

Ep 5 – Rob Lee: Back from the Front — Ukraine Closes the Deep-Strike Gap (June 2026)

June 22, 2026

Rob Lee is back in Kyiv after another round of frontline visits — from Zaporizhzhia to Donetsk to Kharkiv — talking directly with frontline commanders and the R&D teams building the war's newest capabilities. In this episode Sam Cook stands in for Dmytro Putiata and interviews Rob on what's actually changed as of early June 2026.

The headline shift: deep strike is no longer Russia's game. Ukraine is now hitting at operational depth too — with cheap, scalable drones, corps-level strike assets like Hornets, and a brigade-to-corps reform that's giving commanders real ownership of their battlespace. Rob walks through where the front is genuinely different from a year ago, where it's still grinding (Kostiantynivka, the Kramatorsk–Sloviansk line), and why he wouldn't be surprised to see successful Ukrainian armor assaults this year.

Speakers on this Episode:



Samuel P.N. Cook
Founder



Rob Lee
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Episode Summary

Fresh from his latest series of front-line visits, military analyst Rob Lee returns to the Ukraine Military History Podcast for a sweeping June 2026 update on the state of the war. Speaking with host Sam Cook, Rob draws on conversations with front-line commanders, R&D specialists, and technology teams embedded across the battlefield—from Zaporizhzhia in the south, up through Donetsk, to the northern reaches near Kharkiv. The result is a grounded, first-hand assessment of how the fighting has evolved over the past year and where it may be heading next.

A central theme is the tempo of Russia's advance, which Rob argues has notably slowed. He examines how Ukraine is holding key defensive lines, the grinding battle around Kostiantynivka, and the mounting pressure on frontline cities. Tackling the "turning point" question head-on, Rob weighs whether recent shifts represent a genuine change in momentum or simply another phase in a war of attrition—offering nuance rather than easy answers.

The conversation's most forward-looking material centers on technology and the closing of Ukraine's deep-strike gap. Rob details how cheap drones are rewriting battlefield economics, how Ukraine has built a real edge in counter-UAS capabilities, and the growing role of ground robots. He also explores Ukraine's leap forward in mid-range strike and emerging ballistic missile capabilities—developments that could finally let Kyiv bring the cost of war back onto Russian soil, echoing the strategic impact of the HIMARS summer.

Beyond hardware, Rob digs into structural reforms reshaping Ukraine's military, including the shift from a brigade-based system to a corps structure, improved command and control, and how corps are gaining their own organic strike power. He also addresses the double-edged role of Starlink—both an enormous advantage and a strategic vulnerability.

Closing out, Rob and Sam turn to the bigger picture: the pressures nudging both sides toward a possible ceasefire and what the months ahead might hold. Equal parts battlefield reporting and strategic analysis, this episode offers listeners a rare, on-the-ground look at a war in transition—and a clear-eyed take on what Ukraine's evolving deep-strike capabilities could mean for its outcome.

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Full Episode Transcript

Chapter 1: Back from the Front Lines

SO

Speaker One [0:00]

Hi, it's Sam Cook, the founder and co-host of the Ukraine Military History Podcast. Uh, welcome to another episode of the Ukraine Military History podcast, with, uh, Ukraine military, uh, analyst Rob Lee, who's the world's foremost expert on and military, uh, as it pertains to how they fight, uh, on the front lines. He's, he lives here in Kyiv. Uh, he's a regular contributor and co-host to this podcast, and he's back as of early June of 2026 for, uh, another, uh, update from his front line visits, which he does regularly. Uh, he went out to the front lines and spoke with, uh, a number of front line commanders with whom he has longstanding relationships across the front lines. Uh, also, uh, spoke to, uh, other key people in R&D centers and, uh, technology centers, uh, that are based i- in the different units across front lines. So this conversation, I interviewed him. Uh, regular co-host, uh, that he normally works with, uh, Dima, was not yet, uh, not able to join us for this episode, so I stood in for him and interviewed Rob about the situation on the front line. Uh, we go all the way from Zaporizhzhia down south up through, uh, Donetsk, uh, to the northern part of the front line near Kharkiv, and his, uh, uh, understanding of the current situation and some thoughts on where the war may be heading. We also, uh, dove into technology, Ukraine leaping ahead in, uh, UAV technology, especially in the middle strike area, and starting to even the playing field in terms of volume and accuracy and, and range, uh, on deep strikes and some of the things that Ukraine's developing in the ballistic missile sphere that, that is, uh, very interesting and, uh, could change the dynamic of the war, uh, in terms of bringing things back to Russia. So this is, uh, the next in a regular series that Rob will be doing on the first draft of history, as I call it, the analytical community's, uh, view of what's hap- happening on the front line intermixed with our discussions of military history going all the way back, uh, to the beginning. So enjoy this episode with myself and Rob Lee, and I look forward, uh, to seeing your comments below. Before we start this episode, I just wanted to make a quick word to mention our sponsors. I'm gonna give you a brief introduction for our sponsors, and then at the end of the show, we'll do a longer discussion about each sponsor and what we're offering so that you can get right into the content. So this podcast is funded by the Borderlands Foundation. The Borderlands Foundation is a foundation that I established to make sure Ukraine's heroes are never forgotten, and we have two main centers that are, in effect, the sponsor for this podcast. The first center is the Ukraine Military History Institute. It's an -speaking, uh, and -speaking, uh, center, which is our mission is to translate Ukraine's history from , uh, into for the world, uh, to consume and learn from.

Speaker One (continued)

Ukraine has a lot of allies who've supported it. Almost all of them, the common language of military officers, military historians, and professionals is , so the Ukraine Military History Institute created and sponsors this. And I'll tell you all about our programs and how you can support the institute at the end of the episode. The second sponsor for this podcast is the Ukraine Center for Traumatic Stress. This is also part of the Borderlands Foundation. It's a center dedicated to research and raising awareness and, uh, helping to bring in to Ukraine, uh, cutting edge, uh, therapies, treatments, uh, protocols, and education related to post-traumatic stress disorder. Uh, the heroes of Ukraine that are fighting this war, whether they're Ukrainians or foreigners who've come in to fight side by side with Ukrainians, they're writing this history, which creates the stories, which creates a strong future country, and those memories have costs, so we're dedicated to helping advance the research, treatment, and, uh, and, uh, breakthrough, uh, that all soldiers, veterans can have dealing with and overcoming post-traumatic stress disorder and mental health that arises from their service. And then finally, our last sponsor is the Borderlands Group. This is a, uh, for-profit company that donates the money to fund the Borderlands Foundation and all of our programs. I'm also the founder and president of that organization, and we do military advisory, advisory for, uh, defense companies working inside Ukraine, and consulting and software development and technical work, uh, for both governments and, uh, military defense companies. So with that, that's our sponsors. At the end of the podcast, I'm gonna tell you a lot more about each sponsor if you're, if you're looking for ways that you can contribute to the Borderlands Foundation, our two centers, or if you'd like to work with myself, Rob, and other contributors for this podcast. I'll talk to you about how you can get in touch with us through the Borderlands Group for that. So welcome to another episode of the Ukraine Military History Podcast. I'm here with Rob Lee. It's the beginning of June. Rob just got back from the front line. I'm filling in for Dima, our normal co-host on current military analysis, uh, because he's still in the process of, uh, uh-

Chapter 2: Comparing This Year to Last

ST

Speaker Two [5:09]

I think he's out now. I think-

Chapter 3: The Turning Point Question

SO

Speaker One [5:10]

He, he's out processed- ... the military, but he's got paperwork and little bit of decompression back in his hometown. So Rob, uh, let's jump straight into it. What, uh, what is going on as of the beginning of June on the front lines 2026?

ST

Speaker Two [5:27]

Um, so I mean, it, it, it kind of repeats some of the things we mentioned on the previous podcast with Dima. Um, I think it's good to compare it to this time last year.

SO

Speaker One [5:37]

Yeah.

ST

Speaker Two [5:37]

You know, because again, there's a seasonal dimension of fighting, and so, you know, it's, it's not always helpful to compare summer to winter because winter is usually more difficult for Russia to advance because they, they, they usually benefit from the tree lines, from the vegetation, from the warmer weather. Um-

SO

Speaker One [5:52]

They call this fighting season.

ST

Speaker Two [5:53]

Right, and, um, but what's notable is that Russia's not advancing faster, right?

SO

Speaker One [5:58]

Mm-hmm.

ST

Speaker Two [5:58]

They're not advancing faster than they were in the winter. Um-

SO

Speaker One [6:00]

Maybe slower?

ST

Speaker Two [6:01]

Yeah, I mean, most indications of that. I, I, I would say- ... you know, look, we talk about mappings, uh, in the, the mapping groups. Um, people jump into very strong conclusions when it shows, like, you know, movement this way or movement that way. Most of this is gray zone kind of movement, this infiltration. It's very undefined, unclear, and so I think people sometimes make very swing, you know, pendulum shifts of, of, like, "Here's what happening," you know, "Momentum is this way or that this way." Um, in general, Russia's advancing slower than they were last year, right? The advance has slowed as we've gone into fighting season, which is a good sign for Ukraine, right?

SO

Speaker One [6:33]

Mm-hmm.

ST

Speaker Two [6:33]

'Cause you, you'd think it, it would be the other way around. Traditionally, over the last couple years, Russia's advanced faster summer and fall, but right now they're advancing slower. Slower even than over the winter. (clears throat) And so that dynamic is positive, um, and when you compare it to a year ago, in particular, the advance, there, are much slower than they were a year ago, and that, and, and I think, like, just from, from this trip, kind of, got into some of the reasons why that, that's the case.

Chapter 4: Russia's Slowing Advance

SO

Speaker One [6:53]

And some people are saying, and I, this is the media narrative where you think a lot of people are jumping to conclusions, some people are saying Ukraine started to gain more territory than Russia in the last few months, but in the places Russia's advancing, they're advancing a lot slower. Who knows where that narrative lies, but what's your overall sense?

ST

Speaker Two [7:11]

Yeah, so I mean, like, th- there's, there's some arguments about a turning point, and-

SO

Speaker One [7:14]

Mm-hmm.

ST

Speaker Two [7:14]

... it depends what you mean by turning point, I guess, right? So, if, if you're saying turning point as in Ukraine has its strategic initiative, and they're, they're on offense more than Russia is, I'm not sure we're there yet. We might be, but it's, it's kind of unclear at the moment. Um, if we're talking about, has the situation improved for Ukraine relative to last year, I think it's pretty clear that's true, right?

SO

Speaker One [7:33]

Mm-hmm.

ST

Speaker Two [7:33]

And there's some changes that are, that are, you know, that are clearly different now than they were last year. Um, and so in that respect, it has changed, um, but what I think we're gonna see this year is that, you know, Russia's still advancing some directions, Ukraine's been pushing back in other directions. I think we're gonna see more of that this year, whereas-

SO

Speaker One [7:47]

Hm.

ST

Speaker Two [7:47]

... last year, mostly Russia's on offense, Ukraine did some kind of mul- limited counterattacks. Okay, yeah, the Kupiansk operation, for the most part, though, Russia had the initiative. Now, I think it's, it's less clear that Russia has, you know, kind of the, um, the initiative in, in, in total. I think Ukraine is pushing back more and ki- kind of contesting this to, to a greater extent.

SO

Speaker One [8:05]

It's like the battle for initiative right now.

ST

Speaker Two [8:06]

Yeah, more or less. (clears throat)

SO

Speaker One [8:08]

Yeah.

ST

Speaker Two [8:08]

So, you know, uh, w- different place on the front line, um, you know, it's always important to keep in mind different parts of the front line are different, right? And so some brigades notice some things, and you have a different approach from elsewhere. So, um, we went from Zaporizhzhia, through Donetsk, up to, you know, Izyum, Kharkiv, um, so we saw a good amount of the front. Not everything, and so, like, I don't have the, the, you know, the entire picture of every, every brigade and corps, but, you know, a couple of snapshots in, you know, south of Zaporizhzhia, the situation's better. (clears throat)

SO

Speaker One [8:35]

Mm-hmm.

ST

Speaker Two [8:36]

So, you know, someone I met from one of the brigades, you know, in the Svetodonsk area, his estimate was that, back in, uh, like, end of January, February, Russia controlled, like, 70%, 80% of Svetodonsk. Now, he estimates it's the opposite.

SO

Speaker One [8:48]
Mm-hmm.

ST

Speaker Two [8:48]
Basically, Ukraine, you know, controls about 80% or so. Uh, Pyromorske, this other village along the river, also same case. So, it was the same kind of dynamic. Um, and so for him, he, you know, h- he also noticed that assaults are less frequent. There's fewer infantry they're seeing. He, he kind of says, maybe it's the manpower, you know, a- aspect to it, or maybe it's just not a priority direction for Russia now. That's, that was kind of his conclusion. Um, but, you know, the, the overall sense is that, you know, five months ago, the situation's better now than it was then. (clears throat) And so i- i- Ukraine's pushed back a little bit and, and, and improved the situation.

Chapter 5: Holding the Zaporizhzhia Line

SO

Speaker One [9:17]
And Russia's no longer in FPV range of Zaporizhzhia city?

ST

Speaker Two [9:20]
I think they can hit it with Molniya, um-

SO

Speaker One [9:23]
Yeah.

ST

Speaker Two [9:23]
... but not with quadcopter FPVs, most likely.

SO

Speaker One [9:25]
Yeah.

ST

Speaker Two [9:25]
Although, again, it, technology's changing, so it's, it's hard to say entirely, but you're not seeing strikes in downtown Zaporizhzhia with, with FPVs.

SO

Speaker One [9:32]
And, but there are still glide bombs in there?

ST

Speaker Two [9:34]
(clears throat) Glide bombs, Shaheds-

SO

Speaker One [9:35]
Mm-hmm.

ST

Speaker Two [9:36]
Um, you know, th- there was that, obviously, big attack on, on Kyiv last weekend. Uh, I was in Zaporizhzhia for that. There was also strikes in Zaporizhzhia the same time. It was, you know, it was quite loud too. Um, so that, you know, again, that, that's also happening. Zaporizhzhia, obviously, an important industrial city, and so Russia's always, kind of, targeted, you know, locations in that city, and it's, it's very strategically important. And, again, good news is, um, you know, the dynamic on the front line there has improved since over the winter, and it's very important that Ukraine pushes Russia back as fa- as much as possible from that city because of how important that city is.

SO

Speaker One [10:07]
Mm-hmm.

ST

Speaker Two [10:07]
(clicks tongue)

SO

Speaker One [10:08]
On the south, uh, what is the... One of the things that seems to be a big challenge for Russia, and I'm sure you, you have some details on this, is the logistics lockdown-

ST

Speaker Two [10:19]
Mm.

SO

Speaker One [10:19]
... that the great marketing Minister of Defense, Fedorov, was, was, was able to brand that term. What's the reality on middle strike logistics targeting on that front line, and how much is that affecting Russia's ability to hold, uh, against Ukr- Ukraine, which seems to have the initiative there?

ST

Speaker Two [10:35]

So, I think on the front line, some brigades said that they thought they might have noticed some change.

SO

Speaker One [10:41]

Mm-hmm.

ST

Speaker Two [10:41]

I think most of them say that it's too soon to, to notice the change at the tactical level.

SO

Speaker One [10:46]

Mm-hmm.

ST

Speaker Two [10:46]

They expect it will come.

SO

Speaker One [10:47]

Okay.

ST

Speaker Two [10:47]

And that basically, um, it, it certainly is a cause for optimism, and there is greater optimism from, from units across the front line I talked to that basically, there's a new capability that they, they lacked last year, and clearly it's, it's creating really big problems for Russia, and it doesn't seem like Russia's got a good solution right now. Um, and so, that campaign is, is successful. Um, again, we gotta wait and t- to see how that affects the front line. I think the hope is that, um, you can d- disrupt your fuel supplies, you can disrupt, maybe, ammunition deliveries, maybe deliveries of FPVs or UAVs, so on. And then you start seeing, if, if Russia can't get those things to the front line, uh, then offensive potential just, kind of, g- gets degraded, right?

Chapter 6: Corps Gain Strike Power

SO

Speaker One [11:24]

Mm-hmm.

ST

Speaker Two [11:24]

So, fewer FPVs on the line, fewer, you know, less, uh, artillery ammunition there, more difficulty with the infantry on the front line. Maybe the infantry have to walk further to get to the front line, um, and that, one, makes it more difficult for Russia to continue offensive operations, but also, potentially, sets conditions for, you know, localized kind of o- f- you know, counterattacks in some directions. And so, it's very clear this is a, you know, positive dynamic. Um, y- you know, Hornets are playing a big role from, from autonomy. Uh, and, and, you know, part of this too is that, you know, before this, unmanned systems forces was kind of the one, you know, unmanned systems forces and some of the, the special operations units and, and Khor and SBU Alpha had, kind of, the monopoly on middle strike capabilities. Now corps are getting this too.

SO

Speaker One [12:04]

Mm-hmm.

ST

Speaker Two [12:04]

So, so 1st Azov Corps, uh, 3rd Corps, they both have Hornets, they both have this capability to hit things, you know, deeper behind the front line. And so now, you know, they can kind of shape their battle space at the operational level, which they couldn't do before.

SO

Speaker One [12:16]

Which is really good, because unmanned systems forces is, is not... .. really holding any battle space. They're augmenting, they're supporting, but if you're a commander, being able to actually interdict and influence your own battle space, I think, is critical.

ST

Speaker Two [12:31]

Yeah. An- and, look, i- it, it's been a debate for a long time about the role of armed services forces and the, the tensions with the battle space commanders-

SO

Speaker One [12:38]

Mm-hmm.

ST

Speaker Two [12:39]

... 'cause our military forces often don't report to corps commanders. They might go after different targets that make sense for, you know, part of the E-point system or, or other kind of incentives, but not necessarily what the, the corps commander, you know, wants to achieve, basically. But now, w- when you give corps commanders kind of operational or strike capabilities, they can shape the battle space more in their directions and they can obviously focus on, they know the battle space better than anyone else.

Speaker Two (continued)

They know what roads and logistics issues are the big problem. So, um, you know, right now, they're successfully, uh, you know, at least for Azov, they, they, they, they saved ... you know, successfully interdicted a bunch of the roads leading into their direction. They pushed it, you know, to d- Donetsk, uh, city, to the ring road. They've now pushed it, you know, deeper to the, the road from Mariupol back to the Donetsk region, also to Crimea. Um, and in particular, they're going after, you know, important targets, right? Trucks that are likely bringing important kind of equipment. Um, and again, if, if they can't use these main roads, however Russia's gonna respond to it, and they will adapt in some respect, it's gonna be more costly-

SO

Speaker One [13:33]

Mm-hmm.

ST

Speaker Two [13:33]

... because they have to either, you know, slow down the logistics, push the further from the front line, or set up, you know, some kind of, uh, counter-UAV teams in different lines, pickets or so on. But all this will, will cost them, and it all kind of diverts attention away from the front line, which again, just improves the situation for Ukraine.

Chapter 7: Echoes of the HIMARS Summer

SO

Speaker One [13:49]

It reminds me a lot of summer of 2022 when Ukraine first got HIMARS.

ST

Speaker Two [13:54]

Mm-hmm.

SO

Speaker One [13:55]

And you started to see huge ammunition depots, fuel depots go up. And then about two to three months later, Ukraine was actually able to claim the initiative, go on the offensive in Kharkiv and in Kherson. Um, I don't know if Ukraine has the combat power and the potential. Everyone's just assuming maneuvers dead on the battlefield. Uh, but maybe there's some surprises ahead on, in terms of Ukraine's ability to, to start to claim some offensive, uh, momentum.

ST

Speaker Two [14:25]

I mean, right now, we're seeing a lot of tinkering and experimenting with, you know, how you set conditions for offensive operations again. Um, last year, Russia was trying this and they, you know, they basically, I think, concluded that the center of gravity of the military was UAV teams. It was the tactical level. And so, they very much focused their fires on UAV teams.

SO

Speaker One [14:44]

Mm-hmm.

ST

Speaker Two [14:44]

So, they stopped worrying about infantry, 'cause the infantry weren't really stopping their advances. It was, you know, UAV teams were responsible for 80% plus fatalities. And so, um, you know, artillery, glide bombs, UAV strikes, all of them really focused on UAV teams. And when they used Rubicon, it was also in, in place to reinforce offensive operations, right? So in Doropillya, they redeployed all the naval infantry brigades and regiments there back, uh, in, like, you know, October or September. And they also redeployed a bunch of Rubicon attachments in support of them, and so, and they, and they were trying to directly support these, you know, mechanized assaults. It just wasn't sufficient.

SO

Speaker One [15:17]

Mm-hmm.

ST

Speaker Two [15:17]

And so, they weren't able to, to, to really overwhelm Ukraine defenses, and Ukraine had good enough, you know, UAS units there that they found a count of this. Um, but the, but the opposite can be true, right? Ukraine can try and kind of set these conditions now, too. Uh, with interdiction, you know, this is something that, that hasn't existed, actually, because in '23, there were arguments that, like, HIMARS might set conditions for, you know, interdicting lines, or (clears throat) ATACMS or other kind of capabilities. But ultimately, those weapons are just not responsive enough.

Chapter 8: Cheap Drones Change the Math

SO

Speaker One [15:43]

Mm-hmm.

ST

Speaker Two [15:43]

Right? 'Cause you had to bring up HIMARS to fire. You need ISR and so on. With the sheep drones, and they are really cheap, you can send them up even without ISR, right? Just knowing, like, "Hey, there will be targets. If there's no target, it's okay. We can afford to lose a, you know, \$4,000 drone." And so, they can send up drones on the, the main logistics routes that they know that there are gonna be, you know, targets. And they can go hunting and basically free hunting. And then once they send up one that finds targets, they can send up more. They can control multiple at a time. But because the, the cost ratio has gone down so much, you can afford to do this kind of thing. And so now, we're seeing an actually successful interdiction campaign. Um, it was not possible before with the technology they had before, but now it is. And it's not just Hornets. There's also, you know, Darts. Darts, you, you, if you put Starlink on it, it's now, you

Speaker Two (continued)

know, still a very, very cheap drone, still can hit targets at, at, at, you know, at operational depth. (clears throat) Blitsekovka, the, uh, kind of copy of the Molniya, put a Starlink on that thing, too. It also is very cheap. It also can, can hit things at 100 kilometers or more. And so, all these kind of new assets are just very, very cheap assets. And again, before this, Ukrainians won, like, operational strike capabilities like HIMARS. That got degraded over time. It's still y- important, but, you know, not as important. Um, but now these UAVs are achieving things that HIMARS couldn't achieve.

SO

Speaker One [16:54]

Mm-hmm.

ST

Speaker Two [16:54]

Because again, you can launch them. You can launch them in large numbers, uh, and they're much more responsive now.

SO

Speaker One [17:00]

And this is really interesting because why can't Russia do the same thing?

ST

Speaker Two [17:04]

Well, they were trying this in January.

SO

Speaker One [17:06]

Mm-hmm.

ST

Speaker Two [17:06]

I mean, again, so, so the, part of the story of 2026 is that Russia started scaling up a, a kind of military campaign in January. They started putting Starlinks on Molnias as well as, like, BM35, BM70s. Um, and for a couple weeks, it was really actually concerning development. They were knocking out fuel trucks on the, on the Pavlograd to Pokrovsk, you know, uh, highway-

SO

Speaker One [17:26]

Yeah.

ST

Speaker Two [17:26]

... between Petropavlovka and, and, and Pavlograd. Um, they were hitting a bunch of things, you know, northern Oleksandrivka, like, uh, HIMARS systems, other things. Um, and for a few weeks, it looked as though Russia now had a, you know, burgeoning operational strike campaign, uh, with very cheap drones. But that was enabled, you know, through Star- Starlink.

SO

Speaker One [17:43]

Yeah.

ST

Speaker Two [17:43]

Starlink was this really decisive kind of capability. And once they lost that, they lost this capability. And again, you know, they still have Shaheds. Um, they are still using this kind of role because, again, some of them have a, have a FPV kind of camera.

SO

Speaker One [17:55]

Yeah.

ST

Speaker Two [17:56]

And, and they can be used to go after dynamic targets. Um-

SO

Speaker One [17:58]

So, they, they do have some kind of dynamic targeting capability with Shaheds, but they're a lot more expensive and harder to control.

ST

Speaker Two [18:06]

They're more expensive, um, (clears throat) and, um, yeah. I mean, look. I mean, Ukraine has a better counter-Shahed system.

Chapter 9: The Interdiction Campaign Begins

SO

Speaker One [18:13]

Yeah.

ST

Speaker Two [18:13]

They've had it bou- and, and it developed since, you know, October 2022 when Russia started using them. So, Ukraine has a more sophisticated echelon system of how to, to protect against Shaheds.

SO

Speaker One [18:22]

Mm-hmm.

ST

Speaker Two [18:22]

Um, so brigades have, you know, interceptors, cores of interceptors and then, you know, so on. Um, and Russia just doesn't have that. They don't have it to the same extent. And so, Ukraine can send up drones and it's, a lot of them will get through. Also, a lot of these military drones that Ukraine uses are smaller, right? The Hornet is small, or Blitsekovka is small, or-

SO

Speaker One [18:37]

A lot cheaper, a lot more mass.

ST

Speaker Two [18:38]

Right. And so, you know, part of this is that Ukraine has a more sophisticated counter-UAS system, including against, like, middle strike drones th- than Russia has. Um, and also the quantities. I mean, right now, uh, (clears throat) the quantities ... I mean, sh- Shahed are ... Obviously, they can be used at operational depth, but they're more of sh- you know, a, a shitty kind of strike weapon. Um, Ukraine is using kind of smaller drones, and a lot of these drones are just ... are having a lot of success. And again, that's what Russia wanted (...). Th- they, they ... Rubicon was doing this in January, but w- they needed Starlink for this and without Starlink, they, they, they don't have the options. So far, you know, they'll probably de- f- ... Uh, they'll probably develop one eventually. Um, and so there is a concern that Russia will see what's happening. They'll innovate. They'll copy this. Um, you know, how long does it take? Uh, no one knows.

SO

Speaker One [19:19]

Mm-hmm.

ST

Speaker Two [19:19]

And the other issue is, is I think for the, the counter U-A-V system (clears throat) is that the, the quantities of drones Ukraine is producing are just really significant. And so, you know, we're talking about thousands of Hornets per month, uh, Darts, large number of Darts too, (...), so on. And because they're so cheap, right, Uk- you know, Ukraine can just afford to send up a lot of these drones, not to mention FP2s. Um, and, and Russia's

Speaker Two (continued)
g- they're gonna have i- a lot of difficulty unless they create a really comprehensive echelon system. And right now, it just ... it just doesn't exist.

SO

Speaker One [19:46]

And, and the Ukraine miltech industry is definitely ahead of Russia in interceptors, uh, cheap interceptor drones.

ST

Speaker Two [19:52]

(laughs)

SO

Speaker One [19:52]

And, and Russia right now has to catch up on that front.

ST

Speaker Two [19:54]

That, and also, (clears throat) when you talk about, like, Darts or (...), um, the interceptors are arguably more expensive than the, the, the drone themselves, right, the, the, the medium strike drone. And so-

SO

Speaker One [20:04]

And the skill that it takes to intercept.

ST

Speaker Two [20:06]

(clears throat) Skill and also, I mean, i- i- you can ... The different tasks are important, but y- you can fly them at low altitude over, you know, the lines. Then, uh, there's more of a threat from, like, small arms or machine gun fire. Um, but, you know, other places, you can fly them a higher altitude where interceptors kind of struggle to get to them. And so, again, it's, it's this political and (...) challenges. Russia will eventually, you know, adapt to this. They will develop countermeasures. I don't think they're gonna be able to, to completely kind of erase this, this, uh, this challenge. Um, and look, Starlink is the other big, you know, X factor that Ukraine has, this huge advantage. Um, one commander, you know, the way he explained it to me was basically, "Starlink is our superpower."

Chapter 10: Ukraine's Counter-UAS Edge

SO

Speaker One [20:41]

Mm-hmm.

ST

Speaker Two [20:41]

It's, it's just this huge advantage. Um-

SO

Speaker One [20:43]

Don't say that too loud for some people. (laughs)

ST

Speaker Two [20:45]

(laughs) Well, (clears throat) yeah. So it's, it is, but it's, it's an important advantage. And, um, you know, one of the f-

SO

Speaker One [20:50]

It's also a huge risk if it, if anything changes politically or business-wise there.

ST

Speaker Two [20:54]

It is a, a ... is single point of failure.

SO

Speaker One [20:56]

Mm-hmm.

ST

Speaker Two [20:56]

And, and that's why, you know, most units are, are, are trying to develop kind of c- you know, uh, uh, alternatives if, if they lost it. Um, but right now, Starlink is used on, you know, almost all UGVs. It is the main source of, you know, communication for UGVs. Used on naval drones (clears throat), um, and a lot of mil strike. Not, not all mil strike. There are th- there are a lot of other options, but, uh, a lot of the mil strike drones are using them too. And so it just provides this really significant advantage. Um, and, you know, like fortunately, uh, uh, Russia doesn't have a great countermeasure. They've got a s- ... You know, analog, they're developing, but they're, they're far behind on it. Um, they are developing EW systems that can jam Starlink.

SO

Speaker One [21:30]

Yup.

ST

Speaker Two [21:30]

And, and they, they are, they are using them now, and so it does ... In some cases, UAVs will lose, you know, video feed, you know, briefly. Um, (clears throat) but again, can they scale this into a systematic system?

SO

Speaker One [21:40]

Yeah.

ST

Speaker Two [21:40]

I'm not sure. And I think that the, the, the benefit here is that you're combining kind of ingenuity and, like, American ingenuity, right, with, with these systems. And that's a really difficult combination to, for Russia to compete against.

SO

Speaker One [21:52]

And don't forget Europe in there, which is stepping up massively in terms of, um ... You and I both see a lot of different companies coming in here, and th- the number of new, well-funded, highly competent miltech startups is exploding, and it's, it's pretty, pretty awesome to watch.

ST

Speaker Two [22:07]

Also, I mean, I th- what's also important about it is that Europe is doing a lot of targeted funding here.

SO

Speaker One [22:11]

(clears throat)

ST

Speaker Two [22:11]

And so European governments are funding direct units. Um, they're funding direct capabilities, direct companies, and, and, and trying to develop capabilities they know military needs, and they're funding it themselves.

SO

Speaker One [22:21]

Yeah.

ST

Speaker Two [22:21]

And so that's become quite effective. The targeted funding has been very effective. Um, and, and really, you know, again, as long as that funding, you know, is sustained, um, Ukraine's defense industry is very innovative. You've got great people there. As long as they have enough money to produce these things at number, a- a- a- at scale and also to continue innovating, Ukraine's gonna have an advantage. Um, and so again, that's, that's one of the reasons for, you know, for relative optimism right now, is that, um ... And again, mil strike is r- really not a capability Ukraine had last year. And for a long time, Ukraine has known where targets were. They knew where, you know, command posts were or o- o- other things. They just didn't have the capacity to hit them, but now they do. And it's really changed the dynamic of the fighting this year. So, um, look, I mean, that, that's a very positive dynamic. Um, (clears throat) I would say, you know, again, different parts of the frontline are different, right? Another one of the big developments is that the, the corps system is a more mature system now in Ukraine. So corps has been around for over a year, um, and in some places, like-

Chapter 11: The Starlink Advantage and Risk

SO

Speaker One [23:13]

They, they even have their own billboards now, right? (laughs)

ST

Speaker Two [23:15]

Billboards, um, training systems-

SO

Speaker One [23:17]

Yeah.

ST

Speaker Two [23:17]

... um, R&D labs-

SO

Speaker One [23:18]

Yes.

ST

Speaker Two [23:18]

... I mean, a lot of things. But, (clears throat) you know, one of the problems for a long time, Ukraine's a brigade-style military before this. And that meant that above them, where there's, there's no real chain of command above the brigades.

SO

Speaker One [23:28]
Mm-hmm.

ST

Speaker Two [23:28]
And so they, they created these, these temporary structures, like the OTU, the, the OSOV. Um, and (clears throat) the problem is the commanders were, were temporary. They got rotated out.

SO

Speaker One [23:38]
Mm-hmm.

ST

Speaker Two [23:38]
The staffs were temporary. And-

SO

Speaker One [23:39]
And they had no resources.

ST

Speaker Two [23:41]
(clears throat) They didn't have resources. Um, and they also didn't ha- th- the brigade, they had too many brigades. The OTU would typically have, like, 20 brigades under its command. Corps is about five, typically. Um-

SO

Speaker One [23:49]
Five to seven, typically.

ST

Speaker Two [23:50]
Yeah, it depends. (clears throat) But also, I mean, OTUs, when brigades got assigned to them, it was a temporary thing.

SO

Speaker One [23:55]
Mm-hmm.

ST

Speaker Two [23:55]

And so basically, it's, it's an attached unit. You don't have the same responsibility. You don't have this sense of like, I want to develop this unit over time, 'cause you might lose it. It might get transferred to somewhere else. And so now, with corps, the corps commanders have ownership of these brigades. Uh, it's not perfect, 'cause some corps, you have brigades still spread out.

SO

Speaker One [24:10]

Mm-hmm.

ST

Speaker Two [24:10]

They're not under the command. Um, but they are trying to improve that. And in some places, like again, like, third corps is kind of the, the obvious kind of success story, where, um, you know, where third assault brigade was, the brigades, you know, o- on the flanks became part of third corps. And now the quality that was in third assault brigade initially has spread to those other brigades.

SO

Speaker One [24:28]

Mm-hmm.

ST

Speaker Two [24:28]

And now the coordination is better. Um, adjacent coordinations has often been a problem in this, in this war. Coordination is better. A lot of the doctrine and other things are, are better. And the corps is just o- ... You know, Liman is a much better situation now than it was a year ago.

SO

Speaker One [24:39]

Yeah.

ST

Speaker Two [24:40]

Right? And a, a lot of that comes back to just the corps form has been useful. Um, now there, there are certain elite corps that are kind of unique, and, and other corps that are not as ... Uh, uh, so, I mean, it's not a ... it's not perfect. Um, another important development is that, you know, corps have certain units at their level. So, they're trying to set up, you know, UAS regiments.

SO

Speaker One [24:57]

Yes.

ST

Speaker Two [24:57]

Um, some corps have them, some don't. Um, they're also receiving, you know, <so we have artillery brigades, right, directly supporting them.

SO

Speaker One [25:03]

Mm-hmm.

Chapter 12: From Brigades to Corps Reform

ST

Speaker Two [25:04]

Some of them receive, uh, you know, like some corps has High MARs now, and so it's now a corps-level asset, as it should be.

SO

Speaker One [25:09]

Mm-hmm.

ST

Speaker Two [25:09]

Um, and so a lot of these are, are positive developments that were just, were not existing before. And a lot of it is just improving command and control.

SO

Speaker One [25:14]

And do they have their own engineering and logistics assets too?

ST

Speaker Two [25:17]

They do, but again, uh, I think, uh, it varies between corps.

SO

Speaker One [25:20]

Mm-hmm.

ST

Speaker Two [25:20]

Um, but overall, I mean, that's one of the reasons why the situation is better is that command and control makes more sense, the, the system is better. Um, and, you know, before Russia could exploit these kind of, you know, vulnerabilities, and the, the less vulnerabilities now than it was before.

SO

Speaker One [25:34]

Mm-hmm.

ST

Speaker Two [25:34]

So I think that's, that's one of the positive dynamics, um. And again, you know, other parts of the frontline, uh, are, are still relatively stable. But, you know, you still have problems 'cause Staha, the situation can, continues to get worse. Russians are infiltrating northwest and northeast part of the city, uh-

SO

Speaker One [25:49]

Wait, Kostyantaysk is?

ST

Speaker Two [25:51]

Konstantynivka.

SO

Speaker One [25:51]

Konstantynivka, okay.

ST

Speaker Two [25:52]

And, um, and so that still remains a real threat, where Russia might be able to take that city. Um, it certainly is under threat. Also, there's, there's one main road that leads to the city, and, you know, FPVs have been, have been going after the supply lines for a long time. So UGVs, you know, in many cases, will not make it to the city itself.

SO

Speaker One [26:09]

Mm-hmm.

ST

Speaker Two [26:09]

But it just looks extremely difficult. It's really hard to get infantry in there, it's really hard to rotate, casualty evacuation is very, very difficult. And so you have this kind of issue partially 'cause the geometries are, are quite difficult. Um, so Kostyantaysk is, is a concern, that, that situation is getting more difficult. And then, you know, Kramatorsk, Slovyansk, the Russians, they, last year, they wanted to encircle the two cities, they wanted to kind of move up from Doropilya, and they wanted to go from Lyman and get to Barvin-Kilve and kind of encircle the entire, you know, agglomeration. Um, that didn't succeed-

SO

Speaker One [26:37]
Mm-hmm.

ST

Speaker Two [26:37]
... and they, they pulled away some units, so that's, that's unlikely to happen. Um, but instead they're kind of just, you know, m- m- m- moving their way towards Slovyansk, Kramatorsk towards east. Uh, the movement's slow, but they are advancing, and there's high ground east of the cities, and to take that high ground with the, uh, line of sight, it makes it, you know, UAV range will extend basically.

SO

Speaker One [26:56]
Mm-hmm.

ST

Speaker Two [26:56]
And so, you know, right now, um, it is getting more difficult in Kramatorsk, where FPVs fly into the city more often, artillery does, you know, hit the kind of eastern part of the city. Um, the atmosphere's kind of changed, like some of the, some of the, the coffee shops are, uh, uh, leaving. Um, and again, like, we, we know when Russia approaches cities, what happens, right?

Chapter 13: Better Command and Control

SO

Speaker One [27:14]
Yeah.

ST

Speaker Two [27:14]
And you see more glide bomb strikes, you see, you know, at some point, if they get close enough, artillery strikes, other things, and, you know, then civilians are gonna leave. A lot will, well, some will stay, but many civilians will leave because it would become too dangerous. Um, and unfortunately, like that, that is a real risk this year, is that e- even if Russia doesn't take the cities, and like I, I, I don't think they probably will take the cities, but even if they approach and they get within, you know, 15, 10 kilometers, so on, um, they can make these cities, you know, almost unlivable for civilians.

SO

Speaker One [27:42]
Yeah.

ST

Speaker Two [27:42]

And also, you know, Kramatorsk, Slovyansk have long been the, the kind of like... I mean, the, the co- command, command control is just <obviously the military for Donetsk region, but also for, like, soldiers, if you're fighting in Chasiv Yar or Kostyantaysk or somewhere else, this is where you come back and you could, like, do some R&R, right?

SO

Speaker One [27:57]

Mm-hmm.

ST

Speaker Two [27:57]

You had, you know, coffee shops, you had, like, food, you had other kind of, like, things. Um, and then as cities become more dangerous, those things leave, right?

SO

Speaker One [28:05]

Yeah.

ST

Speaker Two [28:05]

Because civilians, you, w- would just leave. Um, and then it becomes more difficult for soldiers, right? Because then you lose those kind of like, uh, um, I wouldn't say luxuries necessarily, but you lose those kind of oth- other things that are, that are useful for morale.

SO

Speaker One [28:17]

Well, th- those small comforts mean a lot.

ST

Speaker Two [28:19]

Th- they mean a tremendous amount.

SO

Speaker One [28:20]

Yeah.

ST

Speaker Two [28:20]

And, um, there aren't many cities after that, right?

SO

Speaker One [28:24]
Mm-hmm.

ST

Speaker Two [28:24]
Because one, one, those are the last two kind of main cities in, in Donetsk, obviously there's Doropilya and other places, but these are the two kind of main cities. Um, and so again, that, that's something, you know, they'll be, they'll, they'll, the situation will get worse because of that. Um, so again, that, that's the one, the one I said comment where the situation is still very difficult, the Russians are still prioritizing this direction, and so the manpower there is, is, is, hasn't, it hasn't kind of ebbed, it's still a c- a consistent, you know, number of soldiers every day being used there. Whereas other parts of frontline brigades kind of said like, you know, compared to last year, we're seeing fewer assaults, we're, we're seeing fewer infiltration attempts, where infiltration was smaller and that basically the dynamic and, and trend is more positive.

SO

Speaker One [29:01]
Mm-hmm. So speaking about that, I was, I was actually, I got to see some UAV crews up in, in Kramatorsk. You mentioned Starlink. Um, what, what's really interesting there is because Ukraine has Starlink and Russia doesn't, that's really the backbone of UGV communications. Now they're trying to get other redundant communications on there, like LTE and then, uh, digital radios for backup whenever you're out of range for whatever reason, under a bridge or going through a tunnel.

ST

Speaker Two [29:31]
Mm-hmm.

SO

Speaker One [29:31]
Um, but that gives a huge advantage on the mobility, medevac, casevac, and now even assaults being led by UGVs. What are you seeing on the UGV front compared to versus side?

Chapter 14: The Grind at Kostiantynivka

ST

Speaker Two [29:45]
W- well, Russians are, are very ba- far behind in this, this direction.

SO

Speaker One [29:49]
Mm-hmm.

ST

Speaker Two [29:49]

Um, so, you know, Starlink was huge change. And so again, Russia was using UGVs more aggressively before, uh, they're using Starlink, and when they lost access to Starlink, UGV usage just declined significantly.

SO

Speaker One [30:00]

Mm-hmm.

ST

Speaker Two [30:00]

Because they can use Wi-Fi bridges, they can use, you know, radio connections, but the ranges are much smaller, operators have to be close to the frontline. And so you're seeing UGVs not as close to the frontline as you see with Ukraine, they're further back, and just, they, they don't have the same kind of capabilities. Um, and so again, you said before with Ukraine, like I, I met a bunch of the UGV companies like, uh, in 2025 and, and, and the winter of 2025, and the big issue was signal connection.

SO

Speaker One [30:23]

Mm-hmm.

ST

Speaker Two [30:23]

What, how, how do we maintain this? Um, they weren't really using Starlink too much back then, I think maybe to some extent, but there's conversation about, you know, do we use <Silvis?> Do we use the other kind of companies which are expensive?

SO

Speaker One [30:33]

Mm-hmm.

ST

Speaker Two [30:33]

How do we do, create a mesh network? So on. Um, and then just Starlink just won.

SO

Speaker One [30:37]

Yeah.

ST

Speaker Two [30:37]

And basically Starlink became the option. Uh, there are other options, but for radio signals, um, it's usually for short missions, you also need a, a UAV repeater if you do this.

SO

Speaker One [30:45]

Yeah.

ST

Speaker Two [30:45]

That, that adds demands, right? And so Starlink, you can remove these demands, and of course the pilots can be far from the front. They can be, you know, they can be, they can be here if they want to, um, but they can be further from the front. And so then the pilots come in, they're working in, like, a more comfortable background. (clears throat) Uh, the missions are very long missions, right? Because again, UGVs are moving, or most of them, are moving like seven kilometers an hour.

SO

Speaker One [31:06]

Yeah.

ST

Speaker Two [31:06]

And so they're doing the mission where you have to go, if you get dropped off 20 kilometers from, you know, wherever the front line is, 10 kilometers-

SO

Speaker One [31:12]

It's a lo- it's, it's an all-day thing.

ST

Speaker Two [31:13]

It's, it's, it's, you know, it's like five, six, seven hours, right?

SO

Speaker One [31:15]

Mm-hmm.

ST

Speaker Two [31:16]

It's, it's a very long event. (clears throat) Uh, it's very tedious, but you have to focus 'cause if you, if you drive into a crater or something else, like, you can lose a UGV.

SO

Speaker One [31:24]

Mm-hmm.

ST

Speaker Two [31:24]

And so, um-

SO

Speaker One [31:25]

And this is really, really important and stressful, especially when you're doing medevac and someone's life is on the line. There's-

ST

Speaker Two [31:30]

Yeah.

SO

Speaker One [31:30]

... there's huge pressure on these crews.

ST

Speaker Two [31:32]

And so it's important for operators to be comfortable and not to be, like, you know, in a blind dodge somewhere on the front line. It's more, just more difficult to operate that way.

SO

Speaker One [31:39]

Mm-hmm.

ST

Speaker Two [31:39]

So, (clears throat) um, you know, UGVs have been scaled significantly in the military this year, a lot last year as well. Uh, I think the Ministry of Defense said they want to contract 50,000 UGVs for the Ukraine military this year. (clears throat) Um, and, you know, there are a lot of very successful versions, almost all of them. I mean, there are some foreign ones here, some of them are doing well, but, um, almost all are because they, they need to be cheap.

Chapter 15: Cities Under Mounting Pressure

SO

Speaker One [32:00]

Mm-hmm.

ST

Speaker Two [32:00]

They need to be turnable. Uh, you need to be able to lose them, and if you can't lose them-

SO

Speaker One [32:04]

Well, they're, they're primary targets on the battlefield for FPVs now.

ST

Speaker Two [32:08]

(clears throat) And FPVs are the main reason you lose them.

SO

Speaker One [32:10]

Mm-hmm.

ST

Speaker Two [32:10]

That, or the remote mining. (clears throat) Um, but yet, you know, gave you some real unique, you, you, you know you see some really unique things happening. (clears throat) Um, you know, 1st Medical Battalion, (clears throat) they have their own kind of casualty evacuation system. They made their own UGV, it's a gas-powered UGV called the Molle. (clears throat) And, uh, because it's gas-powered, it can drive much faster.

SO

Speaker One [32:28]

Mm-hmm.

ST

Speaker Two [32:28]

And so it, it can do, like, 75, 80 kilometers an hour. Um, and so they can do (clears throat) cads eva- ignitions much faster than other brigades can because they're using a different type of UGV, basically. But the developments are really interesting, they just need more funding.

SO

Speaker One [32:40]

Yeah.

ST

Speaker Two [32:41]

And, and it's, and it's really important that there's more funding for these kind of things, for, for R&D, but just buying new UGVs 'cause, again, you're gonna lose them all the

Speaker Two (continued)
time, and if you have a decline in (clears throat) the logistics of UGV or so on, that could be the difference between holding a position or not holding a position, or being able to evacuate or someone or not. And some of these evac missions, you, you, you might lose, like, seven UGVs.

SO

Speaker One [33:00]
Mm-hmm.

ST

Speaker Two [33:00]
Uh, I mean, you might send a bunch to the front line, and FPVs just keep killing them, basically. So, um-

SO

Speaker One [33:05]
They told me when I was there a couple months ago, they, they probably had 20% of th- what they actually needed in terms of UGVs.

ST

Speaker Two [33:13]
Yep.

SO

Speaker One [33:13]
And that's why Ministry of Defense is, is scaling it so aggressively.

ST

Speaker Two [33:16]
They are, and, and again, the innovations are very impressive, what they're doing. Um, but, you know, UGV space is very important. One important dynamic this year, too, is that, um, Ukraine's working on counter-UAV turrets. And so there are different turret-turrets you can put on UGVs, you can put on vehicles. (clears throat) Um, they're testing now, there are some on the front line. Um, and so not 100% by any, by any means, but they are actively shooting down FPVs, right?

SO

Speaker One [33:40]
Yeah.

ST

Speaker Two [33:40]
There are UGVs with turrets that are shooting down UGVs, or sorry, FPVs. Um, in a system, like, there's AI incorporated where basically it can locate, put a box around a

Speaker Two (continued)
flying object. It can do a lot of the work for targeting, you just have to push a button.

SO

Speaker One [33:54]
Yeah.

ST

Speaker Two [33:54]
So that is coming. Um, now again, where are we gonna be at the end of the year? I have no idea, right? We- will this be a, a, uh, you know, effective technology? Will it be kind of still very, you know, in the infancy stage? That's not clear. But it's also one reason why offensive maneuver might be possible again. (clears throat) Um, if you can put ... and, and not just on UGVs, but if you can put on turrets, like on MRAPS, uh, a turret that is pretty good at shooting down FPVs, um, then you can use armored vehicles again. Okay, maybe you're not gonna shoot at every FPV, but if you can shoot down two or three per assault, each vehicle-

Chapter 16: The Ground Robot Revolution

SO

Speaker One [34:25]
Mm-hmm.

ST

Speaker Two [34:26]
... that, that could be sufficient, right? Um, and of course you can put UGVs up there ahead of time. You can potentially stage them close to the front line, and if you bring up armored vehicles, maybe the UGVs can start shooting them down in the way they're going. So there are a lot of interesting things happening. (clears throat) Um, how fast does technology succeed? I don't know. But, uh, I do think we're gonna see, you know, we're in the moment was the demand to, to figure out the UAV situation. How do you counter FPVs? And I think we're ... there's gonna be developments that are cheap enough to, to counter them, where they'll still be a, a, a threat, they'll still be a problem, but they're not gonna be maybe the biggest, as big a problem they've been so far. (clears throat) And, you know, f5U FPVs are, are one of the really big issues for, for Ukraine. Russia has a lot of them and they're quite u- uh, effective. Um, but in particular, they, they fly slower. They're usually bigger, 'cause they have the big coil. And so those ones in particular would be easier to shoot down with turrets if turrets have, you know, camera guidance, basically.

SO

Speaker One [35:17]
Mm-hmm.

ST

Speaker Two [35:18]

Um, and it's ... and again, they can also shoot down, shoot at the, the zdun, the, the, the ones that are kind of waiting on, on the roads. Um, and so again, we're, we're in a moment ... And again, like, I, I kind of compare it to War I, not because the front line looks like War I, it doesn't, because we had new weapons come in this war, FPVs, MAVERs, bombers, so on, and initially (clears throat) favored defense. And then now, after, you know, defense kind of gained the upper hand, we're, we're seeing the tinkering of how do you reestablish offensive operations. We're gonna see technological changes, uh, TTP changes. All those things are being worked on right now in Ukraine, and it's why, like, look, we might not see an offensive, successful offense, you know, this year. We may- maybe the war ends before it happens. But at some point, right, w- where the conditions for, for reestablishing maneuver are gonna come back. And I think it's, you know, I would not be surprised we see some successful armor assaults this year.

SO

Speaker One [36:09]

Well, it's, it's, it's like that episode we released, uh, recently on ... with General Zabrodsky on World War I and how the Germans restored maneuver to the battlefield. And really, it was creating combined arms, uh, doctrine and training, which is always more difficult for offensive operations than it is, uh, for defensive operations. Germans weren't nearly as successful as the Allies ended up being at the end of World War I 'cause they didn't have tanks, they didn't invest in that. But even without tanks, they were able to restore maneuver to the battlefield before the Allies, uh, and I think that's a huge lesson. You, you said, "We may get to peace before then." I don't see, uh, Putin really getting serious about peace until he's actually losing, but I may be wrong on that.

Chapter 17: Countering the FPV Threat

ST

Speaker Two [36:50]

(clears throat) Well, I mean, look, this year, it ... Look, it's hard to predict things, uh, more than a few months in advance in this war thing. Um, (clears throat) I think- ... the dynamic has changed, right? And maybe Ukraine's not on offense, maybe they don't have the, the initiative, but certainly the situation is more difficult for forces than it was before. Um, they're having more difficulty advancing, uh, they're taking heavy casualties still. There are signs of manpower problems, where they're still, they're g- still gonna recruit a large number of soldiers this year, but it, they're g- I think they're gonna have more issues this year than they had last year and the last year before that. (clears throat) Um, and I think their approach that they developed last year, which was, you know, there were some innovations, the units have kind of figured those out. And so again, it's not, it's not perfect, Russia still has enough guys to get those still advanced in some directions, but the rate of advance has slowed. (clears throat) Um, Ukraine on the UAV employment side, tactical level, I think Ukraine has the advantage. Uh, at operational depth, I think they very clearly have the advantage, and I think it's gonna get worse for Russia. And-

SO

Speaker One [37:44]

Especially with Starlink.

ST

Speaker Two [37:45]

Yes. But, but, but even not just Starlink. Um, even, I mean, a lot of drones don't always use Starlink.

SO

Speaker One [37:51]

Yep.

ST

Speaker Two [37:51]

And for some units, the majority of middle strike is not using Starlink, and these drones are still getting through.

SO

Speaker One [37:56]

Yeah.

ST

Speaker Two [37:56]

Um, and again-

SO

Speaker One [37:56]

There's other technologies.

ST

Speaker Two [37:57]

There's other technologies. Um, Starlink i- is, absolutely is important, but it's not the only one.

SO

Speaker One [38:02]

Yeah.

ST

Speaker Two [38:03]

And the quantities we're seeing of production are just scaling, right? So FP-2s, I think, I think they said that they're producing like, uh, I forget the numbers actually, but like, like 100s a day. Hornets are thousands a month. Um, and you have, uh, you have-

SO **Speaker One** [38:15]
FP, FP-2s are one of the long, deep strike, uh-

ST **Speaker Two** [38:18]
FP-1's a deep strike, FP-2 is the, the middle strike drone.

SO **Speaker One** [38:21]
Okay.

ST **Speaker Two** [38:21]
(clears throat) But FP-2 has a, like, 250-pound payload.

SO **Speaker One** [38:25]
Yeah.

ST **Speaker Two** [38:25]
Whereas other mid-strike drones, like Hornets, like, you're talking, like, you know, 10 pounds, right? So, the, the targets you're going after are different. Hornets are going after trucks, FP-2, the thing is you can, you can drop a building, right?

SO **Speaker One** [38:34]
Command posts.

ST **Speaker Two** [38:35]
You can drop warehouses.

SO **Speaker One** [38:35]
Yeah, T-posts.

ST **Speaker Two** [38:36]
Uh, if you hit an air defense system, it's gonna be destroyed. And so you have different class of middle strike drones based on payload, essentially. And, and again, FP-2 is more expensive as a result, but it's still, it's still really important. Also, you know what's

Speaker Two (continued)
interesting is that, (clears throat) um, in some respects, FP-2s, Ukraine doesn't have air superiority, right?

Chapter 18: Closing the Deep-Strike Gap

SO **Speaker One** [38:53]
Mm-hmm.

ST **Speaker Two** [38:53]
And, and, and they can't bring up fighters too close to front line. They, they do use glide bombs, but they have to-

SO **Speaker One** [38:57]
But, but there is a new glide bomb that just came out, apparently.

ST **Speaker Two** [39:00]
Yes. (clears throat) But because of Su-35s, mostly, but also air defense systems, they have to drop them pretty far from the front.

SO **Speaker One** [39:06]
Yeah.

ST **Speaker Two** [39:06]
And so they're not going very far past the front. Um, but FP-2s, because they have a big payload, they can kind of be used in this role, right? Where you can go after, you know, underground positions, and okay, an FPV is not gonna destroy it. A, a, you know, artillery is not gonna destroy it. But, a 250-pound munition could destroy things with this. And so, um, in some respects, it's kind of serving as, like, aviation, like, you know, what, what, what it would be for us, but you're getting this from UAVs, with, with, with, you know, really heavy payloads. Um, but anyway, the quantities are going there. (clears throat) And then, last one, deep strike, you know, Ukraine is, right now, we're, maybe there's not parity.

SO **Speaker One** [39:40]
Yeah.

ST

Speaker Two [39:41]

But Ukraine has certainly narrowed the gap. Where Russia had this complete advantage early in the war, where Ukraine could not hit things deep into Russia, uh, (clears throat) now, right, you know, on a daily basis, weekly basis, we're seeing larger and larger drones being sent. Um, you know, some of these cases, it's, it's more than 1,000 drones in a night. (clears throat) Um, the numbers are quite significant. Um-

SO

Speaker One [39:59]

St. Petersburg got hit during the (laughs) economic forum.

ST

Speaker Two [40:02]

St. Petersburg, Moscow, um, you know, different refineries. (clears throat) But, you know, the Ukrainians are, are improving the system. I mean, Ukraine is developing their own cruise missiles, ballistic missiles. Um, there's supposed to be the delivery of ERAM this year, too, this, uh, cheap cruise missile from the US. (clears throat) Um...

SO

Speaker One [40:18]

And there- there's a ballistic missile that they're doing, that I think can do, like, basically attack range with a much bigger payload, but then there's also one that's supposedly coming out that can hit Moscow.

Chapter 19: Pressure Toward a Ceasefire

ST

Speaker Two [40:28]

Right. So yeah, I mean, the longer the war goes on, Ukraine's gonna, has incentive to continue developing those capabilities. So, um, you know, the, the bottom line is that the, the deep strike game, it's no longer dominated by Russia, it's something that Ukraine is also hitting things at, at depth, too. Um, and if this, and you know, if the war, the war is increasingly costly for Russia. (clears throat) And so, again, the, the question always has been, you know, as a way of ending the war, if you can stop advances on the front line, and plus, increase, you know, the costs you're imposing on Russia elsewhere, both in the economy e- and, and elsewhere, um, that might set the conditions for some kind of ceasefire, for some kind of peace deal, so on. Uh, and if not, (clears throat) right, then there's a risk that for, for Putin that the war starts going the other direction, right? Where maybe Ukraine starts advancing, maybe Ukraine starts taking back more territory than Russia holds, and then maybe back, Russia's b- on the back foot again. Um, and so again, you know, we'll, we'll see how this, this year develops. Uh, with Putin, it's, it's, you know, he, he has doubled, tripled, you know, quadrupled down this war over and over again. The war's clearly, I think, reached diminishing returns for Russia, um, and yet he continues going at it. And so, again, uh, you know, maybe this e- the i- increasing (...) Ukraine has this year maybe sets conditions for some kind of, you know, peace deal. Uh, if not, maybe it sets conditions for, you know, reversals later on this year or, or in the future.

SO

Speaker One [41:49]

And it could cause Putin to get desperate and double down again in some other way, whatever that is.

ST

Speaker Two [41:55]

Well, I think there's, look, there's, there's also an escalation risk. (clears throat) Um, and right now, like, I mean, I think part of his, uh, Russia's kind of strategy in this war, the assumption that foreign countries were not going to continue supporting Ukraine, this might, you know, cracks might develop and so on. That didn't, that didn't really happen. Um, you know, there's still a strong, you know, robust support from Eu- from Europe for Ukraine, the financial aid is, is sufficient to, to keep Uk- Ukraine's defense industry running, the, and the budget, um, so on.

SO

Speaker One [42:21]

Yeah, Orban lost, and now they've got the two-year funding package.

ST

Speaker Two [42:24]

Right. (clears throat) And so, um, as long as Ukraine defense industry's, you know, properly funded, uh, Ukraine can make many of these things, you know, domestically. And again, back in 2022, 2023, artillery was the main casualty-producing weapon. Ukraine was very reliant on foreign aid for ammunition, but also for howitzers. Now Ukraine is making, you know, Bohdana, like, I think 40 a month, something like that. And so production is, it's mostly, but also we know that, you know, drones are, account for the vast majority of casualties now. So it's, you know, more than 80%. Most of that is FPVs made in Ukraine, bombers made in Ukraine, so on. And so, uh, to a large extent, Ukraine is much less dependent on at least American aid as it was before. Um, the one alternative is, is, is PAC-3, or the Patriot Interceptor. There's no good alternative for that right now, and that's still a big issue, and we've seen this recently with the strikes on Kiev, where, you know, Ukraine is really, is, is struggling to intercept ballistic missiles. B- even just cruise missiles are getting through, too.

Chapter 20: Where the War May Head

SO

Speaker One [43:18]

Mm-hmm.

ST

Speaker Two [43:18]

And so again, Russia does do some complex, uh, strike packages. That does make it m- you know, more difficult, and that will be a threat continuing into the rest of the year, where, you know, will Ukraine be able to defend critical infrastructure, or can Russia, you know, continue to kind of hit that, um, effectively?

SO

Speaker One [43:32]

Mm-hmm. So, I think we covered quite a bit. That was a comprehensive journey through the trends from UAVs, middle strike, deep strike, tactical level, UGVs. Uh, any geographic differences between the south... I know we just talked about the difference between Kramatorsk in the south and all the way up to Lyman. Uh, anything else that is worth highlighting from, from your trip based on different units you spoke to?

ST

Speaker Two [43:57]

No, I mean, look, some parts probably are still difficult. You know, the priority directions, I think Pokrovsk and Star, you know, Kramatorsk will be honest, this is still the priority directions for Russia. And so the number of soldiers the brigades are facing is still relatively consistent. Um, you know, other places, you know, I think because manpower is not as significant as with before, Russia can only focus on a f- you know, fewer priority directions basically. And so the other secondary, you know, objectives, they're just not gonna probably have much, much success. Um, and there are also conditions for, you know, localized counterattacks that can retake territory in those directions. And so you get Lyman, I, I wouldn't be shocked if, if, you know, Ukraine takes back more territory in that direction. Um, you know, I think Zaporizhzhia's is, is relatively stable right now. Uh, and even in the Kupiansk, Russia de- redeployed a bunch of naval infantry brigades from the Doropillya section, um, and still, you know, the units there are still holding, right? They, they're not really losing that much territory either. So, um, you know, again, the, the concern still is, you know, because Star is, is ruled with situations, is deterring, is getting more difficult, um, and then, you know, it depends how, how close Russia can get to, because, to Kramatorsk and Slovyansk, taking the high ground will, will pose real, significant challenges for those cities, uh, and that's where the concern still is. But, um, you know, overall, Russia is still having more... They're having more difficulty this year than they did last year. Um, uh, there's reasons for, for relative optimism, right? I think the situation is better for Ukraine right now than it was a year ago, um, and I think a lot of these, these trends are gonna, are gonna remain positive for Ukraine. I think they're gonna maintain the advantage, uh, in innovation, I think middle strike capabilities is gonna get more capable with the quantities, um, and deep strike is, is gonna become, you know, costlier for Russia. And so, you know, those are positive trends that I think will, will continue.

SO

Speaker One [45:39]

Well, Rob, great, great report. Thank you for this. I, I know that Dima will be back in this chair to, to help you on future updates as you guys continue your, your analytical work together. Um, also, you've had great success, uh, because you're an analyst, uh, getting access to, I think, a lot of people that wouldn't normally talk. I think you did a couple interviews on the front lines that we'll be releasing on this podcast. Uh, and, and because of your reputation for, uh, discretion, but also just letting, you know, commanders speak for themselves, uh, without (laughs) gotcha journalism, uh, 'cause you're not a journalist, you're an analyst, um, you're attracting other people that want to speak to you, uh, and, and share their story with, with, with the, the viewers here, listeners, uh, on the Ukraine Military History Podcast, so I look forward to seeing that keep, keep happening and growing. If any of you are, uh, active soldiers, commanders, wanna, wanna reach out, just go to our website and let us know. We'll, we'll definitely put you on our list, uh, for Rob to come visit, uh, when he goes back out to the front lines. So, uh, with that, another great episode of, uh, Ukraine Military History Podcast: The Current Situation - First Draft of History, with Rob Lee, uh, the mil analyst here for the war. So thank you for listening to

Speaker One (continued)

this episode of the Ukraine Military History Podcast. I promised you at the beginning that I'd tell you more about our sponsors if you'd like to find a way to support the Ukraine Military History Podcast, the Borderlands Foundation more broadly, or if you'd like to work with myself and the contributors, the editors and the guests, uh, that come on this show. So, this podcast is produced by the Borderlands Foundation. The Borderlands Foundation has two main initiatives. Our mission at the Borderlands Foundation, uh, it was founded right after the war started in 2022, is to make sure that Ukraine's heroes are never forgotten, and there's two things that I'm passionate about helping Ukraine do. Number one is build a strong future for Ukraine, for my family that I'm raising here in Ukraine, uh, through national, uh, military history, study and education. I believe that nations, great nations, are founded and sustained and grow in strength based on the stories that those nations believe together about their history, and Ukraine has had a very complicated history. Uh, it's a very old country. A lot of people don't understand that Ukraine's 500 years older than actually Russia, a- as, uh, Ukraine was around before Russia. Ukraine, uh, was founded by Vikings that moved to this part of the world in the, uh, eighth and ninth century and were traders and, and became, uh, you know, rulers of the local Slavic peoples. So Ukraine, Kyivan Rus', was o- was an ancient and the most powerful empire in Europe, and Ukraine's history is very controversial. Through the years, Russia has appropriated it, stolen it, called it their own, and then tried to change history to make it their own, this great rich heritage that Ukraine has. So our mission at the Ukraine Military History Institute is go back through history and reclaim Ukraine's great military history tradition, because Ukraine's military history tradition, uh, encompasses, uh, almost all the great military traditions in the world. It started out interfacing and competing with the Vikings as well as Constantinople, absorbed those traditions over the years. It became part of the military history tradition, the Great Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, and then the Ottoman-Mongol, kind of Crimean Tartar, uh, heritage of Genghis Khan's great military tradition, all fused, competed, and created this unique military history tradition inside Ukraine, which I call the Cossack military history tradition, which takes from Western military history, the German, uh, , uh, American mission command, NATO mission command school, uh, as well as, uh, the good things, hopefully, and leaves the bad from the school, deep battle, uh... And a lot of the positive things that have come out of the military history tradition, and our mission is to help with the world's best military history center, studying the current war, going all the way back into history throughout Ukraine's history, uh, starting with battles from World War II that were fought in Ukraine, uh, you know, World War I, the, the , the first independence period from 1917 through the Civil War in 1921, back to the, the Cossack period. Uh, all the way back, uh, Ukraine has a great and unique style of fighting and tradition, uh, of fighting. The first written constitution was written by Cossack class, the warrior class wrote down the first declaration of rights in history, in modern history, which founded the enlightenment, led to the American, uh, Declaration of Bill of Rights, the Polish Constitution, and a number of other declarations of rights and constitutions since then were all inspired first by Ukraine's declaration of, of the rights, uh, with Pep Orlok after the defeat at Poltava, uh, at the hands of Peter the Great. So, understanding Ukraine's military history tradition is a passion of ours, and every author who comes on this, uh, episode, who publishes, uh, a written work, we actually paying those authors. So if you want to donate to support the authors, you can donate, uh, to get access to anything that's been published in the Ukraine Military History membership site, which we're gonna be releasing soon, where people who write about the current war or things from the past, uh, in military history, um, or, or some military historical case study that can help Ukraine think about how to fight and win and innovate in the current war, all those authors are getting paid by the center. I want to encourage great, uh, scholarship by, by paying Ukrainians to write their own history and other people who want to contribute, to pay them to, uh, build this body of work and knowledge, uh, at the Ukraine Military History Institute. So when you donate to support this podcast, we have production costs. It helps us pay the author that we come on and interview about what they've written or what they've done, uh, and then also just pays for all the c- uh,

Speaker One (continued)

production costs, the social media, the distribution, and everything that you enjoy about this podcast. So, that's the first way you can support the center. The second big way you can support the center is we have a, an, and are building a Heroes of Ukraine Tour, uh, which is gonna be a, uh, custom program that we're developing, uh, which takes people who want to come in and see the battlefields of Ukraine from the current war that have been liberated, we can take you to different battlefield sites. Uh, the Battle of Kiev, uh, which we've studied very well and have a lot of material, h- people who've studied that and can show that to you. Or if you want to go out to other sites, uh, battles that have i- in territory that's been liberated in Kherson or, or Zaporizhia, uh, or other places, uh, uh, out in Sumy or, or, uh, Kharkiv Province, uh, we can take you around to those sites. This is something we're developing. We want to launch this if and when, uh, the, the full-scale fighting, uh, with Russia pauses. We, we believe this could be a, a much bigger tour that people can come and come on a, a tour just buying individual seats and over a couple of weeks meet people from all over the world who want to see Ukraine. But before we do that public version of the tour where anyone can book any number of seats at scheduled times, if any of you would like to have a tour of the battlefields of Ukraine that have already been liberated and are safe, uh, we don't do war tourism to active parts of the fighting, but we do do tours, historical staff ride battlefield tours for military professionals, government officials, and/or business leaders that would like to understand what has happened here, you can contact us about the Heroes of Ukraine Tour. So, that's the Ukraine Military History Institute, which pays for and produces this podcast. The next sponsor I'd like to discuss is the Ukraine Center for Traumatic Stress. This is a center that is near and dear to my heart because of my past service in, in combat as a soldier, my study of history and the history of psychological, uh, trauma that comes from serving in combat, personal experience of my own, overcoming my own struggles with it, uh, is, is a center dedicated to helping advance the research conversation and, uh, funding of breakthrough, uh, technologies and treatments for, uh, post-traumatic stress disorder, uh, which ef- affects a number of soldiers who've served in Ukraine, uh, and, and we want to make sure that they recover psychologically to become productive, vibrant leaders in the, in the future of Ukraine. This is headed by Major General Vladislav Klochkov, retired, the former commander, the first commander of the Moral Psychological Support Forces of Ukraine under the Commander-in-chief President Valery Zaluzhnyi. It was a new position that he created right before the full-scale invasion. And General Klochkov has written his PhD on, uh, military psychology of, of a f- of a soldier and is passionate about, um, advancing the, the, the study and the treatment of, of this disorder for veterans. This is a podcast that we're gonna be releasing very soon in , translated into for those who are not that want to listen in on the conversation and comment on it, uh, on our social media. Uh, but the interviews will be conducted in to advance and start the conversation for veterans, mental health professionals, and government officials who are working on this problem, which we believe, uh, is, is critical, uh, to, to solve, uh, for the future of Ukraine. So if you'd like to donate to support that podcast, to help us produce and start that conversation, or if you'd like to inquire about donating to supporting specific veterans going through, uh, different treatments, workshops, uh, for, uh, treatment of PTSD, uh, you're welcome to reach out to us. Uh, the center also has a rehabilitation through golf program where we pay for veterans to play golf and go play in our annual, uh- ... uh, Heroes of Ukraine Freedom Summit Golf Tournament, uh, which will be held next year in Dallas, in the United States, in March. And this is a very, uh, important program that you can also take a look at sponsoring veterans in their journey to mental health recovering. So, that's the Ukraine Center for Traumatic Stress. And then finally, uh, for those of you who watch this podcast, they, that you see our co-hosts, some of the guests that come on there, um, all of our podcasts are filmed in Ukraine. The reason we do this is, I, I believe in talking to Ukrainians, uh, and people who will actually come to Ukraine that want to speak about military history, analysis of the current war, uh, defense industry issues, um, all the things that we need to learn in, uh, Ukraine and our allies in NATO who've supported Ukraine, uh, to fight and win the next war against our adversaries. Russia,

Speaker One (continued)

China, Iran, all of the people that support, uh, Vladimir Putin, um, are learning from this war the lessons that Russia's learning. We need to make sure that we learn the, the war, the lessons from the war that Ukrainians are learning, better, and implement those across the force for our partner forces. Americans, British, all the other European NATO forces, uh, partners out east, uh, Japan, South Korea, Australia. All the c- all the countries that are supporting Ukraine, we wanna make sure that we create a community that, that disseminates those lessons. And we get contacted by different groups. Sometimes governments, foreign militaries that would like advisory services to help them learn and implement the lessons of this war for their armed forces. Defense companies r- reach out and would like to get help developing, testing their product, selling their product inside Ukraine, uh, that, that may be helpful on the battlefield. Uh, that's what the Borderlands Group does. We advise defense tech companies. We even do forward support engineering for defense tech companies, software development hardware, uh, you know, hiring and staffing a forward-deployed engineering shop for Western defense companies. Uh, so all those services, if you're looking for advisory services, custom, uh, analytical studies by Rob Lee and his team, uh, defense advisory services, uh, for defense companies or foreign militaries, we can put together a package for you, give you a proposal and, and help you, uh, with that. So, to get in touch with us, just go to the website for the borderlandsgroup.com. Uh, fill out our contact us form. Uh, we'll evaluate your request and get back to you in the appropriate secure communication channel if that's what you'd like to do. So, thank you for watching (laughs) the sponsor reads here. Uh, it's important, uh, to, to me that we provide value to you in every podcast episode, and these are the ways that you can support us so we can con- continue to afford to produce and expand and increase the frequency of our content production for the benefit of Ukraine and its allies fighting this war, winning this war, and the next.
(instrumental music)