

EXCLUSIVE

By Lord Ashcroft



I'd never held a gun, but I wanted to be as skilled as the person trying to kill me

In the first of two exclusive dispatches from Ukraine, Lord Ashcroft meets former music industry worker Hanna Vasyk who explains why no one should underestimate the women forced to take up arms by Russia's invasion



CHANGING PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS: Lord Ashcroft with Iryna

AS A self-confessed hippy who enjoyed a career in music and the arts, Hanna Vasyk makes an unlikely soldier. With her striking features and fondness for jewellery – including a gold-hoop nose piercing – the peace-loving former music industry worker looks as though she might be more at home on the catwalk than the battlefield.

First appearances, however, are deceptive. And although for a time Hanna feared she lacked the courage to serve on the frontline, or whether she could face the loss of freedom required to be in the military, those self-doubts were misplaced.

Today Hanna, 38, has not only proved to be an outstanding combat medic but she is now working in recruitment for the Ukrainian Armed Forces.

She is passionate about the need for Ukraine to win its war with its brutal neighbour.

“I don't want to simply stop Russia – I want Russia to be destroyed so they can never do this again,” she says with steely determination.

Hanna is one of the tens of thousands of women – both military personnel and civilians – who are playing a crucial role in their country's fight for survival, nearly three years into its all-out war. Stylish with short, cropped black hair, she agrees to be interviewed at the headquarters of Arm Women Now, which is based in the Ukrainian capital of Kyiv and seeks to empower the nation's female defenders.

Typically, Hanna, who has travelled to more than 40 countries in her search for adventure, was abroad on February 24, 2022, when Russia launched its all-out invasion of Ukraine. In fact, she was 5,000 miles from her homeland in a remote part of Uganda, where she had gone to recharge her batteries and see gorillas in the wild.

Family and friends sent messages that her country was under attack so she cut short her holiday and flew back to Europe.

“It was a really shocking moment for me,” she admits. She then flew to Berlin, Germany, where she had good contacts from her work in the music industry.

Initially, she planned to return to Ukraine quickly but, when her coach ticket home was cancelled, she decided to stay in Berlin and help her country from abroad, using her PR and other skills. “However, I soon felt unfaithful towards my country and I was diagnosed with clinical depression,” she says. “So I returned to Ukraine in October and immediately felt comfortable there and my energy levels returned.”

LIVING in Kyiv and fearing a new Russian offensive, Hanna made careful preparations to defend her homeland: namely, she bought a rifle and learnt to shoot. “I had never held a gun before but I wanted to become as fast and as skilful as the person who would be trying to kill me,” she says. She also studied first-aid and medicine so, by June 2023, she was ready to take her next step. Speaking in fluent English, she tells me: “I thought to myself, ‘The army desperately needs people and, with my new knowledge, I can help them.’ But I was reluctant to take on the role of combat medic because I thought, ‘How will I perform under a shelling and if I have to help a person with a real wound or who has lost a leg?’ So I thought I would instead try to help with army PR, communications or even military intelligence.”

Hanna sent her CV to several regiments, including volunteer units. Worried she would not cope with the discipline of the military, she felt that

with a volunteer unit she could leave at any time. However, she was soon offered a full-time role as a combat medic, which involved evacuating soldiers from the battle area, with the 78th Airborne Assault Regiment – and they wanted her to start the next day.

“It was a hard decision,” she says. “I spent several hours analysing everything. I realised that the No1 task for Ukraine is to finish the war and defeat Russia. Why should I sit and wait or expect someone else to do it for me?”

“I thought, ‘I will do all I can and, if I fail, I will have tried and I will switch my energy and interests to somewhere else.’ I love the Ukrainian idiom, ‘The eyes are scared but the hands are working.’ I hoped that, if I did not die, I would find my way.” She enrolled as a combat medic on June 20, 2023, with the intention of staying in the army until the end of the war. “I was concerned for my safety but I worked through my fears of death, amputations and heavy wounds during my training,” she says.

“Becoming a prisoner of war, particularly for a woman, would be really bad but, rationally, the chances were low. As for having a traumatic amputation, I

thought, ‘I will get a super-cool, contemporary prosthetic and become a fashion model or an actress!’ You can turn a weakness into a strength.” In August 2023, Hanna was deployed to the Zaporizhzhia district close to the eastern Ukraine frontline and by then she was desperate to test her courage and skills.

“On my first day, it was our counter-offensive and, when our assault was going on, we were trying to hide but, with 500kg [enemy] air-bombs, there was nowhere to hide. It was super-scary and I was super-nervous. There were lots of explosions: mortar and artillery shells. There was a very experienced male sniper with us and he went white so I thought, ‘If he is scared, then we are done for.’”

As a medic, Hanna's role was to accompany the assault teams and wait close to the front line. She would then take the wounded by ambulance to the stabilisation point before they were taken to a military hospital.

For most of the time, she worked with a driver and another medic around two miles from the front line. During 24-hour shifts, up to six wounded soldiers would be brought to them at any one time. Hanna was trained to help the most seriously injured first: to stem the bleeding, check their airways and calm

down anyone who was screaming in pain or fear. She says of her work: “We have a saying, ‘If you are not scared, you are either crazy or dead.’ But I coped and I knew I was fighting for my values – for people's freedom to do and to say what they want within the laws of our country.”

“I know that I could not exist under Russian rule – they would get rid of me super-fast – so I was fighting for my survival also.”

“When I was working with the wounded, I was concentrating so hard that I was not scared at all. In a situation of total chaos, I felt comfortable. I could turn off my emotions and think, ‘Who is the most badly injured? I must help him first.’ My brain just shut down the noises around me and I tried to save lives.”

Hanna says her most terrifying moment was when she was convinced Russian collaborators had carried out the practice of putting small lights on the roof of a building to enable the enemy to bomb it using drones.

“I went to pee in the middle of the night

and when I came back I saw this blinking light on the roof of our building. I was terrified,” she says. “I got my driver so we could escape but then he used his torch to see the blinking light and it was a cat! I felt so stupid but also relieved.”

SO FAR Hanna has never had to kill anyone or even fire her rifle in anger. However, she has endured some sexism including suggestions that a woman's role was cooking borscht, the traditional Ukrainian soup. She even reported one of her commanders for his alleged bullying. However, she said the situation is now improving regarding the attitudes of men to women in the Ukrainian armed forces.

Immediately after her half year as an evacuation medic in the rank of soldier, Hanna was diagnosed with PTSD but she now feels recov-

ered and is, once again, enjoying her work – this time in military recruitment and in the rank of sergeant. Earlier this year, it was revealed there are more than 67,000 women in Ukraine's armed forces. They constitute seven per cent of the total force, with 45,500 holding military positions.

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. She says: “Hanna's story is a wonderful example of how Ukrainian women are taking on the greatest challenge of our time and the greatest injustice of the 21st century.”

Hanna believes women need to think carefully before joining up but says she has found her role hugely rewarding.

“Whether you are talking about joining the army or a civilian job, listen to yourself,” she adds. “If you don't like what you are doing,

you'll never be successful or really able to help. It is important to choose a role you really like. Being in the army, particularly on the frontline, is hard but what helped me in the difficult moments is that I loved my job.

“As an evacuation medic, I loved the fact no one died in my care. My other message for women is be ready to work 10 times harder than men because, even if you are capable, you have to prove it time and again.”

● 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

FIGHTING FOR HER FUTURE: Hanna Vasyk, 38, at the Arm Women Now HQ in Kyiv



MERCILESS: A Russian air strike on a southeast Ukraine town last week

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