

The Horse Paths

They were told it could not be done. It was done anyway, by people with no authority to do it.

The vans were Sprinters. Somebody welded sheet steel to the inside of the door panels, which does almost nothing against an anti-tank mine and a great deal for the confidence of the man driving. They carried basic medical supplies, onions, potatoes, and bread.

They did not use the roads. The roads were littered with anti-tank mines, so the drivers took the horse and cow paths — the tracks that crossed that ground before anyone graded a highway over it. The paths were slower. They took smaller loads and more trips. They also worked, and the drivers came back, and then they went again.

Nobody gave those men permission. Nobody could have. There was no authority in a position to authorize a civilian to drive food across a field in a country at war, and if there had been, the paperwork would have outlived the people waiting on the other end.

I want to be clear about where I was, because it matters to how you should read this: Washington, DC. I never set foot in Ukraine, never drove a van, and never took any risk worth the word.

What I did was read satellite imagery and track a dozen streams of open reporting, and turn that into something the people actually moving could use — where the water was mined, which crossings were still holding, what a route was going to cost this week and whether it would exist next week. Then sourcing, fundraising, and coordination, by phone and encrypted chat, with Americans and Ukrainians who took all of that and drove.

How a guy in an apartment ends up useful

In August of 2021 I was building a mapping portfolio for a job application. I picked Russia because the open-source material was abundant — a portfolio needs data you can actually get.

What the work turned into was armor. I used commercial satellite imagery to find Russian equipment depots, and then I counted what was in them. Vehicle by vehicle, revetment by revetment, building an inventory of what was parked where and how much of it there was. Months of evenings on the same three questions. Where are things. How much of them is there. What would it take to move any of it.

By December I was watching daily.

I am not going to claim I predicted anything. But when the invasion came in February I was not starting from zero, and in those first weeks that was the only qualification anybody had. I got on the phone with two Rotary clubs — the

Rotary Club of Global Impact and the Crystal City Pentagon Rotary Club — and we started planning a humanitarian response.

My first instinct was the obvious one, the same one everybody reached for. Find the port. Romania: short, direct, adjacent, already moving volume.

It was shut. Mines had come loose from their moorings and were drifting across the Black Sea, and no underwriter would price that lane at a number a charity could pay. Nobody attacked us. No cargo was seized, no shot was fired at anything we owned. The sea simply became a place where the arithmetic stopped working.

In the city I was sitting in, that is where the conversation usually ends. There were a great many people in Washington that spring explaining, at length and with real expertise, why relief could not move at scale into that country. The ports were closed. The insurance was impossible. The corridors were contested. Every one of those statements was true.

Relief moved anyway. Not because anyone solved the problem those people were describing, but because a lot of people who were not waiting for it to be solved found ways around it, one route at a time.

Who actually did it

There was no organization. There was a ramshackle of WhatsApp groups and Signal channels, and later Telegram and Discord, most of it unvetted. Ukrainian Americans who still had family there. Church networks that already had congregations on both sides of a border. Rotary clubs raising money in American living rooms. Volunteer drivers with vans that were not built for this.

There was no way to confirm who was on the other end of a request, and the cost of guessing wrong was not embarrassment — it was a convoy. So people developed instincts and used them, because the alternative was waiting for a vetting process that did not exist while people needed onions.

That sounds romantic and it was not. It was a bad system. It was the only system, and it was staffed entirely by people who had jobs and families and no obligation whatsoever to be doing any of it.

When the relief finally routed, it went through Rotterdam — most of a continent from where it was needed. Others were flying aid into Poland and trucking it in from there, which is the most expensive way there is to move mass. Everyone chose it anyway, because the cheap way was closed and the need was not going to reschedule itself.

Two directions

The vans went in. The buses came out.

That is the part I did not expect and the part I think about most. The same denied space, the same improvised network, two cargoes moving in opposite directions — food and medicine toward the front, and old buses carrying people

away from it. Nobody designed that. It assembled itself out of whoever had a vehicle and a reason to use it.

The drivers who found the horse paths were not being clever. They were using the only network nobody had bothered to draw. The roads were mined because the roads were the plan — somebody engineered that network, everybody routes on it, and an adversary who wants to stop movement knows exactly where to put the mines, because the map tells him. The horse paths predate the map. Nobody surveyed them, nobody planned on them, and so nobody targeted them.

It cost something. Slower, lighter loads, more trips, vans instead of trucks. That was the price of the lane staying open, and the people paying it were the ones behind the wheel.

Power, by the unit

When the energy infrastructure came under attack, we moved on generators. We raised the money first — a considerable amount, from people who mostly did not know anyone in Ukraine — and then went looking for supply.

The useful question turned out not to be who makes the best generator. It was: where is a generator already, inside Europe. We got a call with the board of a generator manufacturer, and they told us they had a sister company in Germany. We sourced there and trucked into Ukraine, to hospitals and orphanages.

Had we bought American and shipped, we would have been back in the Rotterdam problem — ocean freight, port access, insurance, weeks of lead time on equipment that hospitals needed that month. Instead a private citizen with money already in hand got a manufacturer's board to open its European supply, and the power reached the wards.

No program office. No contract vehicle. No authority of any kind. Just a phone call, and a room full of people on the other end who decided to help.

What it was

None of us called it anything at the time. It had a name — decentralized logistics — and every part of it was decentralized by force rather than by design. Multiple sourcing points instead of a depot. Multiple routes instead of a corridor. A loose confederation of churches and clubs and diaspora families instead of a command structure. And decisions made at the edge, by a driver choosing a cow path at the moment he saw the road.

Coordination in Washington, money raised in American living rooms, generators sourced in Germany, drivers on Ukrainian cow paths. Nobody in that chain was ever in the same room as anybody else, and there was no room to be in.

It worked because of that, not despite it. A centralized version — one port, one warehouse, one corridor, one channel — would have been a target list.

I have spent three years since then building tools that try to teach this, and I still think the most useful thing I saw in all of it was not a method. It was the speed at which ordinary people decided that the absence of a plan was not the same as the absence of a way.

The experts were not wrong. The ports really were closed and the insurance really was impossible and the corridors really were contested. They were describing the problem accurately.

The volunteers were solving a different one. Not *how do we move relief into a contested country at scale* — that problem was genuinely unsolved and stayed that way for a long time. Theirs was smaller and more urgent: *what can we get to these people this week*. And that question had answers, and the answers were a van, a path nobody had mapped, and a driver willing to make the trip.

They did not need anyone's permission for that. They needed onions, and diesel, and somebody in an apartment in Washington to find out where the generators were.

Aaron Myers has planned and coordinated humanitarian logistics into Ukraine since February 2022 — food security, emergency evacuation, medical resupply, and generator delivery — as a project manager with Cops Helping Cops and through the Rotary Club of Global Impact and the Crystal City Pentagon Rotary Club.