



The New Era of DIY Warfare

By

Raffy Chiswick

It is a cold and foggy morning in Chasiv Yar, a city in Ukraine close to Bakhmut. Four men with American accents, dressed in military equipment and surrounded by weaponry, are talking in a compact log bunker. All are in good spirits, laughing about how one was able to survive being hit by a Russian missile and chatting between the sounds of explosives landing overhead. None of these men are representing the American military, and some may not even have previous experience in combat. One, however, is the host of a YouTube channel with over one million subscribers. He has lived in Ukraine almost full time since the Russian invasion in February 2022.

The presence of non-state actors on the battlefield is a common occurrence in warfare. Private military companies, such as the Wagner Group, make the news regularly for their violent involvement in multiple conflicts across numerous continents. In addition to mercenaries, foreigners can involve themselves in the current conflict in Ukraine legally by joining the International Legion for the Defense of Ukraine, also known as the Foreign Legion, a group included in the broader Ukrainian military.

However, a feature of recent wars, which rarely attracts much attention, is the presence of individuals or small groups who arrive without state-backing or membership in a larger private fighting force. These individuals or small groups are present during wars on a voluntary basis. They are often in complete control of their mission plans and ambitions, and do not appear to report to any higher authority in the military.

They also tend to work alongside more official or established militaries or private military companies. Whilst some may technically be members of groups, such as the Foreign Legion, or semi-autonomous groups, such as the AZOV Brigade or the Georgian Legion, many seem to operate mostly independently and without needing the official approval of these groups to act and carry out their plans.

In order to demonstrate this unique aspect of war, it is worth drawing attention to the YouTube channel [Civ Div](#), which is run by a former American marine, ex-member of the Kurdish YPG, Iraqi YBS, and currently a volunteer operating in Ukraine. The channel gained widespread traction since the start of the war due to the unique coverage and insider perspective it gives to viewers.

Since the start of the war in Ukraine, Civ Div has played numerous roles. He began by training Ukrainian troops on how to use Western weapons. He then taught them how to carry out drone reconnaissance missions on the front line. Now he is designing and building explosive FPV drones alongside his team and training Ukrainian soldiers on how to use them in the Chasiv Yar region. It is safe to say he has had incredibly varied experiences. These ventures are captured on a GoPro which seems to be permanently running, providing a gritty and fascinating view of day-to-day life in an active war zone.

Currently, Civ Div seems to be operating out of an abandoned house in the Chasiv Yar region, along with a team of Americans and Ukrainians. He recently left his drone reconnaissance role and is therefore no longer required to live in underground bunkers, as was the case before.

Despite some of the team having a military background or experience in combat zones, one American has a background in tech and simply decided his skills could make a difference on the front lines, helping to arm Ukrainian soldiers. Due to limited access to mission specifics and details on the YouTube channel, for obvious reasons, it is very unclear as to who oversees this operation.



One might expect them to be members of the Foreign Legion acting legally, but this is hard to establish and even if it were true, they seem to be autonomous, incredibly.

Interestingly, the FPV drone project, along with some other missions carried out by his friends, which are posted to the channel, are funded by the viewers who can donate by Patreon and GoFundMe. When one joins the channel's Patreon, their name is written on a munition which is then given to a Ukrainian soldier and eventually used on the front line, a rather dark rewards system. Previously, Civ Div advertised his friend's Go Fund Me, which was aiming to raise money for his unit to buy a truck for military operations.

This presents a unique situation where individuals are engaging in something along the lines of a "DIY war." The members of the team in which Civ Div works are self-funded, in control of their own mission, do not need to report progress to anyone, and yet are proving themselves able to make a real difference in turning the tide of the war.

Civ Div himself describes the FPV drone project as "grassroots," highlighting the extent to which they only answer to themselves. The group has also been given drones by another charity, known as Doves of Freedom, which is also entirely crowdfunded. The significance of the YouTube channel is evidenced by his fear that he has become a "high-value target" to the Russians.

Overall, the success of Civ Div and his team shows the extent to which war may be beginning to change, moving away from conflicts between groups which are purely state-funded and controlled towards this DIY warfare. Remarkably, it may be that teams such as his, operating in Chasiv Yar, could make all the difference, especially when considering the low operating costs and the fact that all they have achieved is on the back of accumulated small donations from viewers.

Raffy Chiswick is a freelance writer. Views expressed in this article are the author's own.