

Edinburgh woman heading up Halo's work in Ukraine

Mairi Cunningham from Leith who is leading the work of the HALO Trust in Ukraine to rid the country of landmines, admits the work has become harder after the most recent invasion.

The 33-year-old has already worked in some of the world's most hazardous countries including Syria and Somaliland, but said nothing could have prepared her for working in Ukraine.



Photographs taken around Kyiv, June 2022 by Simon Conway.

Mairi said: “When I took on this role in November no-one could have imagined how things would unfold. This is not exactly what I signed up for.

“I knew there were security challenges of a hostile neighbour, but I do not think anyone could have anticipated the situation was going to change so dramatically.

“We’ve been working next to the front line in the Donbas since 2016 and it had been a fairly entrenched front line for many years.

“I’ve worked in post conflict environments clearing up explosive ordnance, but suddenly living amongst an actual conflict of this scale adds a whole new dimension to the challenges of this job.”

The £2million UK Government funding from the Foreign,

Commonwealth & Development Office enables The HALO Trust to survey and then clear devices from areas in Ukraine where Russian troops have withdrawn. The Scottish charity – whose headquarters are in Thornhill, near Dumfries – is also working to educate civilians, especially children, about the risks of landmines.



Mairi Cunningham

Mairi admitted she had her own near miss as the Russians bombarded the country with air strikes.

She said: "Although we are now far away from advancing Russian troops, we still face the threat of missile strikes across the country.

"I had an uncomfortably close shave in Lviv. I got delayed heading out for a run up a hill and it was hit with a missile strike at the very moment I'd have been there had I not been held up.

"The danger and unpredictability of the situation, it can get to you without you realising. There is this underlying threat and when you hear air raid sirens frequently.

"That threat is pervasive. You carry on as if life is normal and get reminders that life is not normal."

Mairi was in Ukraine as Putin's tanks mounted their invasion on 24 February.

She said: "At the time it felt surreal. Cafés, bars and restaurants were open as normal and despite the news of troop build-up getting more and more alarming, even in the east we had staff telling us, 'We've lived with this for years, what is different now?'.

"It was like the Truman Show and moving around on a film set in Central Kyiv, but with this sinister backdrop of something bad going to happen, which ultimately it did.

"Our operations were suspended but we maintained a symbolic presence in Lviv to support our local staff remotely and on the day of the invasion, it took us 12 hours to travel about 2km to cross the border into Poland.

"It was a stressful experience, but nothing compared to the ordeal of our colleagues who have lost loved-ones or been displaced from their homes.

"A staff member was killed in Mariupol during the bombardment and fighting there. The majority of our 30 staff in Mariupol

made it out but we still have six who are unaccounted for and we've lost contact with."

She admits that her family worry for her safety. She said: "I doubt either of my parents are happy with my career choice right now but hopefully they understand why we're here. I think they are proud of the work we are doing.

"I was out visiting our teams clearing anti-tank mines in a village north-east of Kyiv and the need is huge.

"We're focussing our attention in and around Kyiv Oblast. Since the Russians retreated you can understand why people just want to get back to some sense of normality and clearing unexploded ordnance plays a crucial role in helping with that.

"There was one site we visited where farmers have tractors in their fields and thankfully one driver miraculously survived unscathed after being thrown out of the vehicle when an explosion happened.

"He was driving a truck of sand between construction projects on a rural dirt road and was unlucky enough to hit an anti-tank mine on his way.

"It is people – and children – trying to go about ordinary life who face this threat. Ukraine is littered with a colossal amount of mines, missiles and artillery.

"The HALO Trust is immensely grateful to the UK Government for its generous and timely funding to support our work, which will prevent further deaths and allow families to return to homes, factories to reopen and fields to be re-cultivated."

The UK's Minister for Europe Graham Stuart said: "Putin's illegal use of landmines in Ukraine is deliberately inflicting death and injury to innocent civilians.

"That is why the UK Government supports The HALO Trust's world-leading demining work. Mairi's team in Ukraine is saving

lives and helping communities to rebuild their homes and livelihoods.

“We will continue to support the Ukrainian government in its fight against Putin’s illegal and inhumane war.”

HALO has been working in eastern Ukraine since 2016 and the UK’s overall demining funding to the country to date has resulted in 2.5 million square metres of land cleared and in 2,862 education sessions, reaching over 130,000 people.



Convoy transporting vital humanitarian supplies.
Ukraine April 2022



Survey work around Kyiv, May 2022