

My name is Roman. I am 31 years old, and before the war I was a businessman. I live in Kyiv.

My wife and I had bought this beautiful piece of land by the forest just outside Kyiv. We had saved and saved, but we could only afford the land and building the foundations of the house. So we decided to save up some more money and start construction in the spring of 2022.

But then the invasion came. On february 24 when everything started, I first evacuated my wife from Kyiv. I borrowed a car and my wife joined up with three other women. They left on february 25 in the morning. When they had left, I turned my own car and went in the opposite direction. I went to join the army.

I had no previous weapons experience or army training. For me, it was an easy decision, but it wasn't easy for my wife, though. These were dangerous times. Kyiv was half surrounded by russians, and the Ukrainian army was only trying to organise its defence. Those that went out north did not expect to come back alive.

I was driving north, where my brother was located. This was where the confrontations were happening. I was in civilian clothes, without any military equipment. I heard explosions all around my car. I understood that if I continued driving, I would be in the middle of the fighting. I wanted to turn the car, but I had this inner decision that I needed to take part in the protection of Kyiv. That was the hardest moment. I kept driving.

I had my brother on the phone while I was in the car. He was in contact with the military checkpoints and was asking them to let me through. He told them which car I came in and asked them not to shoot me. At the time it was very hard to tell who was the enemy.

The soldiers at the military block posts told me to go back, it was dangerous there, but I refused. They couldn't order me. I am a free person in a free country.

When I finally arrived, I got a gun and I was united with my brother. Two days later I had a bulletproof vest. Within a week I had a full uniform, and I was happy I didn't have to defend Kyiv in a sports costume anymore.

My brother and I were in this defence unit, like partisans. I stayed in the unit for five months without receiving salary, and all the money we had saved for the house disappeared. I joined the official army afterwards. I was sent to Bakhmut.

Our piece of land was right on the frontline. Fifty meters from our piece of land was a beautiful forest with a spa complex and a lake, and in the forest is this field with horses. So peaceful and beautiful. It was heaven.

But the russians took that forest and they used the spa complex as a a torture and rape point. When they left, they destroyed the buildings. They even threw a grenade in among the horses so they all died. The forest is full of mines now.

We will not let this darkness take over our place and our forest. If we let them spoil the meaning of this place, it would be a defeat.

Recently we decided to start build our house. Not the house that we dream of, but the house we can afford. And right now, we have walls, a roof and doors. We even planted our first plant there the other day, a raspberry.

We still don't know when the house will be finished. That depends on money. The house is small, but I like it. It is ours.