

Author: Leslie L. Wilson

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Retiring to a War Zone

Bzz-bzz-bzz bzzzzzz-bzzzzzz-bzzzzzz bzz-bzz-bzz

Attention.

Air raid alert.

Proceed to the nearest shelter.

My wailing phone yanked me out of bed. "Again?" I pulled the duvet over my head. My phone danced off the table, crashing to the floor. Note to self: SOS vibration. Bad choice!

No sooner had I drifted off when a loud explosion rocked my apartment. Instinctively, I gathered phones, computer, power bank, and go-bag on my way to the safe tub. I actually accomplish a fair amount of work in this makeshift writer's retreat. Creative juices really flow while entombed in a concrete-walled bathroom bunker, standard in durable Soviet high-rises. Updates on my

Resilient Village project—a formidable battle in its own way—generally start here as PowerPoints featuring a map of my three years’ travels throughout Ukraine and border nations.

The decision to live outside my beloved homeland of America was simplified by my inability to afford medical care, even basic Medicare. Since it’s of no use internationally, I didn’t apply during the years I donated my time in other countries. I was blissfully unaware that a cumulative monthly penalty was driving the cost beyond what I could afford, should I ever choose to return to American comfort. On the other hand, in a nation like Ukraine I could afford a simple, yet comfortable lifestyle with money left over to “do good”.

Simple decision.

However, getting the visa was far more complicated. During my first 18 months, I became a nomadic minimalist, forced into exile every 90 days to a different country to avoid violating the “90-day, visa-free” rule. It was good. I learned that I needed very little to live a vibrant and healthy life. Now that I’ve finally secured a residence permit, I still live the life of a potted plant, one that God can pick up and move wherever He has work for me. I cannot imagine a more fulfilling way to spend the rest of my days, blooming wherever He plants me.

Bzz-bzz-bzz bzzzzzz-bzzzzzz-bzzzzzz bzz-bzz-bzz

Attention.

Increased air threat in your area.

Proceed to the nearest shelter.

Checking the Air Alert map, I saw all Ukraine was now lit up red with threats of incoming attacks. The fan-shaped icons pointed back to three bases in Russia and on the Black Sea. Kyivska Oblast, where I live, now showed an explosion icon dated 3 minutes ago.

There's a sense of comfort in any ability to control the information that comes at you, if not the dastardly actions they represent.

Bzz-bzz-bzz bzzzzzz-bzzzzzz-bzzzzzz bzz-bzz-bzz

Attention!

The air alert is over.

May the Force be with you.

For me, the dry wit of a Star Wars quote restores balance to this roller-coaster life. It appeals to the emergency manager in me. Like a slide show, video snippets flood my mind from both local responses and long-term deployments across America since 2005. In the last 14 years, such droll humor found a home abroad as I volunteered and forged independent outreaches to help fill in gaps of unmet needs. From the Pamir Mountains of Tajikistan to Ukraine-under-attack, “disaster humor” struck a chord. Not appreciated by most normal Americans leading contented lives. But then, my life has been anything but normal.

With grim determination, I slammed my laptop shut and hoisted my arthritic body out of the tub. From the radiator towel rack, I grabbed my robe, threw it over my back, and braced myself for the cold apartment beyond. Sunrise set ablaze the living-bedroom as I hastily dressed.

"I need a McChicken."

Having McDonalds just a few minutes' walk away is one of the perks of living in this suburb of Kyiv. The restored and improved, post-massacre community of Bucha is a symbol of hope and recovery for the nation. It's a privilege to live among these resilient people.

Force of habit from summertime's daily scheduled power outages, I ignore the elevator for the scenic route instead. The floor below still sports the blackened, mangled metal door to the unfortunate apartment penetrated by an artillery shell three years ago. The hallway still suffers from smoke-blackened ceilings, as if the horrors of the occupation had just happened. When the wind is just wrong, you can still catch a whiff of smoke in the ventilation. Regular pilgrimages to fourth floor keep me focused on my reasons for choosing to spend retirement years in a war zone surrounded by courageous freedom fighters. Independence, flexibility, creativity, and dignity pervade the atmosphere of this nation united in common cause. It's exhilarating and quite infectious, like living reenactments of America's own struggle for independence, but with the reality of drones, death, and destruction always close at hand. Just being among them instills renewed strength in this 76-year-old body.

Lost in thought, I'd absentmindedly taken the wrong path. Just as I pivoted to my McChicken, the neighborhood air raid siren screamed to life. "No way!" Doggedly, I pushed forward. Just as McDonalds came into view, so did the tightly-bunched crowd dressed in golden-arch uniforms. They dutifully descended into the highway underpass leading to their designated shelter about five minutes away.

No one else reacted to the alert except for the disgruntled customers forced to take their meals into the frosty outdoors. American restaurant chains always follow air raid guidelines in Ukraine. Most folks just get on with life. (School children and their underground classrooms are a whole different story.) Here in the Kyiv area, alerts may come and go any time night or day, determined to destroy hours of work or sleep.

"There goes my feast," I moaned.

This day saw four alerts. 20 minutes to six hours. No rhyme or reason. Messes with your mind.

"Well, here's hoping for a solid eight hours!" It was still light when I crawled under the duvet.

Bzz-bzz-bzz bzzzzzz-bzzzzzz-bzzzzzz bzz-bzz-bzz

Attention.

Air raid alert.

Proceed to the nearest shelter.

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