



With peace talks on the table, Lord Ashcroft meets a shadowy Ukrainian special forces operative whose men have undertaken some of the most risky and successful operations behind Russian lines, as well as helping save Kyiv on the first day of the war



SPECIAL OPS: Lord Ashcroft meets 'Shaman'; Hostomel Airport after the attack; main image, 'Shaman'



What do I think of Donald Trump?

IT'S NOT WISE FOR ME TO EMBARK ON A WAR WITH TWO NUCLEAR POWERS!

HE IS both sensitive and emotional when discussing his comrades who have been killed in battle. Yet he remains cold and dispassionate when talking about the numerous Russians he has "liquidated" during Special Forces operations deep behind enemy lines.

Welcome to the world of call-sign "Shaman" – a Ukrainian special forces operative who readily admits he regards those who serve with him, rather than his blood relations, as his closest "family", such is his bond with his men.

Aged 35, broad shouldered, blue-eyed and bearded, with a black sense of humour, he is the commander of the eponymous "Shaman Battalion", which he has led during the last three years of all-out war.

Many would argue it has been Ukraine's most daring and successful Special Ops unit, which is why Shaman's true identity is a closely-guarded secret.

He has been the target of many assassination attempts by Russian agents. One saw attackers open fire on his car in the Ukrainian capital, Kyiv, wounding his driver. It is therefore not surprising that, when it comes to photographing Shaman before our interview, he disappears to find a black balaclava and cap so that nothing of his face, other than his eyes, can be seen.

There is also a pistol on his desk throughout our interview, although Shaman later

EXCLUSIVE

From Lord Ashcroft in KYIV

reassures me it was only a training weapon. I start by asking him which has been his most frightening moment of the war.

"The scariest moments are always the few seconds before the start of the operation, when the sound of the first gunfire is only a heartbeat away.

"Once you are in the helicopter, or once you start firing, you just follow your instincts and do what you are trained to do.

"I find it harder to co-ordinate a mission than to go on one because, when I am not there with my men, I know the emotions and fears they are going through."

Shaman, who works for GUR, Ukraine's defence intelligence agency, together with several of his former Special Forces colleagues, were well prepared on the morning of February 24, 2022, when Russian leader Vladimir Putin ordered his all-out invasion of Ukraine.

The "band of brothers" had known the previous night that the attack was only hours away and were primed to go into action.

As explosions sounded and the airborne attack on the capital began, their first order was to defend Hostomel Airport on the north-western outskirts of Kyiv, one of the main Russian strategic targets on the first day of the war. If Russia had held

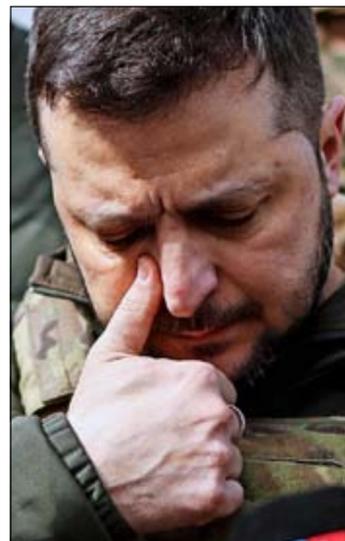
the airport, it would have been used as a bridgehead for the distribution of forces, including Russia's elite paratroopers, armoured vehicles and supplies.

As it was, a day of brutal fighting saw Ukraine's forces stall the advance for long enough to prevent the capital city being seized. It was a key moment and, by early April, Russian forces had been forced to withdraw from the entire Kyiv district, including the city of Bucha, the scene of some of the worst atrocities of the war.

Despite all his Special Forces operations over the past 35 months, Shaman still considers this the finest achievement of his men. "Of all my operations, this is the one that gave me the most satisfaction and relief. "Kyiv is only as it is today because of that successful operation. We only moved on to other missions from early April [2022] when we felt Kyiv was 100% safe," he explains.

His comrades in Shaman Battalion – usually abbreviated to "Shamanbat" – then, like now, were a collection of Special Forces veterans motivated by a desire to protect their country. They work hand-in-hand with the Armed Forces of Ukraine.

Since April 2022, the main role of Shamanbat has been to carry out Special Forces operations which have taken their inspiration and basic tactics from Britain's



HEROIC DEFIANCE: Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky

SAS unit of the Second World War and beyond. Like the SAS, Shaman believes in the value of using small groups of men to go behind enemy lines for hit-and-run raids.

Their targets have included airfields, oil refineries, ammunition factories and the assassination of individuals.

THEY reach their destination either on foot, by helicopter or, occasionally, in military vehicles. In one of their most audacious raids, they were taken by a helicopter more than 60 miles behind Russian lines.

"At dawn, we flew into enemy-held territory. We didn't land the helicopter but we used a variety of weapons to shoot and destroy military supply locations.

"The whole mission only took 40 minutes without the loss of any of our men, thank God," he recalls.

In another operation in the summer of 2023, Shaman and his men played a key role in capturing Major Yuri Tomov, an enemy intelligence commander, in an operation into Russian-held territory close to the Dnipro river in south-east Ukraine.

Tomov had in his possession unencrypted minefields maps and a mass of confidential data on his phone. With typical understatement, Shaman tells me: "It was a very

successful but very scary operation. Over a period of time, on the left bank of the river, we captured several officers and soldiers."

Over the duration of the war, Shaman and his men have operated widely along most of the 620-mile frontline, including in the Donetsk and Kherson regions.

"Some of the tasks we were given were the craziest ones," he chuckles.

Although many of his missions have been shrouded in secrecy, he reveals he once spent an entire week behind enemy lines. However, on other occasions their operations lasted only hours, sometimes just minutes. The size of his raiding parties, depending on the task in hand, has ranged from two men to 30.

When I asked if it was true he always personally attends the funerals of all his fallen comrades, he stared at me sternly and asked if I had him under surveillance, before breaking into a wry smile.

Then he paused, his voice cracked, and he rubbed his tear-filled eyes as he spoke of his affection for his men, including those

who have been killed on operations. "My saddest moments have been when my guys have died. You have to understand: – my unit always stays together. We fight together and we bury our fallen comrades together.

"The children of the fallen fighters are the children of all of us.

"It is our duty, our moral obligation, to look after the families of our fallen comrades.

"We cannot fully replace a father, a husband, a brother or a son, but we aim to be there for those people." Shaman, who has been widely decorated for his bravery and service, adds: "I know what love is but, without exaggeration, I regard my unit as my family – and that will be the case whether I get married or not."

In contrast, I asked Shaman what he felt when he killed a Russian soldier and his reply hinted he does not lose a great deal of sleep over it. "Being a professional Special Forces officer, I do not want to discuss my emotions too deeply, but I can say one thing. The Underwater Demolition Teams [the predecessor to the US Navy seals] in Vietnam used to have a saying.

"He who kills for pleasure is just a psychopath. He who kills for money is an

assassin. But he who kills for pleasure and money is a Special Forces operative."

Shaman has a reputation for never asking his men to take on a task he would not do himself. As a result, he has been wounded three times, including a serious injury to the head. Now, however, after his unit was expanded in size to operate in several locations, he can no longer go on every operation himself. "And I am an old man too," he jokes. "The way I live my life, one year counts as three!"

The US-brokered peace talks currently underway in are for others to consider, he says. "As a professional soldier my job is to continue fighting to preserve the independence and sovereignty of Ukraine," he states. Finally, I ask Shaman if he wanted to comment on recent controversial comments made by US President Donald Trump, that Ukraine had started the war with Russia and President Zelensky was "a dictator".

While normally straight-talking, Shaman indicates that, on balance, it might be prudent to keep his thoughts to himself, adding with typically dark humour: "It might not be wise for me to embark on a war with two nuclear powers rather than just one."

● Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is an international businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. For more information on his work, visit lordashcroft.com. Follow him on X/Facebook @LordAshcroft

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