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Less than a week before his trip home he sat out on a mission — as he calls them — and the entire family was along for the ride via WhatsApp, which keeps us all connected in real time through texting. Here's how it played out.

Getting the call

On Friday, Pat saw a text on the dispatch system they've set up for volunteers across Ukraine. It read:

https://www.gvnews.com/opinion/from-the-editor-a-final-mission-a-life-changed/article_5ed590ea-f666-11ec-b419-4f5ad75fc92b.html

From the Editor: A final mission, a life changed

By Dan Shearer
Jun 28, 2022

An ambulance and several others declined to go because the girl's village was being shelled in eastern Ukraine near the front is strict — if you're out after hours, anything could happen.

Pat thought about it — probably not for very long — and texted us: "This might be my purpose."

He told the dispatcher he would go, along with Graham, his 20-year-old sidekick from Virginia who'd been with him for weeks.

We would later learn that a large group of volunteers in the dispatch chat immediately tried to talk him out of it. The child was in a village outside Kharkiv where the dilled roads, unstable military situation and bombs going off indiscriminately rendered it a near impossible task.

"We actually had some really tough arguments with many," Pat wrote to us. "Eventually, there were a few who sent us personal messages telling us they understood why we went, but there were many who kept telling us that a dead people wouldn't bring back one."

The dispatcher sent Pat a photo of the child — actually, a young woman of 20 — to place him for what he'd be dealing with. A cancerous tumor had more than doubled the size of her head. Pat said when they arrived, it was actually far worse. The woman weighed about 50 pounds, skin and bones. Her name is Viktoria.



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Getting the call

On Friday, Pat saw a text on the dispatch system they've set up for volunteers across Ukraine. It read:

"EXTREMELY URGENT: Driver and vehicle needed for immediate extraction of very sick little girl with cancer tumor in head... The child cannot sit up and needs to be able to lay down in the vehicle. This is an EXTREMELY urgent case..."

An ambulance and several others declined to go because the girl's village was being shelled and curfew in eastern Ukraine near the front is strict — if you're out after hours, anything could happen.

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The dispatchers sent Pat a photo of the child — actually, a young woman of 20 — to brace him for what he'd be dealing with. A cancerous tumor had more than doubled the size of her head. Pat said when they arrived, it was actually far worse. The woman weighed about 60 pounds, skin and bones. Her name is Viktoria.

Pat's role was to get her to the Polish border where they'd meet an ambulance that would get her to a hospital in Berlin.

Just before deciding to go, Pat had dropped off a load of child-sized quilts at an orphanage. They were handmade by a group of women from Desert Hills Lutheran Church in Green Valley. One of his early texts after arriving in Viktoria's village unveils what we call a God moment:

"She can't breath, she can't hold her head up. She can't eat. She is skinny as a rail. Sleeping means suffocating. We have a paramedic on the phone constantly, we were told originally one was riding with us, but that info was wrong," he wrote. "God told me to hold on to 5 of the quilts Danny's ladies sent and it was a life saver. They were perfect to make a laying down place for her and to keep her warm."

Then they started the slow, frustrating, arduous drive out of eastern Ukraine. Pat said they couldn't go over 10 mph the first few hours because of the awful roads. They hadn't slept in a day, and had to stop every hour so Viktoria's mother could clean out her mouth to allow her to breath. Choking to death was a very real possibility. All the while, missiles flew overhead.

Pat points out more challenges on the journey to and from eastern Ukraine:

"The checkpoints out this far east are beyond strict at curfew. We had machine guns pointed at us each time we were stopped and searched. But each time, the soldiers told us how sorry they were but had to do their jobs. They said, 'We are human and we wish you luck on your mission.' This was before we got to her. Now, they look in the window, jump away and wave us on."

The gruesome sight of the young girl was even too much for soldiers in the midst of war. ^[1]_{SEP}

Along the way, Pat kept us informed of what was happening, hour by hour. We prayed, we offered ideas, we encouraged him. We knew much of this Pat had to maneuver alone. How could we possibly understand what he was going through from 6,000 miles away? But what we all shared at times was a sense of despair. And, as we had all along, anger at this damned, meaningless war.

About 7 p.m. Friday, Pat told us he had 14 hours to go "just to meet a real ambulance." Then he said it might be closer to 20, which turned out to be accurate.

"Every time I hit a bump she groans in pain and it reminds me of how I have no right to ever complain again about my own comfort."

They were in constant contact with a paramedic team during the ride.

"The hardest part is looking at her mother's face knowing that her pain of not being able to stop her daughter's pain is just as real and painful."

At one point they passed a village that, three hours later, was hit by 24 missiles. Pat got a firsthand report on the damage from somebody he knows in a nearby town.

"My house shook terribly," she wrote to him. "It was very scary."

Along the way, an ambulance team agreed to meet them at a warehouse in Lviv and to take Viktoria to Berlin.

"After we got her in the ambulance, her mom started to cry so hard," Pat wrote. "I honestly don't know what to think... I don't know if there is any hope. My guess is no. I hope I am wrong."

He also wrote, "Those quilts were a huge help to support her head and keep her warm. Her mom says they will keep them forever."

After 36 hours without sleep, Pat went to bed.

Follow up

Hours later, Pat gave us a couple of updates.

"I just found out that the warehouse that we met the ambulance at last night was blown up with missiles this morning here in Lviv."

He also said he had a request from officials to stay in Ukraine longer to help evacuate people from the east, and he was strongly considering it. A couple of days later, he decided it was time to come home for a while. We all think he made the right decision. He wasn't so sure.

"I am going to have these feelings of abandoning people," he wrote.

Our family reminded him of the hundreds of people he'd helped, how he had conducted himself with honor, made good decisions, and knew when to move forward and when to pause. All of that kept him useful and alive.

"There will never be a good time to leave," he eventually conceded.

On Tuesday morning, we asked if there were any updates on Viktoria. Pat told us he'd met some volunteers in Lviv. He was putting some equipment into his donated bright-yellow van when a couple of volunteer drivers approached and said, 'Is this the famous yellow submarine?! OMG, dude, you're a legend! We've been talking about you for days now! You saved Viktoria!'"

They told him they wanted to form a team with him when Pat returns to Ukraine. Then they showed him a video of Viktoria being delivered to a Berlin hospital in the ambulance, then photos of her in a hospital bed, looking rested and well cared for. She has a very long road ahead, but she just might make it.

"They said there was a team of doctors working on her," Pat wrote. "They said her first words when they put a tube through her throat was, 'Thank God I can breathe!'"

— Dan Shearer