



1 Some 200 fighters from Vostok Battalion, a pro-Russian militia, set off in a convoy from Donetsk to the Marinovka border crossing, 90 miles away

2 They are told the post will be easy to take, but it's a trap. They are caught in a firefight with professional Ukrainian soldiers

3 The separatists are pinned down in no man's land as they are attacked by Ukrainian MiG jets

4 Dispirited, they cross into Russia. Rather than being welcomed, they are detained and questioned

Fighters from the Vostok Battalion line up at their base in Donetsk before setting off on their doomed mission

# 'Sent right into a meat-grinder'

As Ukraine's new president prepared to meet Putin in Paris, Mark Franchetti joined a militia flushing out a border post in the east. Then all hell broke loose

MY FACE is pressed so hard into the ground I can taste the dirt. I am wearing a brand new flak jacket and helmet, but I feel completely exposed.

Around me a fierce battle is raging between Ukrainian soldiers defending a border crossing with Russia and pro-Moscow separatists fighting to capture it. Dmitry Beliakov, a photographer for this paper, and I are caught in the middle.

Bullets whizz around us, cutting the air with a distinctive whistle and a metallic ping as they repeatedly hit an armoured personnel carrier (APC) a few yards away from us already riddled with holes.

The ground shakes as rocket-propelled grenades are fired from behind our backs; rockets send a succession of heat waves towards us.

In faraway Paris, as world leaders mark the 70th anniversary of D-Day, Petro Poroshenko, the new Ukrainian president, and Russia's Vladimir Putin prepare for a meeting that might eventually lead to a diplomatic solution to the West's most serious confrontation with Moscow since the end of the Cold War.

Here, on the border between the two countries, it is chaos. There is shouting, screaming and swearing, drowned out by a relentless exchange of heavy blasts from mortars and anti-aircraft guns and the crackle of at least 200 AK-47s. Most distinctive of all is the chilling swish of snipers' bullets.

The firing is so intense that we are pinned down. Whether or not we get hit is purely a matter of luck. The longer we stay put, the more likely it is that one of us will get hit. But move and we risk being caught in the crossfire or picked off by a sniper.

For Dmitry it is a photographer's worst nightmare: in the thick of it but unable to take a picture. Raising his head only a few inches would be suicide.

"I hope you're getting some good pictures of the grass," I joke. He is not amused.

Behind us bullets ricochet off an armoured steel plate the separatists have welded to the front of a truck. There is a loud hiss as a tyre is struck.

The fuel tank of an abandoned truck a few yards away is on fire, spewing black smoke into the bright blue sky. Fearing it will explode, one of the separatists risks enemy fire to clamber into an APC and ram it away from us.

Inch by inch we begin to slowly crawl back, our movements hampered by the thick flak jackets. We roll into a ditch next to Alexander Khodakovskiy, the commander of Battalion Vostok, the pro-Russian militia we have followed into this battle.

A former special forces officer, he is one of the few members of the battalion with any military training. He seems relieved that the two journalists with him are still alive. "You okay?" he shouts.

"Oh sure, all fine, no problems, and you?" I'm struck by how absurd my words sound.

"You wanted to see something interesting. There you have it," he replies.

The barrage of gunfire is getting worse. I stand up and sprint 100 yards down the slope, hurling myself behind thick shrubs. I slide into a deep ditch, joining several Vostok fighters armed with machine-guns and grenade launchers.

Their faces are covered in

sweat and grime. One, who has been hit in the hand, lies in the dirt as a comrade ties gauze around his wound. Another stabs a wounded friend in the thigh with an anti-shock syringe.

To my left Lyudmilla, the only woman to join the fighters, a trained nurse now in combat fatigues, is desperately using both her hands to stop a fighter called Sergei from bleeding to death.

He was hit in the groin by a sniper's bullet that smashed his artery. He is howling in pain and his face has turned yellow. "I can't feel my legs," he moans.

"Hang on in there, you'll make it, you'll make it," Lyudmilla keeps telling him, her hands smeared in his blood.

As the fighting rages around us I can see Khodakovskiy, crouching behind shrubs on the edge of our ditch, frantically shouting into a mobile phone, asking someone in vain for help to get his wounded men across no man's land and over to the Russian side of the border.

Dmitry, his forearms covered in deep scratches, crawls into the ditch. Two fighters shout at him as he points his camera at Sergei, now in agony. "Put that down now, mother f\*\*\*\*\*, or I'll shoot you," barks one.

More than two hours into it the firefight shows no signs of dying down. Behind us the grass and shrubs are on fire. The heat is searing. My mouth feels like sandpaper.

A noise in the sky announces my worst fears. "Planes, planes!" shouts Mamai, a burly volunteer from the Russian region of North Ossetia, who rarely leaves Khodakovskiy's side.

THE day's mission had seemed straightforward enough that morning at Vostok's base on the outskirts of Donetsk, the regional capital.

The separatists had received intelligence that Ukrainian border guards at the Marinovka crossing point with Russia — 90 miles to the east — were demoralised, disenchanted with the government in Kiev and ready to abandon their post without a fight. All that was needed was a show of force.

The task fell to Vostok (East), which was founded two months ago by Khodakovskiy and made up mostly of pro-Moscow civilians from eastern Ukraine and volunteers from Russia.

Khodakovskiy, 41, who until recently had headed a Donetsk anti-terrorism special forces command, was sent with his unit to Kiev in January to help quell pro-western demonstrations against Viktor Yanukovich, the then president.

"I saw with my own eyes how extremist those demonstrators were, attacking the police and hurling petrol bombs at them," he recalled.

"When Yanukovich was ousted, I understood they would come here to the east to fight. So I funded Vostok to fight them back."

The battalion, which has fewer than 400 men, first attracted attention last month when it lost some 50 men — mostly volunteers from Russia — in a fierce battle for control of Donetsk airport. Last week's firefight at Marinovka was only its second battle.

As Khodakovskiy barked



Pro-Russian separatists under fire from Ukrainian troops last week

orders, 200 fighters — brave, enthusiastic but without basic training — lined up in the yard of Vostok's base.

"I couldn't just sit at home and do nothing when I saw the violence spreading," said Viktor, 36, a car mechanic.

"We're protecting our homes from a bunch of fascists who are backed by the West."

A bearded Orthodox priest in black robes and carrying an icon blessed the fighters who, after several false starts, set off in a convoy of 15 vehicles.

Khodakovskiy led the way at the wheel of a four-wheel-drive. Mamai sat next to him, cradling an AK-47. Dmitry and I were in the back.

Following us were an APC, three military trucks, vans and a few Ladas crammed with fighters, mortars and crates of ammunition. Then came two trucks mounted with anti-aircraft heavy machine-guns. One had to be push-started by dozens of men and broke down after a few miles on the outskirts of Donetsk, bringing our ragtag military column to a halt.

"You f\*\*\*\*\* son of a bitch," Khodakovskiy shouted into his mobile phone to the man who

had supplied the truck. "You've given me a piece of shit! Any man we lose today is on your conscience."

The men pushed the truck on to a petrol station forecourt and offloaded the gun on to another vehicle.

As we drove, we were waved through several separatist checkpoints and did not encounter any Ukrainian government forces — proof that, despite the recent escalation of its "anti-terrorist campaign", Kiev has lost control over large parts of the east.

Dmitry and I knew little of Vostok's mission when we set off. We had asked Khoda-

**“DON'T CRY, SISTER, ONE OF THE FIGHTERS TOLD HER. HE'S GONE TO HEAVEN”**

kovskiy to let us see his men in action and he had suddenly called us, giving us time only to grab our flak jackets and rush to the base.

"There's a picnic waiting for us at the end of this mission," I joked to Dmitry when the commander turned on a CD of popular Russian music and we watched the pretty countryside flash by.

Nearly three hours after setting off we stopped in a deserted country lane and our convoy was joined by a group of local armed separatists.

Khodakovskiy donned a flak jacket and helmet and reached for his automatic weapon and pistol. He ordered us to put on our protective gear. A few miles down the road he parked his car and we joined him on the back of the APC.

On the horizon, on top of a gentle hill surrounded by vast open countryside, the Marinovka border crossing soon came into view. The men took the covers from the two anti-aircraft guns. Leaving the road we squeezed into three trucks that took us across farmland towards the post.

"We'll approach it from the side, moving right along the

border," Khodakovskiy told his men. "They'll think twice before sending in any fighter planes as they'd be hitting the Russian side of the border."

From my vantage point behind Khodakovskiy on the back of the lead vehicle, our slow approach through open fields seemed suicidal. A single airstrike could take out the entire convoy.

From afar the border post seemed abandoned. The APC smashed through two lines of barbed wire and roared on into no man's land. A few seconds later I spotted a few Ukrainian soldiers calmly walking away and vanishing behind shrubs.

UNBEKNOWN to us we had fallen into a deadly trap. The intelligence Vostok had been fed by the locals could not have been more misleading — whether deliberately or not remains unclear.

Far from relishing the chance to surrender, the Ukrainian border guards had been reinforced with professional soldiers — including at least two snipers — and their post beamed up with heavy machine-guns.

"Retreat! Retreat!" yelled fighters scattering across no man's land away from the Ukrainian border. "Towards the Russian side!"

Bullets were still whizzing by a few minutes later as I ran, clumsy in my flak jacket, down the gentle slope of the field towards the Russian positions.

The jet — this time clearly visible only a few hundred yards from the ground — reappeared, screaming across the bright blue sky.

It flew into Russian airspace, then turned sharply towards the Ukrainian side, aiming low as it launched several rockets at the fields.

Four hours after the firefight had begun, Dmitry and I, accompanied by 80 Vostok fighters — several of them

wounded — finally reached the Russian side of the border.

We were met by Russian border guards, who now had a problem. The Kremlin has repeatedly been accused by America and Ukraine of taking the side of the separatists whom, it is claimed, they allow to move with weapons across the porous border.

The border guards at this, the Kuybyshevo crossing, may have sympathised with the Vostok fighters, but did not welcome them as heroes.

Instead they were disarmed at once. The wounded were taken to hospital. The others, including us, were taken to a hangar where we spent a sleepless night being questioned by law enforcement officers.

One exhausted fighter who had been close to Sergei wept silently in a corner as his comrades tried to comfort him. Many were seriously concussed and deafened by the explosions. One fainted, hitting his head hard on the cement floor.

Yesterday, in response to calls from G7 countries, Putin ordered the FSB security service to tighten border security to stop illegal crossings.

The move followed attempts in recent weeks by the Kremlin to distance itself from the separatists. But could our misadventure have also played a part in the decision?

Dmitry and I were released the next day; Russian authorities did not prosecute us for crossing a border illegally as our lives had been in danger.

The men from Vostok were not so fortunate. Earlier one had told me they planned to smuggle themselves back into Ukraine. Instead they were loaded on to coaches and sent to a remand jail.

Their anger was intense. "We were set up, it was a f\*\*\*\*\* trap," said one.

"We were sent head-first into a meat grinder."

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## Olive branch

Petro Poroshenko, sworn in as Ukrainian president yesterday, offered political concessions to the Russian-speaking east in an attempt to bring his country back from the brink of civil war.

Poroshenko, 48, a confectionery billionaire known as the chocolate king, declared: "I don't want war. I don't want revenge, despite the huge sacrifice of the Ukrainian people."

But he also stressed that the Crimean peninsula, annexed by

the Kremlin in March, would "always be Ukrainian".

Mikhail Zurabov, the Russian ambassador to Kiev, was among dozens of dignitaries, including Joe Biden, the US vice-president, who attended the ceremony.

Zurabov called the address a "promising declaration of intent" but urged Ukraine to end its military operations in the east.

Separatist groups dismissed the speech. "The fight will continue," declared Fyodor Berezin, one of their leaders.



Petro Poroshenko says Crimea will always be Ukrainian