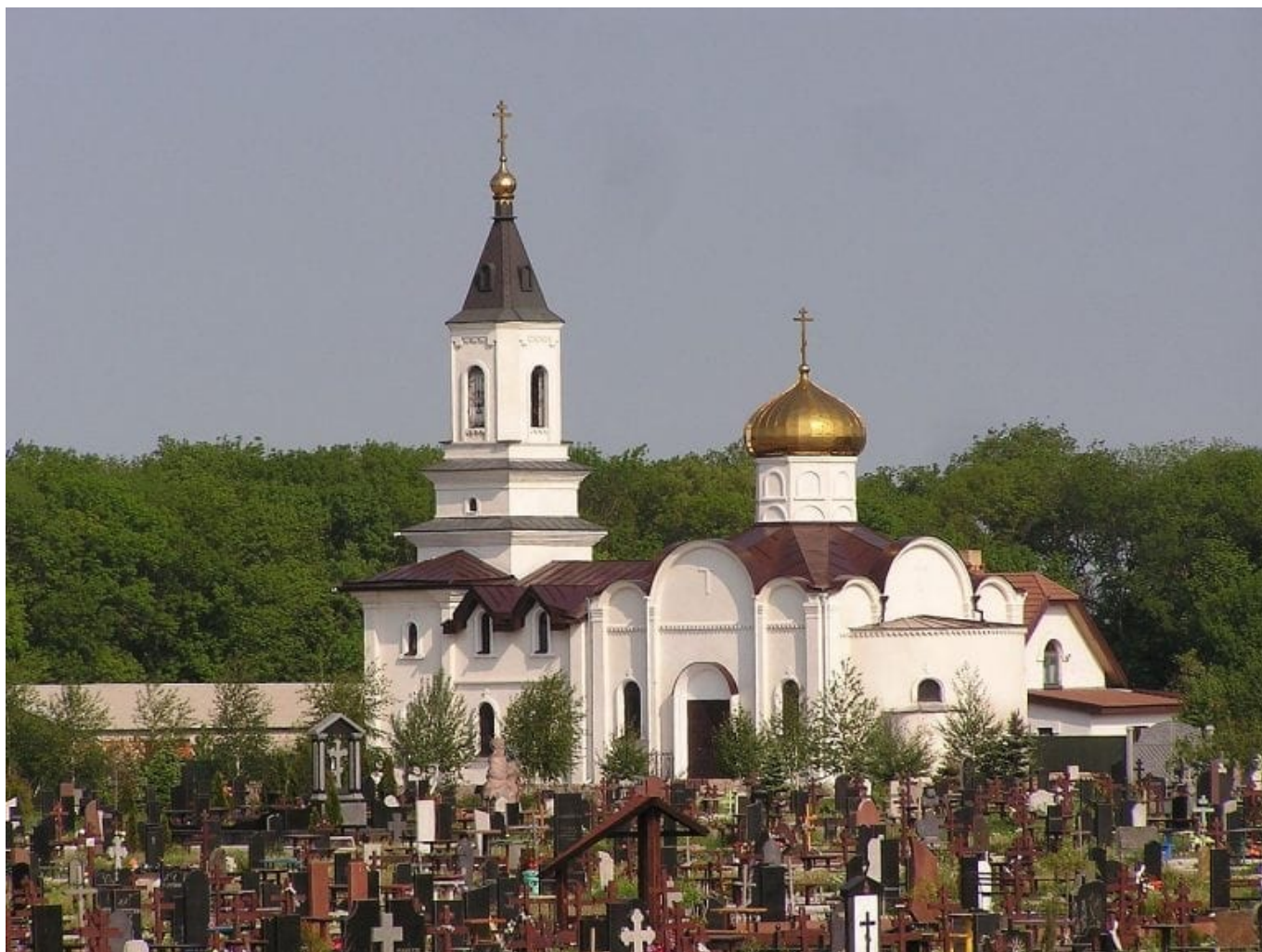
Each room, including the Commander's, had two double bunks on the North and South walls, for a total of 8 bunks in each room, usually with 4 or 5 soldiers in each. Candles were the only illumination, but Reem's stove worked better than most, and the room was actually warm. We sat down for some Green Tea.

We had some tea, a Russian tradition that while not as formal as the Japanese ceremony, had its protocols. I sat in a dark room, lit by a single candle and listened to Reem give combat instructions to the other 3 soldiers who were there, then he turned to me and made me understand it was time to fight. The Ukrops would start their attack within the next 10 minutes. I was to get to my room, don my vest, helmet and webgear with 4 loaded magazines and be ready to work. In Russian military circles, the word "robota", "to work", means to start shooting. I did as I was told. In my room, I paused for a moment to say a prayer, then donned my gear and reported to the guys who were setting up near the Utes at the front of the building, facing the control tower. I was instructed to take a firing position on the 3rd floor, along with Arik the sniper. It was about 8PM, and a light snow had started to fall. We took up our position just as the Ukrops began to open fire.

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**SIDEBAR** READ BELOW ABOUT THE MONASTERY TURNED INTO AN STRATEGIC POST WHERE TEXAC WAS STATIONED WITH HIS COMRADES

The war destroys a monastery in Donetsk. Click on this bar to open dossier.



ABOVE: The Monastery in 2008. "This church is a part of the monastery and is almost out of the town. Right next to the airport. Normally people came here because of their relatives' death. There is a cemetery at the church. Now there is no church, no monastery, no cemetery. On May 26th the shelling began. On the 27th there was Easter and many thought we would not survive. But we survived. More people started to come to the church when the war broke out – perhaps because people realized, that we could easily lose our church soon. Sisters lived in the monastery under the shelling for two months. When the danger got extremely high, we took sisters to Larinka. Then several sad pieces of news reached us – on the Internet, we found a video, showing how the monastery was shelled. Later on a fire broke out in the church. After the fire almost all the icons were evacuated. The monastery is destroyed, and the military people are there now, but we believe, everything will be alright. All who are guilty will be punished by God."

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What the war has done to the Iversky monastery. A war of choice triggered by Western intrigues and plots against Russia. (Wiki photo CC)

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Sidebar Ends Here

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Sitting there, warmed by a wood stove, lit by a candle, listening to the soft, deep and ominous rumble of Reem's voice, I felt about as far away as it was possible to be from the conventional reality of my friends and family back in the States. I was living like an outlaw cowboy from the 1800's, but I was doing so in Eastern Europe in the 21st Century. It was crazy, it was weird, it was hard and it was scary, but there was no place on Earth I would rather have been.



Texac on guard duty. The bitter cold makes things even more interesting.

We had some tea, a Russian tradition that while not as formal as the Japanese ceremony, had its protocols. I sat in a dark room, lit by a single candle and listened to Reem give combat instructions to the other 3 soldiers who were there, then he turned to me and made me understand it was time to fight. The Ukrops would start their attack within the next 10 minutes. I was to get to my room, don my vest, helmet and webgear with 4 loaded magazines and be ready to work. In Russian military circles, the word "robota", "to work", means to start shooting. I did as I was told. In my room, I paused for a moment to say a prayer, then donned my gear and reported to the guys who were setting up near the Utes at the front of the building, facing the control tower. I was instructed to take a firing position on the 3rd floor, along with Arik the sniper. It was about 8PM, and a light snow had started to fall. We

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One of the first things you learn, instinctively and without instruction, is to tell the difference between bullets being fired in your general direction and bullets being fired directly at *you*. The latter have a distinctive “crack!”, a mini-sonic boom as they pass, or else you can hear their impact on whatever cover you happen to be using for protection. The tempo and intensity of fire from the Ukrops quickly increased. There were at least 3 separate groups in the woodline, 150 meters to our front – one on the left and two to the right. Probably between 12 and 20 soldiers, laying down a steady stream of fire. ...It was a surreal existence, dark, cold, deadly danger. In a strange language. Operating mostly on vibes. They’d look at me and tell me something important, and I’d have absolutely no idea what the words they’d just said meant, but I could catch the vibe. And I have to say I caught on pretty quick. It only took me two days to figure out I was wearing my body armor backwards. Russians don’t teach you, they let you figure it out. And we all had a good laugh when I did. The trick to doing everything the right way, the best way it can be done, is to do it like they do.

Arik and I would take turns firing out the window, then take cover and await the return fire. I would pop up, fire off 5 or 6 rounds in 4 seconds or so, then get down. Arik would wait about 10 or 15 seconds, then take a position at the window and fire 2 or 3 aimed shots with his SVD. We were effective, and soon came under sustained fire. At one point, a green Ukrop tracer came through the window right between us. And of course, when you see a tracer, there are 3 or 4 more non-tracer bullets that you do not see, coming along with it. We both saw the tracer come through the window. We looked at each other and laughed, then got back to work. It did not take for me to empty my 5 magazines, and I headed down to the second floor to reload. The battle was in full pitch. Reem and Mir manned the Utes, and Bielka had the PKM working from the window to the left of the Utes. Reem had a highly effective method of shooting – although the Utes is a fully automatic machine gun, Reem had perfected the technique of firing single shots. It was a steady drumbeat of fire, about one round per second, each round at a different target. The PKM and other shooters developed a rhythm with the Utes, which created a solid stream of hot lead covering all Ukrop firing positions almost constantly. Though we were outnumbered, we maintained the initiative, and controlled the battle.

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[dropcap]I[/dropcap] reloaded my mags as quickly as I could, and learned many important lessons in the process. Often, in battles at Troishka, both sides would need to reload at pretty much the same time. Being able to reload quickly is as important as being able to unload accurately. I was pretty slow that first night, but soon learned to get much, much better. I returned to the window where Arik was still working, and took up my firing position. I fired a round, then pulled the trigger again. Nothing happened. I looked down at my rifle and saw the bolt was jammed in a half open position. I tried

pushing forward and pulling back, but it was stuck. Fuck..

The Kalashnikov series of rifles are among the best combat weapons ever produced, and their superior quality has always been their reliability. I thought that either a Ukrop bullet had hit my rifle, or a bad bullet had exploded in the chamber. I went downstairs, not relishing the idea of sitting out the rest of the raging firefight with an inoperable weapon. I showed my rifle to Mongoose, the commander. He also tried to get it to function, to no avail. So he gave me an RPK that was in the arms room, and I continued the fight with that. The battle continued for several hours, until the Ukrops finally withdrew back to the control tower complex. We gathered in the arms room to reload and to smoke cigarettes. It was about midnight, and it had been a long night. I left my AK in the arms room, and took the RPK with me to my bunk. I removed my webgear, helmet, boots and vest, and crawled up onto my bunk. The room was still of course freezing cold, no fire in the stove, only a candle for illumination. I slid into my bag, said a prayer of thanks, and went to sleep, with only my nose sticking out. Tomorrow would be another busy day.



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The days and nights consisted of taking care of day to day chores while waiting, and being ready, to be attacked by numerically superior forces at any time. We usually had about 5 minutes warning, from radio intercepts or observation that the attack was coming in the next few minutes, or some Ukrop would open fire early, and let us know they were coming. When we hit back, it was hard. Reem and Mir were on the Utes heavy machine gun, and we had an AGS automatic grenade launcher, plus maybe 10 or 12 more guys with rifles. Plenty of ammo.

Supplies were delivered every day or so, water, food, ammo. At dawn the car or van would arrive, 3 or 4 of us would run across the open terrain to the relative cover in front of the church. And back with heavy burdens, two or three trips. Firewood was a rarity, though there was a big pile of wooden construction debris about 300 meters away, across sniper scanned fields. And we went and got it there too. Nobody got hit, but in retrospect, it seemed crazy. No matter. Within a few days of my arrival, we were shooting so much ammo we had plenty of wooden ammo crates to burn. Plenty.

One night, I was assigned to AGS duty. The AGS is a machine gun that shoots grenades that will cut any exposed meat within a 5 meter radius of where they hit. But totally ineffective against armor. As the nightly Ukrop attack began, Lataishik, Mas and I unsheathed the monster and prepared for battle. It was pitch dark, and I couldn't see a thing. We couldn't use our flashlights because light draws fire, so it was literally touch and go. Lataishik let off about 5 rounds and then turned to me and said "Te agon", "You shoot". I felt my way over and went ahead and did. All the while, bullets are impacting within a foot or two of the edge of the window we are firing out of. You just have to ignore them and keep on working. When they shoot at you, you can see the muzzle flash from the rifles. Then you know where to shoot back with a grenade machine gun. I laid some down. I had learned from Mir on the Utes that you never shoot the same target twice, a different one every time, every few seconds, so they never know if the next one's for them. We ran through six 25 round drums, then it was time to reload. Quickly, because the battle was not over.

[dropcap]L[/dropcap]ataishik assumed sniper duty at the window with his SVD. Mas and I headed up to the ammo room to reload. Reloading AGS belts, under optimum conditions is not an easy task. Barehanded in the freezing dark, for the first time, in the middle of a battle, I have to rate as among the toughest

things I have ever done. And that's how it went. OJT, On the Job Training, but I was catching on. I hadn't gotten killed yet, or gotten anyone else killed, so I was doing pretty good. I did my share of guard duty – on the stairs by the AGS, guarding the entrance against “surprise visitors” in the form of Pravy Sektor commandos stationed half a kilometer away. The other guard post, manned 24 hours a day, was the PKM window beside the Utes. We had a night vision (light amplification) scope for the Utes, and a handheld thermal imager for observation. Beyond bullets, beyond Grads, my biggest fear was that I would drop the thermal imager on guard duty. It was one of our most important weapons. Technically, “Non-lethal”, but it multiplied the power of every weapon 20 times, because it could show us where to shoot. Remember that when US government hacks talk about non-lethal aid. Some of the most important weapons in war cannot kill people by themselves.

THE BATTLES OCCURRED WITH REGULARITY, pretty much every day, and every night. Battles lasted at least an hour, sometimes many hours, with literally thousands of rounds fired by each side. One night, Mongoose was at the next position, Milnitsa, (“Windmill”) meeting with other commanders when the Ukrops attacked Troishka. It was a heavy battle, and we soon needed to reload. Unfortunately, Mongoose had the key to the main ammo room, and fire was too heavy for him to make his way back. It was not a pleasant situation – We were literally running out of bullets for all our weapons, and it wouldn't take the Ukrops and Pravy Sektor nazis long to figure it out. 150 meters across semi-open ground, and they would be at the door. We would be fighting with knives against psychos with loaded machine guns.

Fortunately, Orion, who had arrived a few days after me, came up with a solution, not elegant, but effective – a wood-splitting maul makes a passable field expedient door key when your life is on the line, and within minutes, the door was in splinters, and we were opening ammo cans and reloading mags

and ammo belts as if our lives depended on it. Which, of course, they did. Reloading is as important a skill as shooting. There are tricks to it, as with everything here. When you've loaded up all your mags, you take a big handful of loose rounds and put them in the right hand pocket of your coat. Not the left side pocket, because then you have to transfer every round to the right hand before you put it in the mag, and it takes almost twice as long to re-load. With our mags topped off, we suddenly began returning heavy fire towards the Ukrops who were advancing, much to their surprise and dismay. We owed a debt of thanks to Orion, and after the battle, we all gave him a pat on the back.

Each day was like a week, and filled with learning experiences. I was promoted to a front firing position, to the right of the Utes, my "office" with a small firing port that had been chipped out of the wall. I often shared my office with Mars, the top sniper in the Essence of Time combat unit and one of the best snipers in the NAF.

I was asked if I wanted to train as a sniper, but declined. Sniper is a young man's job, and I was a bit old, and my eyesight was not quite up to snuff. I was pretty good with the Kalashnikov and PKM, but was reluctant to take up the sniper's SVD. The war continued...

On the 12th of January, Motorola and Spartak Battalion moved into the Cachigarka position under heavy fire. Cachigarka is halfway between Troishka and the New Terminal. That evening, the Utes was moved from its usual position to a window facing New Terminal. We were given a warning order that Sparta would assault the New terminal that night, and we would provide covering fire for their approach.

At 22:00 Hours (10 PM) the attack began. The entire New terminal was lit by muzzle flashes and incoming tracers. Mortar and artillery fire was constant. It was an important engagement with more than a hundred soldiers on each side. As



Sparta entered the Terminal on the left, we were instructed to shift our fire to the right end of the Terminal. At about 1 AM, a magazine of green tracer was fired straight up into the air, the signal that the New Terminal had been taken. It was a major victory for the NAF. At 4 AM, I was posted to guard duty at the door. In the last few minutes of my 3 hour shift, exhausted, I started to doze off, only to awaken moments later to Mars standing above me on the stairs, understandably very angry. I would be assigned "robot duty" as punishment for my infraction. Orion would also be joining me. Under artillery attack the night before, he was reporting to Milnitsa, and was saying over open radio frequencies that Ukrop rounds were landing "300 meters to our left." As Mars pointed out, he was inadvertently acting as an artillery spotter for the Ukrops. So, the next day, Orion and I made our way under intense artillery fire to the Gavin position.

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[dropcap]T[/dropcap>hey had a basement there that was to be used as a bomb shelter, but was filled with junk, old food and other miscellaneous debris. Our job was to clean the basement. Although it was a punishment mission, the weather was clear and not too bitterly cold, and we were several hundred meters back from Troishka, in relative safety. It was almost a holiday. We spent a few hours working hard to clear out the basement, then lounged around in the sunlight and clean, crisp, smoke-free air. While we were there, Somali Brigade brought up several tanks and began a sustained fire attack on the control tower. Just after lunch, it was cut down. The ukrops still held the buildings in the control tower complex, but had been deprived of an important observation post, at the probable cost of several of their lives. Another major victory for us. We were kickin' ass and taking names...

I had picked up a bad lung infection in training at Ysynavada, and I continued to have a serious cough. During my weeks at Troishka, it had not gotten any better. It could not have gotten any worse, because it was already as bad as it could

get. The frigid temperatures and dense smoke that were ever-present did not help any, either. It was really bad, but not bad enough for me to ask to go to the hospital. I had not come to Donbass to check into a hospital of my own volition. But on the 14th of January, the Vostok Battalion doctor came to Troishka to visit me. He asked many questions, listened to my chest and noted the lung-crushing conditions of smoke and cold. He did his best to talk me into coming back with him, but I refused. I did not intend to leave before my comrades did. But the next evening, having green tea with Reem, a message came over the radio – I was ordered to be ready to move to the hospital the next morning at dawn, and to leave when the supply van departed. Conditions were very harsh, and honestly, I was very sick, but I was more dismayed than relieved by the order. In my rudimentary Russian, I conveyed to Reem that I did not want to go and had not asked to. He understood.

At dawn on the 16th of January, I bid my comrades good luck and boarded the van back to civilization. After a little over two weeks in heavy combat, my entire perspective on life had changed, and I finally had a realistic idea about what my new life was really going to be like. As the van made its way from combat zone to city center, it was like going from one world to another, though separated by only a few thousand meters. At the Vostok hospital, I was prescribed 4 days of bed rest. Rather than stay at the hospital, I prevailed on my doctor to allow me to stay at the apartment of my friend Christian Malaparte. It was warmer and more comfortable, the food was better and most of all I could communicate in English. Between basic training and combat at Troishka, it had been over a month without a single day off, without a doubt, the hardest month I had ever spent in my life. I was ready for a little R&R, and felt I deserved it. I got to Christian's apartment, was fed royally, chugged down most of a bottle of Armenian cognac and passed out for the next 16 hours. Meanwhile, back at the airport, Troishka was about to become the scene of one

of the biggest and most important battles of the war...

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### ADDENDUM

Days of war and comradeship...la lotta continua.



Reem, Poet, and Texac

This one's me, Reem and Poet. Poet joined the NAF in Summer 2014. He was 16, told 'em he was 19, they let him in. He served 6 months in Vostok Bn. Artillery, then came to CB in March 2015. He was at the front line Ushi position and Milnitsa with me and also at the hottest of them all, Blisna. We tried to protect him as much as we could, but he still got in the thick of things many times. He was a good soldier, tough and brave. He's 18 now, and retired. But he'll come back if we need him. Spetznaz Donbass.

The battle of Donetsk Airport was one of the earliest and fiercest encounters of this war.

This is our salute to the heroic defenders of this important position.



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