

Scott Ritter: Live-Action Role Play. America's Legionnaires in Defense of Ukraine

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*Malcolm Nance, Dennis Diaz and Willy Joseph Cancel: Their experiences — one fatal — offer a sobering view of **Americans in the International Legion of the Territorial Defense of Ukraine**.*

It was — literally — a made-for-television moment. A former U.S. Navy chief petty officer turned cable news pundit, dressed in a fresh out-of-the-box camouflage uniform replete with body armor and magazine pouches, wearing matching camouflage helmet and gloves, and cradling an automatic rifle, stared into the camera [and announced](#) “I am here to help this country [Ukraine] fight what is essentially a war of extermination.”

With a Ukrainian flag on his left shoulder, and a U.S. flag emblazoned on his body armor, the man, **Malcolm Nance**, declared that “This is an existential war, and Russia has brought it to these people and is mass murdering civilians.”

A day before, Nance had [tweeted](#) a black-and-white photograph of himself, similarly clad, announcing “I’m DONE talking.”

I’m DONE talking. [#JoinTheLegion](#) [#StopRussia](#) [#SlavaUkraini](#)
pic.twitter.com/ob3gL1cZ7P

— Malcolm Nance (@MalcolmNance) [April 19, 2022](#)

Nance spent 20 years in the U.S. Navy as a [cryptologic technician, interpretive \(CTI\)](#), specializing in the Arabic language, and has turned his career into a thing of legend, so much so that when he speaks of his journey from news desk to Ukraine, it almost sounds convincing.

“Ukraine announced that there was an international force on Feb. 27,” Nance told one reporter,

“and I started looking into it on Feb. 28 ... I called the Ukrainian embassy in Washington, and I said: ‘Hey, I want an appointment.’ They were a little slow, so I just went down there and put in my application. The guy asked if I had combat experience and I said ‘Yep.’ Then he looked at my application and said, ‘You’re on the team.’”

Just like that.

But the hype doesn’t match the reality.

Although he sports a combat action ribbon on the lapel of his coat jacket (when not attired in full combat regalia), Nance has never actually participated in ground combat operations, according to a [serviceman](#) who served with him. His “combat” experience was limited to providing linguistic support onboard a U.S. Navy ship off the coast of Beirut in 1983. Important work, but not combat.

Despite this resume enhancement, Nance was — according to Nance — a natural for recruitment by Ukraine. In the days before the Russian invasion, Nance was in Ukraine, reporting for MSNBC.

But being Malcolm Nance, he claimed to be doing so much more.

“I spent a month in Ukraine,” [Nance recalled](#), “driving around, mapping out the Russian order of battle, driving up and down the highways and analyzing where the invasion routes would come and go. So I knew the country backward and forwards by the time of the invasion.”

(It might be time to remind the reader that Nance’s Navy specialism in Arabic gave him neither the training nor the experience to conduct the kind of battlefield intelligence preparation that he described.)

The Ukrainians know this. So why would they take on a 61-year old Arabic linguist whose physical presence on any battlefield would be seen as a detriment?

‘Not an Infantry Guy’

“I’m not an infantry guy,” Nance is quick to [admit](#). However,

“combat isn’t about being a murdering, Seal Team Six assassin; it’s mainly about precision, accurate fire, selective fire, keeping people calm, getting on the line and moving forward.”

None of which are skill sets in Nance’s real-life resume.

Despite his larger-than-life televised send-off, and his proclivity for dressing and acting like an aging LARP (live action role play) warrior on a weekend [airsoft](#) reenactment, Nance’s real-world duties mimic those he was performing with MSNBC.



Airsoft player. (UNHchabo, CC BY 2.5, Wikimedia Commons)

“Right now, part of my duty is to the press,” Nance admitted during a recent [interview](#).

“They [the Ukrainians] were well aware that I was a high-level asset. So, instead of putting me out on the line, I’m in a safe house talking to people like you.”

Today, Nance is little more than a poorly paid newsroom producer (the Ukrainians pay him and other Legionnaires \$600 per month). “I get up at 4 and what I do is I read, I read the news. I try to feel the battlefield based on Ukrainian news and reporting. And then I look at expert analysis from the previous night in the West.”

But he is always hopeful for some action.

“No matter where I am, no matter what I’m doing, I constantly check my gear. If I’m in a safe house on a press junket, like I am now, I go over all of my gear. I reorganize my pack. I assume that I will have to take everything, get up and run with it or move to a forward location.”

This would all be pathetic if it were not irresponsibly dangerous.

Nance fronts for the [International Legion of the Territorial Defense of Ukraine](#), which he describes as “a branch of the Ukrainian army.”

According to Nance, the International Legion is “an organized combat element with contracts signed by the Ukrainian army. We are paid by the Ukrainian army and get a Geneva convention ID card.”

And the mission of the International Brigade? Simply put, per Nance, if a Ukrainian unit is “on the line and they need more reinforcement, they will get a legion unit to give them

more manpower.”

Dennis Diaz

Dennis Diaz enlisted in the U.S. Marines in 2000. He was deployed to Afghanistan and Iraq, before being honorably discharged in 2004.

In early March, Diaz, an entrepreneur [and former 2020 candidate for U.S. president](#) from Waterbury, Connecticut, now 39 and the father of four, volunteered to serve in the International Legion.

“I’m ready to roll,” [he told local media before leaving the U.S.](#) “Whatever I have to bring, I’m going to pack it up and we’re going to take care of business.”

<https://t.co/Cc66tuUlfm>

— Dennis A. Diaz (@RealDennisDiaz) [April 4, 2022](#)

His age and obvious lack of physical conditioning did not seem to be an obstacle for the one-time combat Marine. “War,” he told the press, “is 90 percent mental, 10 percent physical.”

Diaz says he has a lot to offer Ukraine.

“I have a lot of military experience,” [he said](#), “I did go to Iraq and Afghanistan ... I have some flight experience. Also, I was field artillery in the Marine Corps. Also, I’ve got some experience driving tanks. Enough to be a valuable asset to Ukraine.”

According to [his Tik Tok page](#), Diaz spent some \$2,700 of his own money purchasing uniforms and field equipment, including a flak vest and helmet, to take with him to Ukraine.

But by late March, Diaz was still in the U.S., waiting further instructions from the Ukrainian embassy. He never made the trip.

The Ukrainians, it seemed, had cooled to the idea of Americans fighting for the International Legion. Where once they were welcoming (“Foreigners willing to defend Ukraine and world order as part of the International Legion of Territorial Defense of Ukraine, I invite you to contact foreign diplomatic missions of Ukraine in your respective countries,” the Ukrainian foreign minister [tweeted](#) in early March), by the end of March [the Ukrainian embassy stopped publicly commenting](#) on U.S. applications.

The primary reason for this newfound publicity shyness appears to [be the poor performance of the International Legion](#) during its first combat experiences, fighting Russian troops in the Kiev suburb of Irpin in mid-March.

Haphazard Approach

The haphazard approach to recruitment was the norm, it seemed, for the entire intake and training processes associated with the legion.

Potential recruits made their own way to Poland, from where they were told to head to the western Ukrainian city of Lvov. The candidate legionnaires were then taken to Livorov, a

military camp outside Lvov, where they were subjected to a rudimentary selection process that sought to separate those with and without combat experience.

Those with combat experience were issued weapons and ammunition and sent straight to the front, where they were integrated with Ukrainian Territorial Defense Units. Those without were given a rudimentary four-week basic training course.

The first group of “combat tested” legionnaires were sent to Irpin, where they were tasked with conducting a “hasty defense” against a Russian attack.

While the Ukrainians held, the performance of the legion was “uneven,” resulting in many of the newly minted legionnaires being unceremoniously released from service and sent home. The lackluster performance of the legion had become a domestic political issue, prompting the Ukrainian government to halt recruitment due in large part to the lack of weapons and the lack of military experience.

Some legionnaires, however, were asked to stay, [including a four-man team](#) led by a veteran U.S. Army combat engineer with two deployments to Afghanistan named **Cameron Van Camp**.

Willy Joseph Cancel

One of the Americans under Van Camp’s charge was a 22-year-old former U.S. Marine named **Willy Joseph Cancel**.

Cancel had enlisted in the Marines in 2017, where he underwent basic training before being trained as an infantryman. Cancel never saw [combat](#) and was given a bad conduct discharge. In 2020 he was given a bad conduct discharge from the Marines after serving five months in jail for disobeying a direct order. Upon being discharged, Cancel got married, had a son, and gained employment as a corrections officer in Tennessee.

For whatever reason, Cancel, after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, left his job and his family and, on March 12, at his own expense, flew to Warsaw, Poland, where he met up with Van Camp.

Together the two Americans travelled to Ukraine, where they were sent directly to the front lines in Kiev due to their status as “combat veterans.” (though Cancel never served in a combat zone.)

Embellishment appeared to be the name of the game with the Americans and the legion; according to Van Camp, he and Cancel were sent to Irpin to assist the Ukrainian military in counter-battery and “sniper” operations, even though neither of them had ever been trained in these highly specialized military occupations, something that would have been painfully obvious to anyone involved.

In any event, Van Camp was able to keep his four-man team in the legion following the post-Irpin “purge” and subsequently his unit saw combat in southern Ukraine, fighting in Kherson and Nikolaev. It was here, sometime in late April, that Cancel lost his life; his remains were not recovered from the battlefield.

BREAKING: U.S. citizen Willy Joseph Cancel was killed in Ukraine while fighting alongside Ukrainian troops against invading Russian forces, his family confirms

to @ABC News. <https://t.co/fLWXAt2tQ0> pic.twitter.com/HaQJ8L6ksH

— ABC News (@ABC) [April 29, 2022](#)

Van Camp and the other Americans who had fought with Cancel left Ukraine in early May to bring the deceased former Marines' belongings home and to speak with Cancel's widow and family.

Cancel's presence on the battlefield raises numerous questions about the screening process used by the International Legion.

One of the easiest ways to check the relevant military experience of a U.S. veteran is through an examination of his or her DD 214, or record of service, a copy of which is provided to every veteran upon discharge.

Cancel's DD-214 would not only have shown that he lacked any combat experience, but that he had not been trained in any relevant combat arms skill set other than basic infantryman — especially sniper or counter-battery operations. Moreover, his bad conduct discharge would have been a red flag for any professional military organization.

Cancel's death on the front line as part of the International Legion directly contradicted the legion's own stated standards.

"What we want is for people to come that have already been in the line of fire," [a corporal in the International Legion who was responsible for training declared](#).

Americans, however, could apparently pass themselves as having what the corporal called "concrete combat experience," making them "very attractive candidates" for the legion.

This inability to effectively screen genuine combat veterans from LARPer points to a lack of professionalism on the part of the International Legion.

A Canadian who had travelled to [Ukraine to help train the Territorial Defense Force](#) in urban combat said he wasn't impressed by what he had seen; **with recruits lacking experience, equipment and proper motivation**. In true LARP fashion, they seemed only interested in gaining what the Canadian described as "quick combat exposure."

"I think that the international legion was something that was conceived to be a propaganda tool to push forward the message that this is the world against [Russian President Vladimir] Putin and that they're fighting for more than just Ukraine," the Canadian said. "They don't have the infrastructure, or the time, to really properly do any sort of international unit."

This message should be heard by anyone who might be caught up in the "romance" of fighting side-by-side with the Ukrainian army against the Russian invader.

It should be used to counter the propaganda being generated by over-the-hill want-to-be heroes like Nance. It would have been useful for aging veterans such as Diaz before they spent nearly \$3,000 outfitting themselves for a war in which they were never going to participate.

But, most importantly, it should have been heard by Cancel and his family, so that he could have been dissuaded from embarking on his one-way journey of personal redemption.

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Featured image: Malcolm Nancie in 2019. (USC Price, Flickr)

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