

DEFIANT UKRAINIAN FIGHTERS

FOR NEARLY three months, the eyes of the world were on him and his men, the brave “defenders of Mariupol”, as they came under a relentless enemy assault, eventually being surrounded and trapped in the Azovstal steel works.

Awarded the prestigious “Hero of Ukraine” decoration from President Zelensky, Colonel Denys Prokopenko and his soldiers repeatedly defied the much larger and better equipped Russian forces.

In fact, members of the elite Azov Brigade had pledged to fight to the last man in the military unit’s home city in south-eastern Ukraine.

Eventually, however, Col Prokopenko obeyed orders from Kyiv’s military headquarters and surrendered, largely so more than 300 seriously-wounded men could receive vital medical care. Some 950 Azov soldiers, including Col Prokopenko, were taken as Prisoners of War (POWs).

That was more than two years ago and yet today Col Prokopenko, freed under a prisoner exchange deal, and his elite, battle-hardened men are still fighting and killing Russian troops on the frontline.

I met Col Prokopenko, often known to his comrades by his call sign of “Redis”, and his trusted deputy, Lieutenant Col Bohdan Krotevych, at a secret location near the frontline in the Donbas region, just hours after their Azov men had fought off a determined enemy attack.

Both men joined Azov as volunteer junior soldiers 10 years ago – in the summer of 2014 – when Russia was illegally occupying Ukrainian land in Crimea and the Donbas.

Now the two officers lead one of the most respected fighting forces in the world – Col Prokopenko, 33, as the commander of Azov,

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and Lt Col Krotevych, 31, as chief of staff.

I wondered whether both men had considered stepping back from serving – feeling they had done enough for their country – either during or after their brutal four-month captivity when, according to Lt Col Krotevych, they were badly beaten soon after their capture and then spent the rest of their time in solitary confinement in a Russian prison.

“No, never,” said Col Prokopenko. In fact, his darkest hour came on May 20, 2022, when he reluctantly surrendered to the Russians.

“I had expected to die in the Azovstal steel works but I followed my orders to surrender and it was the right decision to save the lives of my men and to enable our seriously wounded to receive medical care. But I felt bad: I was no longer the master of my own life. It was a bitter experience.

Lt Col Krotevych, who was born and brought up in Crimea and who was also held as a POW, agreed. “My homeland was occupied in 2014 so I volunteered to fight to get it back. There is no expiry date or time limit on my duty to my country.

“As long as my country needs me, I will be there.”

Even after a decade of fighting, both men shrug off the dangers they face almost daily on the frontline. In the words of Lt Col Krotevych, “We had expected to die in Mariupol with our rifles in our hands and we may still have an opportunity to die with our rifles in our hands.”

Col Prokopenko, who is 6 feet 5 inches tall, broad shouldered and with fair hair, is both charming and articulate. His deputy, who is shorter with a mop of dark hair and a bushy beard, is equally friendly but with an air of steely determination about him. Both men speak good English and have a

warm, if sometimes dark, sense of humour. It is mainly the Russians who have been advancing gradually on the front line in the first eight months of 2024 because Ukraine’s Armed Forces have faced a desperate shortage of weapons and ammunition.

However, I can reveal that in recent weeks the Azov Brigade, working with the 1st Brigade of the Ukrainian National Guard, has been one of the few Ukrainian units to capture enemy ground, although senior military sources admit that the advance has been slow and difficult.

It is understood that the Azov Brigade is currently responsible for defending a key area of the frontline, more than six miles long close to the city of Lyman and which includes the Serebryansky forest.

It is a pine forest on sandy soil which

makes trench building difficult for both sides. Furthermore, the high trees interfere with the frequency of the drones.

As I have witnessed, the signs of a brutal and on-going war are everywhere: thousands of pine trees have been scorched black by artillery and other fire, while there are burnt-out military and civilian vehicles besides the roads and in the forest.

Lyman itself is known as “the city without windows” as a result of being at the heart of the fighting for more than two years and barely a glass window in most buildings remains intact.

However, over the past 10 months, successful assaults using drones, artillery fire and sniper fire suggest that the Azov Brigade, believed to be nearly 5,000 strong, has become the world’s most deadly fighting force in these forest conditions.

As frustrated Vladimir Putin relentlessly poured Russian forces into the siege of Mariupol to break valiant resistance in the city, it seemed the defiant Azov Brigade would indeed die for their pledge to fight to the last man. But, more than two years after they were ordered to surrender, LORD ASHCROFT has been to a secret location near the frontline to meet the undaunted commanders of this deadly force who lived to fight another day

Faced with a weapon and ammunition shortage, they adapted including organising the mass production of FPV (First Person View) and “kamikaze” drones in their homeland, rather than relying on imported

‘Every step we take is aimed.. at bringing Azov men home’

or gifted arms from abroad. In June, there was more good news for the Azov Brigade. After nearly a decade, the US finally lifted its ban on providing arms to the unit over claims it was a far-right, even Nazi, force.



UNDER SIEGE; Fighters in the Azovstal steel-works, led by Col Prokopenko and Lt Col Krotevych, right with Lord Ashcroft, centre



PROUD: Soldiers of the Azov Brigade hold flares in memory of fallen comrades. Below, wrecked armoured troop carrier and buildings in Mariupol



my eyes and beneath my chin. It meant I was deprived of oxygen and so I felt less,” Lt Col Krotevych said with a shrug and laugh. “The most painful things were their dumb commands and remarks, telling us they were going to throw us off the plane with no parachutes. I thought to myself: ‘Don’t just promise it, f***ing do it’

He added that the officers were only interrogated once early in their captivity. Conditions in their tiny cells were brutally harsh: they were under 24/7 surveillance including having a video camera fixed on their toilet. “I like to challenge myself and I was determined they would not break me,” he said dismissively.

Despite their treatment at the hands of their Russian captors, the two officers are insistent that neither they nor any of their men have ever mistreated any of the 50 Russian soldiers that Azov has captured in the past 10 months.

Today, like the country’s president, the

‘I feel privileged to have met two of the most courageous men’

two senior officers believe it is crucial for Ukraine’s future security that it is granted NATO membership so it receives the joint protection given to all the member countries. So far this has not happened because many existing NATO members fear this would lead to a huge escalation of the conflict, even a nuclear war.

They have other causes that they are actively pursuing notably bringing to justice those who allegedly perpetrated a massacre of Azov and others POWs at the Olenivka prison camp. Russia stands accused of deliberately blowing up an area of the prison camp in late July 2022, thereby killing 53 prisoners and injuring 110 more.

Russia claims the prison was hit by a missile fired from Ukraine.

The famous siege of Mariupol in 2022 now seems like a distant memory after so much fighting since then.

Now, as the author of seven books on courage and as a collector of gallantry medals, I feel privileged to have met Col Prokopenko and his second-in-command, two of the most courageous men on the planet.

Although both insist they will continue to fight the Russians for as long as the war lasts, they also long for a successful peace deal that guarantees Ukraine’s future.

When the war ends, Col Prokopenko says his first priority will be to “pay our respects to our fallen brothers” – to honour Azov soldiers who have sacrificed their lives for their nation’s freedom.

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