

**Commission on Security & Cooperation in Europe:  
U.S. Helsinki Commission**

**Helsinki on the Hill Podcast**

**Brothers in Arms**

**Guests:**

**Former U.S. Army Staff Sergeant James Vasquez;  
Lieutenant Colonel Rip Rawlings (USMC, Ret.)**

**Host:**

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TIERSKY: Hello and welcome back to Helsinki on the Hill, a series of conversations hosted by the United States Helsinki Commission on human rights and comprehensive security in Europe and beyond. I'm your host, Alex Tiersky.

Listeners, this episode continues our series dealing with the ongoing Russian war against Ukraine. One of the remarkable aspects of this war that we haven't touched on yet is the extraordinary phenomenon of the thousands of non-Ukrainians who have signed up to help defend the cause of freedom in Ukraine. Today I have the privilege of bringing to you a short interview with two men who retired from the U.S. armed forces and are now standing shoulder-to-shoulder with their Ukrainian brothers in arms. James Vasquez, a former U.S. Army staff sergeant, who has fought for months on the frontlines in Ukraine. James has gained a huge following on social media with his frontline documentation of what he is seeing and experiencing in this fight. James, thanks so much for joining us.

VASQUEZ: My honor.

TIERSKY: I also want to welcome to the podcast retired U.S. Marine Lieutenant Colonel Rip Rawlings, who is mobilizing and coordinating support to the Ukrainian armed forces through his foundation, Ripley's Heroes. Rip, thanks for joining us.

RAWLINGS: Thanks for having me. Glad to be on board with you.

TIERSKY: Well, gentlemen, I want to start with, I think, the first question that anyone with the opportunity to talk to you would want to ask. Which is: listeners of this podcast are pretty well aware of the conflict in Ukraine and the stakes involved, a lot of them have supported in one way or another the Ukrainian cause. But the two of you have taken this, I think, to whole different level. I'd like you to tell our listeners a little bit about how you first got involved in this fight. James, maybe we could start with you. If you could tell us a bit about your background, how you decided this was something you personally needed to be a part of.

VASQUEZ: My grandmother was Latvian during World War II. When I was a kid, she used to tell me stories about, you know, her literally running through the war. Her whole family got slaughtered. She was – she was one of the people that saw the writing on the wall and decided to flee. And while she tried to have her family flee with her, they were pretty complacent because the BBC was saying that everything's going to be OK. So they kind of believed the news, or whatever propaganda they had back then.

But she fled through the war, and literally was running through the woods, watching soldiers get blown up and, you know, making her way to France. And she would tell these stories when I was a kid. And, you know, everything that she told me I'm now watching on TV. I mean, I literally was watching TV and seeing women and children running through the war, people stepping on mines and getting blown up, and, you know, just some crazy footage. And I'm, like, man, this is – this is exactly what she was telling me about. So it was no longer something that, you know, I heard. This was now something that I saw.

I said, you know, I'm going to go there. I'll go there for a couple months and, you know, help these people out. I didn't realize it was going to turn into this, well, lifelong mission, you know, at the time. But I figured I can give them a couple months. You know, whatever I could financially, you know, afford to be able to be away from work and be away from my home. And then once I went there, you know, it really changed my whole outlook on what's happening. And so here I am. I'm back. And fighting for these people again. And it's actually my honor to do so.

TIERSKY: James, thanks for sharing that. Rip, I'd like for you to also tell us how you became so deeply engaged in supporting the Ukrainian armed forces. And I'm curious, for instance, how your – how your career with the Marines plays into this. Over to you.

RAWLINGS: Yeah, sure. So the actual incidence of getting involved was kind of interesting. My wife and I were headed out to an '80s cruise, where you can listen to '80s bands. We'd saved up for it for a couple years. And looking forward to – (laughs) – yeah, we were looking forward to listening to Flock of Seagulls and a bunch of stuff like that. (Laughter.) And the war kicked off. And I'm kind of an insomniac to begin with and it was one of these nights where I kind of was tossing and turning. My wife woke up and she said: What's going on now?

And I said, well, this thing in Ukraine's bugging me. And she said – she looked at me, and she said: We're not going to the '80s cruise are we? And I said, well – (laughs) – I don't think so. She said, you got a plan, don't you? I said, well, I think I do. I think, let's go over and see what we can do to provide some good, because this is an act of sheer terror and abject evil that Russia has perpetrated on the Ukrainian people. There's no reason for them to have done this, and the people are innocent.

And so my wife had the time off. She's a surgeon. We met in the military. We went to Poland and tried to do some help. After about 10 days of helping in the refugee camps where, you know, the stories and the faces and the horror that people had experienced kind of hit us full face. I mean, we realized at that point just how terrible it really was.

We had gotten the media reports and seen what was happening in the news, but when you talk to, you know, little kids as young as 12 and 13, you talk to young people who've left their lives and had their world demolished. And in a lot of cases, they've lost parents and loved ones. In some cases, just because of the abilities of technology, they were still in touch with brothers and cousins and fathers that were fighting, you know, literally on the day that they arrived.

But so we tried to provide them comfort and support. My wife, you know, working as a surgeon in the temporary field hospital that was set up there, and I was credentialed as press. And so I was trying to get the stories out so people understood what was happening. After about 10 days, my wife had to go back to the states. She had, you know, cancer patients that were counting on her for their survival back in the United States. But I kind of asked her permission, you know, as husbands do, and said, hey, listen, I'm interested in doing some more. And she said, well, are you asking? Because it's pretty clear you're going to do it anyways. (Laughter.)

I said, well, yeah. So I crossed the border and linked up with a friend of mine. And made fast friends with a bunch of other guys that were civilians. And, you know, just said: What can we do to help? I linked up with some soldiers and some marines that had been in the Ukrainian legion. And just determined that we could provide some support to them. So, you know, the first unit that we supported, we were able to fundraise about \$70,000. And we gave it directly to them. It was night vision goggles and stuff like that, that we were able to purchase. You know, and we did it all legally. We did everything the right way. That's one of the reasons that we still exist, I think, is that we've chosen to do things 100 percent legally.

My family is Polish on my mom's side. So I grew up with stories from my grandmother and from my cousins. And some of them – you know, we had uncles – a great uncle that had fought against the Russians and the Germans and had a very – a very bad perspective on Russia in general, the Soviet Union especially, of course. But my grandmother on my mom's side used to tell me all the time – she would say: Huntoush (ph), never trust the Russians. She would say it over and over again. I mean, as a kid when you're, like, eight or nine or 10, it just doesn't make a lot of sense. But it's funny, all these years later, you know, she was right. Never trust the Russians. This is a very, very evil act that they've committed.

TIERSKY: Rip, thanks for sharing all of that. I want to follow up with both of you, actually. Something that you said – I want to come back to the Ukrainian – the international legion. But before I do that, Rip, you mentioned a bunch of other guys. And I know the two of you connected in Ukraine, James and –

RAWLINGS: We did, yeah.

TIERSKY: Just give us a picture. You know, you're showing up, both of you in your own way, kind of early on in this conflict, in this war of aggression. Is there a flood of other non-Ukrainians that you are interacting with and seeing? Did you really feel like you were kind of alone, free electrons? Or give us a sense of, you know, who were the other non-Americans and the extent to which you interacted with them.

RAWLINGS: Having been in the refugee camps, we saw a flood of people coming out. And that was generally the direction. We were there in very early March, and so we saw just a flood of refugees, all Ukrainians, leaving. The one thing I think that's most important to express is this is a country at war. And of course, in the first weeks it was very, you know, I mean, horrific, I guess. The only way to explain it is that the Russians were crushing everything in their path, civilians.

I mean, it felt like being in, you know, Paris as the Germans approached. It felt like being in, you know, Saigon as the Viet Cong approached. I mean, it was – people were burning documents. People were getting in any vehicle that they could. They were abandoning vehicles on the highway, walking, you know, to get to the Polish border.

And so, you know, but we did meet a number of differential nationalities – Spaniards, Americans, Brits, Frenchmen. I met with James not too long after that. He had been, you know, fighting up in Bucha, near Irpin. And we met in Lviv.

TIERSKY: Sure. Well, James, let me – let me ask you the same question. As you're showing up for the first time on the battlefield, or on your way there, you know, should we be picturing a kind of flood of, I don't know, you know, as I say, brothers in arms from the Baltic states or from Poland, who are kind of all around you?

VASQUEZ: Well, to Rip's point, I saw a lot of people leaving. I didn't see a lot of people heading in. I was on my way to Lviv. And I was going to – there's a base over there, and I was going to sign up with the Foreign Legion. Well, while I was traveling for two days to get over there, I didn't realize that that Foreign Legion base got blown up. It got attacked. So they were – I, basically got there and, you know, they're picking up bodies and didn't know what to do with me. So I hooked up with a Ukrainian-born U.K. soldier, active-duty U.K. soldier who left his country that he lived in to go back home to fight. And so it was kind of a little bit of a little kismet.

So because the Foreign Legion was no longer available at that moment he's, like, well, look, I have friends that I grew up with. They're fighting on the front lines. You know, if you want, come with me and let's go, you know, hook up with these Ukrainian soldiers. And they were happy to have us. And, you know, from there, we realized very quickly that these guys are heavily undertrained, heavily under-armed, and had a lot to desire, you know, as far as being soldiers.

So we took it upon ourselves to start training them. You know, I started a PayPal account, raised a bunch of money through this underground railroad system of Ukraine – was able to get them sights, scopes, you know, buttstocks, all the stuff they'd need to fit out these, let's face it, 30-year-old AK-47s and -74s. I mean, they were just crap weapons. There was no sophistication whatsoever. And so, you know, maybe selfishly for me, I – (laughs) – I wanted to get everybody squared away and have them have the best stuff. I mean, these guys were fighting in sneakers and, you know, no Kevlar, no body armor, no nothing.

But, you know, I didn't want them to get me and Victor killed, so – (laughter) – so we did a lot of work as far as, you know, getting these guys trained up, getting them up to par, making sure their weapons are up to par, took them to the range, dialed in all their weapons, showed them how to shoot, showed them how to, you know, fight, gave them basic tactical maneuvers in order to be able to fight like gentlemen. And so within just a few weeks – I probably had the best outfitted unit in the whole country because of our efforts.

TIERSKY: Well, James, I want to come back to this question of, you know, how far the Ukrainian forces have come since the beginning of the war, and what they most need in terms of support. But before we do that, you know, you both mentioned now a couple of times the Ukrainian legion or the international legion. You know, we're all aware that Russian propaganda is a reality in this space. And one of the – one of the accusations that I suppose someone in your position might need to deal with is the accusation that, somehow, you're a mercenary of some sort, that it's illegitimate for you to be there.

James, let me start with you. First of all, have you – have you seen those accusations for yourself, personally, or for some others that you’ve deployed with? And then, Rip, I’d like to bring you into this conversation as well. How do you handle this kind of propaganda?

RAWLINGS: Well, let me throw one thing in there. To be a mercenary, you have to get paid. You have to have a government that says: We want you to come in and work for us. And then you have to get money from them. And James has never gotten paid, so. (Laughter.) I mean, he’s not a mercenary. People keep saying stuff like that.

VASQUEZ: Not only am I not a mercenary, as far as any monetary value, but I didn’t even join the Foreign Legion. So I wasn’t getting paid by anybody. I financed my whole trip.

RAWLINGS: He’s the – he’s the reverse of a mercenary. He paid for all his own stuff.

TIERSKY: Along these lines, let me ask you then, how well-integrated are you in the kind of formal structures of the Ukrainian armed forces? Are there issues like, you know, the uniform that you need to wear, or issues of rank? How does that all get sorted out?

VASQUEZ: Well, I’ll start on that one. In the beginning, there was – when I first went there, there was zero rank structure. There was – I mean, there was zero structure, period. When I first got there, there wasn’t – you know, these guys were civilians. They weren’t – they weren’t soldiers. And there was no rank. It was basically whoever was the oldest was the guy who led the way, which it’s ridiculous because that doesn’t make him, you know, the best soldier there.

Now it’s becoming a little more sophisticated. You know, my guy Victor (sp), just spoke with him earlier, has been made a commander. They’re starting to get more of a rank structure. Uniformity is still a problem, but – as far as uniforms, to answer your question, but they’re still trying to get, you know, all these basic combat, all the things that Rip and I are trying to provide to make them have some sort of uniformity.

I mean, this is why we were wearing blue tape on our arms when we first went in, because it’s the only way we can identify ourselves because people were fighting with all types of different uniforms. Some people had sneakers on. Some people – you know, I fought with a – I was fighting with a guy, he had a red t-shirt on. I’m like, what are you doing, you know? (Laughter.) So it’s getting better every day. These guys are becoming soldiers more and more every day. It’s getting more sophisticated every day.

In the beginning, all these guys had was – you know, was their heart. And their heart was in it. Now their skills and what Rip and I are trying to provide these guys with as far as, you know, equipment, is now catching up to their heart. So these Ukrainian soldiers are – their morale is getting boosted big time by everything that’s, you know, now coming in and being provided to them. Whereas the Russians’ morale, I think it’s kind of fallen by the wayside. So, I mean, that’s a critical part of being able to win this war. And I wouldn’t be back over here if I wasn’t 100 percent positive that Ukraine’s going to be victorious.

TIERSKY: Uh-huh. James, thanks for that. Rip, I just want to see if you have any thoughts you'd like to contribute on the issue of the integration of soldiers who are not Ukrainian into the Ukrainian military effort.

RAWLINGS: Yeah. I mean, let me kind of hit on something that James is on, and then I'll get on that one. You know, it's difficult for some people to understand that this is a country completely consumed by war. So they're under martial law. They're still a democratic country. So their border, at least to the west, is open. But, you know, they're being shot by missiles on a day-to-day basis. There's about five different types of missiles that impact all over the country, that hit civil infrastructure, it's hit schools.

So, you know, things are organized. But they're also chaotic. You know, James was talking about how rank structure and all this kind of thing – I mean, you know, imagine the United States being overwhelmed on three sides and you kind of get a picture for what things look like inside the country. It's that people were – I never saw any Ukrainians panicked. In fact, in some places they root maybe a little too deeply to their communities and don't leave when there's, you know, Russians attacking. But, you know, this is a country that, you know, you can take a look at it and say, well, this was disorganized, or this didn't work.

But as far as the other question you asked, you were acting about interaction with foreign fighters. I think about 66 percent, maybe two-thirds, of the aid that we provide goes to foreign fighters, which are Ukrainian legionnaires. It's partly just because their demands are higher. Partly because the communications signals to us are better. Ukrainian units that we support, because we do have a number of them as well, tend to, you know, ask for one piece of equipment and then they're quiet for a little while. And then they say, oh, you know, are you still able to help us with this?

Whereas the U.S. units – (laughter) – we feel like we're constantly behind, because, you know, hey, you guys promised us 10 helmets. And we've been able to procure three. You know, and then they don't forgive you. (Laughs.) So, like, a week later it's, hey, are seven more helmets coming our way?

The biggest thing is we – you know, you do – we have a huge trust that's been placed on our shoulders. I mean, these are moms, and dads, and uncles, and kids, and whoever, that are giving us \$5 and \$10. I mean, the donations are all very small, and they're from people who are very well-meaning. And in some cases, we tell people, if you can't afford it, don't donate. But, you know, just retweet us and kind of watch the news and make sure you're staying informed. But we'll put the \$5 to good use.

And so, you know, we had one unit that lost a set of NVGs. (Laughs.) And, I mean, it was all I could do not to jump through the phone and chew them out. When I talked to the guys who lost it, they were – I mean, remorseful doesn't cut it. They were, like, sir, we are so sorry. But it literally fell off into the water and we couldn't recover it in time. And they were beating themselves up way worse than I would, even as a – I mean, as a colonel of Marines, I would have kicked their butt. But the remorse that they showed was equal. But, you know, that's a lot

of trust that's down the drain. You know, you think of all the people that contributed money to make – to buy that, and it's lost.

TIERSKY: Well, Rip, let me just – at the risk of stating the obvious – you're obviously talking about – when you use “we,” you're talking about the support that's provided by your foundation, Ripley's Heroes. And I'll just – I'll just jump in and mention that NVGs, that you mentioned, these are night vision goggles, obviously.

So you were – you were moved to put together this foundation. I'd love for you to talk a little bit about why you thought a formal mechanism like a foundation, Ripley's Heroes, was necessary. And then, James, maybe you can talk a little bit about what kind of support you've seen that's been especially effective and needed by some of the frontline forces. Rip, why don't you get us started?

RAWLINGS: Yeah. I think one of the greatest aspects of our democracy is that we have individuals and private parties that are empowered by our government to use our free will to help where we want. And so you see two different types of free will being used, you know, in your – directly in front of you in the interview today. Which is James has decided to use the freedom that's given to him by the democracy that we live in to go help these people physically and mentally and support them in fighting. So he's literally drawn to use his experience and skills to help ensure that the fighting that's being done by the Ukrainians in order to support their budding democracy to thrive and continue to exist.

So it's a similar thing for Ripley's Heroes. Obviously, you know, James is in the fight whereas I'm, you know, well behind the fight providing equipment. But when we realize that a set of night vision goggles or some body armor – we provide only non-lethal aid, we don't do bullets or guns—those types of equipment, to quote I think it was Winston Churchill, the United States is the arsenal and the forge of democracies. So we take that literally. I mean, as private citizens, we're empowered to do things when our government is not able.

I mean, the government is able to provide a tremendous amount of support and has provided billions of dollars in aid. That doesn't trickle down. So you imagine from the bottom up, there are a lot of units that are still left wanting. And so we're filling a niche. I hope at some point the U.S. starts to increase, and all other nations, increase the amount of what they're giving. And then, you know, we're out of business because every troop is receiving all the equipment he needs in order to stop this invasion.

But, you know, the question that you asked was why were we compelled to do it? And it's because budding democracies like this one are exactly what we're supposed to protect. I think it's something that we're – is embedded in our democracies. That we have an inherent right as individual citizens to support other countries and other people when they're in need.

Even better, you know, the sons of our democracy – James himself and a lot of the other warriors that we support – have decided to put their own lives on the line in order to support people and their own budding democracy in Ukraine. So I think that's a worthy effort. It's very fulfilling. It's very difficult.



TIERSKY: Well, Rip, I'm going to come back to you for some of those details because I think they will be particularly interesting, and ask you also in a moment about any kinds of obstacles to providing kinds of assistance you think are especially worthwhile. But let me – let me flip it to James now and come back to this question that I wanted to get to. Which is: What – you know, in your experience on the ground with the Ukrainians that I've heard you talk about in other fora, really your guys, what is it that they – and, again, here, already you've talked about them as starting the fight in sneakers and red t-shirts. What is it that they needed to begin with? What do you expect that they need now, and going forward?

VASQUEZ: Well, they needed everything from the beginning. They can never have enough, you know? Fortunately, you know, I just had a talk with one of my guys today. And, you know, say these howitzers that we sent out, these M-777s, they were able to take on a couple Russian tanks this morning. You know, so these weapons that they need are really starting to trickle in and they're getting trained on it. They're getting better and better at it every day.

Their weapons have gotten better. Their uniforms have gotten better. These guys are no longer fighting, you know, with no body armor and stuff like that. So it's – the need is always going to be a lot, because they're, you know, well, under-armed, you know, comparatively to Russian forces. But it gets better and better every day.

So what they need now is just, you know, to keep up – (laughs) – really just keep up the fight. You know, keep the morale up. You know, keep getting what we've been getting to them, whether it's, you know, the howitzers or the HIMARS, or, you know, uniforms. I mean, these – the change has been significant. From the first day I got there to now, it's just – it's a 180. It's completely turned around. These guys are now well-equipped, they're becoming battle hardened. They're becoming warriors. Their skills are catching up to their heart, like I said earlier. And, you know, it's just going to be – it's going to be a win. Now, when is it going to be a win? I don't know.

TIERSKY: Rip, let me – let me get your take here. What are – what are the requests that you're getting in your capacity these days, that the foundation is getting? And as I mentioned before, I'd love for you to talk a little bit about any kind of obstacles, whether it's regulations or other things that stand in the way of private donations that you think would be particularly helpful in this effort?

VASQUEZ: NVGs and thermals are still the most requested items.

RAWLINGS: Yeah, I – you know, NVGs are – and thermals – are the most expensive. So we kind of harp on those a lot because, you know, they're – they cost thousands of dollars and when it comes to regulation they're the most difficult. So we've had to be very smart about doing things legally. We hired two ITAR lawyers to help us ensure that we're, you know, connected to the right people and filling out the right paperwork, and that kind of thing.

TIERSKY: Could you – Rip, sorry to interrupt you, but could you just remind our listeners what ITAR is?

RAWLINGS: Yeah. ITAR is the International Traffic in Arms Regulations. So it's a U.S. law – or, I should say, a series of laws, it's not just one – that constitutes the U.S. policy towards exchanging not just weapons, but equipment, and training, and other things to foreign nations that might be used against us. So kind of the easiest thing for people to understand is if you were to, I don't know, work at a nuclear facility and took the codes or the specs for a nuclear weapon and sold them to China, you would obviously be directly opposed to the ITAR laws.

The ones that we're dealing with are a little more subtle than that. Part of the things that we're trying to accomplish is to change – I should say, update the law, in order to ensure that Ukraine is better recognized as a close ally, and therefore, worthy of some of the greatest technologies that we have. And, you know, our group is not trying to do, you know, advanced nuclear secrets or even kind of the military-grade capabilities and systems that you see in the U.S. military today.

It's kind of, like, yesterday's technology. It's the stuff that you can buy from a hunting store – literally, quite literally. And a U.S. person can purchase those, but it's much more difficult to get it transferred to a Ukrainian. So we – and night vision goggles and thermals are – they're a red tape program, they're a legal aspect problem, they're an expensive set of equipment. And so we do spend a tremendous amount of time.

The easier wins are things like James just was able to help us get a bunch of AK-47 and -74 buttstocks. These are collapsible buttstocks so that the Ukrainians can remove the wooden buttstock on some of their older weapons and make it more modular. It includes picatinny rail systems. This is a rail system that sits on the front of the rifle so you can attach flashlights, and lasers and forward grips. So all that kind of technology are easy wins for us. We purchase those, you know, open source in Poland or other parts around Europe, and then ship them over to units that need them.

You know, the types of gear and equipment – I think I've outlined some of them. There's a tremendous amount in between there, from backpacks, to sleeping bags, to just individual uniforms for guys that have been fighting for a while and their uniforms are worn out. You can imagine if you're in the frontlines for even, you know, two or three months, your uniform is basically in tatters and you're patching it together with a sewing kit.

IFAK kits have been a very big deal for us. These are medical kits that you strap onto your leg or you attach onto your belt and your leg. And it has bandages and a substance called QuikClot, which is a powder that you can pour into a wound that seals the wound so that you don't bleed to death. We have – we heard from a lot of units that they were great, and we appreciate those IFAK kits, but they were dealing with a lot of other little things, that included getting the flu, or getting sick, or just kind of being beaten and bruised. So we have burn ointment in there now. We have basic ibuprofen. We've got flu medicines.

And so, you know, it's all pills and tablets that are all in small quantities. And we have refillers available at our warehouse in Kyiv. But the point is mainly to set it up so that, you

know, they have kind of an all-in-one little medical kit so that they're self-sufficient. So that when they need –

TIERSKY: Yeah. Sorry, I was going to say, it sounds like an upgraded first aid kit. Really just the basics.

RAWLINGS: It is, yeah. I mean, so it's called an IFAK, I-F-A-K, kit in the United States military. And we've tried to replicate those, and then made some lessons that – you know, even the military kits that we have in the United States military weren't adequate. And, you know, the guys needed something a lot – I mean, they're not anywhere near a pharmacy.

They're not anywhere near – in a lot of cases, everything around them and behind them has been destroyed and demolished. So even as something as simple as water purification tablets is important to keep their sanitation. Handwipes, you know, antibacterial gel. You know, we kind of pack these kits full of everything. But these are the smaller wins that are easier to put together. We've had a lot of support from the medical community, especially the military medical community, in the U.S.

You know, we've also been supporting aid workers. So people kind of tend to forget, but we support aid workers and surgeons. Dr. Elizabeth, you can see on our website and on our Twitter, agreed to allow her face to be on. And so she is one of the public faces of the medical community that we've been able to provide. She is a heart surgeon from Arizona. She is extremely skilled. And we sent her over for quite a bit of time to the Kyiv military hospital, the Kyiv army hospital in Kyiv, in order to basically free up surgeons that can then go further forward.

So she was not a combat surgeon, but by providing her services and skills, which was at a premium in the largest location – the largest city of Ukraine, that, you know, the military hospital's staffed at 50 percent already because they've sent a lot of their guys to the front line. So she didn't see a tremendous amount of battlefield casualties in her tenure over there, but she did see, you know, a lot of other regular stuff. But obviously her experience there freed up other doctors.

So we've attracted medical talent. We have another doctor we're vetting right now who's a former army colonel who is a medic. He was a general surgeon. And so the vetting process takes us, you know, a couple weeks, to make sure that we've got somebody that's going to be self-sufficient. I mean, it takes a particular type of person to go to Kyiv, because they are getting shelled regularly with artillery – or, with, you know, missiles and things, so.

But obstacles have been many. I'll try to shorten it, because I know that I've been speaking for some time, but I do think the red tape in U.S. law has been difficult for us. We deal with price gouging in Europe. Vehicles – the price of vehicles has gone up about 25 percent.

We have difficulties in transportation, getting things across the border. We have to fill out a tremendous amount of paperwork. All of my people work pro bono. We're all kind of,

you know, retirees that had a lot of experience that don't really need any money but are glad to provide our time to support this.

TIERSKY: Yeah. Rip, I can hear very much the challenges that you all are facing.

I want to change gears here for just a second. James, as I said in my introduction, you've amassed quite a following on Twitter in particular. And you post some – you regularly post information about the battlefield and, in fact, a lot of footage about what you and your guys are seeing. I just wanted to ask you, you know, what do you hope to accomplish by posting so directly and candidly about your experiences over there?

VASQUEZ: It's just awareness. I mean, honestly, if there was no such thing as Ripley's Heroes right now, I wouldn't be posting anything. I'd just be doing what I got to do. It's more to raise awareness and to help our foundation. I mean, it's just – it's you're going to get a – you're going to get a million people that are going to support you. And then you're going to have, you know, a whole bunch of so-and-sos, you know, writing, you know, stupid stuff. So it really doesn't matter to me. Honestly, you know, in the beginning it bothered me. But, you know, it's probably because I never had social media before, so I never experienced anything like that.

But, you know, I'm pretty used to it now. So it's – I post things really to keep the awareness out there, make sure people don't forget what is actually going on. Raise money for our foundation because, you know, without a positive cash flow, you know, Rip and I won't be able to do the things that we're doing. So trolls don't bother me. It goes with the territory. You're not going to be able to stop it.

TIERSKY: Sure. Sure, Rip, let me turn it over to you. I mean, you both obviously are directly engaged. But in a sense, you're also telling the story, including by appearing on this podcast. Tell me – tell me about what that means to you, Rip.

RAWLINGS: So appearing on the podcast is important to us. I mean, part of, I think, what people do – and it makes sense to me 100 percent – is that people want to sense legitimacy from an organization they're going to give money to. So if you're giving \$5 or \$50, people will take a look at an organization and say are you – what's your overhead? People expect kind of a zero percent overhead. Ours is 2 percent because we do have to pay fees to credit card people and PayPal takes 3 percent off the top no matter what.

But people also want to see where it's going. You know, they want to know that we're being trustworthy with the money. And so you do have a tremendous amount of trust placed on your shoulders where you feel as though every piece of equipment that you purchase you want to post it online and say, hey, look, here's what your donations bought. I'll be honest with you, probably 75 percent of what we buy we can't show people.

I posted a picture of me in one of the first vehicles we bought, and it was just the window, and the winch on the back, and one of the tires. I was like, I don't want to show the vehicle. It's going to a unit that's doing classified work. And someone immediately said:

That's a Mitsubishi Pajero, looks like 2016. You know, look at the window frame, blah, blah, blah. Someone literally dissected what the vehicle was in about 15 minutes of me posting that. It's, like, God, I'm endangering the unit even just by posting a picture of the window.

So in a lot of cases, what we do is try to tell the story and say, this unit received equipment from you guys. And in a lot of cases we just ask the unit and we say, listen, send us a photo when you can. But they do thrive off of seeing a photo of you using a set of night vision goggles. We don't want to put – I don't do pictures of dead Russians. I don't do pictures of dead Ukrainians. I do a lot of positive stuff about what people are doing to try to help the Ukrainian government and the Ukrainian people.

You know, we've had news organizations that have wanted to kind of look at everything. It's, like, that's fine. Please do. We appreciate the scrutiny, because it means that more people will read that and read the scrutiny and say: Well, by gosh, it passed the scrutiny. They're good enough for my dollars.

TIERSKY: Sure. Sure. Well, listen, Rip, James, you all have been both generous with your time. As we close up our episode here in the next minute or so, I was just hoping to come back with where we started, which is really the why behind all of this. So if you are able to tell our listeners – let me start with you, James. You're on your way back to the fight. Why are you headed back right now?

VASQUEZ: Well, the easy answer is if you saw what I've seen over there and you – and you didn't want to help, well, you would just be not human. Again, this started out as, you know, I'm like, hey, I'm going to dedicate two months to this. And, well, the atrocities that I've seen, everything that these people are going through, how great these people are, really just this united front of a whole country that's – it is overwhelmingly beautiful. So – and if you saw what I saw over there and you didn't want to continue to help then, again, you would just be not a human being.

TIERSKY: Thanks, James. Rip, can you share with us your “why”?

RAWLINGS: Yeah, sure. You know, I served 23 years in the Marine Corps. I did 10 deployments. Not all of them combat deployments, but quite a few of them into Iraq, Afghanistan, North Africa. And I've never seen war like this. James obviously is in the frontlines. I've been behind the frontlines on battlefields after the fact and talked to people, citizens, that lived in the villages and towns, and heard their stories. And seeing the destruction that Russia has caused, and heard the people talk about the rapes and the murders. And I ceased to be a reporter at a certain point, up in Bucha, Irpin, and Hostomel, where I had enough time – chances talking to civilians to hear the story, where I said: I can't do this anymore. I need to physically help. I can't just report news.

But so I'm echoing a lot of what James said, which is I think if the world were able to truly see some of what's happened – and see through me and James' eyes – then they would have a much better picture as to why – why not, I guess, would be a better question. You know, one of the greatest quotes I've heard was not my own but was from a gentleman who said: If you'd

ever wondered what you would do at the outset of World War II to stop Nazi aggression across Europe, well, you're doing it right now. Because it's happening in front of you.

So that's the same sentiments that James and I feel, which is, you know, if you're not doing anything, why not? And stay involved. Stay engaged. Listen, pay attention. That's the least you can do. Understand the truth of what's happening over there. No one should have to experience what Ukraine has experienced under the Russian attack.

TIERSKY: Gentlemen, I just want to thank you both, again, obviously for the important work that you're doing, but also for joining us today on Helsinki on the Hill. I would encourage our listeners to follow James on Twitter. Rip, can you give us the Ripley's Heroes website, please?

RAWLINGS: Yeah, you bet. It's [www.ripleysheroes.org](http://www.ripleysheroes.org). You can read about us and learn more about what we're doing.

TIERSKY: That's great. Thank you, Rip. Thank you, James, for coming on the show today.

RAWLINGS: Thanks for having us.

VASQUEZ: Thank you.

TIERSKY: With that, listeners, we've come to the end of another episode of Helsinki on the Hill. Thanks again for joining us. Until the next conversation, I'm Alex Tiersky, signing off.