

Ukraine Finds New Hero in Besieged Base Commander

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Colonel Yuliy Mamchur standing with fellow Ukrainian servicemen at the air base in Belbek, near Sevastopol.

KIEV — After Crimeans voted to leave Ukraine and join Russia, a man in a black raincoat turned up at the gate of the Belbek Air Base to demand that Ukrainian forces holed up inside surrender to Russia.

The Ukrainian commander of the base came out wearing his cap decorated with gold wings — and refused.

The Russian visitor persisted: "From yesterday, you are located on the territory of a foreign state. So I'm giving you your chance to keep your honor as an officer."

"As an officer with honor, I tell you I will stay," retorted Air Force Colonel Yuliy Mamchur.

That act of defiance against the overwhelming force of Russian troops that had put Belbek under siege created a new Ukrainian national hero. Today, Mamchur is hailed as an officer

who stood up to the Russian juggernaut, remained true to his oath as a soldier and held out with his beleaguered unit in Crimea for as long as he could.

After Mamchur refused to cave, Russian forces overran Belbek with irresistible force and numbers.

Mamchur stood calmly with his men. He led them in singing the Ukrainian national anthem, which begins with the lyrics "Ukraine's glory and freedom are not yet dead."

Russian forces then arrested Mamchur and took him away for questioning.

He withstood five days of sustained intimidation and pressure to defect from his captors — and he was released last Wednesday after that pressure proved futile.

"They tried to get me to renounce my military oath to Ukraine and switch to the Russian army," Mamchur said in a televised interview shortly after his release. "Then they applied psychological pressure, they did not let me sleep, banging with their rifle-butts on the door."

Mamchur is now heading to a hero's welcome in the capital, Kiev.

As a pilot and instructor of the MiG-29, a fourth-generation jet fighter that can fly at over twice the speed of sound, Mamchur was a clearly a "top gun" among Ukrainian Air Force aviators, said Thomas Newdick, a Western air power analyst. At Belbek, Mamchur would have had an important role in preparing cadets and young flyers for combat duty, Newdick said.

For Mamchur, the saga of resistance began in early March when troops under orders from Moscow swarmed into Crimea. Ukraine's inexperienced government dithered over a response, uncertain over whether to order Ukrainian forces to evacuate Belbek in the wine country north of Sevastopol.

So Mamchur stuck to his ground whenever the Russians came calling to tell him to leave.

"If there is an order, I will leave. If there is no order, I will stay," he told the man in the raincoat who demanded last week that Belbek stand down.

During the ordeal, the colonel gave reporters and television crews the run of the base grounds still in Ukrainian hands, and held impromptu news conferences in front of brigade headquarters.

Any hungry journalists were welcome to join his men for borscht and kasha in the mess hall, the colonel said.

Displaying a sense of cool under pressure as the inevitable storming of his base neared, Mamchur oversaw an impromptu wedding between two lieutenants — medic Galina Volosyanchik and communications officer Ivan Benera.

As the couple were handed a gift and bouquet of flowers, Mamchur said: "You will always remember this, the whole world is here watching."

Hours later, armed pro-Russia forces smashed into and took control of the base.

The colonel's arrest provoked helpless outrage in Kiev.

But any fear that Mamchur would defect to the other side proved unfounded.

On Wednesday afternoon, acting Crimean Ukrainian President Oleksandr Turchynov announced that officers detained by Russian troops were being released.

Mamchur was given the time to gather his belongings from home, bid farewell to his wife, and leave the peninsula. Like all military spouses left behind by retreating troops, Larissa Mamchur will be reunited with her husband once new accommodation is found for them.

If Mamchur was fazed by his ordeal, he showed no sign of it.

"I feel good. I am in a fighting mood," he told reporters during his television appearance. "What will I do now? First I will build up my strength and then I will make a decision. Glory to Ukraine!"

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