

THIS city is so close to the front line that the air-raid sirens go off after the Russian bombs have detonated. Whether delivered from the air or the ground, Putin's missiles take less than 40 seconds from launch to landing and exploding.

Ukrainians are blown to pieces as they go about their everyday lives – be it walking to work, shopping or taking children to school.

This has been the near-daily routine in Kharkiv, the country's second largest city, since Russia's invasion in February 2022.

However, amid the death and destruction, the misery and the mayhem, an extraordinary story has emerged of courage, resilience and skill displayed by a surgeon and his medical team.

Professor Kyrilo Parkhomenko, director of the 25th Kharkiv Clinic, a 455-bed public hospital, has dedicated nearly three years of his life to carrying out life-saving operations under the most dangerous and difficult conditions.

At one point, he was moving from one operating table to another while leading four different surgeries simultaneously.

He and his team are estimated to have carried out thousands of operations and to have saved hundreds of lives.

Fighting back tears, Prof Parkhomenko tells me: 'The saddest moments have been while treating children.

'Some have been brought in so badly injured that there was nothing we could do to save their lives.

'Amputations with children are also horrific – again it's the feeling of helplessness. What should have been a healthy child, with their life ahead of him or her, has been murdered or maimed.'

I ask if there was ever a moment he felt unable to carry on his work. The 54-year-old replies, during a short break between operations: 'No! There is always more work to do.'

However, he says that if Russia does capture Kharkiv, a sprawling industrial city once home to 1.4 million people, he expects the Russians to kill him because of his work. 'I could never collaborate with the Russians in any form,' he says.

In recent weeks, Prof Parkhomenko has achieved a long-held 'dream' of building underground operating theatres in cellars beneath his hospital where, even

He's built his own underground hospital in the bombed frontline city of Kharkiv, once operated on four gravely wounded victims at the same time and tearfully tells of amputating the limbs of children maimed by Putin's bombs. But, says Ukraine's bravest surgeon...

Please don't call me a hero



cialist equipment to the Ukrainians, who are very grateful to British volunteers who have risked their lives to bring aid to Kharkiv.

Prof Parkhomenko says that he has even operated on people known to have collaborated with the Russians.

'I have always treated them the same as other patients, because of my medical oath – even though deep down in my heart I felt it was wrong,' he says.

I ask him what he thought of Russian claims that Moscow military chiefs are only bombing mili-

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tary targets in Kharkiv. 'It's a total lie,' he replies.

Indeed, on the morning I arrived in Kharkiv for our interview, residential buildings were hit, injuring at least ten people.

Prof Parkhomenko says he's been 'lucky' to live and work in Ukraine-controlled territory and not 'Occupied Territories', or as Ukrainians prefer to call them 'Temporarily Occupied Territories' – under Russian control.

He says doctors there treat more patients but must do so with less equipment and drugs, and with no fresh water or electricity.

He also knows of doctors who have been tortured and killed by Russians solely for treating Ukrainian patients.

'These are the real heroes. Not me,' he says, shaking his head in disbelief at the extent of the atrocities carried out by Putin's forces.

Prof Parkhomenko, whose whole career has been in medicine, beginning as a nurse in 1989, says his wife and three grown-up children remain in Kharkiv because it is 'a special city' and their home.

'At the start of the war, I decided that I was prepared to die for my country. But, of course, I do not want to die at the hands of the Russians,' he says.

When I ask if he felt that, despite its dangers, his life-saving work was rewarding, he replies wearily: 'Probably not anymore.

'It just feels like I have to keep doing it.

'I long for the day when I can go back to doing my normal job.

'But despite everything that has happened, I still have hope.

'I see a free, peaceful Ukraine in the future and I long for the day when I am a happy pensioner still living in my home city and my son is carrying on my work.'

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From LORD ASHCROFT

IN KHARKIV

responsible for the wellbeing of 200,000 citizens.

He says: 'I spent some of my own money on equipment because in the past three years I have had no need to go on holiday, to buy a new car, to buy a new wardrobe.

'So everything I have has gone on the hospital.'

On February 24, 2022, when Russia first attacked Ukraine, he was woken by explosions across the city. Despite the build-up of Russian troops on the border for many weeks prior to then, he had been one of many Ukrainians who did not believe that one major European country would invade another peaceful nation.

At that time, he was working in Kharkiv's Central Hospital, and that day he got to work 90 minutes earlier than his normal 8am start 'in anticipation of casualties'.

In fact, his team didn't treat their first patient until the third day of the war but the professor says that, by then, 'the city's medical system had collapsed.

'Many people responsible for medical aid had fled.'

He says: 'I never thought of leaving for one moment. I had no doubts that this was where I was needed – and about 70 per cent of my staff, the surgeons, took the same view. Yet we were hampered by a severe shortage of medicine and first-aid kits.' They all worked

long hours, every day, and sometimes all night, supported by little more than coffee and adrenaline. For months, they snatched only a few hours' sleep on mattresses in the hospital corridors.

'It was probably 120 days before I had the chance to spend a night at home,' Prof Parkhomenko says.

'Early on, as the Russians tried to enter and capture the city, we were treating bullet wounds. Later, we treated more people with open wounds from exploding missiles, bombs and artillery shells. Some injuries have been terrible – when the whole body is in trauma.'

The work has been relentless.

'When a patient dies, there is no time to grieve. We have to move on to those still alive. There was a time when I remembered every patient I had ever treated... but not anymore,' he says.

At one time early in the war, he and his team could not step outside their hospital without a bullet-proof vest.

But then – like now – when carrying out surgery, they were unable to wear such protection because the vests are too restrictive.

Of his two years working at Central Hospital, which has 1,000 beds, Prof Parkhomenko says: 'It was very scary to be in a hospital nine floors high when enemy jets were circling around. I felt a fear

that I had never imagined before.' Initially, when bombs fell, he says his team went into shelters but then there were so many patients 'we had no time to waste hiding from the bombs'.

During attacks, doctors moved away from the windows to go into corridors for a brief moment of protection.

The professor says: 'It was difficult to adjust to the new type of surgeries.

'Before the war, everything was planned and all the care was meticulous.

'But then we were dealing with lost limbs and body organs that had been turned inside out.

'Our priority was simply to save lives.'

He says, at one point, they didn't have enough bandages and had to use ripped sheets to stem bleeding. 'These were conditions similar to those experienced in the First World War,' he says.

Today, clinic staff can carry out surgery on up to 32 patients at a time.

'We have to grade the injured when there are so many.

'I decide who to operate on first by the nature and seriousness of their injuries,' he says.

At the start of the war, Prof Parkhomenko's son, Ivan, was an intern but now he's a doctor.

It was Ivan who encouraged me to interview his father because he believed it was time that the world knew of the sacrifices that the surgeon has made for his country. 'My father is one of the most skilled surgeons in Ukraine. He is also one of the bravest,'



CARNAGE: The aftermath of an air strike in Kharkiv, top. Left: Prof Parkhomenko with Oleg Hladkyh. Above: One of his operating theatres

home city's future. In a voice reflecting exhaustion and desperation in equal measure, he says: 'I'm sure Kharkiv will be wiped out sooner rather than later and that's one of the reasons I don't want children of my own yet.'

Among the most feared Russian weapons routinely fired at Kharkiv are 'glide bombs' – cheap but highly destructive weapons that are hard to detect because they have no motors – and C-300 anti-aircraft missiles that have been adapted for use against civilian targets.

During my visit to the clinic, I meet Oleg Hladkyh, a 33-year-old married man with two children, who was severely injured while working at a post office in Kharkiv that was bombed in October last year in an attack that killed eight people and injured about 20 more.

Mr Hladkyh was knocked uncon-

scious, suffering multiple injuries from shrapnel, including head, abdominal and internal wounds that were so serious he was given little chance of surviving.

However, after hours of life-saving surgery led by Prof Parkhomenko, and then further reconstructive surgery, he is now back home and hoping to return to his job.

He says: 'The professor and his team saved my life. They carry out amazing work.'

Prof Parkhomenko has met Prof David Nott, the British surgeon acclaimed for his work in war zones. Prof Nott says the two men first encountered each other in 2022 when he went to Kharkiv with a small team from his own David Nott Foundation to train local doctors to deal with war wounded.

The foundation has donated spe-

‘Some injuries have been terrible – when the whole body is in trauma’

says Ivan. 'He has carried out the most complex operations in the most difficult conditions. He is a legendary figure in Kharkiv.

Once, we had six operations going on simultaneously and my father was conducting four of them – doing the main surgery, getting washed each time between surgeries, before moving on to another operating table.

'It was incredible.'

Ivan, 26, says that, for him, the saddest moment of the war happened after a residential street was bombed.

'We received a family in two different ambulances. The mother was dead. One of her daughters, aged around ten, was in the operating theatre, but she was slowly

dying with a head injury. It was impossible to save her.

'Her younger sister, aged about four, was OK other than cuts and bruises.

'But the only thing she asked, and she repeated it about ten times, was, "Where is my sister?"

'About an hour later, her father came in looking for his family. 'I never saw such sadness in a person.

'He had lost his wife and one of his daughters. He was pale and just sat on the floor doing nothing until late that night.'

Ivan is pessimistic about his