U.S.-Born Soldier Killed While Fighting Separatists in Eastern Ukraine

By Anna Dolgov

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Mark Gregory Paslawsky was among nine Ukrainian troops killed during intense fighting in Ilovaysk, near Donetsk.

The only known American-born soldier fighting for the Ukrainian government against pro-Russian separatists has been killed in battle, an Interior Ministry official said.

Mark Gregory Paslawsky, 55, was among nine Ukrainian troops killed during intense fighting in the transportation hub of Ilovaysk, near Donetsk, Ukrainian Interior Ministry adviser Anton Gerashchenko said Wednesday in a Facebook post.

Paslawsky was born in New York to a Ukrainian-American family, but moved to Ukraine after the country gained independence after the 1991 Soviet collapse. He told Vice News in an interview earlier this month that he had taken up Ukrainian citizenship before joining the battalion in order to "fight as a Ukrainian."

"I'm of Ukrainian descent, and because of my parents' background I'm entitled to immediate Ukrainian citizenship," Paslawsky, who also went by the nom de guerre of "Franko," told Vice News.

In Russia, a country whose nationals are among the leaders of the insurgency in eastern Ukraine, online media circulated reports of Paslawsky's death, with many referring to him as an "American mercenary." In Ukraine, some media reports referred to Paslawsky and other fighters killed in Ilovaysk as "heroes."

Gerashchenko said in his post that Paslawsky had chosen "to sacrifice his life to help defend the unity and independence of Ukraine, while American senators, congressmen and diplomats [only talk] about supporting Ukraine, and refuse to supply us with modern weapons and reconnaissance equipment."

A graduate of West Point and a former investment banker, Paslawsky completed volunteer training in Ukraine before joining the National Guard, Gerashchenko said, suggesting the move was a demonstration of Paslawsky's willingness to serve among the rank–and–file.

"Why did he, a graduate of the most prestigious military academy in the U.S. — West Point — need a month–long course for novice fighters?" Gerashchenko said. "'Franko' was a very modest and shy person, with a tremendously strength of spirit and principles."

Paslawsky, who moved to Ukraine about two decades ago, informed his family earlier this year that he intended to volunteer for the Ukrainian army, his brother Nestor Paslawsky told RFE/RL.

"We were concerned about the situation he was going into ... but I think we were also proud of his decision," Nestor Paslawsky was quoted as saying.

Fighting in the town of Ilovaysk flared up Tuesday and continued Wednesday, as the government sought to retake a major railroad and a highway that leads to Russia, Ukraine's National Security Council spokesman Andriy Lysenko was quoted as saying by media reports.

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