

Stuart Ramsay

Stuart Ramsay: [00:00:00] I'm lying in the back, just watching the whole car slowly but surely does integrate. And that's when I actually said to myself - I remember it - I am going to die now, and I wonder if it's going to hurt?

Ramita Navai: From *Aurra Studios* this is **The Line of Fire** with me, Ramita Navai. I've been working in conflict zones around the world for nearly two decades. And in this series, I talk to fellow journalists about covering war and the life-changing moments of confronting death. Welcome to **The Line of Fire**.

My guest today is *Sky News*' Chief Correspondent [00:01:00] Stuart Ramsay. Over the past 30 years, he's covered 18 wars and won a lot of awards, including two Emmys. Stuart is *Sky*'s longest serving foreign correspondent. He recently got back from covering the war in Ukraine where his team came under attack and he was shot and wounded. Stuart welcome.

Stuart, I usually start off by asking each of my guests how they got into reporting conflict. But actually you're my first guest who I'm speaking to fresh from covering a conflict. So if it's okay with you I want to dive straight into Ukraine. How was it covering Ukraine and how is it different from the other conflicts you've covered?

Stuart Ramsay: One of the essential, one of immediate and essential difference between the two is that you've actually got two armies fighting each other. I think that it's peer fighting I think it's called. And basically all though they're near peers. I mean, Russia is probably a bigger army. You [00:02:00] have two full-scale armies.

A lot of the wars that we've been covering in recent years have actually been a big army against a terrorist organization or a less well-organized smaller army. So that makes an immediate difference between the two. I'd been covering Ukraine from 2014, 2015. I've been back a few times since. And actually in this particular trip when eventually we had to leave because we were attacked we had actually been there for two months. We'd had a few days off in between, but we'd arrived in January. We started in December. We arrived in January and we'd done sort of eight, nine weeks by then. And so we were waiting for the war to start and in many ways we'd been in the east for most of that period of time which has been this sort of frozen conflict with a continuous firing, but not that many deaths and not much movement along the sort of demarcation line between the separatists or the Russian-backed separatists and the Ukrainian [00:03:00] government forces and militias. So we'd got used to being in, if you like, in the war zone before we had moved actually to Kiev on the assumption, actually it'll all probably end quite quickly, and that was the sort of basic thinking. That was the planning. So to be near the capital if the invasion began, which of course it did.

Ramita Navai: [EXPLAINER] *Russia's president Vladimir Putin has long seen Ukraine - a democracy with a free press - as an existential threat. When protests drove out Ukraine's Moscow friendly president in 2014, Putin acted. He annexed*

Ukraine's strategically important Crimean Peninsula. And a few weeks later supported two separatist insurgencies in the east. As Ukraine grew close to Europe and to NATO, tensions escalated. With Putin invading the country on February 24th 2022 declaring he was fighting against Nazis and genocide. Moscow even alleged that Ukraine was building a plutonium bomb. All unfounded [00:04:00] claims. In reality, Putin unleashed Europe's biggest war since World War Two leaving tens of thousands dead and more than 11 million people displaced so far.

And spending that amount of time in a war zone near the front line, did you let your guard down? I mean, were you living in constant fear or did you become used to it? What happens?

Stuart Ramsay: No, I think I don't ever let my guard down when I'm there. I'm actually known, I think, to be relatively risk averse. Which is paradoxically one of the reasons why what happened to us, and I'm sure we'll talk about it, has affected so many people in our newsroom and people who know me because they know I don't take risks.

But I was always, when we were there, very mindful of how dangerous wars can be. I've done a lot of them and I still intend to continue covering them. And one of the reasons that I'm still here after all these [00:05:00] years is that we do, you know, you take it all very, very seriously and you concentrate every single time you go out in the car.

If you let your guard down, if you have music on in cars - you won't believe how many people drive into war zones with music on, they can't hear anything that's going on. It's crazy. So those sort of things you look out for. So I don't let my guard down at all.

And you

Ramita Navai: were speaking about the difference between covering Ukraine and the other wars you've covered, which is a really interesting point, actually, that it's two peer armies.

How does that affect the way that you work on the ground?

Stuart Ramsay: It's more difficult in some ways because, you know, armies are regimented and you can't as a rule wonder around. Whereas in other conflicts, actually you can move around quite easily. Certainly the middle east slightly changed because you knew that as Westerners generally as journalists certainly you were actual targets in your own right. Particularly for groups like Islamic state. So that, you know, that became very dangerous. But covering wars in [00:06:00] Africa or covering wars in other parts of the middle east, you can actually move around quite easily. When you've got two big armies, you've actually got to go with them. Now, one of the ways around that is, particularly on the Ukrainian side, is they have an awful lot of militia who are fairly relaxed about checkpoints and coming and goings.

But as soon as you're involved with the official Ukrainian army, particularly, for example in Mariupol I was with the Marines. They were really, really strict. I mean, they were as strict as any British or American army that I've been with. Where you can go and where you can't go and procedures and names on lists and PR people with you and all the rest of it. So, it makes it more complex like that. Of course it makes it much more dangerous because the weapons being used are massive. You know, we're not just talking about small arms a lot of the time. You know, we're talking ballistic missiles and mortars and all sorts.

So it's a higher level of danger. Not necessarily on immediate attacking on a personal level, but the effects of huge bombs is the [00:07:00] shrapnel and the stuff that can go with it and that's makes it very dangerous indeed.

Ramita Navai: How dangerous is it? Was it and is it compared to the more recent wars you've covered, let's say Syria, Iraq?

Stuart Ramsay: Well in Syria, well in Mosul actually, I mean, I was actually properly blown up by an IED that was driven in a truck that was a cement mixer. I mean, how I'm alive from that I don't really know. I mean, 60, 70 people died in that incident. So that was a big. It's interesting actually thinking about it, you know, because you'd go into Mosul, which is an incredibly dangerous place, but you'd have a sense of where you were, you know, you had a sense of the movement of people and you could have a - you know, you would hear a lot of firing, but you couldn't see it because you're in a built up area. And I suppose this was similar, except that the danger seemed to be from the scale of the weapons being used. And I think, you know, you've got tanks fighting each other, et [00:08:00] cetera, or tanks going into towns with the Ukrainian military using, you know, British and American supplied anti-tank weapon systems. You weren't actually getting that near to that, but sort of away from it, the levels of danger were very high in a variety of reasons. Not least checkpoints that were quite jumpy in their own right. A number of the *Sky News* teams, in fact, a number of teams from all sorts of news organizations had a terrible time with checkpoints, where guns were fired, they were taken out of cars and beaten up. Not least because the Russians had put in advanced groups of what the Ukrainians called saboteurs and they had been driving around saying that they were media. And so every checkpoint became very dangerous, very dangerous, and that didn't get any better as the likelihood of the war got nearer and then when it actually started. In fact, it became very, very dangerous indeed.

Ramita Navai: So can I take you back to the day you got attacked. [00:09:00] Can you tell me where you were and what story you were doing and what happened that day?

Stuart Ramsay: We'd been driving. We decided to go to a town called Butcha. Now nobody had heard of Butcha at that time. It's now become synonymous with violence and death. But at that stage it was just a town which the Russians had attacked. It's quite near Kiev and probably about a 40, 45 minute drive max but that's even if you're going very slowly. We had heard that a Russian convoy had entered and it had been attacked.

We had good contacts in the town and said it was quiet, all the Russians had gone and you could come and see their column and what had happened to it. One of the reasons we wanted to do that was because we'd been hearing - you know, the war had started, we'd been hearing explosions, we'd been locked down in a Kiev for 36 hours, they'd introduced this curfew [00:10:00] for basically two days effectively and we wanted to get out and we wanted to see what was going on. Because we were reporting about this war but we weren't actually seeing anything of it. So we try to get to Butcha. It took hours and hours and hours through checkpoints, some very jumpy.

And we were approaching and the whole battlespace massively changed. We could see helicopter gunships in the air and the checkpoints were more jumpy. And then they said that Butcha is fighting again. And it was quite clear to all of us, but to me particularly, that it was getting too late, too dangerous, and we weren't going to achieve anything.

And actually, you know, one of the difficult things for journalists is that you actually sometimes have to say, "We're not going to get this story today and we're going to have to leave." And, you know, I'd been there long enough to know that I can ring and say, "I'm sorry, but I didn't get anything today."

Ramita Navai: Which is a huge pressure.

Stuart Ramsay: It's a lot of pressure on people. Yeah. I mean, I'm senior enough to be able to cope with that. I mean, I'm sure we'd have [00:11:00] put something together because we're filming all the time. It's just not the story we wanted to do. So we turned round. But I say we turned around, we turned round metaphorically because we decided to head back to Kiev.

But by now all the roads that we'd come in on were now battlespace themselves. So we had to find a new way out and it was becoming more and more difficult. Ended up at a checkpoint who stopped. Bizarrely gave us some ice cream, which a member of the public had given to the police. And I asked them which direction is best, which road should we go down?

And we talked it through. The message from them was go down the road that we were on. That is the M06 is what it's called. It's it also linked to another road called E40. These now are famous roads because of the numbers of people who've been killed on them. But at that stage which we think was the very early stages of the Russians moving in and taking over that area, which was the Western entry into Kiev and that would be the way they were going to bring [00:12:00] their tanks in.

You remember, there was a huge column of tanks, et cetera. That was where they were going. It all sort of fell apart. But at this stage, that was still the plan.

Ramita Navai: I remember those incredible satellite images. I mean, it was, a lot of hardware.

Stuart Ramsay: I can't remember how kilometres long, but it was huge wasn't it? Miles and miles and miles of stuff.

Ramita Navai: So you knew that that column was on its way?

Stuart Ramsay: Yeah. But it's still by this stage...

Ramita Navai: It had gone stuck hadn't it somewhere?

Stuart Ramsay: It's above Butcha somewhere.

Ramita Navai: Right.

Stuart Ramsay: It's funny with these things, isn't it? Because you get more information after the event. But at this moment, at this stage, we're in day three of the war. We know that there's a lot of fighting taking place, but we haven't seen it.

We don't know what's happening in the east of the country. We don't know what's happening in the south of the country. We're not really certain what's happening outside of Kiev. And are we going to be able to report on it? And so with this information of going down this road, we headed off in that direction, back towards the capital, back towards our hotel.

We didn't get there. **[Stuart laughs]**

Ramita Navai: What happened?

Stuart Ramsay: We pulled up. Well, there was, as we're [00:13:00] driving along the road, we can see...

Ramita Navai: Sorry, how many of you in the car?

Stuart Ramsay: Ok so there's five of us in the car.

Ramita Navai: And is it an armored car?

Stuart Ramsay: No, no, no. It's a white family saloon.

Ramita Navai: God.

Stuart Ramsay: And we didn't have any TV markings on it because the Ukrainian government and army had told us to not have them.

Ramita Navai: Because then you'd be a target?

Stuart Ramsay: But the target being that these Russian saboteurs had said that they were TV and had TV on their cars.

Ramita Navai: Oh wow ok just to throw that in the mix.

Stuart Ramsay: So the Ukrainians said, listen, the best thing you can do is just approach the checkpoints quietly. You know, show that you're not carrying anything. And we'll look at your press accreditation then. Don't have TV because actually we'll just shoot. So we'd made that decision. So we had nothing.

In other conflicts I often mark press, et cetera, but not here. We drove and I could see it was very quiet and I must admit, I'll be honest, and we've all talked about it as a team, I had great misgivings driving down the road. I said to the guys that I just don't think this is right. And we all discussed it, but [00:14:00] actually at that point I think when I first said that, we went back to the police.

Ramita Navai: You aired that? You said I'm not, I don't have a good feeling here?

Stuart Ramsay: Oh yes.

Ramita Navai: And what was that feeling? Have you had it before?

Stuart Ramsay: Yeah. Yeah. I mean, I've had it before. It's interesting. You can't do all your news coverage on feelings, because if you did you'd probably always stop. Because I've actually thought about it a lot. How many times have I got out of trouble because I've had a feeling and I've gone by it? Or I've had a feeling and decided to ignore it? So this one was one. When I got blown up was another. When I got taken hostage in Ukraine, that was another. But how many times have I also thought I've got a bad feeling but did do something about it? So, you know, maybe I always have a bad feeling. You know, I'll have to remember the next time. So I don't think I had any some great premonition in retrospect. I probably just always I'm nervous about going down quiet roads.

Ramita Navai: Just to talk about these instincts that you have, these [00:15:00] feelings. Do you think there've been honed from years of doing this or is it just innate self-preservation?

Stuart Ramsay: No, I think it's years and years of experience, to be honest. I don't think there's any way around that. I think of things that I did when I was much younger, which were not being reckless, but I shake my head in disbelief because I just didn't know.

And you know, when you've seen as much death as I have, you seen so many incidents, to be honest, children and refugees, you just get used to that sense of the impending doom that's coming, which you don't have when you're young. And I definitely know from talking to other members of the team that joined, who are often a lot younger than me, that they will later say you called that. And I didn't even know

I was calling it that at the time. And I think that me and, you know, I'm not the exception, I'm talking about all the aging reporters like myself have been doing this from ITN and [00:16:00] BBC, from Sky. They're all the same. They all think very similarly. I'm sure.

Ramita Navai: And what, so what happened when you told the team that you had a bad feeling?

Stuart Ramsay: So that was slightly going back in time, actually, because remember I mentioned the ice cream? It was when we went back having just gone onto this road. Now, the reason we turned round was A. We could see that ahead of us there was something bad happening. That was helicopters. And so we turned back and I said, I don't like this direction. That's when we went to the police, that's when they gave us the ice cream. And that's when they said go down. So we went back down and I still had a bad feeling, but we had agreed that this was the best way home. Where I really regret is that I asked the right question about the best route, I'd failed dramatically to ask the follow-up, which you always ask, is when did you last do that road?

Ramita Navai: Oh gosh, yeah.

Stuart Ramsay: Now he might've done it an hour before and it was safe then an hour later. But he might've done it a week before. Therefore his opinion is - like a day before is completely irrelevant. I didn't ask [00:17:00] that, but I mean, you know, there is a war going on.

[Both laugh]

Ramita Navai: There is a lot going on. I wouldn't give yourself a hard time about that.

Stuart Ramsay: Well, there was a lot of bang and incoming all the time. I mean, it really was very dangerous. So we head off there. As we entered - there's like - I think it's either a gantry or it feels - it's a gantry that there's a sort of like bang on the front left of the car. So Martin Vowles, who's one of our producers, he's driving. Richie Mockler is our cameraman, he's in the front and he's filming. We have Dominique Van Heerden who's my producer, she's sitting in the back in the middle. I'm on the left and Andrii Lytvynenko he's on our right-hand side. The car sort of we'd slowly come to a stop. Everyone's saying, you know, "was that a shot?" The boys think it's not, I think it is. Anyway within seconds, the first round. And you [00:18:00] can hear everyone go, uh oh and start shouting. Andre and Martin are straight out of the car.

Martin - in ambushes, the driver always dies because they have to stop the driver. So before you think he has to get out of the car.

So he was out and gone, which was the right thing to do. Andre, who hadn't been working very long and is very young, just followed him, just saw that he was going

and he was gone. And I think that Richie and I who've been in lots of nasty things before knew that debussing as it's called was absolutely essential.

Ramita Navai: That means getting out of the car.

Stuart Ramsay: Debussing is what it's called. Basically just get out of the car.

Ramita Navai: And sorry Stuart, at this point when you heard the incoming, did you realize that you were the target? You didn't think, oh, we're stuck in a middle of a firefight?

Stuart Ramsay: Oh no. I knew we were at the target, but I thought it was a mistake.

And I think the three of us, well, we know we've talked about it. And actually we started shouting when the first set of bullets stopped firing, we [00:19:00] started shouting journalists. We were convinced it was a Ukrainian checkpoint that had got jumpy and was just starting shooting and that when we started shouting journalists they would stop.

What happened was actually the firing didn't just start again it intensified. By this stage, we know there's a shooter in front of us and there's a shooter to the left side. Now the left side is my side. I know this because, well, there were bullets coming from the left and across. And Dominique later described it as being like, you know, in a washing machine of bullets, because that's what it was like.

It was unbelievable. I mean, you were just seeing sparks. Your mind goes - I mean, I don't know if people have talked about it, it's happened to me when you're in a car crash, everything goes super slow motion because you can see it. It was like being in a super slow mo. It was like being in the Matrix. It was absolutely bizarre.

And, I mean, I remember it so clearly. Whether it's my imagination, but I swear to God, I could see the bullet coming that hit me, but [00:20:00] it didn't, you know, maybe I didn't, but that's, swear to God, that's how it feels to me. We were all catatonic with fear, as you can imagine. I hear Dominique say I'm going to have to get out. And she sort of crawls out of the car. You know, she said to me later, you know, I know 100% I was going to die in the car, but I might stand a chance outside and she's scuttled off trying to find where to go. And actually the way out was out to the - if we're looking straight on - to the right of the car, there was a very steep motorway embankment, but like really steep because we're leading to a bridge over a river.

So, it's sort of 40 feet down but very, very steep.

Ramita Navai: And so she'd left the car and you're still in it?

Stuart Ramsay: Yeah, yeah, so, so she's gone and has got away. Now I'm - so Richie is in front and he's made himself into a tiny - he's a big guy, [00:21:00] but he's tiny. He made himself very tiny.

So he's effectively in the well of the car, on the passenger's side. Effectively hidden by the engine block, which has given a lot of protection, but not protection from what's coming in. I'm laying in the back, just watching the whole car sort of slowly but surely disintegrate.

And that's when I actually said to myself, I remember it, I am going to die now, and I wonder if it's going to hurt.

[Stuart cries]

Anyway, it then got hit. I then got hit and I remember thinking, well, it didn't hurt that bad. And weirdly I then sort of sat up, put my helmet on. I hadn't had my helmet on when we were driving because it was quite difficult in the car and it's this tiny little car. And put my helmet on and then reached back. I was just about to get out of the car, there's a [00:22:00] lot of firing going on, but I thought now I haven't got my phones. So I went back and reached back to my phones and I don't know what made me think that. It became incredibly important later because that was our only communication because nobody else had their phones with them anymore.

And you know, there was just stuff everywhere. So, I got my phone and I remember getting out of the car fairly relaxed. And you can hear Richie on the rushes saying, "What are you doing?" Because I stood up and sort of slightly walked over to the embankment edge, took two steps down, realised I was falling and dived.

I then landed at the bottom on my head. Probably, I almost certainly knocked myself out. But I was talking to Martin and Dominique afterwards and they saying he was genuinely actually belly shakingly funny when I fell down and there's bullets going everywhere, they were really scared, but they were actually laughing because it was just so comedic. And then Rich was then still in the car. Now it's difficult to know how, I don't know how [00:23:00] long it took, but it's seconds. I mean, it's 30 seconds, not even, but I know that the guys shouting for him to come. He went silent on them and they thought he was dead. But he knew, you know, Richie doesn't mind me saying, he was a former soldier. He knew exactly what he was doing. He was waiting for them to reload. So when it went quiet, he went for it because they had reloaded and he comes over and I don't remember this from seeing it, but I told him on the rushes because incredibly Richie filmed everything, he is just, I mean, there's bullets all around him, a hail of bullets as he came over the side.

And he didn't fall down the bank. As a young fit man he was able to stay upright and he got himself down and that's when he turns to me and says, "Stuart, I'm still rolling." We've edited it there because I couldn't believe it. And then we start making our escape.

But the thing that was incredible about it and it is, you know, it is miraculous, whether one can use the word miracle or not is another discussion, but basically you have five people sitting at the equivalent of sort of a breakfast table in a kitchen. [00:24:00] That's how small a car is. And for three minutes and 20 seconds, it was fire at constantly.

And I'm the only one who got hit. Richie actually got hit twice or three times, but in his armor, mine was just beneath the armor because of the angle I was lying. That's really why.

Ramita Navai: Did you know you'd been hit?

Stuart Ramsay: Oh yeah. Yeah, yeah.

Ramita Navai: From the moment you got hit?

Stuart Ramsay: When I got hit I knew I was hit. It was just I was surprised it didn't hurt as much as I thought it was going to.

And in fact, funny enough, it was described to me - somebody asked me what it was like. And I said, I don't know, I can't describe it. And another guy said, does it feel like - and obviously he'd had that description given to him before - like you've been hit with a hammer with sparklers on it.

I said, that is it. And so we think the sparkling sensation it's the skin flesh burning. And the hammer is obviously it going through. Now where I was very lucky was that it went straight through me. So there's an entry and an exit point. And didn't hit any organs in [00:25:00] between. I think it considerably hurts more if it hits anything. Bones, et cetera, it's going to be agony. But actually it just went straight through me. I mean, it came out. Just sort of went into the left-hand side of my bottom, as best description, but out near my kidney. So I was blinking lucky.

Ramita Navai: And did you not panic? Did you not think I might lose blood? I might only have a certain amount of time before I bleed out. I need to get to a hospital. I imagine I would panic.

Stuart Ramsay: Yeah. I didn't panic. In fact, what we're all pleased about in the rushes is how little panic there was given that everyone's at a very high level of panic clearly. But we're still operating at quite a good level.

And I think, you know, we do do quite a lot of training on this stuff and virtually everyone there has been in some really nasty situations. Not so much - well certainly Dominique, not as much as me and Richie and Martin, but she's been in loads. So, you know, it was a case of regrouping, getting to safety.

I knew I was hit, I knew I was bleeding, but there was no - we knew that all our medical stuff was still in the [00:26:00] car. And that's another mistake of ours. I mean, for a variety of reasons, mainly to do with fitting. Our medical stuff which is usually attached to us was actually unattached. Which is a mistake.

Ramita Navai: Of course, I've seen the footage and you're right. I mean, you were all remarkably calm. I mean, I was in far more of a state watching this footage than you guys appear in the rushes in the clip that I saw. What happened next? What did you do?

Stuart Ramsay: So we had to get away from the car and then had to get away from the embankment.

We're still very much in the line of sights from where the ambush was coming from. And we were very worried of a follow-up, which is standard [00:27:00] procedure. If it's a professional ambush, there's a follow-up, that's just how it works. That's the theory. There would almost certainly be a major followup in this instance because in an ambush with five people in a car, the expectation of one person getting out is unlikely but acceptable to the attackers, five getting out is just this is a mess. I don't know how we got out, but anyway. If they're soldiers, which we're pretty certain they are Russian soldiers and I will explain that in a bit, but we expected a follow-up. So we went along the side of the motorway. And I think I've went slightly ahead and could see like a warehouse unit but with a gate that was open. I just assumed it was going to be shut. But also it was a gate with like one of those, a bar that goes up and down to the point that it looked like somebody was going in and out still. It wasn't like you would expect it to be just closed up.

So we ran inside there just to get off the street really. And [00:28:00] we probably made quite a lot of noise as we were chatting us because we realized there wasn't much, weren't many options to get away and a door open and these three old guys came out who were the caretakers, and sort of called us over and basically said we could stay with them.

So we went in and then probably - it's difficult to know how quickly afterwards, but a lot of firing started and we realized quite quickly that it wasn't, we thought initially that it's coming, they're coming for us and they're just shooting ahead. But it wasn't, they were engaged. It was an engagement between two sides.

Much, much later, what we think happened is that they did try to come to do the follow-up, but that a Ukrainian, some type of Ukrainian defense team, we don't think it was police because we spent a lot of time with the police later, but a sort of a traveling group of militia may have come to see what was going on, saw the fight and they just engaged. [00:29:00] Because that lasted, if we were in there for about four or five hours, about half the time there was shooting going on.

Ramita Navai: Oh God, I mean, that's terrifying.

Stuart Ramsay: [Stuart laughs] Oh, it was terrified actually. I feel bad about it because Dominique was very upset and I sort of went over, she's hiding in the, well, you know, that you'll see in garages where they're working under the bottom of a car or lorry, and she said, "So we'll be okay now. Right?" And I said, no. [Stuart laughs] I said like often with these things, you've just survived the initial horrible thing, but actually what happens next is even worse. And I said, you know, if they come in this is going to be bad. So we started looking for other ways out.

Walking around in the countryside in the middle of a war with body armor on being looked at by somebody at a checkpoint further down the road - you're going to die.

You can't afford not to have your armor on because anything could be dropped from the skies. So basically movement was pretty irrelevant, pretty impossible. We've thought about going across fields, but we'd been for the last, oh, couple of days we'd been driving around fields that had been heavily mined. Everywhere we went they were mined.

So, [00:30:00] you know, I don't think going across a farm to a farm house was much of an option. And so by this stage we're ringing through or Dominique and Martin between them, mainly Dominique actually, ringing through to our producer, who's actually our main sort of super producer who's in Lviv who knows everyone.

And he was ringing the government, the police, the secret service, the foreign affairs office explaining what was going on. So there was a big effort to try and get us out. And we then had a phone call after a little while where they were saying listen we will come and get you, but we can't come and get you tonight because it's already too late and it's too dark. It's too dangerous. And we'll come and get you in the morning. Just sort of stay tight.

Ramita Navai: Oh God.

Stuart Ramsay: I was not really in a great state by this stage. We hadn't had any water. I was bleeding quite a lot, but not terribly. I mean, it hadn't hit any main things or anything. It was just that it's, you know, I've got two holes in me, so I was bleeding.

And [00:31:00] obviously we were all still suffering shock and it's freezing cold remember. I mean, that's the other thing which, you know, it's very easy to forget. Then we were still in winter. So, it was bitter and we're in this big drafty metal unit. So we'd go to if you like the upstairs bit, which is like presumably the administration room, the office for the thing with a door and we just say, okay, we just pulled in chairs and said if we all get in this room, at least we'll be warm enough. There was a couch there. I think there was for some reason there was couch. Sort of sat on that and I actually began to drop off quite quickly. I was really exhausted by this point and that's when Richie says his heart absolutely dropped because we suddenly heard this huge kerfuffle outside.

And then big boots running along and you'd hear machine guns banging on bits of metal as people coming in. Lots of shouting. [00:32:00] And I have a slight advantage. I mean, I was based in Moscow for a number of years, so my Russian is poor, but I can actually understand when people are talking in simple sentences.

So I knew straight away it was Ukrainian as opposed to Russian. Richie didn't and just thought this is it. And they came clambering up the stairs and then we heard, "It's Ukrainian police come quickly." And they bundled us into this car and left at very high speed to go to a police station. So that was sort of how we got out.

Ramita Navai: What was going through your mind when you realised that it was Ukrainians and you're about to walk out of that situation?

Stuart Ramsay: I was, well, overjoyed but still very concerned. We know we are still a long way from safety. We're going to a police station that is by definition at this stage a target. Because the last we knew was that the Russians were coming. [00:33:00]

And so, okay, we're just being taken from one bad place to a place that's perhaps an even worst outcome, a police station. It's like, how are we going to get out of here? You can hear the bang, you know, the police are jumpy, there's explosions going off everywhere and, you know, we were very, very exhausted now.

The great thing is they gave us cups of tea and I must have drunk about 15 cups of tea. I was just really, really dehydrated and in quite a lot of shock actually. And so they took me out - it was hilarious. They took me to what they described as their medical center, which actually wasn't a medical center. **[Stuart laughs]**

It was a room with a couple of sort of nurses in it, I think. And the whole room was full of policemen who were really hyped up. I mean, I think it was because they hadn't been involved in the war at all. I mean, now they will have been, but then they weren't and they were really chuffed they'd saved someone.

And then later [00:34:00] on, they put us on their Facebook and all sorts of craziness. So they were all in the room and the two nurses, well, it was two women who were nurses and a man who's either a nurse or a doctor, but none of them identified themselves as anything. Anyway, they pulled my trousers down and the collective **[Stuart makes shocked and disgusted sound]** **[Ramita laughs]** from like 11 people in the room. It was like thanks a lot. **[both laugh]** Have you ever thought about the patient's feelings? And of course I hadn't seen an exit and entry wound and the exit is horrible. I mean it's big, you know, I mean I'm going into too much detail, the flesh flares out. So it looks very nasty.

Ramita Navai: Wow. And this is on your bum?

Stuart Ramsay: Well, no, it's on my back.

I mean, well, it's just here. So just above, just next to my kidneys. So I think they were all horrified. They're going to see an awful lot more. So they just poured iodine on it and that was that. And said this is going to hurt. I said, not really. [00:35:00] Now it was really hurting because it's exposed.

And also it's at the level where my armor is sitting on it. So it's like just constantly rubbing. Anyway so after that hilarity, we then said to the police we know you can't do much for us, but we can't stay here. Is there a house we can go to? And their boss rang and said bring them to mine. And we went and stayed with the police chief who was a really nice guy. And he then began to explain to us why he knew it was a Russian forward operating team, because they'd identified them in the days prior. And the bridge had been blown for that very reason to stop them coming back and forth. And that's when we first began to get the indicators that actually this wasn't a mistake. This really was Russians. The next morning the local police went off to try and get our car or not get the car because the car was destroyed pretty much, but to get passports and phones and things and kit, and they came under [00:36:00] quite intense fire. Day later, we know this from a friend of ours who works for another news organization, a foreign news organization, they interviewed a family that they had stopped. The husband and baby survived, the wife and child were killed at the same point as our car, they pulled up behind our car. They don't know why the father was allowed to leave, but I think it was because he just had a baby.

And then later on, on the E40, there's been a number of reports since of people. There was a quite well known picture of a guy getting out of the car next to a tank and he gets shot. Well, that's about a kilometer and a half up the road from us. So that's why we think it was the very early stages of the Russians moving into make their sort of forward operating area for the attack on the west of the city.

Ramita Navai: So you just got extraordinarily lucky?

Stuart Ramsay: Oh yeah.

Ramita Navai: How'd you explain that?

Stuart Ramsay: I don't know. I mean, we've joked that somebody in the car, and most of us say it's probably Dominique, [00:37:00] there's an angel looking over them.

[Stuart cries]

Because **[Stuart cries]** I just do not know how we got out of there. It makes no sense.

Ramita Navai: Are you religious?

Stuart Ramsay: Well, I am now. **[Stuart laughs]** No, I am fairly religious, but not, you know, I'm not going to church every day. But did I pray then? Yeah, everyone did. But it is impossible to explain how we got out. I just don't know.

It's still the one thing we think about all the time. And not in bad ways. I mean, I'm quite upset now, I don't know why. I've talked about this so often. I haven't been upset. I think it's just because perhaps I haven't been talking about it much of late but...

Ramita Navai: Does it help talking about it?

Stuart Ramsay: Oh, I think so. Yeah. It doesn't hurt. One of the things, I [00:38:00] know one of the guys saw, well, we always just describe it as the shrink, but he was saying that one of the problems for people dealing with major incidences is that they lose touch with it because they can only remember what they can remember and nobody who love them knows what they went through. And what he was saying was so unique and what's great about this is it's all filmed. So your family can see what happened. It's not like you're going to be talking about it in terms of you just can't understand what actually they can understand and they can see. And actually for us, you know, how much of it we remember or don't remember is irrelevant because it's all on film.

Ramita Navai: Yeah. Can you still watch it?

Stuart Ramsay: Do you know that the watching isn't so bad because the visual references and the writing, which, you know - I mean, I remember sitting down to write it and Richie and I just could hardly speak. [00:39:00] When we actually took a few days. It took us a long time to get out of Kiev then to Lviv.

So we sat down to edit and we started to say, right, this is going to be really complicated edit. And, it was like the easiest edit that we've ever done. Because first off the first three minutes we didn't cut or anything, we just left it all. I just had to say, I'm just going to say this here and there just to give context. And I actually want to say really one of the things why we wanted the story to come out, and there was a lot of discussion at sky as to whether it even should run, was that we knew this was happening to ordinary people, but they never have film of it. They never have armour. They're not trained. But it is happening every single day. And that's what our story was about. It was not about us. Yes, of course we're the center of it. It wasn't about us. It's like, this is what's happening. And the attack itself wasn't exceptional. It was the filming that was exceptional. And that's really the point we tried to get across.

But going back to your thing, what was it like? Yeah. So the visual references are okay. [00:40:00] The hearing the sound - I was waiting to do a podcast at Sky actually, it was the first interview we did and they played the sound. And I looked at Richie and I looked at Dominique we were all three together and everyone was in tears. It was like the first time. And it wasn't even a bad bit. It wasn't the screaming

bit. It was when we were actually out and talking. So yeah, it's quite difficult to hear it, but actually seeing it isn't so bad because the references are clear to you.

Ramita Navai: Yeah. I mean, Stewart talking to you now and I want to tread sensitively with you because it's still so raw and I can see that it's affected you so much. So tell me if you want us to move on.

Stuart Ramsay: No, no.

Ramita Navai: But I want to know how are you dealing with it? Because I can see the pain of it as you talk about [00:41:00] it now, how are you going to deal with this? It's still there.

Stuart Ramsay: Yeah. It's still there. Most of the time it's pretty good. I mean, we're actually working on our plans for our return.

Ramita Navai: Really?

Stuart Ramsay: Yeah. I mean, as soon as Dominique...

Ramita Navai: You're ready yo go back?

Stuart Ramsay: Oh yeah. Yeah, yeah. I've no doubt it will be difficult and I'm not sure that we will go direct to the front but in a war the front can come to you pretty quick.

But we are already putting our plans in place and talking to who we go and where we're going and all that type of stuff. And there's another team going in now so I'll be on the next rotation I would think.

Ramita Navai: I mean, colleagues of ours have stopped doing the job for less.

Stuart Ramsay: [Stuart laughs] Yeah.

Ramita Navai: At any point, have you asked yourself if it's worth it?

Stuart Ramsay: You know, without getting all high faluting, you know, all of us and I've lost loads and loads of friends, all of us do it for a reason. And the reason is to bear witness. I [00:42:00] was talking to Sam.

Ramita Navai: Our friend Sam Kiley.

Stuart Ramsay: Sam was saying and I noticed there was a magazine article he was quoted in and he said, "We're sort of quite British about this." Sort of it's our job so we just get on and do it. We don't spend on our lives being scared about it. And

that's right. You know, it is actually what I do for a living, but it is something that I do because I actually believe very strongly in it. And all of team that will come back will probably not - the same team won't go together. I think that would be crazy. We'd spend the whole time talking about it for a start. We'd never get any work done. But Dominique and I always work together. So we will definitely go back. And our belief is that we need to go. We, you know, have a lot of friends in Ukraine now.

Both me and Dominique have been working on it since 2014. She was in a different company then. So we have a lot of relationships there that I want to go back and see. You don't have to [00:43:00] necessarily go to the frontline and the fighting because the real story that's actually much more important are refugees and people. And that's really what we would look to go and do.

But you know, how do I deal with this? Well, you know, there is psychological help. That's anything you want. In this particular instance, I haven't spoken to Leslie who is the lady we use at Sky but I know some of the others have.

Ramita Navai: How come you haven't? I find that quite surprising.

Stuart Ramsay: I think I'm going to. I haven't needed to. I remember a long time ago when there was some concerns over whether I actually had PTSD when I had a breakdown. I actually had a breakdown because I was overworking. I didn't have a breakdown over PTSD. And the psychologists have actually sort of gone through this and said, you don't have it. We can just tell that your responses are not. What you are is upset by the way you're being treated at work. And you're upset by overworking and all the rest of it. You're exhausted. And actually I felt much better after having had a rest. Well, in this [00:44:00] instance I feel very much the same.

The shock or otherwise of the event is something that I have to deal with. And obviously, sometimes you get upset talking about it, but actually there's nothing wrong with that. Am I acting in a strange way or behaving, you know, am I drinking too much? Am I doing anything like that? Actually no I'm not. Nothing abnormal at all. Now there could be an argument about whether I drink too much and that's another discussion. **[Both laugh]** So I think I'm feeling quite good.

Ramita Navai: Do you think Stuart there might be a bit of this, and I've seen this with some of our other colleagues, Anthony Lloyd, Sam Kiley as well, both went through terrible incidents and then went back to war. So do you think there's a bit of this that maybe you have to prove something to yourself or you have to face down that demon?

Stuart Ramsay: I think there's an element of getting back on the horse. I mean, I remember when [00:45:00] Anthony got shot and I remember saying to him, "Anthony mate, you've done enough now. You just don't need to do it anymore." I've had that same conversation with loads of people that I respect saying, okay, now's enough. And Anthony sort of didn't really say very much and went back. And I'm not

saying much either. And I think it's probably exactly the same. Because you know, has Anthony's reporting got better as a result of what happened?

I would argue potentially. For what's happened to him isn't the same as what's happened to lots of people in Syria, but it gives us a good insight. Well, what's happened to me isn't what happened to loads of people in Ukraine, but it gives me a good insight. And, you know, it's probably worth thinking this is perhaps something that you should use rather than run away from.

Ramita Navai: **[INSERT]** [00:46:00] *Hello, it's Ramita Navai here. And thank you for listening to my show. I hope you agree that these stories are not only powerful but important. As I speak to some incredible journalists from around the world about what they've learned from working in dangerous places and how it's changed their perspective it would be great to get your help in sharing their personal stories.*

So please do spread the word and subscribe, rate, and review the show wherever you get your podcasts. I hope you continue to be inspired by the series. And I look forward to you joining me for more episodes.

How has this incident changed you?

Stuart Ramsay: I think, I don't get angry about silly things anymore. I really don't. There was a guy behind me in the car screaming because I didn't move [00:47:00] out into a roundabout as quick as he wanted. And I just thought - I'd never been a road rager but I could see he's wound up about this - really? And perhaps I was slow going out because it was like I'm not gonna rush today. So I try not to. And I stay in touch with my kids constantly now and my wife, which, you know, I was a traveling dad. I mean, I always have been, but now we speak a lot.

And I think they like that as well. You know, we talk most days, whereas before we probably didn't and that's I think that's a direct result of this.

Ramita Navai: Yeah. Stuart on a more personal note, did this teach you anything about yourself?

Stuart Ramsay: I suppose it tested me. And I felt that I passed the test. Mentally I didn't fall apart while I was there. I was quite pleased at [00:48:00] that.

Ramita Navai: Did you react how you expected you would?

Stuart Ramsay: One of the things that's been growing in recent years on me is that I've been getting very nervous before big events, big fighting type events, or big events that could turn violent.

And I didn't ever used to be. Now, I'm not scared of flying, but I don't particularly enjoy it anymore. I didn't like Heights, now I actually cannot go up high buildings. So it's one of those growing things with age.

Ramita Navai: I have the same. **[Both laugh]**

Stuart Ramsay: And I remember Dominique was very annoyed with me one morning when she was saying listen I keep asking where are we going to go with this war and you're not giving any answers. And I said, listen, my decision-making is failing because I actually am very scared about going out. But I'm not scared of going. I just don't want to be there making the decision. So let's talk about it, but lead it in the direction. And I think that has been something that's been concerning me, but I knew that we wanted to go out that day and I didn't have any [00:49:00] problems.

But what I found is that when I'm in it and what I was pleased about is I actually just go straight into completely, really quite professional and not scared. I'm not scared at all once I'm in it. And that is something that I really have learned. So, okay, yeah. I know I've been worried about being worried but actually when push comes to shove, it just gets back to being okay it's just the job. And you know, survival instincts are pretty good. They do actually help you. Adrenaline helps a lot as well.

Ramita Navai: Yeah. Has there been an incident in your career that you think has changed you or has changed your perspective on life?

Stuart Ramsay: Yeah. I mean, I think there's been, you know, is it a specific incident? I don't know if it's specific incidents. But over long periods of time where you've been exposed to, you know, a [00:50:00] particular tragedy or a particularly dangerous series of events. I think they have, they shape your life in as much as that you learn to deal with these things, you learn to have coping mechanisms for what you're seeing in front of you. I cry often when I'm writing my scripts and I think that that's not bad. I think that's good. Because a lot of people write those pieces and that they actually just don't seem like they care.

It seems to me that if you've gone all that way to care about someone, you might as well express that you care. You know, has a particular event affected me? No. But has the effect of those events happening made my storytelling better? Then definitely. That is life changing. Because I would never have reached that without having undone all these various often quite difficult [00:51:00] jobs over the years.

Ramita Navai: Sitting across the table from someone like you is such a treat because of your life experience.

What has reporting on conflict taught you about the way the world works?

Stuart Ramsay: So the war has taught me quite a lot about it and it's made me very, very angry. And a growing anger based on things that I'm sure every one of us as a

journalist has been angry about; this fake news and the fact that everyone can just lie all the time.

And that's, by the way, you know, is every government; British, American, Russia. Just as a bunch no worse than, or no better than anyone else. And some things that have been bad about reporting whereby people have seemed to find a difference because the Ukrainian people look quite like us really annoys me too.

I don't see any difference between a Sudanese refugee to a Ukrainian refugee and I wanted my reporting to really reflect [00:52:00] that. It's irrelevant. It's completely ridiculous. What is interesting is just geographically it's very near to us, which actually scares the hell out of people, but it makes no difference as a war.

Yeah, I think the way the world works one has to be cynical of a lot of things that happen because they act in such a cynical way. There's very few wars that I've covered, very few of them are really genuinely honorable or without some political edge to it or angle or some type of strategic advantage that's being played.

Very rarely do you say, we're going to war because this is right against wrong. And I have never seen an exception to that in my entire life. One could probably argue World War Two was different. But I don't think anything else [00:53:00] since. There's a political reason for it. In this case, Putin is clearly looking for his own territorial gains and whatever else he wants.

And you know, the cynicism particularly, you know, even amongst the NATO members about whether they should or shouldn't buy oil and gas and sort of say they shouldn't, but continue to do so, these are always the issue. So that's one of the things that I think I've taken away from this is that there's always an angle.

They never really doing it out of some great higher calling.

Ramita Navai: Stuart I end the program asking every guest the same question and that's if there was one bit of wisdom that you've learned from covering dangerous situations and seeing the worst of humanity and doing the job that you do, one bit of wisdom you could impart to our listeners, what would it be?

Stuart Ramsay: Just you've got to always report the truth. And if you do nothing more than that then the truth, as [00:54:00] you see it, then you've done the best you can if you're a reporter.

Ramita Navai: And one bit of wisdom on living life and how you live your life now having witnessed everything you've witnessed compared to before.

Stuart Ramsay: I think if nothing else, you have to show compassion to people because we are really fortunate as a rule. The world needs compassion all the time because most people are defenseless actually. And there's nothing they can do and

it's imposed upon them. And we've lost that a bit, certainly in Britain, we've seen it where we don't like people coming into our country, et cetera, et cetera, it's wrong.

And we need to show more compassion. I think that's my big take on it.

Ramita Navai: Well, Stuart compassion is a beautiful note to end this conversation on. Thank you so much. And it's been a real honor that [00:55:00] you've really opened up with us today.

Stuart Ramsay: Thank you.

Ramita Navai: Thanks Stuart.

You can watch the terrifying moments Stuart and his team were ambushed and attacked in Ukraine by following the link in the show notes. And you can catch his award-winning reporting from around the world on *Sky News*. I also recommend watching his latest series *Hotspots*, where he meets people living on the frontline of the climate crisis. It's on *Sky On Demand*. To follow Stewart on Twitter, his handle is @Ramsaysky.

Thank you for listening to this episode of **The Line of Fire**. If you'd like to follow me, my Twitter handle is at @RamitaNavai.

And if you've enjoyed this episode, review, and subscribe. And tell your friends they can find us wherever they get their podcasts.

Until next time.

The Line of Fire is a podcast from *Aurra Studios*.

It was [00:56:00] presented by me, Ramita Navai, and edited and produced by Chris Scott. Our executive producers are Matt Raz and Richard Osman.