

EXCLUSIVE
By Lord Ashcroft

THE ART OF WAR

In his latest dispatch from Ukraine, with the embattled country under increasing pressure, Lord Ashcroft meets a talented painter and photographer who has turned her creativity to the defence of her courageous nation...

As one of Ukraine's most talented artists and photographers, Iryna Kovalchuk never expected to work with more than a paintbrush or camera in her hands. She certainly never imagined being taught how to fire a rifle in anger. However, like millions of other Ukrainian women, when war came to her homeland thanks to the aggression of its brutal neighbour Russia, Iryna had to decide whether to flee her country or fight for its survival.

It didn't take her long to decide on the latter course of action.

As most of her wartime role involves going to the frontline, the 38-year-old and her husband Pavlo have continually risked their lives from Russian fire.

However, it has also brought them even closer together – particularly as a result of one incident in the Donetsk region of eastern Ukraine on a dark winter's evening towards the end of 2022.

"We were about to go back to the trenches at a time when there was a lot of noise from gunfire and shooting all around us," Iryna told me. "Suddenly, out of nowhere, there was a loud explosion followed by a whistle which was from an enemy Iskander missile.

"I froze in fear but my husband, who was nearby, saw this, pushed me to the ground and hugged me. I understood at that moment that he would always protect me and that he would put my safety before his. It was a very emotional moment."

On the day of the all-out invasion by Russia on February 24, 2022, Iryna – widely known under her creative name of "iSky" ("I am the Sky") – was at home with her husband, who worked as a film maker, and her son, Max, at their apartment block in a town close to the capital Kyiv.

"We were on the 25th floor and we saw the [enemy] helicopters and it was very scary," Iryna says.

Before the invasion she had not spent much time considering what she would do if Russia did invade. The dramatic events of that day concentrated her thoughts.

"We all sat and discussed what to do. My husband and I decided we would stay and fight for our country," she recalls.

"My son was, at that time, 17 years old and we thought it was best for him to leave the country. However, he made it clear that he wanted to stay in Ukraine too and we respected his views. So we offered to do voluntary work."

IN THE autumn of 2022, Iryna and Pavlo joined the 59th Brigade of the Armed Forces of Ukraine and they soon took part in basic combat training.

However, because they had been working together as a creative duo under the artistic name of "Vony Razom", it was decided their skills could best be used taking photographs, as well as creating paintings and short films, of service personnel.

"We started working with other artists and our aim was always to try to lift the spirits of soldiers and officers," says Iryna.

"My main task was to make good portrait photographs of everyone – a photograph is a memory, something to treasure in the years ahead."

I asked Iryna, who was dressed in combat fatigues for our interview, why she is so patriotic and also what she thought of President Vladimir Putin of Russia's repeated claims that Ukraine has never existed as a nation.

"Ukraine is a unique country and there is so much to love about it," she replies.

"We as a country never attack anyone else, we only protect or defend. We are naturally pacifists and we have always lived in

harmony with nature. Putin says these things to provoke us but I know my country, I love my country, and I know the truth."

Before the war, Iryna's work, along with that of her husband, was exhibited all over the world.

Since the war started, Iryna has painted many wartime images which she sells to raise money for the Armed Forces.

More than £60,000 has been raised to date in this way.

One of her works was bought by Sean Penn, the A-list US actor, who is a big supporter of Ukraine.

"I was a mixed media photo-painting inspired by a tragic scene in Bucha. I was at the frontline when he bought it so we never met," she says.

With typical Ukrainian generosity, presented me with a striking painting for my ongoing support of her homeland.

Iryna said that she tries to be optimistic about the future but that she is concerned about the ongoing security of the world because there are so many bad "big dictators" in countries such as Russia, China, North Korea and Iran.

Iryna met her husband through work five

years ago and, in time, a professional partnership turned to a love affair.

They married in July 2023 near the frontline city of Bakhmut when they joked that enemy fire in the sky provided the "fireworks display" to mark their union.

There were no guests other than the person who conducted the service.

"My husband gave me a bouquet of lavender because, in Ukrainian mythology, lavender protects a person from evil. It was meant to make our marriage sacred."

There was, of course, no time for a honeymoon: they were both working only hours after their wedding.

Iryna got pregnant shortly after their marriage and she was overjoyed because she had always wanted a girl as well as a son. However, tragically she



Lord Ashcroft with Iryna and the painting she gave him



Ukrainian MP Iryna Nykorak



Artist warrior Iryna, main, and above with husband Pavlo

Iryna feel extremely emotional.

"I said to my husband that if I did not make a picture of this [tragedies] I would lose my mind," Iryna says.

"I wanted to be a voice of Ukraine to the outside world and to show how we felt and what we were experiencing."

Another project, Once upon a time, now or never, was inspired by Ukrainian fairytales, which are very different from British ones but which Iryna uses to create positive news rather than bad news.

THERE are more than 70,000 women in Ukraine's armed forces and they constitute around 7% of the total force. Some 5,500, including combat fighters in roles such as snipers and drone operators, serve on the frontline while many women perform other key roles, including being medical and support staff.

Iryna is one of more than 30 women whose war-time story is included in a book written by Ukrainian MP Iryna Nykorak called Strong Women of a Strong Country.

Nykorak, the founder of Arm Women Now, is at the forefront of efforts to get more women into the Armed Forces, to improve their working conditions and to better appreciate their value and sacrifices in defending their country.

In recent weeks, Iryna [Kovalchuk] and Pavlo have also been working in the communications department of the 59th Brigade.

"As well as trying to motivate our service people, we are also now the voice and face of our brigade," she says.

Iryna spends almost every hour of every day with her husband, 30, and she says they complement each other.

"People say that I am an iPhone and he is my charger," she smiles. "My battery sometimes dies very quickly but he is always there to recharge it."

Her son, 20 and from a former relationship, wants to serve in the military, ideally as a pilot, but for now he is learning skills as an engineer.

Like so many women in Ukraine, Iryna Kovalchuk, or "iSky", is willing to die for her country. But despite all the horrors that have accompanied this brutal war, she still tries to look on the positive side.

"I just want to be able to say, as and when the war ends, that I did all I could for my country," she tells me firmly.

"This is what drives my actions."

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miscarried their baby, after just three months, because of the side-effects from being so close to artillery and other fire.

Despite her desire for a child with her husband, Iryna has decided she will not try again for another baby.

"Some struggles make us stronger but this one [the loss of her unborn child] broke me," she says.

"I am scared to give a new life and to bring a new person into such a cruel world."

Iryna's work during the war has included the 333 Project, a work inspired by the massacres at Bucha and Irpin shortly after the invasion, when hundreds of civilians were murdered and many women were raped.

Creating this artwork, and others, makes