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News

DISPATCH FROM UKRAINE

Ukraine's secret attempt to retake the Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant

With meltdown an ever-present threat, the stakes behind the attack could not have been higher. Kyiv's great gamble is explained by Maxim Tucker

By the night of the raid in October, Russian troops had held the power station for over six months

Maxim Tucker, ZaporizhzhiaFriday April 07 2023, 5.00pm BST, The Times

In the dead of night last October a Ukrainian special forces team boarded a 40ft armoured patrol boat, taking up positions at its three heavy machineguns and Mk19 automatic grenade launcher.

They were among nearly 600 elite troops scattered along the north bank of the Dnipro River, which carves through Zaporizhzhia region. The teams boarded more than 30 vessels bristling with weapons, formidable gifts from friends in the West.

Their orders: to launch an assault to recapture the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant from the Russians on the opposite bank.

Kyiv has never acknowledged attacking Europe's largest nuclear power station but Ukrainian special forces, military intelligence and navy personnel involved have revealed to The Times details of the highly dangerous operation to recover the site.

By the night of the raid, Russian troops had held the power station for over six months, using its territory to bombard Ukrainian cities across the water and a major steel plant in Nikopol. [Ukraine's](#) desperate attempt to retake the facility from President Putin's troops, and the reasons it gave for doing so, highlight the risk to Europe of nuclear disaster at the contested plant.

Rafael Grossi, the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), visited the site last week in an effort to broker a deal to demilitarise the area around its six nuclear reactors.

"It is very, very important that we agree on the fundamental principle that a nuclear power plant should not be attacked under any circumstances," Grossi said during his visit, which took place a week after The Times asked the IAEA to comment on the raid. "It shouldn't be used to attack others, likewise. A nuclear accident with radiological consequences will spare no one."



The International Atomic Energy Agency inspected the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant last week  
FREDRIK DAHL/REUTERS

On October 19 the Ukrainian soldiers were excited. If they survived the war, their mission would be one to tell their grandchildren about, an officer involved said.

“The idea was that this would be an infantry-only battle. They wouldn’t be able to use artillery against us, as this is a nuclear plant,” the officer said. Drawn from select units of Ukraine’s military intelligence, GUR, and including the Shaman battalion, the Kraken Regiment and the Ukrainian Foreign Legion, even the youngest among his brothers-in-arms were already battle-hardened. Yet none of them expected the resistance they would face at the power plant.

“The Russians built a very dense defence, they mined everything,” the officer said. “When we were approaching they even pulled up tanks and artillery and started firing at us right on the water.”

Despite the site’s strategic importance, the Russian occupation was ill disciplined, chaotic and dangerous, according to Petro Kotin, president of Ukraine’s state nuclear enterprise Energoatom.

“There are Russian national guards, FSB [the security service], Omon [special police], DNR [Donetsk People’s Republic], LNR [Luhansk People’s Republic], the Kadyrov guys [serving Ramzan Kadyrov, leader of the Chechen Republic] and they communicate with each other only a limited amount,” Kotin added.

“They do whatever they want whenever it comes into their minds. For example, one group starts to repair the line that connects ZNPP [the plant] to the Ukrainian electricity grid, then another group will shell it.”

Although the reactors [have been shut down](#) since September 11, the plant needs electricity to pump coolant around nuclear fuel if it is to avoid disaster, Kotin said. “The plant has been in full blackout mode six times already, working only on backup diesel generators, now down to two weeks’ fuel supply,” he said. “If they stop you will have melting in six reactors and six spent fuel pools. Some reactors will melt in three hours, some will take a day.”



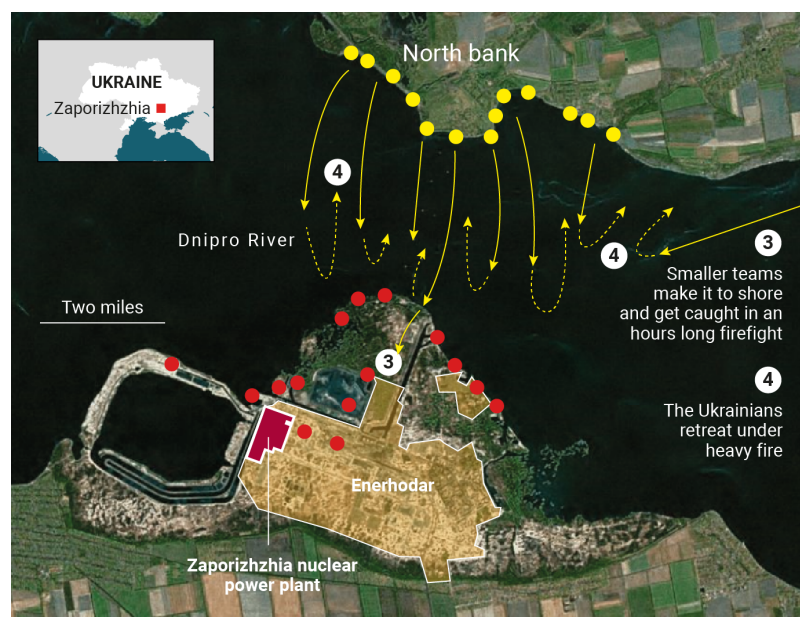


Before the raid Russian troops had tortured staff responsible for the safe operation of the reactors, plant workers said, increasing the risk of the type of human error that caused catastrophe at Chernobyl. Two days before the assault, on October 17, Energoatom reported that Oleh Kostyukov and Oleh Oshek, two senior employees essential to the reactor's safe operation, had been abducted by Russian troops, raising the hazard level still further.

By October each of the seven pillars of nuclear safety had been violated at the plant, according to the IAEA, which said the presence of Russian troops on its territory was inviting disaster. [President Zelensky's](#) administration had appealed to the United Nations to help evict [Putin's](#) forces, but weeks of diplomacy had failed to resolve the risk. Ukraine decided to take matters into its own hands.

As special forces speedboats crossed a stretch of river nearly three miles wide, precision Himars rockets provided by the US smashed into Russian positions on the riverbank.

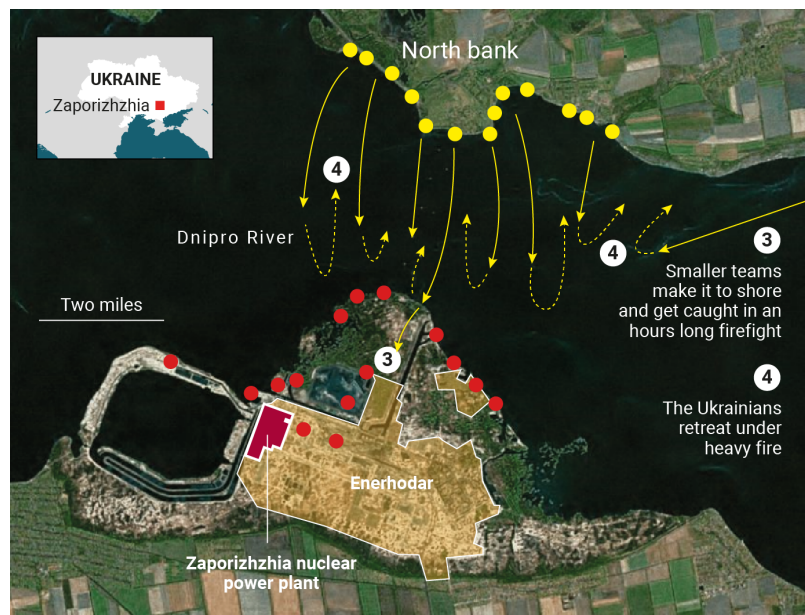
"This is our artillery and Himars working. Here they are shelling us in the water, on the Dnipro River," the officer narrated as he showed video of the assault to The Times, explaining how his patrol boat had probed Russian defences on the bank for weaknesses.



Asked whether the US had provided targets for the Himars before the raid, a US defence source confirmed that "time-sensitive" intelligence was provided to Ukrainian special forces, although they declined to give specific details. "We do share information with them but they are responsible for the selection, prioritisation and ultimate decisions to engage threats," the source said.

Once the Ukrainian boats had neared the shoreline, the Russian guns opened up, forcing the soldiers to change direction.

"We had speedboats, a lot of boats," said the officer. "We repeatedly assaulted their positions, from our shore to their shore. They kept on shelling us, really heavy shelling."



A handful of the Ukrainian special forces teams in smaller boats managed to make it to the shore as dawn broke, engaging the Russians in a three-hour firefight on the outskirts of the town of Enerhodar, which adjoins the plant. The main force was unable to land, however.

"It was impossible for such a large group to penetrate," the special forces officer said. "With smaller groups, yes, we were advancing, penetrating and fighting them. But with a large group it was impossible, as they were lurking everywhere."



The IAEA's visit was closely watched by Russian soldiers  
ANDREY BORODULIN/GETTY IMAGES

His team tried to engage the tanks on the shoreline but it was difficult to fire anti-tank weapons while moving at speed over the water. The larger boats manoeuvred to try to attack Enerhodar from the opposite

flank but a constant hail of fire eventually forced all the Ukrainians to withdraw.

“A lot of lives were saved thanks to the commander of this operation. When he realised it would be very, very difficult and we would take heavy casualties, instead of stupidly saying, ‘Go forward!’ he decided we could retreat.”

Even among senior Ukrainian officials who are adamant the Russians must be driven out, the attempt to take the plant by force is considered controversial.

Energoatom’s Kotin said: “If our army can advance south towards Crimea, toward Melitopol, this is the only option — no direct shelling of the plant, no direct advance on the territory of the plant with direct actions against the Russians. It is very dangerous to do such things near nuclear material. Any damage will bring radiation to the people and to the whole world.”

However, the greatest threat to the plant remains the Russian presence there, Kotin stressed. Today the Russians are using control centres as barracks, installing gun emplacements on the roofs of plant buildings and constructing fortifications close to storage sites of radioactive material. They keep ammunition trucks inside the reactors’ turbine halls, risking a nuclear incident that could blight Ukraine for decades, he added.

“We see the progressive degradation of the plant in all directions — the site itself, equipment and personnel; all type of programmes which in normal, peaceful times would be considered unacceptable,” Kotin added.

“We are in a state of emergency, waiting until something bad happens, and that could happen at any time.”

*Additional reporting by Michael Evans*

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