

Ukraine's drone lessons for NATO

I've learned a lot about drones working in Ukraine — lessons the West will have to learn soon, too.

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By Anna Husarska

On Sept. 9, 19 unarmed drones reached Polish territory. That same night, Russia launched more than 400 drones into Ukraine. While NATO fighter jets [destroyed as many as four of the 19 drones](#) over Poland, Ukraine's Air Force reported it [took down 93 percent of Russia's drone salvo](#). In the field of anti-drone combat, NATO has a lot to learn — and Ukraine has a lot to teach.

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I've had to learn a lot, too. Over three years of delivering aid to Ukraine, I have picked up skills I did not even know existed.

At the start of the war, I was a neophyte. Now I can tell the difference between “Mavic 3” and “Mavic 3 Classic” drones (the former is easier to evade). I can also easily recognize the sound of an Iranian-designed Shahed drone.

I know the best gas stations on the road from Warsaw to Odesa, having driven three dozen supply runs for Ukrainians at this point. I know that if I get too close to the front line, I should unfasten the seat belt and leave the windows open to be able to hear the drone and reduce the impact of the shock wave if anything hits the car.

During a course in Odesa, I was taught how to apply a tourniquet, and I now know how to put together a basic first-aid kit. I learned that thermal blankets can help conceal the warmth of a person's body from drones' thermal cameras. I understand that plastic from recycled bottles can feed a 3D printer for making drone parts.

My colleague Olga Shpak from the nongovernmental organization [Assist Ukraine](#) has drone experience because as a PhD in marine biology she often [filmed orcas and other whales](#). She and I have discussed the utility of “setkomets” — [nets dropped by drones](#) to trap enemy attack drones, not unlike a net Nabokov might have used to catch butterflies. And I know that nets used to protect churches from drones are heavy. I could not lift a box of netting that a friendly priest in Sumy asked me to bring to him from Warsaw.

Once, long ago, I was taught other skills meant for wartime. I am old enough to have taken the obligatory “preparation for defense” course at Warsaw University during the Cold War. We learned how to put on gas masks — for when the American capitalists invaded. All the new skills I have learned will serve me well if, or when, today's war engulfs Poland.

Because there is no escaping the fact that the war is at NATO's doorstep. In March 2024, Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk [said](#) that we are living in a prewar epoch. Now Foreign Minister Radek Sikorski resolutely [warns Moscow](#) that Poland will strike at Russian aircraft that stray into Polish airspace.

President Donald Trump's otherwise surprisingly [optimistic post](#) about how Ukraine "which has Great Spirit, and only getting better"... "is in a position to fight and WIN all of Ukraine back" ended with a worrying sign-off: "Good luck to all!" That sounded to me like withdrawal behind a "[big, beautiful ocean](#)."

But can the United States totally withdraw? Stepping on that red carpet in Alaska, Putin reminded Trump how close the two countries are with the greeting: "Good afternoon, dear neighbor." Just a few days ago, U.S. fighter jets scrambled after Russian bombers [buzzed the Alaskan coast](#).

Facts on the ground, or rather facts in the air, suggest that this is very much our war — all of ours. A war that Europe must confront, and a war that one day may come to the United States, if Putin's imperial appetite is not opposed. I fear my newfound expertise in drone-recognition and tourniquet-handling will become a globally useful skill.

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