

Escaping From Hell

by Robert C. Valentine

It took years for an American public to read in book form the myriad true stories of Pearl Harbor December 7 and Corregidor, of horrifying eye-witness stories and carnage beyond what is published in a common history book.

The lines of communication are far different and faster in 2022. Let us flash backward in time to April 2, 2022, when Ukrainian troops reentered the capital city of Chernihiv, a part of the Chernihiv Oblast (province) of 1,511 settlements of various sizes ranging from cities to very tiny villages. This city has known human settlement for over 2,000 years. Chernihiv was a city occupied by Russian troops for more than a month before they evacuated and fled in April.

Nine days into the tremendous shelling and the start of the so-called war of “liberation”, comes a brutal story from that city. The following episode was given by a *BBC* correspondent Ann Foster, a mere 1½ months after the invasion of Ukraine began.

Which exact unit(s) occupied and held Chernihiv is unknown at this time, but overall the battles for Chernihiv involved the following Russian troops: an airborne brigade (the 11th Guards Air) the 2nd Guards Division, plus two other brigades and a division (74th, 35th Brigades, 90th Tank Div) all part of the 41st Russian Army in addition to the 36th Combined Army, their individual units undetermined as of this writing.

On Feb. 25, the Russian Ministry of Defense announced their superior force had surrounded Chernihiv, and in the next 24-48 hours fierce fighting took place. A day before, a platoon from the 74th Brigade had been captured by Ukrainian troops. Sea-saw battles ensued. Much of the civic center of Chernihiv became completely destroyed by incoming missiles by Feb. 27. That same date, the Kremlin announced to the world they had completely surrounded and blockaded Chernihiv. In another day, while the nearby village of Kyinka was being hit by cluster bombs, a fierce clash involving armor went on in and around Chernihiv.



It was at this stage that three people tried to escape the rotten hell of Chernihiv. Their ordeal was told to Ann Foster on April 9, 2022. Victoria Kutz and husband Petrov took their 12-year old daughter Veronica by car and tried to escape on the last day of February. The entire city was being shelled in the distance. They were in the process of escaping when the terrifying bombardment started raining all around them.



Then, it seemed as if the Russian artillery started to shell their escape.

The father stopped the car and all three decided to run for their lives. Victoria told the correspondent Foster, “My daughter got out of the car, and I went to follow. As I got out, my daughter fell. And, I looked, and saw her head was gone. She was bleeding from her neck, like a fountain. I was holding my baby . . .” Victoria clutched her 12-year old lifeless body with all her strength and ran for her life. Her husband was hit by a shell, too. The bombardment had also killed him. All the while shelling continued.

Victoria was later found by Russian soldiers, who took her to the basement of a school. Unknown to the world, she and 300 other people were held for 24 days in a miserable, overcrowded basement, with little water and food. Prisoners day and night.

On March 1, twenty-six days before the Academy Awards were held in Hollywood, the governor of Chernihiv, V. Chaus, announced to the world that every entry to his capital city was heavily mined. For the next 10 days, heavy air bombing was repeated, by both the Russian artillery units and Air Force. A few trucks of food and medicine managed to get into Chernihiv on Mar. 6, but who knows how



Before war, Victoria with her husband. On right, as she looked in the interview; fotos courtesy of BBC.

many of the 300,000 residents got them.

In one part of the cramped basement where Victoria was held, people died because of lack of any medical help. Seven days into Victoria's captivity, after begging, she was allowed by her captors to bury her husband and daughter. She had them buried in two boxes with the help of other civilians. Two crosses with signs. As Victoria related, "I started to cover the boxes with earth. But, new shelling started. So we ran away before we had finished burying them. If I had the possibility of shooting Putin, I would do it, and my hand would not shake." For the next few days, heavy fighting went on. Why did **women** cut their hair?

The First Coffins

The *Kyiv Independent* March 2: A report on an intercepted message on a WhatsApp audio of a resident from Aleysk, Russia (home to the 41st Guards Rocket Div and an air base), who stated part of the 35th Guards Air Brigade perished in the battle for Chernihiv, and out of 150 men, only 18 survived. She said they were expecting as many as 45 coffins to arrive on the day of her message. She said, the soldiers were "mostly very young men."

The "Hotel Ukraine" was demolished March 12; the big Chernihiv Polytechnic National University was destroyed on March 14. Blocks and blocks were laid to waste. Around March 31, some Ukrainian units were able to declare they had recaptured Highway M01 that connected Kyiv and beleaguered Chernihiv, effectively ending the siege, but the main bridge leading to Chernihiv was completely destroyed. Also, that night, the inhabitants in Chernihiv noticed their first night of silence since the war started although not all of Chernihiv had been evacuated by the occupying forces. However, numerous mines still surrounded Chernihiv. All the while nearby villages were being recaptured from the invaders, or liberators depending who you want to believe.

On March 15, the Chernihiv Regional Prosecutor's Office released information that 123 Ukrainian soldiers, 100 civilians and 5 policemen had been killed. Next day, the world awoke to the news a group of civilians while waiting in a breadline were shot, and murdered, 10 died, one was an American named Jimmy Hill. That same day, the total dead in Chernihiv was listed as 53 civilians, officially. By mid-April more than double that had been discovered. The worst of the campaign in the North, for all intent and purposes did not end until about April 6.