

Ukrainians struggle

Williamsburg filmmaker produces documentary about war in Ukraine, sense of betrayal



By Ben Swenson Correspondent

Philip Forgit is not a fan of bullies. So, when Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, the Williamsburg resident felt compelled to document what he saw as a clear-cut violation of national sovereignty and the United States' moral obligation to support Ukraine.

“Assurance” is a forthcoming documentary Forgit filmed on the front lines of war. The production, which is slated for release in January 2026, is an intimate portrait of Ukrainian soldiers and civilians who are supporting them as they fight to repel the Russian incursion into the nation’s Donbas region. “Assurance” explores the hopes and fears of Ukrainians who are directly engaged in conflict and their disappointment at what they consider to be a betrayal by the U.S. government.

The documentary is currently in post-production, and Forgit is working with a team in Los Angeles on the painstaking task of paring down many hours of footage — he filmed for four months — into a feature-length production. Forgit is also currently seeking funds to support the endeavor.

A William & Mary alumnus, Forgit is a jack of all trades: a decorated U.S. Navy veteran, former public school teacher, Virginia Education Association executive director and businessman. “Assurance” is not the first documentary he’s made through his venture Forgit Films; in 2011, he released “Lions of Babylon: A Soldier’s Story,” which tells the story of U.S. Army Capt. Dan Digati as he works with American troops deploying to Iraq.

For Forgit, the invasion of Ukraine represents more than just a violation of international law. The

Ukrainian people had been given a guarantee of Western affinity and support, chiefly by the United States, and that promise has been broken. “They’re exposed to Western culture, and they look to America,” he said. “We sold them that dream.”

Forgit remembers lessons he learned long ago as a schoolboy about Western values versus communism. Later, through his collegiate studies, military service and work in public education, he realized the United States’ outsized role in international affairs and the ethical duties inherent in such a standing.

“What America does affects the rest of the world,” he said.

That’s why he was compelled to do his part after the 2022 invasion, he said. At the time, he owned the Menchie’s franchise in Settlers Market. He sold the business in order to make the documentary.

Among the challenges Forgit had to navigate was getting into the conflict zone safely. For that, he reached out to Dawn Inc., a Portland, Oregon-based nonprofit that provides medical supplies and educational support on the ground in Ukraine. Yulia Brockdorf, president of Dawn’s board of directors, said the organization was glad to have Forgit along.

“We had a guy who put his business up for sale to go into Ukraine and risk his life so he can tell the story of true historical significance to the American public,” she said.

“I felt called to support him so he could tell the story of Ukraine.”

Forgit filmed in Ukraine for two different periods, in late 2022 and 2023, and spent time both in the Donbas region and in the Ukrainian capital of Kyiv.

As a veteran of the war in Iraq — he was an intelligence specialist and received the Bronze Star for meritorious service — Forgit is no stranger to conflict zones. But filming on the Ukrainian front lines, just a mile-and-a-half from Russian soldiers, was a sort of out-of-body experience. It was only later, he said, as he was reviewing tape, that he realized how present the danger was all around him.

Forgit said he was moved by many of the vivid moments he witnessed while embedded: the fortitude of Ukrainians, wounded Ukrainian soldiers being moved to a place of safety where they could be stabilized, and the camaraderie among soldiers as they toasted glory to Ukraine, to heroes and to the fallen.

The documentary doesn’t sugarcoat scenes of fighting. It includes conversations about the feeling of betrayal sensed by Ukrainian soldiers who thought the U.S. would support them against Russian aggression when they surrendered nuclear weapons after the Cold War and aligned themselves with Western nations.

“And right now, when we are struggling because of the Russians,” one Ukrainian soldier says in the documentary’s trailer, “is that the golden American deal we’ve been taught about?”

“Assurance” documents the heart and soul of the Ukrainian people, but it’s about a conflict that represents something larger, too, Forgit said.

“This is the tip of the spear for democracy,” he said. “That’s not an overstatement.”

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