

RESISTANCE: Stories from Ukraine

Episode 4: "Defenders of Borodyanka"

(Published: May 17, 2022)

Transcript

(0:00)

Alexandr: [Ukrainian]

Vitalii: [Ukrainian]

Alexandr: [Ukrainian]

V/O: On the day Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, lifelong friends Vitalii and Alexandre assumed they would be safe. They thought there was no way the Russian forces would come close to their home of Borodyanka. It's a small commuter town of about 15,000 people 30 miles outside Kyiv.

(0:30)

Vitalii: [Ukrainian]

V/O: They expected the Russian troops to drive straight to the capital. But then, Vitalii says, they made a detour – and a column of armored vehicles rolled into the very center of Borodyanka.

Vitalii: [Ukrainian]

V/O: Russian soldiers soon began shelling apartment buildings, starting with the top floors.

Alexandr: [Ukrainian]

(1:00)

V/O: They assumed there would be snipers up there...

Alexandr: [Ukrainian]

Project Brazen.

V/O: Or maybe Territorial Defense units with anti-tank weapons, like javelins... but in reality the town had nothing like that. All Alexandre and Vitalii said they had were sticks...

Vitalii: [Ukrainian]

Alexandr: [Ukrainian]

V/O: Ok, they're joking – they had hunting rifles – but it sure felt like they just had sticks.

(1:30)

Alexandr: [Ukrainian]

V/O: This is Resistance: Stories from Ukraine. I'm Laurel Chor, a photojournalist from Hong Kong. In this series, I'm sharing personal stories of resistance that have emerged everywhere in Ukraine since Russia invaded the country in February.

(1:55)

Today, we hear from four men who fought back—despite being impossibly outnumbered — against the Russian troops occupying their small town. The adrenaline from the battle has barely worn off and this is the first time they're sharing what they lived through. With the war still raging, most people fighting in Ukraine haven't had the chance to tell their stories yet. But the Russians have retreated from this town. So now we get to hear from the defenders of Borodyanka themselves. This is their story.

(2:30)

PART 1: ALEXANDR & VITALII

Laurel: Hey, thank you for talking to us...

V/O: I first meet Alexandre and Vitalii in Borodyanka's main square. There's a big sculpture of the famous Ukrainian poet, Taras Shevchenko, here, and it's riddled with bullet holes. When you stand next to it, you can see one apartment block with a giant, gaping hole, and another that's collapsed entirely – the result of Russian shelling and air strikes. During the brutal, month-long occupation, the town was cut

Project Brazen.

off – with no power, cell network, or water supply. Little communication made it in or out from here. Now, these survivors are trying to piece together what happened. Alexandr and Vitalii are wearing mismatching military fatigues with guns slung over their shoulders. It's too loud to talk here in the square because bulldozers are clearing mountains of debris - so we head to Vitalii's office nearby. We sit down and their story spills out...

(3:35)

Laurel: You two have been defending Borodyanka from the very beginning...

Vitalii: [Ukrainian]

V/O: They were born and raised in Borodyanka, and have had each other's backs since they were kids. You can sense their brother-like bond. Now, they're 40 and run their own businesses in town, Alexandr in car repair, and Vitalii in construction.

(4:00)

Alexandr: [Ukrainian]

V/O: Alexandr tells me that the first day of the Russian invasion was actually really peaceful. It was a chilly, cloudy day. There were still people out on the streets, and cars driving on the roads. But war descended on them fast. First, a column of Russian vehicles appeared at the main roundabout in town, just behind the school. A friend came running towards them with his arms waving wildly. "The Russians are here," he screamed. In that moment, they made a decision. There was no discussion – they just knew they were going to stay and fight.

(4:40)

Laurel: How did you start fighting? What was the first thing you did? Did you organize yourselves first, or did you just pick up weapons?

Alexandr: [Ukrainian]

V/O: Borodyanka didn't have their own unit of the Territorial Defense Force – Ukraine's all-volunteer militia – until the night before the invasion began. So Alexandr and Vitalii didn't have the chance to join.

Project Brazen.

They didn't have weapons either. The local officials who should have handed them out and organised the defense skipped town as soon as the Russians got close.

(5:15)

Alexandr: [Ukrainian]

Vitalii: [Ukrainian]

V/O: That included the Head of the Military Commission – the unit responsible for recruiting soldiers – who they say escaped on the very first day. So Alexandr and Vitalii started fighting with what they had, their hunting rifles. But before long, they discovered they weren't alone. They came across other men defending Borodyanka, like Mykola, who had years of military experience... We'll meet him later in this episode. Mykola gave them a crash course in ground combat, teaching them which Russian vehicles to target, and which weapons to use.

Vitalii: [Ukrainian]

V/O: Mykola had supplies too. He gave them a box of twenty grenades. This was enough to get them started. Alexandr and Vitalii have so much to say, you can feel their passion – and frustration. They have no qualms admitting they didn't really know what they were doing.

(6:20)

Laurel: What was your strategy?

Alexandr: [Ukrainian]

V/O: they didn't have a specific strategy. They just learned as they went. Alexandr compares it to driving. At first, you have to really think about what you're doing. Then, once you get used to it, you're on autopilot. But they did have one important advantage over the Russians.

Alexandr: [Ukrainian]

(6:50)

Project Brazen.

V/O: They know Borodyanka by heart. Every back alley, every roundabout, every dead end. They know which streets are wide enough for armored vehicles to pass, and which ones are too narrow for anything but pedestrians.

Laurel: You were both born here?

Vitalii: [Ukrainian]

Laurel: And you went to school together? Right there?

Vitalii: [Ukrainian]

Laurel: Yeah...

Vitalii: [Ukrainian]

(7:25)

V/O: After all, the kindergarten they went to together isn't very far from where we're sitting.

Vitalii: [Ukrainian]

V/O: Alexandr and Vitalii say they started by sneaking up on convoys of Russian military trucks, known as Urals. Because they know the town's layout so well, they'd anticipate the convoy's blindspots and ambush them, throwing the grenades under the trucks as they drove by.

Vitalii: [Ukrainian]

(7:55)

V/O: A well-aimed grenade could blow out a truck's tires, stopping it dead in its tracks. Everytime this would happen, the soldiers would get out and get on the next truck, leaving the damaged one behind. So a single grenade could do a lot of damage. Alexandr and Vitalii say that they were really good at this. But when they ran out of the grenades Mykola gave them, they had to improvise.

Vitalii: [Ukrainian]

V/O: So they started making Molotov Cocktails. All they needed were a few ingredients and glass bottles. Neighbors saw what they were doing and offered all the supplies they could spare.

Project Brazen.

Vitalii: [Ukrainian]

(8:35)

V/O: Vitalii and Alexandr smirk as they tell me how they finally got their hands on some real weapons. All they had to do, they say, is walk up to a couple of clueless-looking Russian soldiers and just... take their guns. This sounds pretty ridiculous, and I wonder if they're stretching the truth just a little bit. But these guys say these Russian soldiers weren't exactly top commandos.

Alexandr: [Ukrainian]

(9:05)

V/O: Alexandr says that the Russian soldiers he saw were 20-year-olds, thrust to the frontlines unprepared. They looked unkempt and demoralized, and seemed to come from the more remote parts of Russia. They looted everything, even bras and underwear, and were surprised by things as simple as modern appliances. It's a stereotype I've heard before, and I wonder how much they're exaggerating, but at the same time -- the Russians have been out here looting basic household goods and sending them back home. So it's not that far-fetched.

(9:55)

V/O: With each successful attack, Alexandr and Vitalli stole better and better weapons.

Laurel: *How can you attack machinery with guns?*

Vitalii: [Ukrainian]

V/O: Now that they had real guns, they could take out armored personnel carriers – or APCs –, using the same trick they used with trucks. A single well-placed bullet to the tire would force the soldiers to abandon the APC. One more vehicle out of commission.

Vitalii: [Ukrainian]

(10:25)

Project Brazen.

V/O: But then came the tanks. All Aleksandr and Vitalii had were grenades and guns, so they didn't dare to take those on.

Vitalii: [Ukrainian]

Aleksandr: [Ukrainian]

V/O: Tanks are, as they say, "a little bit scary" ... Still, at least you can hide from tanks. Because once the Russians started dropping bombs, there was nothing these guys could do anymore. The airstrikes hit apartment buildings, devastating the town. There isn't an official death toll yet, but the mayor says at least 200 people have been killed.

Vitalii: [Ukrainian]

(11:05)

V/O: Vitalii's older brother, sister-in-law and 11-year-old niece, were killed when a strike hit their apartment, burying them under the rubble. It's the first – and only time – I hear Vitalii choke up.

Vitalii: [Ukrainian]

V/O: Just the day before, Vitalii was finally able to recover their bodies.

(11:35)

V/O: Aleksandr and Vitalii have had a lot of close calls. They tell me about one of them.

Vitalii: [Ukrainian]

V/O: They were driving through town... when they got to an intersection... and found themselves only 50 meters away – pretty much face to face – with a BTR, a Soviet-era armored personnel carrier. Thirty infantrymen were marching by its side. It was the closest they'd ever come to the enemy. Aleksandr stepped on the gas and sped off, racing around the main roundabout, the cemetery, the church... They only managed to shake them off because the Russians were stuck in a narrow street and couldn't turn around quickly enough. Aleksandr and Vitalii say if they hadn't

Project Brazen.

known the streets so well or had taken a wrong turn... they wouldn't be here to tell this story.

Vitalii: [Ukrainian]

(12:35)

V/O: Some people who have had a near death experience like to celebrate the anniversary as a kind of "birthday"... Aleksandr and Vitalii have had so many brushes with death, they joke they could celebrate *their* birthdays – six times.

Aleksandr: [Ukrainian]

Vitalii: [Ukrainian]

Aleksandr: [Ukrainian]

Vitalii: [Ukrainian]

(13:00)

V/O: Despite everything they did, Aleksandr and Vitalii say they have nothing to be proud of. They wish they could have done more. They wish they'd had more weapons, more skills. But, they have no regrets about staying and fighting.

Vitalii: [Ukrainian]

V/O: like many Ukrainians, they explain, they have family in Russia.

Aleksandr: [Ukrainian]

(13:30)

V/O: And to them, their relatives live like dogs on chains. When told to sit, Aleksandr says, they sit.

Aleksandr: [Ukrainian]

Vitalii: [Ukrainian]

V/O: Aleksandr and Vitalii don't want to live like dogs. And they weren't just going to let the invaders take their home either. "What are we going to do, just give away Kyiv," they ask?

Project Brazen.

Alexandr: [Ukrainian]

(14:00)

V/O: No. They want to live free.

VO: We'll be right back.

PART 2: SERHII & MYKOLA

(14:30)

V/O: Alexandr and Vitalii have to leave – lunch is ready – but before they rush off, they insist that we talk to the men they consider to be the *real* leaders of Borodyanka's defense. — Mykola and Serhii. Alexandr tracks them down, and we squeeze into our van – the closest quiet spot. These men are older and more serious, but also have a sweet, grandfatherly side – they offer me granola bars handmade by children for soldiers.

Mykola: [Ukrainian]

(15:00)

V/O: Mykola is the one who gave Alexandr and Vitalii their grenades. He's stocky, and is wearing wrap-around sunglasses. He had served on the frontlines in Donetsk in the east, but was discharged in 2019 for health reasons. The other soldier, Serhii, is shorter, has a gray beard, and a warm face. But he commands respect. He turned 50 during the occupation.

Serhii: My name is Serhii, I am lieutenant colonel... [Ukrainian]

V/O: Serhii is a longtime officer with the Ukrainian military. This is his third conflict in as many decades. He first served as a conscript with the Soviet army in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in the late 80s. You can tell that he's been in the military for a while by the way he talks – stiff, serious-soldier-speak. Mykola and Serhii were thrown back into battle when this war began. They knew what they were doing, but like Alexandr and Vitalii, they were forced to fight with few resources.

Project Brazen.

(16:00)

Serhii: [Ukrainian]

V/O: They had no bulletproof vests, no gas masks, no nothing, Serhii says. They were dressed like they were out for a jog – in tracksuits and sneakers. It's kinda funny hearing these guys tell their side of the story. Alexandre and Vitalii had been so excited and high-energy, their timeline jumping around, the anecdotes tumbling out, always somehow finding humor. But these guys tell their story with military precision, in perfect chronological order, with minute details. They say this comes naturally to them. You see, they were born warriors – it's in their blood.

Serhii: "We are Cossacks!"

(16:50)

V/O: Cossacks. Many Ukrainians are immensely proud of their Cossack heritage. I've seen more Cossack tattoos than I can count – our interpreter, Andrii, has a huge one on his leg. They're often depicted as fierce, bare-chested horsemen wielding long sabers... warriors with legendary status, like the Japanese samurai.

Laurel: Can you give a timeline of what happened from the beginning of the war until Borodyanka was liberated?

Mykola: [Ukrainian]

V/O: As with Alexandre and Vitalii... this is the first time that Serhii and Mykola are recounting these events to an outsider.

Mykola: [Ukrainian]

(17:40)

V/O: They remember the battle for Borodyanka in phases. The first phase was the ground battle... with infantry troops, tanks, gunfire.

Serhii: [Ukrainian]

Project Brazen.

V/O: the fighting escalated fast. When the Russian troops arrived, Mykola says he and eight other men were waiting for them. The squad fired at the convoy of Russian trucks and APCs deep into the night.

Serhii: [Ukrainian]

(18:15)

V/O: They shot at the convoy's wheels, just like Mykola had taught Alexandre and Vitalii. The enemy vehicles would careen out of control and crash into each other. Serhii and his team would then raid the vehicles for weapons and ammunition, or "trophies", as they call them –like 120mm mortars or even Grad rocket launchers. Anything they couldn't take for themselves, they destroyed, so that the Russians couldn't use it.

V/O: But then came the second phase – the deadly airstrikes. They quickly shifted their focus to evacuating civilians to safety.

Serhii: [Ukrainian]

(18:55)

V/O: Locals pitched in. A logistics company gave them ATVs to take residents away to nearby villages.

Serhii: [Ukrainian]

V/O: But once the Russians fully occupied Borodyanka, evacuations were no longer possible. The Russians were in control. This was the third phase.

Serhii: [Ukrainian]

(19:25)

V/O: Serhii's tone suddenly changes as he starts to tell another story. One day, he received a frantic message from a fellow soldier – a friend. He'd just been shot five times. He was badly, *critically*, injured – and he needed to be rescued.

Serhii: [Ukrainian]

Project Brazen.

(19:50)

V/O: Serhii, who has been so measured this entire time, chokes up.

Serhii: [Ukrainian]

V/O: Serhii and three of his brothers-in-arms set out on foot, sneaking through alleys and backyards to avoid getting caught. Serhii stayed on the phone with his friend the whole time. They were only 300 meters away when the wounded soldier warned them that a Russian infantry fighting vehicle, known as BMP-2, had stopped nearby.

Serhii: [Ukrainian]

(20:30)

V/O: So Serhii and his team decided to wait. Armed with only assault rifles, they had no chance against the BMP-2.

Serhii: [Ukrainian]

V/O: But then, the BMP2 spotted his friend.

Serhii: [Ukrainian]

V/O: And they fired. First with machine guns.

Serhii: [Ukrainian]

(21:00)

V/O: And then with the automatic cannon.

Serhii: [Ukrainian]

V/O: From his position down the road, Serhii watched as the Russians killed his friend. Serhii was on the phone with him until the very last moment. He asked Serhii to tell his family where and how he died.

Project Brazen.

Serhii: [Ukrainian]

V/O: Serhii says he will never forget this, how he watched his friend die.

Serhii: [Ukrainian]

V/O: You can still see the soldier's white car on the road stretching west from Borodyanka. Our interpreter Andriy later points it out to me as we head out of town. The car's steel frame is flattened, crushed by that BMP-2

Serhii: [Ukrainian]

(22:10)

V/O: The battle's next phase was the Russian withdrawal. As reinforcements from the Ukrainian military advanced, Russian troops formed another convoy and fled under the cover of darkness, leaving everything behind.

Serhii: [Ukrainian]

V/O: They then entered the final phase... the one they'd been fighting so hard for...liberation... Today, there is a tense, uneasy peace in Borodyanka. Residents are scared the Russians will come back. And in a way, they're not entirely gone.

Serhii: [Ukrainian]

(22:55)

V/O: The town is now littered with landmines. Modern mines are meant to auto-destruct to prevent hurting civilians, but some of the mines the Russians dropped on Borodyanka date back to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. Deminers have been hard at work, but it will be years before Ukraine is free of all these mines.

V/O: Today, Serhii and Mykola are guarding Borodyanka and manning its checkpoints. At night, after curfew, they patrol the streets and search the surrounding forests for any straggling Russian soldiers.

Project Brazen.

Their eyes are red and tired. Serhii knows there's a long road ahead.

(23:45)

Laurel: *Do you do anything to help process this or to help heal yourselves mentally and emotionally?*

Serhii: [Ukrainian]

V/O: Serhii responds with a line from Gone with the Wind, the classic movie about life during the American Civil War.

Serhii: ... "I will think about this tomorrow".

(24:10)

V/O: Near the end of the film, the main character Scarlett O'Hara whispers: "I can't think about that right now. If I do, I'll go crazy. I'll think about that... tomorrow." ... Serhii says he doesn't have time to think about himself at the moment. He has too much to do.

V/O: As we drive back to Kyiv, I feel the weight of what we have just recorded: fresh memories of war from those who lived through it, a piece of history that has yet to be written down. It's going to take an army of journalists, historians, and analysts years to make out what really happened in this war. What happened in Borodyanka – is just one town's story. With each story that is told and collected, we are able to form – and preserve – a more complete picture of the truth.

(25:15)

V/O: That's it for today. Next, we'll see how entire communities – whether hipster artists or rural villagers – are turning their hands, and talents ... to the war effort

Lilia: [Ukrainian]

Interpreter: *Before the war started she made underwear.*

Laurel: Oh, like sexy underwear?

Lilia: [Ukrainian]

Laurel (5801_5:57): *So you went from a lingerie maker to a military outfitter?*

Lilia: [Ukrainian]

Project Brazen.

CREDITS

Resistance: Stories from Ukraine is a production of Project Brazen in partnership with PRX. It's hosted by me, Laurel Chor. I've been reporting from the field with Arman Dzidzovic and Andrii Kalashnikov. Bradley Hope, Tom Wright and Nicholas Brennan are executive producers. Soobin Kim, Clair Urbahn, Rowan Slaney and Megan Dean produced this episode, with associate producing from Giulia Franchi and Francesca Gilardi Quadrio Curzio. Susie Armitage is our Story Editor. Cover Design by Ryan Ho. For PRX, Jason Saldanha and Julie Shapiro. Special thanks to Yevhen Khimichuk, Hanna Fedorishyna, Alex Guzenko, Anna-Maria Valchuk, Jody Bragger, Michelle Sanders, Neha Wadekar, Siddhartha Mahanta, and Lucy Woods.

For more of our reporting, and a transcript of this episode, visit
projectbrazen.com/resistance

(26:50)

-END OF EPISODE-