

Meet the 'hedgehogs' defending their neighbourhood in Russian-hit Irpin

A group of fathers who banded together are now training to go to Ukraine's eastern front and see the war through to its bitter end

By Nicola Smith and Illia Novikov IN IRPIN

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Hulk, left, and Beard, right, are members of the Hedgehogs, a Ukrainian defence unit that helped evacuate hundreds of citizens | CREDIT: Julian Simmonds for The Telegraph



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The men's patrols are voluntary but foreshadow what may still come for citizens of Irpin - a once idyllic commuter town on the outskirts of Kyiv - who could be called up at any time to serve in the devastating war of attrition on the eastern front with Russia.

When Moscow unexpectedly launched a barbaric assault on the towns surrounding the Ukrainian capital in February, neighbours banded together and picked up hunting rifles, shotguns and literally any weapons they could find to fight Russian soldiers back from their families' doorsteps.

"Hulk", "Doberman", "Beard" and "Armenian" became the nicknames of one "Dad's Army" aged in their 30s and 40s, who forged a dogged camaraderie in the ashes of their homes.

The men, who did not wish to reveal their full names, called their ad hoc unit the "Hedgehogs", as a nod to their strategy of making their neighbourhood too difficult for the Russians to touch.



The men still patrol near the town's shattered bridge | CREDIT: JULIAN SIMMONDS

Peace has returned to the streets of Irpin, but their families have not come back from their scattered refuges to the ruins.

The Hedgehogs, who have since forged links to the local Territorial Defence Forces, say they are now training to go to the eastern front and see the war through to its bitter end.



Peace has returned to the streets of Irpin | CREDIT: Maxym Marusenko/NurPhoto/Shutterstock

“If our guys in the east need back-up and support, we are ready to do that,” said Hulk, 35, who in peacetime managed nightclubs and a furniture business.

“We are defending our own land. It’s important that we didn’t go to anyone else’s country. They came here and they are killing our women and children. So, we are ready to fight and defend to the last one of us.”

Donbas hanging on to victory

Their determination defies the horrific admission this week by senior government officials that the brutal battle over the strategic industrial town of Severodonetsk is costing Ukraine [up to 200 military casualties every day](#) as [Russia pummels defending forces](#) with superior long-range weaponry.

Volodymyr Zelensky, Ukraine’s president, has warned that the [fate of the entire Donbas](#) region hangs on victory in the fierce fight over the embattled city.

On Thursday, a Ukrainian and Western intelligence dossier suggested there was a growing risk of demoralised Ukrainian soldiers deserting their ranks, as the *The Independent* reported. The Ministry of Defence refuted the report as untrue and likened it to “Russian propaganda”.

There was no sign of the dossier’s pessimism among the Irpin Hedgehogs – men who already survived the Russians laying waste to their hometown in March, and who are now prepared to face another hellscape in Donbas.

The fight is very personal. Former salesman Doberman, 33, said he cried after he “lost his dream” to hold his first child, William, when he was born in Canada last week, rather than at home in Irpin.



The group of men are preparing to fight in the Donbas | CREDIT: Julian Simmonds for The Telegraph

Beard, 36, who used to be a truck driver, also forced his wife to flee to safety with their son, seven, and two-month-old daughter after their apartment building took a direct hit from a mortar.

He still guards the street next to the blackened, charred remains of their former nest egg – a modern flat in a once child-friendly cul-de-sac now pockmarked by shell craters.



Beard still guards the street next to the blackened, charred remains of apartment blocks | CREDIT: Maxym Marusenko/NurPhoto/Shutterstock

As of the end of May, Mr Zelensky said some 700,000 military personnel were defending the country.

Official recruitment statistics are hard to nail down, but reports suggest Ukrainians are still lining up to join the fight – many motivated by a higher cause of defeating the advance of an authoritarian aggressor.

Konrad Muzyka, the founder of Rochan Consulting, told The Economist the number of would-be recruits for the armed forces is so high that there is a waiting list of over a month to be inducted.

The more pressing challenges appear to be a lack of experience and [training](#) and, in recent months, some shortfalls in protective gear like flak jackets, helmets, ear and eye protection.

Matthew Robinson, 39, from Yorkshire, is one of about 40 international ex-military trainers working with the Georgian Legion in Kyiv to teach novice recruits to the armed forces the basics of battle tactics and weapons handling.

But as the battle rages in the east, time is impossibly short.

He said a soldiers' training session on Tuesday was abruptly called off by the military, with the message that “they are already being sent to the front, so we are cancelling the exercises”.

Mr Robinson, who said he had trained some 2,000 “completely inexperienced” volunteers, including the Hedgehogs, expressed frustration that so many were being deployed “ill-trained” and “ill-equipped” with a “hodgepodge” of body armour, and firearms with no optics, and suboptimal ammunition.



More pressing challenges appear to be a lack of experience and training | CREDIT: Sergey Bobok/AFP

“They have big shopping lists of everything they need. It’s horrifying to see – I look at these men and think there is a third of you that are not going to live,” he said.

“You do not have enough time to thoroughly drill these guys on the basic principles. You have to go through the motions and hope that they live and learn, but it’s horrifying to see they are sending these men out to the front with these issues.”

Mykhailo Podolyak, a senior presidential adviser, said soldiers did receive proper training and refuted claims that frontline soldiers do not have body armour, although he has repeatedly stressed the terrible death toll inflicted by Russian artillery.

Ukrainian defence underestimated

Experts also present a more complex overview of the current [state of Ukraine’s forces](#), underscoring that despite wartime chaos, the country has held off an overwhelmingly powerful enemy.

“It seems that we were underestimated, and they were overestimated,” said Ruslan Kavatsiuk, a Ukrainian adviser for Spirit of America, a US non-profit organisation that is one of several groups and governments delivering and distributing non-lethal military gear to the Ukrainian frontlines.

The organisation has engaged a network of military commanders to donate nine buses and 155 tonnes of supplies including bulletproof vests, ballistic helmets and first aid kits to Ukraine’s armed forces, transported “invisibly” in vans and cars to where it is most needed.

There was no uniform picture of a war effort that had been forced to embrace recruits with a vastly different range of experience, he said.

But despite mistakes, inaccuracies, lack of planning and supplies, “their [Russian] professional army is losing to all of these people”, he said, pointing to the deaths of multiple high-ranking Russian officers, including as many as 12 generals.

“Russians don’t understand how bees operate. It looks like chaos but in the end, they get the job done,” he said.

Matt Dimmick, Spirit of America’s regional programme manager for Europe and previous director for Russia and Eastern Europe on the US National Security Council, said that while the Russians were bleeding the Ukrainians with artillery, Moscow too was [being worn down by battle](#).

“The Russians have put everything they have into the fight,” he said. “They don’t have a renewable resource when it comes to their own troops and capabilities.”

While they could become entrenched and hard to root out, they may have reached their limits of advancing, he said.

They could make limited gains in some areas where they focused artillery power, but would “probably suffer equal or more losses” where they did not have similar resources.

“The Ukrainians will sniff that out and make the Russians pay for it,” he said.