

A convoy of hope and ‘desperation’: Volunteers drive ambulances from Virginia to Baltimore in effort to aid Ukraine

By Abigail Gruskin

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The closest Art Beltrone had come to driving an ambulance was getting behind the wheel of a U-Haul rental truck. But before dawn on Wednesday this week — after a test spin the day prior — he climbed into one of the white emergency vehicles with lights and sirens on top and buckled up for a long-haul commute from Harrisonburg, Virginia to Baltimore.

Beltrone, a former Newsday reporter and appraiser of military artifacts who lives in Keswick, Virginia, joined a crew of volunteers who shepherded a fleet of ambulances up the East Coast to the Port of Baltimore, where the vehicles will be shipped to soldiers and citizens in Ukraine as part of an ongoing humanitarian aid effort sparked by Russia’s invasion of the country in February of last year.

“It was my way of helping there, a little bit, even though I wasn’t going,” said Beltrone, 81, who served in the U.S. Marine Corps Reserve during the Vietnam War, but was never deployed. “It’s this overwhelming feeling of desperation.”

The convoy of ambulances totaled 15 by the time it reached the Port of Baltimore Access Control Center around 7:45 a.m. Wednesday. The delivery was short of the planned 22 vehicles — two broke down on the road and another five didn’t make it off the lot in Virginia — though all of the ambulances could still make it to Ukraine, if repaired in time.



Brock Bierman of Lyndhurst, Virginia helped set up a convoy of reconditioned ambulances that are headed to Ukraine via the Port of Baltimore. The vehicles were driven from Harrisonburg, Virginia to the Port of Baltimore by volunteers. (Lloyd Fox)

Some of the 27 volunteer drivers woke just after midnight to prepare for their 3 a.m. departure. All battled the blinding morning sun, as it rose during their roughly 170-mile drive.

Brock Bierman, the former president and CEO of Ukraine Friends and the founder of a group called Volunteer Ambulance Corps, arrived at the port after the other drivers — his ambulance had been one of the two to give out in the final stretch of the journey.

“These haven’t been used in years,” he said of the ambulances, which were purchased from a used car lot. “We reconditioned them as best we could.”

Bierman, 58, lives in Lyndhurst, Virginia, and formerly served as the chief of staff to the U.S. Agency for International Development’s Bureau for Europe and Eurasia. He was a three-time member of Rhode Island’s House of Representatives.

Since May of last year, the nonprofit organization Ukraine Friends and the Volunteer Ambulance Corps have donated and delivered 90 ambulances to Ukraine. Most have been handed off to the country’s Territorial Defense Forces, a reserve branch of Ukraine’s military.

“Part of the program is to actually deliver them to the front lines,” Bierman said, noting his multiple trips into Ukraine. “You’re seeing rockets over your head go into apartment buildings and into homes.”

“The issue that kept coming up was ambulances,” he said, noting an informal assessment he conducted of Ukrainians’ needs during one visit. Until now, the vehicles were being sourced from other European countries. The fleet that will be shipped from Baltimore is the first Bierman has coordinated to originate from the U.S., with an estimated cost of under \$10,000, including fees for shipping and customs.

Bierman first spotted the ambulances at a repair shop selling used cars off the side of Route 11, in Harrisonburg, Virginia. When he asked to buy the lot, the owner “looked at me like my head was screwed on wrong,” he recalled.



Volunteer drivers pose for a group photo after they drove the reconditioned ambulances from Harrisonburg, Virginia to the Port of Baltimore so they can be shipped to Ukraine. (Lloyd Fox)

Drumming up volunteer drivers has been easier; many come from Rotary International clubs in Virginia, Bierman said, adding that in some instances the organization has partnered with Ukraine Friends to purchase the ambulances.

“I had no idea this would ever happen,” Beltrone said of his current involvement in humanitarian aid for Ukraine. When he met Bierman a few weeks ago at a military

memorabilia show in Louisville, Kentucky, he jumped at the chance to drive one of the ambulances himself.

“It was arduous,” he said of the drive. He selected ambulance #70, he explained, because “seven is my lucky number.”

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has been met with an outpouring of humanitarian relief efforts across the U.S. In Maryland, Baltimoreans have invested in the cause, rallying around community-born fundraisers.

“There’s a lot of people that care in their hearts and their minds, for this war to end,” said Karina Mandell, who was born in Ukraine and chairs the Baltimore-Odesa Sister City Committee.

But as the war continues, she senses that some supporters of Ukraine have lost steam. “We’ve got challenges in our own backyard and challenges in our country,” she said. The committee is planning a springtime 5K race around Patterson Park to raise more funds and is in talks with the Maryland Department of Health’s Office of Preparedness and Response about the possibility of sending 1,500 ventilators to Ukraine, building on a prior donation from the state.

Ukraine Friends’ ambulances are scheduled to leave the port on March 20, Bierman said, then DHL will transport them by cargo ship to Hamburg, Germany, their initial destination overseas.

Mark McCray, a senior project manager at DHL Global Forwarding, said it’s his first time managing such a job, but that playing a part in global aid efforts is nothing new for the shipping company.

The port “takes a lot of pride in being actively involved in humanitarian initiatives,” William Doyle, the executive director of the Maryland Port Administration-Port of Baltimore, said in a statement to The Sun. Doyle said the port would be interested in supporting “future like-minded projects.”

In April, Bierman plans to catch up with the ambulances in Germany. He inquired about including himself in the shipment, as a chaperone of sorts, but was turned down, he said.



Reconditioned ambulances are headed to Ukraine via the Port of Baltimore. A group of volunteers delivered the ambulances from Virginia and they will be shipped and donated to defense forces in Ukraine. (Lloyd Fox)

Once in Ukraine, the vehicles will be distributed by leaders of the Territorial Defense Forces. In talking with Ukrainian doctors and soldiers, Bierman said he learned that a single ambulance has the potential to save an average of 200 lives per month.

“We’re saving thousands of lives with these ambulances that are coming from the United States,” he said.

The diesel vehicles are in better shape than any others Bierman has delivered thus far, he said. Still, he estimates they’ll last only 30 to 60 days on the ground before being rendered unusable, a fate he attributes to damage caused by Russian shelling. On March 5, Ukrainska Pravda, a Ukrainian news site, reported that medic Yana “Yara” Rykhlitska, 29, died near Bakhmut when her ambulance “came under fire.” A missile attack on a makeshift ambulance was blamed for the death of an American volunteer in Bakhmut last month, according to a CNN report.

Bierman said he will now direct his attention to Ukraine Focus, a recently revived and renamed nonprofit, where he will continue coordinating ambulance donations with

Volunteer Ambulance Corps. He said he looks forward to the day such relief efforts are no longer necessary.

“I hope that the war ends tomorrow,” he said. “I hope it ends today, actually.”