



My personal story of the full-scale war

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Abstract

This paper illustrates the author's own personal grief at family loss and learning to adjust to wartime tragedy. It ends with hope for the future.

Keywords

family, war, grief

My story of the full-scale war began, like that of millions of Ukrainians, at 5 a.m. on February 24, 2022. These memories, I would like to dedicate to my brother, Andriy Volkov.

For late February, it was an unusually warm night. The windows in my room were open, and I was woken up by explosions. I looked outside—the whole city was awake, with lights on in every building. My phone rang. It was my brother, Andriy. For months, everyone had sensed that a full-scale war was imminent, though no one wanted to believe it. Andriy was prepared; his backpack had been packed long before. This was actually the second time he would defend our homeland from Russia. In 2015-2016, he had volunteered to go to the front, and though he later demobilised, he never truly returned from that war...

On February 24, the air raid alert system was unreliable. I spent that day standing in endless lines at stores and pharmacies, where shelves were nearly empty. Helicopters, possibly planes and missiles that our air defences were trying to intercept, flew overhead. Andriy called frequently to warn me about air raid alerts, concerned and urging me to stay safe in a shelter.

Life changed completely. The windows had to be tightly covered for blackout compliance, meaning we lived in darkness, with curfews, and a constant sense of uncertainty about what lay ahead.

Then there was the race against the clock to buy essentials before the curfew. Finding an open store, queuing for groceries and pet food, and assisting the Territorial Defence in making "Bandera smoothies"—became part of daily life. We made it work.

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For the first few days, we stayed in a bomb shelter. From there, we communicated with colleagues who had managed to leave, attempting to resolve work issues remotely.

My phone deserves its own story. Each morning, a flood of calls and messages would arrive, repeated again each evening. In the morning, people would ask if everyone was safe and how the night had gone. In the evening, they'd check in again, wishing each other a quiet night until morning. Knowing my brother was online, even if he didn't respond, was a source of reassurance. A simple "+" in reply became my joy. March 4 was the last time he got in touch...

We grew closer to relatives, friends, neighbours, and acquaintances. Mutual support, help, and care for each other became our top priority.

I mentioned earlier how warm it was on February 24. The following nights in February and March were bitterly cold. The bomb shelter, really the basement of a children's clinic, was freezing. Many unfamiliar faces were there, children and pets alike—dogs, cats, family companions who, like us, sought safety. We only knew what was happening outside from Facebook, Telegram, and calls with relatives. I think it was on February 26 that a Russian armoured vehicle entered our area, as we learned through social media while sheltering. After the air raid, we went outside to ensure our building was intact.

Life paused; the streets were deserted, and cars rarely drove by. Many families had left. Only a few remained in our building. Over time, as I went out, I began to recognise each of the few who stayed.

March 6, 2022 (March 7 was my mother's birthday). Returning from a walk with the dog, I saw a military vehicle near my building. An armed soldier assured me that everything was fine, but I knew something was wrong. Inside, I saw people gathered in the hallway, along with soldiers. I didn't need an explanation; I understood. My brother, Andriy, had died. We hadn't told our mother he had rejoined the military; we didn't want to worry her. She had enough concerns already, and we wanted to protect her health.

Everything ended. Life was left as a sad, pale shadow. It was hard to endure this tragedy, to go through all the formalities—never an easy process—to get through checkpoints, to arrange his funeral. Calling relatives and friends, telling them the news, speaking with someone and holding back tears became our reality.

My brother was a role model to me—a noble man, a man of honour and conscience, incredibly kind and caring. He loved life, his son, his parents, me, travelling, animals (especially dogs; he had dreamed of owning an English Cocker Spaniel), hiking, outdoor activities, cycling, fishing, mushroom hunting, his car, sports, a healthy lifestyle, and his homeland. He gave everything for it—his life. So many beautiful moments and memories we shared, now visible only through the few photos we took. But why didn't we take more?

Even as I write this, I still can't fully grasp that my brother is no longer here. I know it, but I don't entirely believe it. Perhaps it's a horrible dream, and one day I'll wake up to find it's not true.

I hardly remember March; maybe our consciousness blocks the worst memories, sparing us from recalling them.

April brought brighter days, warmth, and some relief. Public transport started running again, and finally, it was possible to reach the office. Not all metro stations were open, so there was a lot of walking. And walk I did—a lot.

In the office, there were only two colleagues besides me. By June, more people returned, and gradually, work resumed its usual pace. The skills we'd developed in organising online work became invaluable.

Summer, autumn, a new job, winter—that's how 2023 passed in brief.

This is now the third autumn of the full-scale war. We've adapted to living in a new reality, learned to appreciate small things, to work, and to care for each other. Many friends are fighting. We help—everyone helps. It seems the entire country of conscious Ukrainians, and not only Ukrainians, have become volunteers. Each person does what they can, sometimes achieving the impossible; some even accomplish remarkable things, though sadly, some pay the ultimate price...

Despite the times we live in, we will persevere, we will win, and we will finally secure our right to live in a free, independent Ukraine, on our land, the land of our ancestors.