

Not Every Angel Has Wings

The following is a story about faith and the courageous determination of a pastor and 32 church members to survive and overcome the Russian siege and onslaught of Mariupol. It is based on excerpts from the personal video diary: "Confessions of Mariupol" by the events experienced by the pastor, Mark Basarab.

The story timeline also contains selected intertwined accounts of incidents in Ukraine and those surrounding the church basement bunker from the Ukraine Defense Forces and other witnesses and survivors of the siege of Mariupol.

The original video can be found here: "Confessions of Mariupol"

The winds of war

Putin decided to raze Mariupol to the dust. He proceeded to bomb every building and every home in a desperate attempt to annihilate city residents first, then he could turn all efforts on the remaining 2,439 members of the despised Azov Regiment, a Ukraine Defense Forces unit heroically still holding out without food, water, electricity, medical aid and low on ammunition in the bunkers and tunnels of the Azovstal steel works. They were strategically assigned to be an agile blocking element against the

Russian invasion, intercepting Russian patrols using hit-and-run tactics, protecting as many civilians in Mariupol as possible. Each and every member of the Azov Regiment was committed to holding out- down to the last man.

"Enduring some of the worst violence since WWII 'Mariupol Mayor Vadym Boychenko said that the evil created by Russia in Mariupol is 'even worse than what Nazi Germany did,' according

to the Mirror, UK.

He continued: 'In the Second World War, 10,000 people were killed in Mariupol in a two-year occupation. In two months of this blood-shedding war, Russia has killed more than 20,000. Putin is a bigger evil than

Hitler and we must stop him.'"

Vladimir Putin has killed more in Ukrainian city than Hitler did during WW2, mayor says

At night the Russians employed phosphorous bombs that rained down on the Azovstal steel works in a sparkling tinkling glow, a chandelier of death igniting buildings, homes, cars, anything that could burn.

The next day Russian mobile crematorium trucks would come by. They would load the bodies of dead civilians who had been shot, raped, and/or tortured into the trucks to be burned to hide the evidence of war crimes. A total of 13 mobile crematorium trucks have been reported in operation in and around Mariupol.

The problem with war crimes is you can only prosecute what you know. You can't prosecute what you don't know and where there is no evidence. The Russians are making sure of that in Mariupol and elsewhere.

The personal diary: "Confession of Mariupol."

Mark Basarab, 28 years old is a pastor of a church in Mariupol and begins his story: "On February 24, the Russian Federation declared war on us and attacked our land. And soon within a few days, the Russian army approached Mariupol and we were encircled. My friends and our community were in

Mariupol and on the fourth day of the war the first shells fell near us on Slobodka.”

Summing up the situation, Basarab knew what he had to do. Surviving the approaching Russian invasion force and saving as many people as possible became his Number 1 goal. It says in the Bible: “Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.” John 15:13.

The Slobodka neighborhood is only one kilometer from the city center, a short walk of 500 meters to the coast of the Azov Sea and 200 meters from the train station. The Azov steel works and home to the Ukraine Defense Force was only a short distance away in the other direction.

After the first wave of shelling, he went outside the basement. The neighborhood was destroyed. Burning houses and smoldering cars marked both sides of the streets. Large craters now marred the landscape.

Walking through the destroyed neighborhood surveying the damage: “The missile landed here

yesterday... (pointing to the crater). There was a fence. It’s not there.”

“I was never in the military. In 2014 as a journalist, I traveled to different places on the front (in Crimea)

I did not think that I would have to go through this in Mariupol.”

Social media

On Facebook, Instagram, Telegram, LinkedIn and other social media an increasing number of Ukrainian accounts stopped posting. Friends in Europe would see Facebook accounts similar to these:

Olga 25. Feb **Svitlana** 27. Feb **Vlad** 27. Feb **Elina** 2 d **Lana** 1 d
Jens 16 h

Social media marked the calendar of their lives. There were no more posts, updates or responses from the time they were killed or captured. Gradually one by one they started fading off the notification updates on the social media sites.

Around Mariupol

Emerging from the eight hour shelling and earthquake shaking blasts on the Azov steel plant a Ukraine defender squinted his eyes adjusting to the sunlight. He was cautiously stepping out of his bunker to begin a reconnaissance mission with his patrol on the northern side of the city. Their mission was to intercept Russian patrols and to protect civilians in hideouts.

Written on the back of a Ukrainian soldier's body armor from one unit read, "God if I die young, let me go to Heaven, because I've already been to hell." That sentiment is shared by all units no matter where they are stationed. **Source:** Anton Gerashchenko, Deputy Minister, Ministry Internal Affairs Ukraine.

In another area along the line of the Russian front, as the shelling and rocket attacks stopped, Russian columns consisting of T-72, T-80 and T-90 tanks, BMD-4 infantry fighting vehicles, MLRS trucks (mobile launch rocket systems) and command vehicles followed by infantry moved into their positions. The Russians were conducting a pincer movement on the area. They were expecting civilians to be flushed out from their hideouts in a chance to flee the advancing Russian troops.

It worked.

As one car with a family emerged from a small cluster of

homes, it slowed at the road junction looking to turn left. Standing at the intersection, the Russians smiled and waved, saying: "Привет." (Privet/Hello). Then as the car turned and began to drive off, two soldiers raised their guns and opened fire on the rear of the car. In a matter of seconds, the car slowed, two front doors opened, as it came to a gentle stop off the side of the road 40 meters away. The four occupants were killed or dying slowly.

Two of the Russian eight man unit approached the car loaded with luggage and household belongings. The wife unconscious and moaning was still alive and hanging out the passenger side of the car. A soldier reached in, grabbed her right arm pulling her out on the street. The husband shot through the back of the head was slumped over the steering wheel. While the two children, young girls remained motionless, bleeding and slumped in their seats.

Lifting the hatch back trunk, they pulled out the luggage. Opening it up they found a new men's winter coat. Then wrapped in plastic and a bed sheet, he found a new laptop, accessories and a large monitor. Smiling, he then shouted back to his men about his new found fortune.

Removing the shoes, the other soldier began pulling the slacks off the unconscious woman. After shaking them out, he held them up to his waist, looking down intently at the length and waist to estimate the size for his wife back home. The other soldier began to stuff the children's winter clothing into his backpack for his own children. Smiling and holding up a new ski hat as a trophy, he said it will be for his daughter's birthday.

As the dying woman bled out on the street, they continued to stuff clothing items, money, IDs, credit

cards, smartphones, food and children's toys into their backpacks to ship home.

Date: March 2. Location: Home. Mariupol. Eighth day of the war.

“On March 2nd the shells fell. When it happened my friends and I were a little further from where we were, and I thought I should go take the kids and family to the church. The walls of the church (in the basement) were 1.5 meters high. It would be safer there than in a simple house.”

“As I grabbed the door handle I heard an explosion and realized that I was afraid to die. That I’m afraid to go out. Hearing the second explosion, I realized that I needed to speed up, because I was with people and they were in danger.

“My friend said: ‘Come on!’ Then I said inside myself, ‘Mark, you are already dead. Run!’”

“On that day my inner world seemed to harden. After that, we realized that we needed to seek shelter. There were 16 of us in the church community. My friends and I did a reconnaissance of the area and found that people in other basements did not want to let us in. Friends with friends, but strangers were not allowed. Since there were 16 of us, I had to seek shelter.”

“Seeing the craters and destruction... it made me move. And I started moving. I was terrified and my friend shouted to me, “Run! Mark run! We ran to the destination (the basement of the 37th school) and took the children inside. At that moment I received such an inoculation against explosions. I stopped being afraid of them. I realized you can run under them, that you can live at the moment of explosions. That determined the rest of my line of conduct in Mariupol. We were under siege for 22 days. From February 24 to March 20, we were in Mariupol.”



That day they made it through the shelling to the church.

Sitting down with friends they prayed. Then afterwards, sizing us the situation they organized the room,

At this point, the Azov Regiment and other units were fighting a full scale war against the Russians. As food, ammunition and medical supplies ran low, Ukrainian soldiers, including those with broken limbs and even amputees with no pain killers continued to hold their positions and fight, repelling the Russian advances around the city.

Seeking the shelter under the “Dog cold” school

As Mark and his group approached the school, they were led underground by a local man who climbed through a hole in the wall. Looking over the damage school.

“We found under the 37th school there is a place of refuge where you can go down. And we went there. It was damp. There used to be a church on the site of the school, but, the Communists blew it up. On the site of the church and temple, they built a school. The underground cellars, which were supposedly the first floor at one time. The Communists made a boiler room there.”

“I can see the beam that can withstand explosions. The safest place in this building is the archway.”

“We came in and spent one night and did not hear explosions. And because of this, there was an impression that there was no war. The downside of this. It was cold. Dog cold! It was very cold from February to March. Many of us slept in sleeping bags and under several layers of blankets and dressed in warm clothing. When we breathed, we breathed vapor inside. The vapor was white. It was cold. We quickly built everything there. I never thought that people can turn a non-residential place into a residential place in a couple of days. Our 16

people were in one room. After we settled in other people began to appear. Soon there were 32 of us.”

“Groups of five or more qualify for a Russian tank round, artillery shell or a rocket.”

“Here is a life hack: suddenly your city is surrounded. God forbid that this happens to you. Or you hear that you are being attacked. Or someone declared war on you. Feel free to go and buy some food. At least some food preparations. As soon as Putin announced the start of the operation, we immediately bought food. We bought several bags of potatoes, a bag of onions, a lot of packs of pasta. Our congregation gathered and we purchased all of this. Due to the wise action at the beginning, all further actions were not so difficult.”

“And when we settled in a bomb shelter, I set a goal for myself every day to make a profit (a small advance) in some kind, a plus for (getting) food and water. In principle from that moment on our primary world has changed. For example, we had our own calendar. First day of war. Second day of war, and so on.”

Date: March 4. Location: 37th School. Mariupol. Ninth day of the war.

On March 4th they held a worship event in the basement of the Number 37 School. “On the eight day,

they began to bomb Mariupol (again). Many in Mariupol ran out of food that day.”

“At that moment I made a decision, (along with the church members) everyone is coming to us and they are ready to even spend the night near the toilet. ‘Just don’t kick us out’ they said. “I had to take them into the church. Soon I found another place to hide people. At that time, the Red Cross helped us with groceries.”

Date: March 5. Location: 37th School. Mariupol. Tenth day of the war.

Assessing the situation at the school with the people Basarab analyzed: "We're fine. Let's get resources.

Think of a place to cook food. That's where we will organize the stove. We're carrying firewood to chop it closer to the stove for cooking. In general, so far, so good. Keep going."

"Many people asked, 'There was no electricity in Mariupol on the fourth day where did you get electricity?' We had a generator and a small supply of gasoline. Which we quickly used up in the community. But, we had friends in the suburbs who also had generators. And some of them were very thrifty. And even in peacetime, they stocked up on fuel. By the time we were escaping from Mariupol, we still had 50 liters of gasoline left. This decided our outcome. Our salvation from Mariupol."

"But, while in Mariupol we did the following. One day we charged our gadgets (smartphones) in the church. Then I could reach friends. Every day I tried to speak on the phone with a friend. To write a video diary. I provided my material every day."

Date: March 6. Location: 37th School. Mariupol. Eleventh day of the war.

There is talk of defending themselves... Basarab also continued to fulfill pastoral duties to everyone in the area.

"I realized on that day I understood my mission and vocation in Slobodka. (Part of) My task was to prevent looters from appearing in my area. I went around to different people, getting acquainted with all of them in our area. With everyone I could meet. Every day I walked down my street. In total I covered about 100 houses."

"I began to introduce them (different people) to each other. And every day I ran into someone... to bring water to someone else... firewood.

"My mask was to keep the morale of the people at a sufficient minimum. So that it did not go lower. So that a person would not turn into a marauder. Fortunately, it succeeded. Then I covered the bunkers. By that time there were 32 of us. And no one more could fit in our basement."

Russian crematoriums on the move

At other locations in the city Russian forces continued to utilize mobile crematoriums to burn civilian bodies shot or destroyed from the blast of the bombings. The bodies were stripped of clothing, ID, wallets, everything, then the bodies were lifted and tossed into the incinerator. First one body, then another, and another. The gas and heat were turned on inside the oven to incinerate the bodies to ash. The clothing was hand searched, then tossed into another truck and the mobile crematorium and Russian military support vehicles moved on to the next location.

Date: March 9. Location: 37th School. Mariupol. Fourteenth day of the war. "Last night there was heavy snow. No money. Bartering with strangers for food and needs. Hold on... They are bombing us very hard. Planes are buzzing. A terrible noise. I prayed a bunch of times. We lay on the floor with our noses on it. People who live on the surface and don't hide in basements are heroes."

From above the Russians continued to drop phosphorous bombs at night exploding hundreds of feet in the air above, raining down death over a large areas like a sparkling chandeliers burning everything it landed on to dust...

Red Cross Bombed

“Then the bombing on the ninth of March. Hell began. Bombs began to fall. The city center was destroyed.”

At this time the fighting between the Azov Regiment, other Ukraine Defense Forces against the Russia military was most intense. The continual presence of the Azov patrols maneuvering and blocking the Russian advances helped hold back the full scale slaughter of civilians.

“We had a Red Cross until March 8. On March 9 the Russians bombed it. At that moment the Red Cross disappeared from our lives.”

“At first the military helped us. Then the police. The veterans did a great job taking people out from under the rubble every morning. They helped us with food (and) the Red Cross helped us with food. That is important to note.”

“They brought us food. Volunteers helped us. Mariupol somehow survived. And people helped each other. They held on to each other.”

“It’s terrible to live like this. But strongly we hold on. We hold on with the hope that the war will end soon. And we will be happy and live our days.”

Thinking back on the bombing: “Today we ate well. I wish you in the future not to fight. So that you do not know this. What we already know. What our grandparents told us about. May the Lord keep you.”



Azovstal Steel Works

Taking pressure off the civilian population, the Azovstal Ukrainian defense units are becoming global heroes holding on to the plant and harassing Russian military forces through hit-and-run operations. The Ukraine defense forces in Mariupol continued strikes against the Russian navy in port and other installations.

The Azovstal defense forces continued to draw the main Russian military focus and wrath in order to spare civilians and smaller defensive units from under the intense bombing pressure.

Social media

On Facebook and other social media, more accounts stopped posting:

Olga 25. Feb, **Svitlana** 27. Feb, **Vlad** 27. Feb, **Elina** 2. Mar, **Lana** 4 d, **Jens** 5 h, **Natalia** 28. Feb, **Anechka** 1. Mar, **Ksenia** 2 d, **Mica** 12 h, **Lana** 4 d, **Jens** 5 h, **Daria** 2. Mar, **Svetlana** 2. Mar, **Vincens** 15 h, **Vivian** 16 h, **Oletsy** 3. March, **Jens** 22 h, **Petro** , **Alexsandr** 4 h, **Vladymyr** 17 h, **Sergey** 5. March, **Olha** 6. Mar, **Tatiana** 1 h, **Vyktr** 9. Mar, **Nadezhda** 8. Mar, **Andrei** 5 d , **Yhor** 18 h, **Yuliya** 9. Mar, **Pavel** 1 d, **Maryna** 23 h, **Borys** 5. Mar, **Sofya** 3 d, **Zoya** 3 d, **Denys** 2. Mar, **Svetlana** 2. Mar, **Vincens** 15 h, **Vivian** 16 h **Dyna** 4. March, **Krystyna** 5 h, **Roza** 3. Mar, **Alena** 7. Mar, **Yaroslava** 8 h, **Artur** 22 h, **Eva** 5. March

Date: March 12. Location: 37th School. Mariupol. Seventeenth day of the war.

“Saw a bomb crater 10 meters wide, 5 meters deep.”

“We eat pasta bread. The further the days, it got tougher and tougher.”

Date: March 16. Location: 37th School. Mariupol. Twenty-first

day of the war.

Basarab went to Donetskkaya Street, Mariupol. "The whole of Slobodka shook that night. There was an earthquake. A parachute bomb. At 6:00am the curfew ended and I ran to Donetskkaya street. There was a huge crater 12 meters wide. Total destruction in the morning. Smoldering burning houses, businesses, cars, people. Aid workers, civilians don't know if it was a plane that crashed or a missile strike. We dug up one grandmother there from under a wall. She was in pain. At that moment it just became hell."

Back at 1st Slobodka: "Wildly tired. Very tired. Most of Mariupol is said to have left. Russian troops are threatening us with a cleansing operation. I don't know what will happen and how. It's just a terrible picture. The very first day of the war, I did not rest. Every day I told myself, Tomorrow you will have a rest. In short, God bless us. I am very tired. I do not know what awaits us ahead, but, I will hope that the

Lord will have mercy on us."

Stopping for the one

Basarab states: "By this time, many people have already evacuated. In general, it got tougher. I had to run around a lot in the city center. For the sake of one girl, I had to go through the whole city. Just to make sure she's alive or not. I came and to my great joy she was alive. We even took pictures. My friend Natasha and I have gone a very long distance. So much that by the 15th day my left leg refused to work."

Date: March 19. Location: Peace Street. Mariupol. Twenty-fourth day of the war.

Surrounded by Russian forces and due to a series of events

known only to the Ukraine government and Ukraine Defense Forces and the Azov Regiment guarding that sector, word reached them that they were able to escape from that area.

The Azov Regiment without food, water, electricity and medical supplies stayed on to defend what remained of Mariupol.

Evacuation Day

Emotionally numb from the shelling and ordeal, as Basarab and the entire group were emerging from the basement the car in front of them and others were still on fire.

“We have 32 people in our basement. 70 people in another basement. There were more and more. I even lost count. At times like these the world went crazy.”

“We went straight to the drama theatre. When I was running around the city, shells exploded close to me, the closest exploded from me at a distance of 100 meters. When the shells exploded I kept saying God forgive all my sins, because, if I die today, I want to be with you.”

“We are evacuating from Mariupol. Most of the people were sent to the checkpoint. We have to leave the cats. The front line is already here at the top. We are gathered there now. We will go to Melekyne.

From Melekyne to Berdyans'k. (sic-From there) we will break through deep into Ukraine. And then we'll see how the Lord decides. In general, our people are leaving. Let's see how everything goes.”

“When we arrived in Zaporizhzhia I got poisoned. It was very bad. But, finally I had rest for one day. I was in shock. I needed to get up. All in all, it was hell.”

Finally, safe in Western Ukraine

Looking back now on the siege that lasted 22 days for them to get to a safe location inside western Ukraine, pastor Mark Basarab reflected on the events.

“Honestly, I had to go through this to understand how much I had. When you lose electricity, gas, water, you have no connection. Nothing. You sink to a state of a cave man. iPhone, all of this, heaps of rich cars, have lost their meaning. All of this no longer makes sense. The most important thing that made sense to us was clean water, that was the most important thing for us. Our values have changed.”

“The Russians could take away my house, my property... and what not. But, the Russians could never take away one thing. They could never take away my faith.”



“A real Christian is different from other people in that he has something no one can ever take away from him. That is your faith in God. Throughout the siege God did not leave us and all the people for whom I prayed.”

“Everyone is alive.”

“Even those who do not believe in Him.”

“You know I am alive and all my relatives are alive. And everyone I cared about. God exists! Therefore, glory be to Him. Thanks.”

Basarab, his congregation and the others are now in safety.

Update: The Azov Regiment

Running vitally low on ammunition, the Azov Regiment continued to hold out for 82 days without food, water, electricity or

medical supplies.

Because Ukrainian Defense Forces could not mount a rescue operation by land, sea or air from over 100 KMs away, on May 17th the remaining 265 fighters including over 50 that were seriously wounded of the 2,400 fighters in total who were defending the city and civilians were ordered to “stand down” ending their mission at the Azovstal steel works. The order was given by the Ukraine Defense Forces Chief in order to save as many remaining lives as possible in a future exchange of prisoners with Russian forces.

The deal was brokered by the UN and International Red Cross who were guaranteeing their safety in order to receive medical treatment, food and housing as prisoners of war in accordance with international law.

Then on July 29, in an Olenivka prison that was housing members of the Azov Regiment, 53 prisoners were killed and another 130 were injured by a “thermobaric explosion” from inside the facility. Authorities believed the massacre was ordered to hide the evidence of torture and numerous executions of the prisoners by the occupying Russian military.

The Ukraine government is continually working for their release. Recently 240 more prisoners were released. However, the status of the remaining Azov Regiment prisoners and whether Russia will honor it’s agreement is unknown at this time. ■

* **Note-** The social media account names are fictitious and the real names are redacted along with the actual social media platforms in order to protect the individuals and others due to stated Russian retaliation.

Original video “Confessions of Mariupol” can be found here:

How you can help

To help support Mark Basarab and the work in Ukraine please use the following information. Thank you.

To donate to Pastor Mark Basarab and his church you can give here and mark your donation "Pastor Basarab." {eoa}

Steven V Selthoffer *is a communications executive based in Germany. He has worked in humanitarian/relief aid for over 20 years with our NATO partners and has testified in joint U.S. Senate and Congressional OSCE hearings on relief aid, international relations and security.*