Half an hour left of your life

Do you still have **Hair** ? Older people might still remember just how much of a cult hit this film was amidst the final throes of entrenched socialism. Obviously, it was mainly the music that captivated us, but the story was also quite unusual for us.

Claude Bukowski, a rather naive lad from rural Oklahoma, is seen off by his father at the bus stop; his father slips him some cash, they shake hands, and he boards the bus to New York. Perhaps he has never seen such a big city in his life, perhaps he has never even been with a woman, but there in his hand is his call-up papers: he is off to the other end of the world to be cannon fodder in a completely senseless, distant war.

When we look at the front lines of Russia's brutal aggression against Ukraine, the setting has changed, but the political cynicism remains the same. And before anyone gets the wrong idea: this post is by no means an attempt to excuse Russian expansionist ambitions.

*One of the opening scenes from the film *Hair*, a clip from the film*

Russia has invaded a sovereign state, in violation of every international law, and this war is their crime. Yet the Kremlin's particular brutality is also evident in the way it treats its own people: Russian conscripts, rounded up from remote villages or prisons and plucked from the depths of poverty to serve as cannon fodder, are thoughtlessly thrust into the most technologically advanced slaughterhouse in history.

Instead of the jungles of Vietnam, they are now entering a digital nightmare forced upon them by their own leadership, and they have no idea what they are getting themselves into.

John Ratcliffe, Director of the CIA, recently shared a shocking statistic at the Pennsylvania Defence and Innovation Summit: **The average survival time of invading Russian soldiers arriving in Ukraine on the front line is just 20–30 minutes.**

> *“Our findings are consistent with some publicly available reports from Ukraine: the average life expectancy of a Russian recruit currently arriving on the Ukrainian battlefield is estimated at 20–30 minutes. This is because AI-powered drones have become specialised, low-cost killing machines.”*
>
> John Ratcliffe, Director of the CIA

This inconceivable figure can be attributed to defence drones (UAVs) that have been transformed into AI-controlled, cheap and specialised killing machines, with which Ukraine is counterbalancing the invaders’ numerical superiority – I might add – quite rightly, as it is slowly running out of other means of defence.

US government officials have stated that Russia is losing around 7,000 soldiers a week. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said that the *“more than 80 per cent”* are destroyed by drones. Whilst Russia has a significant numerical advantage over the smaller Ukraine, Kyiv is limiting Moscow’s territorial gains, partly through innovations in various types of attack drones.

The average survival time of invading Russian soldiers arriving in Ukraine on the front line is a mere 20–30 minutes. Photo: New York Times / Nanna Heitmann

A 30-kilometre-deep ‘Kill Zone’ has formed along the front line. Here, the drones’ artificial intelligence – known as machine vision – makes decisions without human intervention. The operator, kilometres away, simply designates the target, but even if the radio signal is interrupted due to ground interference, the drone’s internal algorithm automatically tracks the fleeing figure’s movements and strikes. According to statistics, these autonomous drones are now responsible for more than 80 per cent of the enemy targets destroyed by the Ukrainian defence forces.

This is the moment in the history of warfare that experts have been dreading for years: the *autonomous lethal weapon systems* (**LAWS**), where machines decide matters of life and death.

Autonomous reconnaissance and the ‘Delta’ system

The hunt for soldiers begins not with an attack, but with constant surveillance. Reconnaissance drones scan the terrain day and night using thermal cameras and high-resolution optics, spotting even soldiers hiding in dense vegetation or under camouflage netting. Data from the drones and commercial satellites is fed into a central, artificial intelligence-controlled battlefield command system (Delta). The AI analyses movements and predicts, within seconds, the direction in which the infantry groups are heading.

The greatest weakness of conventional drones was that *radio-electronic jamming* (**EW**) meant they lost contact with the operator in the final metres before impact. The new AI drones completely eliminate this problem.

When the human operator selects a target (such as a running soldier), the AI locks onto it with an orange crosshair on the display; this is known as target lock-on (*lock-on*). From this point onwards, the drone switches to fully autonomous mode. If the signal is lost, the built-in algorithms use the image from the on-board camera to automatically guide the drone towards the moving target. It doesn’t matter if the soldier runs away or dives into a trench; the drone will track his movements.

The deadliest weapons

- **FPV Kamikaze quadcopters:** These small, extremely fast and manoeuvrable devices fly directly at soldiers’ necks or into their cover, carrying fragmentation grenades.
- **Hornet and Martian winged drones:** These American-Ukrainian-developed machines, with styrofoam (Hungarocell) bodies and quiet electric motors, are virtually invisible to radar. They can operate at depths of 150–200 km. Their AI systems have been trained using thousands of hours of battlefield footage, enabling them to recognise military trucks and personnel even without human command. They often lie in wait for their targets on the ground, in standby mode.
- **Grenade-launching (Mavic-type) drones:** Hovering above static positions, they drop small grenades with surgical precision directly onto soldiers crouching in the trenches.

Swarm warfare and logistical blockade

The soldiers don’t stand a chance of reaching the trenches, because the drones *are “imposing a logistical blockade”* . Supply routes (such as the infamous R-280 motorway) are under constant attack. If a unit is spotted, not just one but dozens of drones (swarms) are sent after them, systematically hunting down the fleeing soldiers one by one.

For soldiers in this zone, there is nowhere to hide: once the AI has identified them, multiple drones will pursue them for as long as they continue to show signs of life.

Defence against drones

There are directed-energy weapons that can short-circuit a drone's internal circuits and processors, thereby disabling the *'AI brain'* , regardless of whether it has a radio link or not. Most of these devices are still in the development phase; in the meantime, more conventional solutions are being tried on the front line.

Construction, agricultural or fishing nets, stretched out for kilometres, cover the trenches and key supply routes. Although heavier drones can cut through them, the nets slow down or prematurely detonate kamikaze drones, thereby protecting the soldiers.

AI identifies them based on shape and thermal imagery. Soldiers sometimes wear special thermal cloaks that block body heat, whilst vehicles are camouflaged with irregular patterns, branches or oddly shaped metal boxes ('turtle tanks') to confuse the drones' machine vision software.

It is virtually impossible to hit a small, zigzagging FPV drone with conventional assault rifles. Hunting shotguns have therefore become standard issue on the front line; their spread of shot can bring down the approaching drone in the final metres.

The way soldiers move on the front line now resembles the gait of the Fremen in the Dune films. Moving continuously and rhythmically across open terrain is tantamount to suicide, as the algorithm can instantly calculate the most optimal and lethal flight path.

Instead, experienced soldiers move in a zigzag pattern; after covering a maximum distance of 200 metres, they crouch down and stop to listen. If they hear the hum, they must freeze completely (*Freezing*), trusting that the software, which hunts for moving pixels, will regard them as mere terrain features.

Of course, this *"fresh meat"* sent to the front either doesn't know this yet or doesn't have time to master it properly; they try to flee in a panic, thereby providing a clear target for the drones armed with live grenades.

Final footage before a drone is destroyed. Source: Baltic Group

The future of technology

It is clearly the United States' undisguised aim to gain access to the technology behind the Ukrainian AI-controlled systems tested in live combat, so that it can integrate it into its own defence industry.

Further bad news is that what is currently *"merely"* battlefield technology could become a civilian reality tomorrow. Security policy experts are already warning that these cheap, open-source AI technologies will seep into organised crime and terrorism in the blink of an eye. The hitman of the future will no longer need to travel to the scene armed. All they need to do is upload a photo of the target into the facial recognition system of a pocket-sized drone, set it loose in the city, and the algorithm will do the job – coldly, impersonally, and provide a perfect alibi.

PS

Whilst we in civilian life marvel at self-driving cars, technology has quietly opened the door to autonomous weaponry. This war, unleashed from behind a desk in Moscow, is no longer a clash of soldiers, but of algorithms. And at the end of the chain, once again, are the Claude Bukowskis of the 21st century, who, on the orders of an aggressor, have barely half an hour left to live whilst on foreign soil, to try to understand this *"brave new world"* .

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Sources

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2. Business Insider: Analysis of the impact of AI-controlled drones and previous estimates by military bloggers: Russian Troops Live an Average of 30 Minutes on the Battlefield (17 July 2026).
3. Kyiv Post: Detailed report on the funding of Ukrainian drone programmes and weekly casualties of 7,000: CIA Director Says AI Drones Reduce Russian Recruits' Battlefield Lifespan to Minutes

4. Defense News: Background article on the summit and innovations in drone technology: Russian troops survive just 20–30 minutes on Ukraine’s front lines, CIA director says (16 July 2026).

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