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Lord Ashcroft talks to Maryna about her experiences on the front line



EXCLUSIVE BY LORD ASHCROFT

MOST motivational speakers deliver their inspirational words in the comfort of a warm lecture hall or a conference room. When Maryna Mirzaeva addresses her audience, she often strives to be heard above the sound of artillery and mortar shells, sometimes even kamikaze drones and missiles, while winter temperatures can dip below -20C. One thing is certain: neither she nor those who listen to her are ever entirely safe. For Maryna is a motivational speaker in the Armed Forces of Ukraine.

As she puts it: "I'm not a warrior by profession, but a warrior by spirit." She has had many brushes with death over the past three and a half years working with her comrades. However, her closest one came only weeks ago when she was the passenger in a military jeep being driven by a male colleague. To begin with, as Maryna recalls the moment of the Russian attack, she falls silent and tears well up in her eyes. Then she composes herself: "I was with a good friend of mine who had the call-sign Africa. We were tar-

Maryna Mirzaeva is one of 70,000 women in Ukraine's armed forces. With the embattled country under increasing pressure to sign up to a US peace plan, Lord Ashcroft reports on their extraordinary courage under fire

I'M A WARRIOR ...not by profession but by spirit



Maryna serving at a secret location in Ukraine

'It's Russian roulette near the frontline'

geted by a Russian FPV [First Person View] drone, these weapons have now penetrated the front line in large numbers.

"He was killed and I survived. Of course, the true titans of this war are the infantry. The fighters from all our units who go out to the line of contact risk their lives every single day. The war has changed - the vast number of drones complicates absolutely everything, including logistics. "We take risks too, carrying out rear-area work and travelling between units to complete assigned tasks. That day, luck was not on our side. This is war."

When I asked Maryna, 28, the extent of her own injuries, I realised for the first time that the heavy make-up on her face was to cover burns and cuts from the blast. She also explained her thick black hair was, in fact, a wig because her own hair had been burnt off. She also had burns and cuts on her arms, while concussion from the blast was so bad that for days she could not speak.

"At the moment, if you are anywhere near the front line, it is Russian roulette - you can be killed at any moment. The enemy has a sufficiently large number of forces and means to deliver devastating strikes on our populated areas."

I asked Maryna whether the attack, which took place close to the frontline city of Avdiivka, had put her off her work or made her even

more determined. There was no doubting her response.

"For a time, I had a plaster cast on one of my hands but I couldn't get it off quickly enough," she says. "They had wanted me to stay in hospital for up to a month but I left the hospital in Kharkiv after a week because I couldn't stay away from my guys."

Kharkiv is Ukraine's second biggest city and close to the front line.

WHEN Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022, Maryna was at her home city of Boyarka, southwest of Kyiv, the Ukrainian capital. As Russian troops had lined up on her country's border, she - unlike many of her compatriots - had expected them to invade. Indeed, she was so convinced of it that she had already booked herself on a medical course the following month.

At the time of the all-out invasion, she was undertaking six different

part-time roles: she was a school teacher, studying for a PhD, working with her city council, a tour guide, working for an NGO (Non-Government Organisation) and writing a book. Yet her real passion was learning about Ukraine's rich history and then informing others about it.

Immediately after the invasion, her priority was to evacuate her mother and younger brother from their home city as it was under Russian fire. Next, she helped form a voluntary group in Kyiv while at the same time applying to enrol in the armed forces. By the summer, as the war intensified, she started carrying out voluntary work near the front line.

In September 2022, she joined the 3rd Assault Brigade, although other units had also been keen to enrol her. She had initially envisaged becoming a sniper, even a

drone operator, but her commanders soon realised that her strength lay in spurring on others.

"Can you imagine how upset I was not to have a combat role?" she says, with a laugh that suggests killing Russians would have come easy to her.

Like all serving soldiers, Maryna, who was dressed in military fatigues for our interview, received combat training but soon she was going from one unit to another on the front line, giving talks and also interviewing soldiers about their experiences for her own book.

"My primary role is to motivate and inspire others," she continues. "In 2022, everyone was eager to defend their country but now, after three and a half years of war, it is harder. Sometimes I speak to soldiers one-to-one, other times I address bigger groups of perhaps 15 people."

She works alongside infantry sol-

diers as they carry out their combat missions. Such positions include frontline trenches, abandoned villages and forests.

Maryna, who is single, has written a book called Women of Freedom about the brave actions of those who have been involved in the struggle for Ukraine's survival.

And they constitute around 7% of the total. Although it is men who make up the bulk of combat soldiers, the role of women has been key to the nation's fight for survival. Women have done so much from fighting on the front line to supporting their country in voluntary roles.

Iryna Nykorak, a Ukrainian MP and the founder of Arm Women Now, is at the forefront of efforts to get more women in the forces, to improve their working conditions and to appreciate their value defending their country.

Iryna has written a book called Strong Women of the Strong Country, which contains write-ups on 30 women, including Maryna, who have played an important role in the defence of their homeland in many different ways. Iryna explains: "Each story I covered is a separate episode in a great

fight. The book is about those who did not choose a war but who chose to fight for their lives. They are mothers, daughters, sisters, wives, united by the same spirit - courage and indomitability."

Maryna, too, is equally proud of the courageous role that women have played since February 2022.

"Historically, women in Ukraine have been treated with equality. They have grown up over the generations, willing to take all measures to defend their country and their loved ones. This is apparent today and it is simply not in the mentality of Ukrainian women to sit on the sidelines and do nothing," she tells me.

Like everyone in Ukraine, Maryna's future is uncertain but she remains optimistic that the war will end with a victory.

ONCE the war is over, she hopes in the short term to complete her PhD course in history and to travel the world. In the long term, she hopes to have a career as a writer, to get married, ideally to someone who has also fought for his country, and for them both to start a family in a peaceful and prosperous Ukraine.

Her unique military call-sign is Mamaika. The name originates from a legendary male Cossack hero "Mamai", who was said to embody strength, freedom and immortality. Maryna has feminised this name for her call-sign.

However, her historical heroine and inspiration is Olena Teliha, a Ukrainian poet and activist who defied the Nazi authorities in German-occupied Kyiv in the 1940s, and paid for it with her life in 1942, aged just 35.

At the end of our interview, I ask Maryna why she loves her country so much.

"I believe that we come to this world to do three things: to be born, to love and to die. In my love for my country, I am discovering so much about life and, in the current situation, my love for my country expresses itself in action and deeds."

Maryna is one of the many courageous women that I have been fortunate enough to meet over the past three years during my 13 visits to Ukraine since the start of this brutal all-out war.

Typical of her positive attitude in the face of her dangerous role, she made it clear that she much prefers to talk about her desire to "live for her country" but there is no doubt that Maryna is also, like her Second World War heroine Olena, prepared to die for it, too.

● 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



The frontline city of Kostiantynivka lies in ruins after three and a half years of war. Inset, Maryna's hero, Olena Teliha

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