



SILENT ASSASSIN: Prone and camouflaged, the female fighter scouts for enemies through her sniper's scope

IRYNA is a 37-year-old mother-of-two, just 5ft 4in tall and weighs less than eight stone. Her hobbies include reading, travel, learning languages and fashion. She is also a highly trained and ruthless killer. Every day, her job is straightforward and dangerous in equal measures: to shoot dead as many Russian soldiers as possible. For Iryna is one of just a handful of female snipers in the Ukrainian army defending her beloved homeland.

'My first kill was early this year,' she says. 'I did not hesitate when I pulled the trigger. It wasn't difficult and I had an adrenaline rush. I didn't feel pleasure or joy but neither did I cry or feel upset. I was glad I did a good job.'

'I did it and then I went home [to her base],' she tells me matter-of-factly.

Speaking softly in near perfect English at a secret training camp west of the country's capital of Kyiv, Iryna explains why she has no sympathy for her many victims: 'The Russians came here to invade our country and so I don't feel sad for them if they die.'

She prefers operating at night as it gives her and her spotter – the second member of their two-person team, a male soldier who helps find, observe and choose her targets using a high-powered thermal telescope – greater safety and also more possibilities to find targets.

Through the sight of her sniper rifle, she sees the Russian soldiers as white shapes in the darkness. Sometimes she will wait all night to fire just one shot, but other times she will fire several in a few hours.

'I work as fast as possible,' she says, meaning she's trained to kill as many enemy soldiers in the shortest timespan.

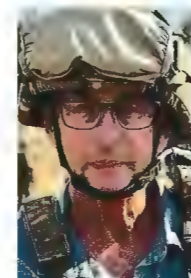
Quietly determined and always calm, she talks about her job satisfaction in the same way that others might discuss a routine role in an office. 'I like my job. I have great people around me,' she tells me, referring to her fellow soldiers.

In an exclusive interview and speaking publicly for the first time about her deadly occupation, Iryna explains her motivation for joining the Ukrainian army.

'Before the war, my family and I had a great life. But the Russians decided to try to take it all from us. So I wanted to protect my country and my family.'

The day when Russia launched its full-scale invasion on February 24 last year, Iryna, who does not give her surname for security reasons, was working in her family business of retail shops and real estate.

She says her brother texted her that the war had begun: 'There had



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IN KYIV, UKRAINE

been speculation, of course, that Russia was going to start the war, but I didn't believe that it could be true until it happened.'

The next day, she took her documents to the mobilisation centre in Lviv and said: 'I want to serve.'

However, there was a hitch – the Ukrainian army was not properly prepared for female volunteers. It took four days just to sign up.

'And now here I am,' Iryna says to me, as she sits cross-legged in the autumn sunshine.

'Finally, after enrolling, I was sent to a unit and an officer asked me what I wanted to do. I was not strong enough to be a frontline assault soldier but I said I had some

‘My friends know I have a big rifle and think it's a romantic role’

experience shooting, which I had done as a hobby.

'He wasn't really enthusiastic but he gave me a rifle and I started sniper training last March. The training is hard but I never thought once of giving up.'

Since then she has been assigned to different frontline regiments and units including those operating in Bakhmut, Zaporizhzhia, the Donbas and other regions.

'I have Donbas soil here in my belt,' pointing to the buckle across her waist. The earth stuck to her belt is the result of spending so much time lying on the ground, waiting to pull the trigger.

Now there are 60,000 women serving in Ukraine's armed forces – more than 42,000 occupying military roles, including 5,000 as soldiers on the frontline. However, the number of female snipers is barely a handful. Some of these women face a battle against not just their

Russian enemy, but also sexism in their ranks.

Iryna says that such attitudes have not changed greatly during her 20 months in the army: many senior officers are still not keen for women to serve on the frontline. This meant that when she started, she had difficulty getting a uniform and equipment that would fit because everything available as standard kit was too big.

Iryna is following a tiny number of other women who have carried out sniper roles, such as Lyudmila Pavlichenko – a Soviet soldier born in Ukraine.

She was the highest scoring female sniper during the Second World War and was given the Hero of the Soviet Union award – the most prestigious accolade on offer. Pavlichenko claimed 309 kills, though some question whether that total might have been exaggerated. Like Iryna, she was a civilian – employed as a trainee teacher – when her homeland was invaded by Nazi Germany in June 1941.

Iryna is the only female sniper in her special unit. Her weapon of choice is a 338-calibre, Italian-made Victrix sniper rifle, with a sophisticated thermal sight and a sound suppressor. She wears a camouflaged uniform and body armour.

Her best shooting position is lying prone on the ground. Her preferred technique is to shoot between one and three shots quickly, and then she and her spotter move away immediately before their position is located by the enemy.

She is capable of killing an enemy soldier from a distance of just under a mile, but says it is easier and more effective to shoot closer to her target.

Under Ukrainian army rules, she cannot discuss how many enemy soldiers she has killed or the details of each action. After being promoted, Iryna is now an officer serving as a lieutenant.

She says that soldiers from both sides are most vulnerable when relocating their position to resupply.

'I don't have a priority list of [specific] targets. Every Russian sol-

When I pull the trigger I get an adrenaline rush...the Russians invaded us so I don't feel sad when they die

Mum of two who's one of Ukraine's very few women snipers tells with brutal candour how she gave up her comfortable job in the family firm to become a ruthless killer

dier is a priority target,' she tells me with a wry smile.

She says the biggest threat to her and other snipers are specialised attack drones: 'You cannot predict their movements. The most dangerous moment for me was when I came under fire from Grad [a multi-rocket launch system capable of devastating a vast area].

'This was really dangerous and I was scared. I am a human being so of course I get scared. Only dead people are not scared.'

'I also had one situation where I saw nearby a phosphorus bomb explode in the sky.'

Iryna's family know she is serving in the army, but she has not told them her precise role. She says her mother would worry too much for her safety if she knew – so Iryna lets them assume it is just a safe desk job.

She's also reluctant to discuss details of her personal life other

than to say she has a son and daughter of school age. Her long and dangerous assignments far away from her home in western Ukraine mean

‘I prefer not to think about dying, but if it happens I want to die fast’

she has been apart from her family for up to four months at a time.

However, Iryna's closest civilian friends are aware of what she does. 'They know I have a big rifle and they think it is a cool job. They think it is a romantic role, even, but it is not. It is hard like any job in the

army during a war,' she said. 'I prefer not to think about dying but it is possible. If it happens, I want to die fast.' She chooses her words with care as if to suggest that, if killed, she would prefer to be shot dead by a rival sniper.

She adds that the most difficult part of her job is when a comrade is killed in battle. 'We lose our best people because they are always the bravest ones who take the most risks in battle.'

'Russia, however, loses its worst people, its criminals and others who are sent to the front line.'

I was able to secure an interview with Iryna through some of the military contacts that I have made during my five visits to Ukraine since the war began.

I ask if she receives counselling for her deadly role, but she shrugs her shoulders as if to say it had not even been considered.

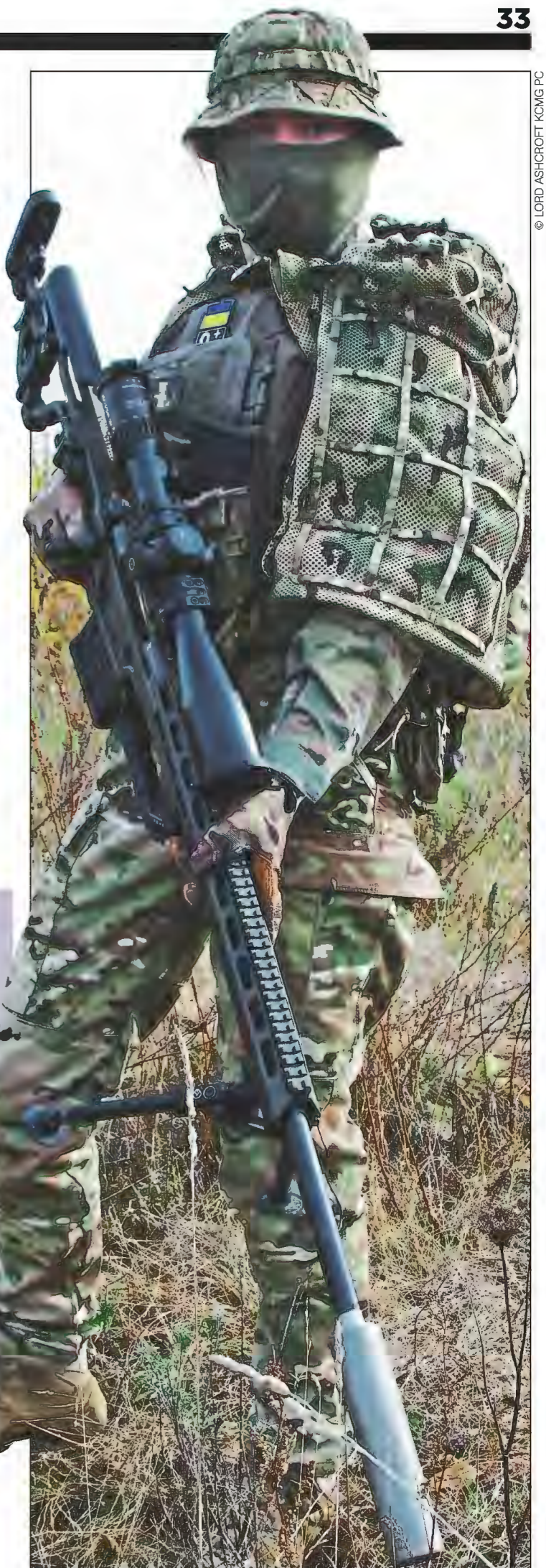
'I don't feel stressed but I am a

little tired because of the long war,' she replies.

Outside her work, she is caring and feminine. 'I am a woman so of course I like nice clothes,' she says with a laugh. Her overwhelming hope is for Ukraine to defeat Russia so convincingly that it regains all of its lost territory, both land gained since last year and that which Russia seized in 2014 – such as Crimea.

Once the war ends, Iryna intends to leave the army and go back to leading a normal life: 'I have put my life on "hold", but after our victory I want to return to my previous job, to travel more, to study more and to spend time with my friends and family.'

Ukraine has a long history of bloody wars and, to prevent more bloodshed in the future, Iryna says



LOCKED AND LOADED: Iryna primed in the Ukrainian wilderness

her country's military must crush its Russian enemy once and for all, with the help of the US, Britain and other allies. 'I hope we are the last generation that need to fight,' Iryna concludes. 'My big dream is that our children will not see war. My biggest dream of all is that we will not have Russia as a neighbour.'

'I know it is impossible but I really want the Russians to go to Mars!'

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