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Santiago de la Presilla



## Ukrainian Soldier Speaks — This Is Our ‘Stalingrad’

What it's like to serve on the war's front line

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RUSSIA (HTTP://WARISBORING.COM/ARTICLES/CATEGORY/RUSSIA) August 7, 2015 Santiago de la Presilla  
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At his 100-acre farm on the outskirts of Dnipropetrovsk, Ukraine’s third-largest city, Alexey Chaban looked rested. He’d just spent three months back home following a half-year of fighting.

The 50-year-old father of four is a first lieutenant with the Ukrainian army’s 17th Tank Brigade. He became well known after he published **an open letter on Facebook** (<https://www.google.com/url?q=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.facebook.com%2Fphoto.php%3Ffbid%3D1530606970525441%26set%3Da.1472118589707613.1073741835.100007284580429%26type%3D1%26theater&sa=D&sntz=1&usg=AFQjCNFxfgVI4x1cvJjil13bjLi9hqFCiVg>) directed to the mother of a captured pro-Russian soldier he and his tank crew let go after a battle.

He’s what many people here call “the typical Ukrainian hero,” since most Ukrainians fighting are middle-aged construction workers, former soldiers and farmers, like himself. During a wide-ranging interview, Chaban shared his thoughts on the pro-Russian rebels and their tactics, his experiences on the front line and the army’s drinking problem.

He also spoke bluntly about why he loathes Ukraine’s military commanders, the Minsk agreements and why the war still rages. His answer — because Russia wants it to.



(http://cdn.warisboring.com/images/1-

Men, No  
Viagra

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### **What was your motivation to fight?**

I really didn't want all of Ukraine to become Crimea. That was my main motivation.

### **What did you use to do before the war?**

This is my job [pointing at his farm], I don't have anything else. I have about 100 acres of land, it's my business.

### **I know you've been asked to tell this story a million times, but describe what happened the day you and your tank crew let the pro-Russian soldiers go, as well as the Ukrainian soldier you managed to save.**

It was on the 22nd or 21st of January of this year. We got intelligence that heavy machinery was being moved towards us, around 15 tanks. We only had two tanks, two BMPs and some infantry in our position. Fortunately we had a small river in front of us, that if you wanted to cross you really had to be familiar with the area, since the bridge was destroyed.

It was a foggy day, we could only see about 200 meters around us. We heard something was moving, but we didn't know what it was. We spotted their tanks and realized that they couldn't see us. We saw they couldn't figure out how to cross the river, so instead they started moving by the riverbed, that was when we finally decided to attack them from behind.

We started shooting at each other. The firefight wasn't fierce, mostly sporadic fire. Once, we actually ran into each other. We just saw two Russian tanks and one BMP — we blew the BMP as soon as we could, their tanks tried shooting us but didn't get us.

We shot blindly due to the fog, but managed to get one of their tanks in the end. They moved about 100 meters, being hit before they stopped. We reloaded but we saw that they opened their cockpit. As the soldiers went out, we saw that they were completely thunderstruck. The mechanic was still inside, so they took some time to take him out.

This was all happening 200-300 meters in front of us, so it would've been really easy to just finish them. At first, I didn't even think about letting them go. We realized that we were supposed to just destroy the target but we all agreed on holding fire

After waiting for a while — and they finally took the mechanic out while disappearing into the fog — we asked our young guys [from the 128th Infantry Brigade] to go and check the tank for booby traps. As soon as we were close, we saw the tank wasn't actually disabled, so I think they got scared and their mechanic was too disoriented to actually figure things out. They left everything in a hurry, it seems as if they weren't thinking straight.

Our mechanic even managed to start the captured tank. When we moved on, we found their BMP stuck on a ditch, but it wasn't damaged either, it was just abandoned. The whole fight really wasn't so harsh. We didn't see 15 tanks as previously reported, just around eight.

This wasn't the first time they attacked us without intelligence. For each Ukrainian soldier that gets killed, we kill 150 of theirs. These guys have very little experience.



Alexey Chaban next to a captured Russian tank. Photo via Facebook

([http://warisboring.com/images/jw/140611Q777grWpoPFwAneZ4FO8mQp0Wb0IGONqWicMm\\_f7v2x90JBXi9rQGmdhmlVimMhwA2xSLI0ztnngmL8olnhdE63bX6lrMzoVdf9epX3iYovEz55TXQquDKqVAXS0Qs6](http://warisboring.com/images/jw/140611Q777grWpoPFwAneZ4FO8mQp0Wb0IGONqWicMm_f7v2x90JBXi9rQGmdhmlVimMhwA2xSLI0ztnngmL8olnhdE63bX6lrMzoVdf9epX3iYovEz55TXQquDKqVAXS0Qs6))

**We can't see that Kiev really is winning the war, especially after the Ukrainian army had to retreat after the bloody battle of Debaltseve. How can you confirm these numbers?**

They've told us to attach cameras on our tanks, but I don't want to make any of this public. I remember after one firefight we could see dismembered bodies all across the field. I don't understand why somebody would want to record that.

We don't have the feeling that we are losing, because it doesn't seem like we're fighting something big, just some alcoholics and homeless guys. Despite the fact that there are Russian soldiers fighting us, they don't have experience and make huge mistakes. Dying by the hundreds — they're not even real fighters.

I knew [former Chechen military commander] Isa Munayev. He came to us asking for help and we provided him and his battalion with security wherever they wanted to go, as well as any extra weapons that we had. The Chechen battalion was full of really good fighters, named on behalf of [first Chechen president Dzhokhar] Dudayev, since Isa was his right hand.

He came here with his 18-year-old son. When I asked him why he was in Ukraine, he responded, "If Ukraine's going to win, now Chechnya will be free. But if Ukraine loses, I will never see a free Chechnya."



He was later killed in Debaltseve. One of our battalions got surrounded, and as he went to help them get out of the mess he died in the fighting. He was always the first one to get in and the last one to get out. When he was killed it took us a week to retrieve his body. Now the commander of the battalion is Adam Osmayev.

Isa always told me that the Russian fighters were just a bunch of drunks, but that if I ever saw [Chechen president Ramzan] Kadyrov’s men, then you should be very afraid. These are professionals, they’ve been fighting for their whole lives. The same goes for Russian Spetsnaz, GRU. If you see any of them, just leave. He also told me that we also shouldn’t capture any of these guys, because even if you capture only one of them, they’ll do anything to kill you.

It’s better to just execute them. [There’s a long pause.] They call them Kadyrov’s dogs.



Ukrainian self-propelled artillery on the move. OSCE photo  
([http://cdn.warisboring.com/images/OSCE\\_SMM\\_monitoring\\_the\\_movement\\_of\\_heavy\\_weaponry\\_in\\_eastern\\_Ukraine\\_16109335994.jpg](http://cdn.warisboring.com/images/OSCE_SMM_monitoring_the_movement_of_heavy_weaponry_in_eastern_Ukraine_16109335994.jpg))

**You forgot to tell me about the Ukrainian soldier you guys managed to save that same day.**

We arrived when another firefight had just finished. This poor guy saw a separatist tank almost flying from the hill — I can only imagine what was going through his head. We found a wounded soldier lying down on the snow, we came to him and asked if he really was a soldier. When he said yes, we asked him with who, but since we were in a Russian tank he was very hesitant.

He said he was Ukrainian, and when we told him that we were Ukrainian too, he couldn’t believe it. [Chuckles]

This same guy took us to another Ukrainian soldier named Alexander Zozulya. Alex was stuck under an abandoned Russian T-72 that was on top of a trench. I thought he wasn’t going to make it. It was  $-8^{\circ}\text{C}$  [ $17^{\circ}\text{F}$ ] and he was in really bad

shape. We were ordered to leave Alex in order to return fire, but we towed the tank and eventually managed to free him. Reinforcements came shortly after and took him to the hospital on a BMP.

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Once he left, I started to think that we'd forgotten to give him the anti-shock injection [Haecodesum]. We were sure he'd die without this, but some volunteers already provided him with the injection before we arrived. It turns out it was great we forgot, since a double dose would've definitely killed him in his condition.



Ukrainian and Russian soldiers train together. U.S. Army photo  
(<http://cdn.warisboring.com/images/435699.jpg>)

**A lot of people read the open letter to the mother of that Russian soldier your tank crew captured. Why did your tank crew decide to let him go? And do you think the separatists would've done the same thing if you got captured?**

The thing is, I found a phone inside the tank. I realized that he left it, and on the phone he had some addresses. Contacts. I thought about doing the open letter for a long time, and decided that, maybe, if I would speak directly to his mother that it would change something.

I'm not a writer, so one night I decided to write the letter properly, and it took me about half an hour. I sent it but I didn't expect it to blow up on the media.

I don't remember if it was the BBC or Reuters that called to tell me that the letter went viral. I didn't do it with the intention of getting attention. After some time, somebody sent me a link to a Facebook post by the same soldier we let go — he wrote that the whole letter thing was bullshit, that the tank was stuck and that some other guys left it. Basically that he wasn't actually in that tank.

He also said that he wouldn't have left anyone go if he had been on my place, but that we at least deserved a thank you for letting the guys go. I think that he may be right because we didn't hear back from his mother after I posted the letter.

Let me explain why. I had one accident where I ran into a dead Russian tankist after a firefight. I took his passport and wanted to give it to our SBU [Ukrainian intelligence service] but they didn't want to have anything to do with it. After a couple of weeks, I gave the passport to a couple of Ukrainian journalists.

We had journalists at least once a week, really brave guys — they barely survived. Their car was filled with bullet holes. For us it's something usual, but they had a hard time adjusting. They ran the story on how this separatist had a Russian passport on some famous Ukrainian channel. Soon after, I got a letter from the brother of this dead tankist and he said he couldn't believe he died, that he had talked to him like three days ago.

When he asked me why I didn't take a picture of the corpse, I told him — “Why the hell would I?”

He then texted me after a couple of months and asked me to retrieve his brother's body, offered some money, but I told him I couldn't help him. There still are hundreds of dead bodies laying around, we can't even get our own guys' bodies, how could I help his brother? Fighting is constant in that area.

Sanzharivka is our Ukrainian Stalingrad. In the end, he was able to retrieve his brother's body by going there himself by car. The tankist's wife also called me a couple of times. This is why I think the Russian tankist we “let go” might've been another guy.

**What was the thing you and your soldiers lacked the most?**

We got plenty of water and ate mostly canned foods, but we never lacked any. If we had some time, we would cook. If we couldn't get any water deliveries, we could just take it from the river.

However, our uniforms were only for the summer. If it wasn't for the volunteers, we wouldn't have had any winter gear. No gloves, no headgear, nothing.

Since the commanders are the ones doing the big deliveries, as soon as the Russians heard on our comms that they were on the area, a firefights would break out. After one battle, our commander said he



Russian passport, seized in Ukraine. Photo via Alexey Gubanov. (http://cdn.warisboring.com/images/ut7\_j0\_6y6p-CifvK235929rK450P-ViWwVdY9SmxdkmKkV1enRnPrsmVeVrk55Zr1YKa0LEywi5847Dkv8OEM6Z81LbFclLuS7meOndo-Jk9XABf3NzgF3dBU4rRQs600.jpg)

wasn't going to come to us to get shot at anymore. Ever since then, he only met us three kilometers from wherever we were.

What is really lacking there is radio communication — it's almost non-existent. We had a fight where one of our tanks went rogue. The radios were just broken. Nobody got around to fixing them, so a tank got lost. Our recon guy ended up risking his life by going on a jeep and eventually found the tank. We had very small radio sets that other soldiers bought out of their own pockets, but they were very short-distance ones.

Fights are very confusing due to the lack of comms, so we end up shooting our own. Friendly fire is very common, especially at night.

we are also lacking a lot of binoculars and night vision goggles. We had no thermals. My friends and relatives got me some thermals, and since then I started fighting in a complete different manner

Everybody's shooting at something at night just because they think there's movement, but once we got the thermals we could see around one, two kilometers from of our position. All we had to do was just check once every 30 minutes.

People usually buy this gear out of their own pockets, so that's what we ultimately did. The thermals cost around €3,200 [\$3,523] a piece, so apparently it's not a lot of money, but the army doesn't supply its soldiers with this type of gear.

**What are your thoughts on the Minsk agreements? Do you think they have avoided bloodshed or do they just exacerbate the situation?**

First of all, we don't know the agreements that thoroughly. We knew we had to stop shooting, and our superiors told us to not shoot at all. The Russians didn't take the agreement seriously. They kept shooting at us like there was never one. We always had some hope that they would stop.

Sometimes we got intelligence that they were getting ready to fire mortars at us. Once they started firing at us, we asked the commander if we could should back, but they wouldn't let us.



We realized Ukraine needs peace. For them [the separatists], it isn't an option. For them, fighting the war is a way to make a living. What are these Russian soldiers going to do during peacetime? Wash cars? Peace for them is death, war for them is life. It's absurd.



Ukrainian soldiers during a training exercise in Yavoriv, Ukraine. U.S. Army photo.  
(<http://cdn.warisboring.com/images/1979077.jpg>)

**What are your thoughts on America's efforts in helping Ukraine? Do you think 300 U.S. soldiers training Ukrainian troops is enough?**

Even though we really wish to have good equipment, nobody should give it to us because half of our brigades are constantly drinking. Some fighters are never sober. I was deployed in August of last year, and until March I saw some soldiers that were never sober. Young people drink much less, but regardless of age, almost everyone drinks.

We never lacked alcohol, that's for sure. But me and my brigade never drank. Soldiers got boxes of alcohol mailed by their families constantly. I saw soldiers ruining equipment in their drunken stupidity, and I'd be really upset if we started to spoil the equipment the Americans gave us just because our soldiers are unprofessional.

Our soldiers are not really that trained, so the equipment is tricky. Even the commanders aren't really that responsible. They're not confident enough. Half of the commanders are afraid of even going into the front lines. Our commander probably came three or two times and even though he wasn't that afraid — his entourage was.

Americans should train Ukrainian troops a lot more — they should even pick our commanders. That's the only way I can see things changing, because all the higher-ups are assholes. Some people will say that it's not everybody, but for me they all are.



It’s really a lot like in the Soviet Union. It’s still very difficult to find patriotic people. All commanders are pretty keen on stealing and avoiding the front lines.

When I was discharged now, I came to Kryvyi Rih where there’s a big military base. As I signed my demobilization papers, they told me that I should give them back all of my gear, even my mug and towel. I was angry and responded, “Are you guys nuts? It’s all shit, everything is wrecked. How can I give you a towel I’ve been using for almost a year?”

I even proposed to pay for the gear instead, but they refused. They didn’t provide me with half of what they were supposed to. If it wasn’t for the volunteers we wouldn’t have survived the winter. [The commanders are] the ones sitting in the bases with heating and warm food.

For me, the real army are the volunteers, the people who are fighting with fire in their eyes. I’d pick my officers from the volunteer battalions. We had one officer who fixed the tank cannons but was drunk all the time, so I had to learn by myself how to fix the damn thing, how to oil it properly, check the pressure. I had to do it all by myself.

If the Russian side behaved like a real army, they would’ve defeated us a long time ago. They’re just worst fighters than us. These separatists are making \$300 a month — that’s why they’re fighting.

**I can see you are very keen on social media, you give a lot of updates on the war. What made you do it?**

I can’t say that I’m active on social media. Only on **Facebook** (<https://www.google.com/url?q=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.facebook.com%2Fagrokompni&sa=D&ntz=1&usg=AFQjCNH9ZTPRincnbql8k6as5KCE2ay37g>).

I wrote like 20-30 articles, nothing more. First of all, there’s just not a lot of stuff to do. When there’s no shooting, you’re always on your phone. We just had a lot of time. You’d sleep eight hours and the rest of the day you’d spend it cooking, that’s it.

This is more of a “positional” war. We exchange fire, but we rarely push forward.

I changed my SIM card so nobody would call me. Somebody told us that the Russians were able to trace our phone calls, so I also didn’t want to put my relatives and friends in danger. On Facebook, I just wrote stuff down like where I was, if I went to church or not — I tried to go every Sunday.

Facebook was just a way of contacting people, keeping touch with the world outside of the war. Sharing your thoughts online made things easier.



Alexey Chaban at his farm. Santiago de la Presilla photo

([http://can.warisboring.com/images/1/1/AmKDTYqWaoU4L6dx0TF57WZxJhAY2VrJc1jMQAu5PNfsC0i89\\_ILcxVAguHF9r1Rxx30X90otr9dQi4nD8hv5fu5tV5nFmRg0tH0uw6D9fyIK9zN7h2FRkUHVnkuhVQs600.jpg](http://can.warisboring.com/images/1/1/AmKDTYqWaoU4L6dx0TF57WZxJhAY2VrJc1jMQAu5PNfsC0i89_ILcxVAguHF9r1Rxx30X90otr9dQi4nD8hv5fu5tV5nFmRg0tH0uw6D9fyIK9zN7h2FRkUHVnkuhVQs600.jpg))

### **If you could describe the war in one word, what would it be?**

As for me, the war is Ukraine being established as an independent state. Patriotism has really been growing since Maidan. Of course, it has its negative side, but state building has never been easy. I think we'll manage.

With the world's help, Russia will stop financing the war, and as soon as the financing stops, the war will stop. The Russian side is entirely fueled by Moscow's money. I don't want to say something stupid, but I don't have anything smart to say now.

**I know of an organization that deals with PTSD amongst Ukrainian soldiers called Wounded Warrior Ukraine ([http://www.google.com/url?q=http%3A%2F%2Fwoundedwarriorukraine.org&sa=D&sntz=1&usg=AFQjCNEVqTkA-ns7EPBhQRWUZO\\_GiDUG9g](http://www.google.com/url?q=http%3A%2F%2Fwoundedwarriorukraine.org&sa=D&sntz=1&usg=AFQjCNEVqTkA-ns7EPBhQRWUZO_GiDUG9g)). Can you tell me if the government offering any type of mental health assistance?**

I've never heard about the government helping veterans dealing with PTSD. I don't think they give a fuck. However, volunteers offer help to the families of soldiers in combat, but nothing else.

If you ask for a psychiatrist, they'd probably give you one. I have a dentist who told me he would treat me for free for the rest of my life. But that's pretty much it, it's all volunteer-based, nothing government-related.

**How was the morale among the soldiers? Do you think you can win or are you just tired of the war?**

For tank crews there’s no war anymore. There’s a lot of waiting involved. Of course if the Russians will launch an offensive, tankists such as myself will go back to the front line. However, I won’t be surprised if the Ukrainian army will stop supporting their commanders.

What’s going on now is total insanity.

Even though I met hundreds of heroes, nobody ever got decorated. We didn’t get anything for capturing the tank [there was supposed to be some sort of monetary compensation], but it’s not about that. It’s about all the heroes who have died defending our country.

I never heard about anybody getting decorated on our brigade. But of course we’re supposed to bring our old towels back.

### How do you see the future of Russian-Ukrainian relations?

Our countries won’t get along for a while. Maybe they never will. Even though we share relatives, I saw a lot of times that friends and family stop giving a fuck and start fighting between each other just for the politics of it.

I would build a wall between Russia and Ukraine, not to stop people, but as a symbol. Our mentalities are completely different. I don’t understand why the Russians even want to fight in Ukraine if some villages 10 kilometers from Moscow don’t have electricity or other basic services. Russia has gas, oil — all these resources — and yet people are so poor.

Long ago before the war, I noticed that in social media everything that was about Ukrainians — the comments from the Russian side — were really negative. I never understood why. I think the Russian government prepared its nation to hate Ukraine and it worked. They want to destroy us.



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**COMMENTS**



**Anonymous ()** August 8, 2015

#2

Russia is guilty – check  
...but everyone “must” give us something – check  
Killed 150 of them per each fallen UA soldier – check  
...lost nevertheless due to dummies – check  
BFF with friendly Chechen wahabis – check  
...war justifies kinda everything – check  
Super ebil separ pigdogs who ache for blood – check  
...and fight for cash only – check  
War inreases patriotism – check  
...but no concern about the same oligarchs making billions – check  
Et cetera.

**REPLY** (/ARTICLES/THIS-IS-OUR-STALINGRAD/?REPLYTOCOM=207#RESPOND)



**11B ()** August 9, 2015

#3

Oooooo.... Strange rant. Check. Not sure what you’re implying here, this is just an honest interview from a regular soldier. Of course it’s biased; interview any soldier and you’ll get a biased opinion.

**REPLY** (/ARTICLES/THIS-IS-OUR-STALINGRAD/?REPLYTOCOM=218#RESPOND)



**Amby ()** August 10, 2015

#4

@Anonymous : +1  
Now Santiago you just have to go and interview a separatist, so that we can have both sides of that story.

**REPLY** (/ARTICLES/THIS-IS-OUR-STALINGRAD/?REPLYTOCOM=240#RESPOND)



**Santiago ()** August 10, 2015

#5

You’d be surprised how hard it is to get in contact with the separatists unless you work for Russian-state media.

**REPLY** (/ARTICLES/THIS-IS-OUR-STALINGRAD/?REPLYTOCOM=245#RESPOND)





**Anonymous ()** August 10, 2015

#6

Good blog reporting, but everything here should be taken with a grain of salt. For example, the "passport" in the picture is not a valid international passport, but what Russians call "внутренний паспорт" or "internal passport." It is only valid in Russia or between some former USSR countries. It has very few security features (as you can tell from the photo) and are very commonly falsified, and you can get a fake one for about \$30.

Despite some obvious statements that be fact-checked and determined to not be credible, I think this is a valuable article for understanding the mindset of Ukrainian soldiers fighting for their own territory. Very few people know more Ukrainian soldiers have died fighting in their own country in one year than Americans have died in Afghanistan since 2001.

**REPLY** (/ARTICLES/THIS-IS-OUR-STALINGRAD/?REPLYTOCOM=237#RESPOND)



**Amby ()** August 10, 2015

#7

" Very few people know more Ukrainian soldiers have died fighting in their own country in one year than Americans have died in Afghanistan since 2001." -> And that's despite fighting alchoolic, homeless, car washers russians.

**REPLY** (/ARTICLES/THIS-IS-OUR-STALINGRAD/?REPLYTOCOM=241#RESPOND)

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