

# Civilians Stuck in the Middle of Donbass Horror

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July 28, 2015



Vasily Nikolaevich, a 63-year-old resident of Mariinka, a small town in Ukraine just 20 kilometers southwest of rebel-controlled Donetsk, was in his vegetable garden at around 10 a.m. on July 19 when he heard sounds of shooting coming from the neighboring street. He said these were Ukrainian servicemen firing from an armored personnel carrier toward Donetsk.

He finished weeding his garden, walked into the house, and told his wife he'd wager for return fire within 20 minutes. He was just making conversation really — living in Mariinka, which is basically on the front line, you don't run into the basement every time you hear shooting. You cannot put your whole life on hold, right?

So, he had a cold drink — it was a hot, sunny morning — and went back into the garden to wash off. And indeed, the return fire did not make him wait. "It was loud and coming from different weapons from two different directions ... targeting the Ukrainian checkpoint at Moskovskaya Ulitsa, some 50 meters from my house," he told me as I sat on the edge of his hospital bed.

So, Vasily Nikolaevich was standing next to his outdoor shower when there was an explosion right in his garden, just a few feet away, knocking him out for a second. When he came to he was almost deaf, a shell fragment was stuck in the center of his forehead, and some fragments caught him in his left lower leg, which was bleeding profusely.

His wife was standing next to him and screaming hysterically. He told her to call for an ambulance. She tried, but the networks were down and the call would not go through.

Vasily Nikolaevich got up, found his bicycle, and rode to the nearby checkpoint, using his unwounded leg. Several Ukrainian servicemen at the checkpoint quickly dressed his wounded leg, and one soldier drove him to a safer area, where an ambulance picked him up fairly quickly.

When I spoke to Vasily Nikolaevich in the hospital in the town of Kurakhovo two days later, the splinter from his forehead and two shell fragments from his leg had been removed, and he was waiting for another operation the next day to have the last remaining fragment removed — it was deeply imbedded, and the doctors couldn't get it the first time around.

He seemed cheerful enough: "It could've been worse, a tiny bit closer and I wouldn't be talking to you," he said. "Also, now I know that this whole idea of a shell not falling twice in the same crater is absolute nonsense. My house was hit on Sept. 22 last year — the roof had a huge hole in it, all the glass in the windows was gone. So, we thought, OK — we've had our share of the trouble, and had it all fixed.

"Now we need to put in the glass in the windows again. The house walls are damaged by shells fragments again and the fence is all destroyed. Well, what can you do. With those checkpoints all over the place, and the both sides firing at each other on a regular basis, you should be grateful for being alive."

More than a year into the armed conflict in Ukraine, pro-Russian rebel forces and Ukrainian forces continue to engage in hostilities despite the truce established by the Minsk agreements. The fighting seems low-intensity now, but it is civilians who are bearing the brunt of it.

Those who happen to live in the vicinity of military targets, like checkpoints or armed personnel quarters, are particularly at risk of being showered with metal fragments on a regular basis. There's a nine-story apartment building in Avdiyivka, a town controlled by Ukrainian forces some 10 kilometers north of Donetsk, that local residents had nicknamed "the ornamental place" because its facade was painted in several different colors.

Now, that nickname has an ironic ring to it — the building suffered particularly severe damage from shelling, with some of the apartments turned into craters as a result of direct hits. And it is not surprising that this building is in such bad shape — Ukrainian soldiers are using the apartment building next door as a base, with military vehicles parked in the yard, some weaponry in plain view, and a checkpoint on the other side.

There is little doubt rebel forces are pounding the neighborhood to eliminate this particular target, hitting the "ornamental place" instead. Several other buildings nearby also show serious damage from shelling. And people live in all of them — they have nowhere else to go.

The "ornamental place" was hit again on July 18, the day before I arrived in Avdiyivka — with a shell exploding in an apartment on the eighth floor, killing a 73-year-old woman, Anna Kostina, and her 20-year-old grandson, Sergei Malashkov.

"Granny Anya had a fractured hip, she could barely walk," a neighbor told me. "So we took care of her all winter, bringing her boiled water for tea and some food. Her grandson, Seryozha had some disability and could not speak."

When the shelling began at around 4:30 a.m., residents who live on lower floors made it to the basement but those high up just sat in the hall in the dark. When it was finally over, they went out to assess the damage and saw that Kostina's apartment was gone.

Two women rushed up to see whether their neighbors were still alive and needed help. "We saw Seryozha's body in the hall, it was all bloody. Apparently, he tried to run for it," one of the women said. "We left him there and entered what was left of Granny Anya's flat. At first we could not see her amid the debris ... I even thought, what if she's alive and someone else got her ahead of us and actually got her out ... and then, I saw a fragment of her face in a pile of debris."

Practically every civilian I spoke to in eastern Ukraine, while on a trip with monitors from International Partnership for Human Rights last week, had one and the same plea to make: could the military please move their checkpoints and quarters away from our homes?

That message is equally applicable to Ukraine-controlled towns, like Avdiyivka and Mariinka, and rebel-controlled territories. In Donetsk, one can see the rebel Donetsk People's Republic bases all over the city, and the residents of the nearby houses pay dearly for it.

The laws of war, applicable to the fighting in Ukraine, require all parties to the conflict to avoid deploying their military forces in densely populated areas — or to remove civilians to the extent feasible from areas under their control.

"I live in the Kirovsky district of Donetsk, and the separatists have a fire position right under my windows, imagine the fun," said Lena, another woman I met in Avdiyivka, where she travels for work across the front line. Or rather — traveled for work.

The cosmetics company Lena worked for was located just a few steps away from the "ornamental place" in Avdiyivka, facing that building full of Ukrainian military. It got hit on the evening of July 17 and then on the morning of July 18, in the same attack that Granny Anya and Seryozha were killed — and the level of damage is staggering.

Lena lit a cigarette and stared moodily at the remains of her workplace. "So, you've got the military here and you've got the military there — and you're in between. It's been more than a year and it's becoming simply unbearable. Is there an end to it?"

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