

THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

Spokane doctor arrives at Ukraine military hospital ready to help – but what will that entail?

By Eli Francovich
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LVIV, Ukraine – Lying in a military hospital bed in this western Ukrainian city of 720,000 people, Dr. Kyle Varner wondered aloud: “What do you do if there is an air raid siren?”

“I guess there is really no class on what you do in a war zone,” he answered.

Varner doesn't have wartime experience, but he is a Spokane physician with emergency and internal medicine knowledge that's been increasingly necessary in the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The war has sent refugees and casualties flooding west from the front to the relative safety of Poland and other European nations – especially those that are members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

Varner left Spokane on Sunday with hopes that he could help. He flew to Poland with a bevy of medical supplies including gowns, tourniquets, bandages, chest tubes (to drain fluid out of the chest cavity following trauma), two portable ultrasound devices and more.

“I tried to pick things that I thought would be useful given the fact that there is a war,” he said. Varner practices at Providence Holy Family Hospital, which donated some of the supplies.

He also received donations from individuals. The Kalispell Tribe gave him \$2,400 to spend how he saw fit, although the shipment was delayed, and he couldn't bring those supplies on this trip. He estimates the supplies he did bring cost between \$30,000 and \$50,000.

After arriving in Poland, Varner contacted other aid workers, including Tom Palmer, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and a vice president at the Atlas Network, a libertarian organization.

Palmer is an erudite man and a veteran of going places he's not wanted. During the late '80s and early '90s, he smuggled banned books, fax machines, cash and other materials into the Soviet Union. More recently, he's undertaken similar efforts in the Middle East.

But this week he's going where he's wanted and is shuttling supplies between Poland and Ukraine. Varner rendezvoused with Palmer in Warsaw.

Palmer purchased a 20-year-old van for 3,000 euros while Varner tried to get permission to practice medicine in Poland along the border. However, by Thursday it had become clear he wouldn't be allowed to practice due to Polish medical licensing law, he said.

The duo turned their eyes east toward Ukraine. Varner had a contact at a military hospital in Lviv, roughly 50 miles from the Polish border and 350 miles from Kyiv, the capital city that has seen some of the heaviest fighting. They could use the help, said administrators at the Lviv Clinical Municipal Hospital. So the duo drove the van, full of medical supplies, the 250 miles from Warsaw to Lviv.

As they left Warsaw at 10 a.m., police cars raced through the city as two major politicians – U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau – visited Poland's capital in a show of support for eastern members of NATO. Other than those flashing lights, Warsaw seemed relatively normal. As Varner drove east, nearing the border, things began to change.

“All these buses are your first clue of what's going on here,” Varner said.

Most of those buses were full of refugees. To date, more than 1.5 million Ukrainians have fled the Russian invasion, with the majority, at least 1 million, going to Poland.

Once at the border, the two waited in line for about 20 minutes. Although more vehicles were leaving Ukraine, plenty were headed into the country – cars full of supplies, ambulances and trucks. Crossing into Ukraine was a simple task.

Ukrainian guards examined their American passports and did a cursory check of the van. As Varner and Palmer waited for final approval, a column of refugees walked by, cheeks reddened from the cold.

Varner's desire to help Ukrainians comes from his commitment to libertarian ideals and his experiences working in Latin America, particularly Venezuela. There, he saw what he called the abuses of Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, a close ally of Russia and President Vladimir Putin.

“When I see the things that happened in Venezuela, it definitely makes my blood boil,” he said. “And the thought of Ukrainian people falling under that kind of tyranny ...”

He paused and said, “These people are going to get subjected and harmed.”

Once in Ukraine, the mood changed. Sandbags and antitank devices known as Czech hedgehogs – beams welded together to resemble the metal pieces in the game of jacks – dominated each intersection. Ukrainian soldiers sat or stood by bonfires and stopped trucks and cars heading west

toward the border. While Varner couldn't be sure, he believed the soldiers were enforcing a nationwide ban on men between the ages of 16 and 60 leaving the country.

As the light faded, Varner and Palmer arrived in Lviv and pulled into the hospital complex designed to treat military veterans, but that's now treating anyone with injuries. According to certain reports, there are some 200,000 refugees who have arrived in Lviv from battered cities to the east.

At the hospital, they were met by Andriy Borisov, a medical doctor whose niece Dr. Olha Huzo practices in Chicago and works with the international aid organization MedGlobal.

Borisov, acting as a translator, introduced Varner to the hospital administrators, and Varner unloaded his supplies. Palmer and Borisov raced off to get to Palmer's hotel before the military curfew went into effect. Meanwhile, Varner was led to his lodgings for the night: an empty hospital room.

Laying in his bed, he scrolled through the news of the day and wondered aloud about the air raid protocol. He called a friend of his, a fellow libertarian who is also in Lviv. That man advised him to run to the basement, cover his ears and open his mouth. But don't worry, he said, there hasn't been an air raid warning in three days. Varner called another contact, a Ukrainian living abroad. She told him not to worry about it, that the building and his room were safe.

Either way, Varner is committed. He plans to stay in Lviv for up to a month, doing what good he can. If that means treating injured soldiers, so be it. If it means helping "little old ladies who get sick," that's OK too.

"I think one of the super important things I can accomplish by being here is showing other doctors it's OK to go," he said.