

(Bayer, K., 2023)

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Kiwi killed in Ukraine: New details of friendly fire incident before foreign unit's 'luck ran out'



By [Kurt Bayer](#)

4 Feb, 2023 06:42 PM ⌚ 3 mins to read

NOW PLAYING • Focus: Off-duty Kiwi soldier killed in Ukraine

Off-duty New Zealand soldier Dominic Abelen was killed in Ukraine fighting with foreign troops and has been remembered as a tough professional "warrior" who "died doing what he loved". Video / NZ Herald ...

A friendly fire shoot-out erupted on the night an International Legion unit's "luck ran out" and a Kiwi soldier was killed fighting in Ukraine.

New details have emerged into the death of Dominic Bryce Abelen, a 28-year-old corporal who was on leave away from the New Zealand Defence Force (NZDF) and not on active duty when he was shot dead trying to re-take a Russian trench in August last year.

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Abelen had been fighting on the frontline with two other New Zealanders who had left the Army – a Kiwi called Tai and the team's leader, who has been called 'Turtle' in a [New Yorker article written by reporter Luke Mogelson](#) embedded with the foreign troops.

When Mogelson joined the unit in a town close to Pavlika, a frontline village about 80km north of Mariupol, he heard about a friendly fire incident that the foreigners had with the Ukrainian 72nd Mechanized Brigade - to which they were officially attached - just before Abelen's death.

The International Legion team were moving to secure a tactically important tree line where earlier drone surveillance had shown Russian soldiers occupying a trench system.

They embarked on the mission late in the evening and although they had briefed the 72nd of their route, a Ukrainian unit opened fire on them as they approached.

The team shot back.

"We won, they didn't," Turtle told Mogelson who wrote about the exchange in '[Trapped in the trenches in Ukraine](#)', an article published in the January 2 & 9, 2023 issue of *The New Yorker* magazine.

During "frenzied close-quarters" fighting with the enemy that night, using rifles and grenades, the team killed at least a dozen Russian soldiers.

"Turtle and Tai, from across the field, assailed additional Russians with the machine gun," Mogelson reports.

But as the sun rose, and the attackers lost the advantage of night cover, they "became overwhelmed".

Abelen was shot in the head while attempting to withdraw from the trench and was killed instantly.

A US Army veteran, Joshua Jones, 24, also died.

Turtle, who had enlisted in the NZ Army in 2002 and did one tour of Afghanistan, spoke afterwards about the friendly fire incident.

Although no Ukrainians died in the blue-on-blue exchange, and Turtle didn't know how many were injured, he allowed: "That might be why some people don't like us in this area anymore."

"There's always gonna be some soreness there," he said.

"Until then, we'd been lucky. And our luck ran out that night."

Mogelson reports that the 72nd brigade's reconnaissance company had agreed to provide additional backup if anything went wrong that night, yet "none of the Ukrainians had joined the battle with the Russians".

"One of them later told me that their radio had malfunctioned and they had not heard the team's call for help," Mogelson reports.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky announced the formation of the International Legion for the Territorial Defense of Ukraine on February 27 last year which called for foreign volunteers to join the fight against Russia under the Ukraine flag.

Within 10 days, it had reportedly received 20,000 requests to sign-up from people across more than 50 countries.

When asked by Mogelson what was keeping Turtle in the most dangerous place in the world, he replied: "In the end, it's just that I love this s***," he said.

"And maybe I can't escape that - maybe that's the way it's always gonna be."

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