

UKRAINE'S FIGHT FOR FREEDOM

In an exclusive report for the Sunday Express, philanthropist LORD ASHCROFT meets a restaurateur in Odesa who has pioneered the 'ultimate takeaway'... using drones to carry nutritious meals to hungry soldiers on the frontline of Ukraine's war with Russia.



Proud Olga flies the flag! Patriot delivers meals to her frontline heroes... using an Army drone

WITH winter temperatures dropping as low as -20C, Ukrainian troops are going cold and hungry on the frontline. Step up the resourceful restaurateur Olga Bielenko, who has decided to use her expertise to help the brave soldiers.

Olga owns and runs a stylish cafe in her home city of Odesa in Ukraine. She has applied her expertise to making high-nutrition dried food which, when rehydrated with hot water, satisfies the coldest soldier.

In a war-zone the delivery of food to the frontline by vehicle is often too dangerous.

So she worked with the military to come up with an ingenious solution: using drones to fly thousands of packaged meals to soldiers fighting close to the Dnipro river. "The soldiers I have assisted have become like a family to me.

"So when they ask for more help I feel I have to do as much as I can for them," Olga told me at her cafe and craft shop, Atelier.

This winter Olga and her team will supply more than 5,000 dehydrated food packs a month. They will be airlifted by drones to Ukrainian troops defending a 620-mile frontline against overwhelming odds.

Each pack of dried food, kept in a foil bag and weighing in at 55-90g, costs less than £1 to produce. A small drone can carry 20 packs, larger drones can carry 50.

The 45-year-old said she is motivated by a fierce patriotism, her commitment to Ukraine's freedom and her determination

'A bowl of borscht will lift a soldier's spirits'

to help her country's soldiers. One of her two brothers is an officer in a frontline unit.

Dressed in a stylish charcoal grey trouser suit and black blouse, Olga told me: "My initial inspiration to do something came from the soldiers in the combat area fairly early on in the war. They asked if I could help out with some meals, specifically dried food with nutrients that tasted alright.

"As a food expert, I asked my team to try various recipes and it turned out to be quite successful. So things grew from that point including the demand for more food, particularly from those men serving on the frontline in winter."

A passion to support her country, which suffered an all-out invasion by Russia in February 2022, is matched by a contempt for President Putin and his brutal regime.

She said: "I do not even consider him to be a human being because he has caused such widespread misery and suffering. This isn't just a war between Ukraine and Russia.

"It is a war between light and darkness, good and evil, kindness and destruction."

Incredibly, her efforts are still accompanied by a touching humility. "I always feel I am doing way too little, and that I should be doing more. I am fortunate to be surrounded by amazing friends and volunteers who support me to do the tasks I am not



PIE IN THE SKY: One of the many drones bearing food for grateful soldiers on the frontline, right



Pictures: COPYRIGHT OLGA BIELENKO

good at. I also have to run my own business, so I need help from others."

She said her brother in the military is undemanding regarding the needs of him and his men. "He never asks for anything. He says I must help other military units, not his one," said Olga, clearly emotional that her sibling is so thoughtful of others.

Tragically, some Ukrainian soldiers have suffered so badly from frostbite and hypothermia that they have had to have fingers, toes and even both hands amputated.

A hot meal can make all the difference to their physical and mental health.

Each food pack is both a vital source of nourishment and a boost to morale.

Maurice O'Connell, a retired banker from Australia who served in the British Army on a short-term commission with the Irish Guards four decades ago, is one of the many supporters helping to fund Olga's

operation. Since the war began he has spent 18 months in Ukraine carrying out humanitarian aid work.

Maurice told me: "Being cold, wet miserable and under attack day-in-day-out is very draining. The lack of decent hot food can be soul destroying so on the frontline these packs are a life saver."

Olga revealed the most popular meal with soldiers is the Ukrainian soup borscht. She explained: "Borscht is in the DNA of Ukrainians and they want it to be red. So we have found a way of preserving beetroot to give them the colour they're looking for.

"When soldiers have a bowl of borscht, they feel like they are being wrapped up warmly in a blanket. It lifts their spirits."

However, aware that tastes differ, Olga has created several varieties of dried meals: vegetable soup (with or without dried chicken); barley porridge with vegetables;

buckwheat porridge with mushrooms and dried chicken; banosh with chicken; and also dried meat, including beef and chicken.

OLGA employs three women in the kitchen and an assistant to help her run her charity.

Some of her friends call her operation "Olga's Kitchen" but its formal name is "Peremoga", the Ukrainian for "victory".

The team is always seeking new ways to increase production, because demand for her food always outstrips supply.

The original equipment for the kitchen was bought by Olga herself. The typical monthly running costs of more than £4,000 are met from donations from friends and supporters. "It's a constant juggling act. I go

from day to day not knowing if we can continue our work," she said.

While the stresses of running the charity have taken a toll on her health, she refuses to give up what she feels is her responsibility to frontline soldiers.

Some customers at her cafe also give donations for her work. Early this year, however, Olga found the challenges of running her own business and a charity too demanding and she stopped the latter, fearing her restaurant would be forced to close if she did not spend more time on it.

But the relentless requests for help meant the lull was only a brief one.

"I just couldn't stop," she said. "When you are getting endless requests from the boys on the frontline, it's impossible to let go. It was also winter so their needs were greater than ever. So I carried on and now I am always trying to think of new ways to

raise funds." Crisis struck in August, when her charity simply ran out of money. So she organised a high-class "garage sale" in Kyiv, the Ukrainian capital. Supporters bought a second-hand gift to sell and they were able to raise enough money to keep the charity afloat for another month.

Regarding the pioneering delivery method, she said: "The idea of delivering the food by drones was initiated by the military, because there was no other way of getting food to the frontline."

However, depending on where the food is needed, some packs are delivered by road as well as drones.

"Sometimes the requests for help tug at my heart - I have been told by soldiers that they are totally surrounded by the enemy, or they are wounded, and so delivery by drone has been the only option."

A voluntary group takes the food to a

secret military position near the frontline and there they arrange for it to be airlifted to where the meals are most needed. When the packages go to frontline positions, they usually have to be accompanied by containers of water and tablets to sterilise it.

Tears began to roll down the Olga's cheeks as she played me some of the countless "thank you" video messages that she receives from hugely grateful soldiers.

"Your food is the first tasty meal I have had in two years," said one soldier. "Thank you for your kindness," said another.

Sometimes the drones are shot down by Russian forces before they make their destination. Five drone missions may be required to ensure the meals finally reach



BREAD OF LIFE: Olga with two staff members baking the vital meals; being sampled by Lord Ashcroft, below

their target. Olga told me: "I love my country and so I want to do all I can to help Ukraine during these difficult times.

"I am particularly passionate about helping our military guys because they stay in touch with me when they face their biggest challenges.

"I am worried by the way the war is going and that Ukrainians have lost faith.

"Western support appears to be waning and some of the doors are closing in our faces. But I always have hope. I try not to think of the terrible things that might happen and instead live one day at a time."

Daria Igrunova, 41, another restaurateur

'They're the backbone of this proud nation'

from Odesa, is a volunteer who helps Olga. Daria's partner Philipp Francke, who is from Belgium, has helped fund Peremoga.

Daria's personal situation is difficult: she was born in Odesa and regards herself as Ukrainian, but her parents moved to Moscow when she was young and she has a Russian passport. Yet Daria, who returned to Ukraine 11 years ago, said her loyalties are clear. "Every woman is applying whatever talent she has to helping Ukraine. What Olga is doing is incredible."

Before ending our interview, I told Olga I had been sanctioned by Russia earlier this year for my relentless public support of Ukraine. I was deeply touched by her reply: "It is a badge of honour because Russia only sanctions great people who stand up to them and who are a threat to them.

"In a war between good and evil, history will judge that you were on the right side."

My admiration for Olga and her work has no bounds. Although it is mainly men who serve on the frontline, it is the women who have chosen to stay in their homeland who are, in so many ways, the backbone of this proud and resilient nation.

I suspect that without the strength, courage and determination of women like Olga Bielenko, Russia would have conquered its smaller neighbour long ago.

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.

To support Olga's work send donations to the Ukraine Freedom Company (www.ukrainefreedomcompany.org).

