

North Bend man talks about life in Ukraine during war

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The first time he was in a war zone, Kurt Kimble volunteered to serve as a member of the U.S. Army. He never imagined when he returned from Iraq, he would be facing war again.

But the longtime North Bend, Oregon, resident is facing that exact scenario as he works to protect himself and his family in Ukraine.

Kimble grew up in North Bend and graduated from North Bend High School, only leaving when he joined the Army. He returned to North Bend after he left the service and raised his family in the area. Three years ago, he was facing tragedy in his life after his wife died, and with the blessing of his son and daughter, he decided to take a job in Ukraine.

"Three years ago, I decided to come to Ukraine to help teach the Ukrainian military and police IED awareness and first aid," he said this week. "Shortly after I arrived, I made some friends and a company asked me to come work for them."

Kimble later fell in love with a Ukrainian woman and remarried, taking in her daughter as his own.

Kimble said life in Lviv, Ukraine has been mostly good, but he started feeling apprehension grow about a month ago.

"When Russia and Belarus were holding what they called exercises," Kimble said. "I'm a former military man, and when they were bringing thousands and thousands of troops to the Ukrainian border, I thought they were going to advance further into Ukraine."

In Lviv, which is in western Ukraine about four hours from the Polish border, the ongoing war was just starting to be felt as of Monday.

"We've had a couple missile strikes and lots of air raid sirens," Kimble said. "Today, we got word that Belarus is bringing up troops to the north. A lot of Russian troops came across the Belarusian border."

As word of a war began unfurling in Ukraine, Kimble planned to escape, but reality stopped those plans.

"We had planned on leaving," he said. "We were able to obtain a visa for my wife. The day the embassy decided to close in Kyiv, they had to cancel my daughter's visa appointment. They basically said go to Poland, but the problem was you had to have a visa to get in."

Poland is now accepting Ukrainians without visas, but Kimble said for now he and his family are waiting it out. Over the weekend, he pounded out stainless steel to make what he called basic body armor. During a video call with The World, he showed around his house, where all the windows are taped over to keep glass from flying if something explodes nearby.

While Kimble is working to be prepared, he admitted he was worried. He said his family uses the Ukrainian word for duck every time they hear the sirens, and they run to their kitchen and hide. In addition, they never leave their home without helmets, just in case.

"I'd be idiotic if I wasn't scared," he said. "I'm more scared for my family."

As Kimble talked to The World, he stopped several times as news flashes reporting new attacks were sent to his phone.

"Apparently the talks in Belarus didn't accomplish anything," he said. "That's what we're hearing. We were hoping for some kind of resolution today with the talks. I don't think the president of the Russian federation will accept anything other than his goal."

Kimble, who after serving in the Army served as a police officer in Myrtle Point and as a Coos County Sheriff's deputy, said he is willing to fight to defend his family, but he hopes he doesn't have to.

"If I have to, I'll die here," he said. "I want to see my son and daughter. I want to see grandkids, I want to see my kids get married."

One thing Kimble has seen, he said, is heroic steps being taken by the Ukrainian people, who stand ready to defend their country.

"Citizens have responded in ways I've never imagined," he said. "People are lining up to be able to do something. I'm in awe with what I'm witnessing. You have people who have to use canes serving at checkpoints, stoking fires, serving tea. A lot of the civilians are standing outside with shotguns, doing what they can."

While Kimble lives the reality of life in a war zone, he said the world can help, but not in ways may would think.

"The world is witnessing a huge humanitarian crisis in Ukraine," Kimble said. "I don't know the exact figures, but I know there's a couple hundred thousand people who have left Ukraine. It's heartbreaking."

So, what does Kimble think the United States and others should do?

"I'm a soldier not a politician," he said. "I don't want to see American troops in Ukraine fighting. We've had 20 years of war with very little accomplished. I've had family serve in Afghanistan, I served in Iraq."

Kimble said he hopes to one day make it back to North Bend with his wife and daughter. For now, he had a message for those back home.

"Take a moment and look on what's going on here and be grateful you live in a country and a community where you don't have to worry about anything like that at all," Kimble said.

While many expect Russia to overtake Ukraine, the Ukrainian people have refused to give up. Kimble said that's not a surprise to him.

"The resolve of the Ukrainian military is phenomenal," he said. "I knew that when I first started training them. They were so eager to learn new information, new methods of training."

As he got ready for another night that was likely to be mostly sleepless, Kimble signed off by saying, "I want my family to know I love them."