

New Fiction from Steve Kiernan: “War Ensemble”

Holding Dick Cheney’s shotgun is not exactly how I thought I’d be spending my time when I joined the Marines. It was summer of ’06 and the meatgrinder of Iraq was going full-tilt. President Bush had gathered all his advisors and generals and a host of other ne’er-do-wells at Camp David to come up with a strategy to unfuck the war. You’ve probably heard of it. The Surge. I’m sure whatever white paper commando coined the term was very proud of themselves. Anyway yadda yadda blah blah you get the picture. I was stationed there at the time as a security guard. Our biggest threat were angry Code Pink moms.

The morning of the big arrival I was called down to First Sergeant’s office and told my orders to an infantry battalion had come in and I’d probably be in Iraq within a few months. Now, normally this was the best news a Camp David Marine could get, I’d finally get out of this chickenshit assignment and get to do what Marines are meant for, what all my friends from bootcamp had been doing for the past two years. I was twenty and dumb and had naively requested these orders a few months prior, had eagerly awaited to hear back as I went through the same groundhog day routine of six hours on duty and twelve hours off, over and over, staring at nothing but trees and fucking duty rosters. My gung-ho attitude changed however, when I received news of Cody, my bunk mate from boot camp. He had been killed just a few days earlier when his Humvee got ripped apart by a massive IED somewhere outside Haditha. He was the first person I really knew to get wasted and I remember feeling suddenly ashamed of my excitement and eagerness and the orders in my hand grew heavy with consequence and complicity. Processing this was too much for my twenty-year-old brain to handle, so I did what any Marine faced with a complex emotional dilemma would do; I tried to

ignore them.

That's the headspace I was in when all this went down.

Now let me get to the big visit.

VIPs wouldn't arrive for a few hours, but Secret Service advance teams were already setting up shop around the facility and we had begun standing up all the extra guards a presidential visit requires. Hoping to keep myself distracted I hid in the React Room with a squad of Marines fully kitted out in body armor, M4 rifles, ammunition, smoke grenades, night-vision goggles, hell, even an M240G medium machine gun. We were watching *The Notebook*.

Sgt Zak walked in and flipped on the lights, producing a round of boos and shouts as we shielded our eyes in the windowless enclave.

"Be quiet, you frickin' snakes." He was standing in front of the TV and holding a clipboard and though he was only 5'6, he knew how to take up a lot of space.

"Oh come on, sarnt!" Dave, who told dubious yet colorful stories of his time as a pool-boy in Daytona, was visibly upset. "Noah and Allie were just about to rekindle their love after he rebuilt the old house!"

"Love can wait."

More boos. Someone threw their hat. Sgt Zak ignored them.

"Okay, morning announcements. Trailblazer will be arriving later this afternoon at 1520, soon followed by the press corps. Other cabinet members will be arriving periodically from 1600 to 2000, so be prepared for several LZ Ops."

Trailblazer, of course, being the president's Secret Service codename. All the Bush family and most of the higher-up cabinet officials had codenames—usually some dumb reference to

the person's character or interests. In Bush's case, he loved mountain biking.

"Also, Angler," that's Cheney, "will be arriving at 1000 and I've been told wants to squeeze in some time at the skeet range. I'll need one of you to go out with him as Range Safety Officer."

A bit of context: maybe you remember but Cheney had just recently shot a friend in the face with a shotgun while out quail hunting. He said it was an accident.

The banter died down as all of us in the room suddenly found something very interesting to inspect on our uniforms and gear. I started picking at my name tape, which was coming unstitched on one side. Travis got up and walked for the door.

"Where do you think you're going?" Sgt Zak said.

"Some rich white guys want to go out and shoot guns and you expect the one black dude to go out there with 'em?"

"Ah dang, good point."

Travis opened the door and left the room.

"Come on, you guys are usually fighting over the chance to get some close-up time with VIPs."

"You know he just shot a dude in the face, right?" I said.

There was a round of agreement, but Sgt Zak just crossed his arms.

I thought I might slink out of the room like Travis, seeing that I wasn't even on the react team and in no mood to entertain the powers-that-be, but I got the sense that was a one-time deal. My chances were probably better staying grouped up with everyone else, a united front.

"He ain't even on react, send him." Dave said, pointing at me.

Despite his amusing eccentricities, Dave is foremost an asshole.

"Gosh dangit. Dave, give me a mag." Sgt Zak didn't wait and instead ripped open a velcro pouch and took one of Dave's loaded pistol magazines. He then picked up the hat that was thrown earlier and began unloading the bullets into it.

"Ah what the fuck, sarnt?" Dave protested.

Sgt Zak then pulled out a sharpie from his pocket and drew a black X on one bullet.

"Each of you take a bullet without peeking, whoever gets the X gets to RSO for Angler."

He came around with the hat and we each did as we were told.

You can guess where this is going.

"You got the X!" Dave laughed, again pointing at me.

The rest of them were laughing too. There's nothing more amusing to Marines than seeing one of their own suffer.

"Yo, make sure you wear your glow-belt out there."

"Nah, wear like five fuckin glow-belts."

"Yeah, sling 'em around your chest like Rambo."

"Nice knowin ya, dude."

"Rest in pieces, bro."

Obviously, this did not improve my mood. The idea of shooting anything felt strangely perverse given the context of what Bush and the cabinet were there to do. One would think the moment demanded a sober retrospection of all that had led to the clusterfuck they had gotten us into. I remembered when

Cody and I got smoked by our D.I. after getting our wisdom teeth pulled because Cody had the gall to let blood drip onto the quarterdeck. He kept whispering "I'm sorry" over and over to me through gauze-filled cheeks while doing endless mountain-climbers. I wondered whether he had been buried yet, or if he was still at Dover getting pieced together for his parents. Maybe, had I taken Sgt Zak aside and confessed all of that to him he would have let me off. He probably would have. But I couldn't. Duty, pride, toxic masculinity, whatever you want to call it, held my mouth shut as I eventually got voluntold for the assignment.

So anyway, there I was, holding Cheney's shotgun and contemplating my life choices. This is something one does a lot in the military. It's actually the first thing one does in the military. But at this particular moment, I was tallying up every decision I made that brought me to signing those enlistment papers, which I had thought was the Right Thing, but now know to be the Wrong Thing, so if I could go back and change one of those decisions I would have ended up doing the Wrong Thing instead of the Right Thing, which would have actually been the Right Thing and not the Wrong Thing, but if I had done the Right Thing I know I would have felt bad for not doing the Wrong Thing and would then convince myself that the Wrong Thing was the Right Thing and I'd be right back to doing the Right Thing and I'd still end up standing at the skeet range holding Cheney's shotgun.

Angler was forty-five minutes late when he finally rolled up in a golf cart with the presidential seal glued onto the front it like some perverse, snub-nosed, boomer Popemobile. One of his aides was driving and brought the cart right up to the firing line, past the sign that read "No Vehicles Beyond This Point." One look at him told me this was headed for a worst-case scenario. I shit you not, despite this being a skeet range overlooking a perfectly manicured and level lawn, and with no reason to leave the covered and shady confines of the

firing line, Angler wore his full hunting regalia. Now this is summertime Maryland, the temp was hovering around 92 degrees and about a million percent humidity and here he was in rubber galoshes, Mossy Oak camouflage pants and shirt, and a hunter orange shooting vest with a dozen different pockets and pouches. And he was drinking a healthy three fingers of whiskey from a glass in his left hand.

"I'll take that," he said and grabbed the shotgun from my hands.

One step at a time, I told myself.

"Sir, I'll be your Range Safety Officer for today."

"Yes, yes, I'm quite familiar with range safety rules," he said without a hint of irony. "Let's get this show goin,' all the morons will be here soon and I wanna get some shooting in before they're all running around getting in the way of everything. Lord knows there's been god damn enough of that lately, ain't that right, Quincy?"

I assumed he was talking to the aide, who looked exactly like his name, but Angler neither looked back at him nor waited for a response.

"Where those shells at, son?"

I pointed to a nearby table where I had neatly stacked several boxes of shotgun shells. He opened a few and began filling his pockets until he was satisfied with the amount of ammo on his person.

"I say 'pull' and you release the clays."

I couldn't tell if he was asking or telling, but the long, thin smirk that never met his eyes told me it was the latter, and so I grabbed the remote.

"PULL!"

The violence of his voice shocked me for a moment before I pressed the button, sending two white clays sailing through the air in a long and slow parabola. He shot them both cleanly, so that they exploded into little white puffs.

"I told ya, Quincy, I told ya." He turned back to the table on his left and grabbed his drink. He had the shotgun cradled in his arm and it waved wildly with his movements, flagging everything behind him, including Quincy.

"Sir, please keep the firearm pointed down range," I said as sternly as I dared.

"Oh don't worry my boy, it ain't loaded anymore." He took a gulp of whiskey before adding, "We're the only ones out here."

Witnessing Angler in person was growing more difficult than I had anticipated. This man, I thought with a growing anger that continues burning to this day, would very likely be deciding my fate over the coming days, had already decided on so many others'. This man with his stupid fucking smirk, a ridiculous orange vest that bounced up and down in time with every nasally laugh, his halitosis, this man who kept referring to himself as Angler, would send us all to our fucking doom, killing and dying. And we let him do it.

We went like that for a while, him shouting "PULL!" and me pushing the button. He never missed a clay. And before you ask, yes, the discrepancy between his so-called "accident" and this impressive display of accuracy was not lost on me. Quincy even came up for a turn once Angler began to slow down, the alcohol finally reaching him. It was obvious Quincy had never held a weapon in his life, and Angler was taking a little too much pleasure in watching him fumble with the shells. When he did fire the gun he flinched hard and put a nice shotgun blast into the ground about ten feet in front of us, sending a dinnerplate sized divot into the air. Angler loved that. Needless to say, the lanky wasp didn't hit a single clay.

Cheney had finished his drink and had switched to smoking a stubby cigar, the smoke of which kept invading my nostrils and causing me to sneeze in fits. He thought that was funny too. I suffered through this until Cheney—apparently bored—held out the shotgun in my direction, and instead of waiting for me to grab it, just let go, sending me scrambling to reach it before it hit the ground. “Why don’t you go ahead and take a few shots” he told me. Now, like I said, I was in no mood for shooting and in-fact considered anything more than somber contemplation a violation of some ancient trust between soldiers and leaders, and more importantly, me and Cody. And plus, pretty soon there’d be dozens of staffers and other officials of varying power and stature wondering around like so many walking monsters and I wanted to get the hell outta the kill zone, maybe hide out with the react team and The Notebook again.

“Thank you sir, but as RSO my job is to ensure safety. Can’t do that and shoot at the same time.”

“Why not? You’ll have the gun.”

He had a good point, but again, I wasn’t in the mood for it, and plus, protocol dictates that we just supervise, try and stay in the background as much as possible. And then I got to thinking that if some officer happened to drive by and see me he’d think I was intentionally getting too friendly, and then he’d start wondering why some idiot corporal was out here shooting and rubbing elbows with Angler when it really should be him and that’s just not fair because rubbing elbows with the big-wigs was exactly the reason he used up two good favors to get this assignment and how was he supposed to wrangle that cushy job and promotion to major or colonel if he didn’t have some god damn connections and names to drop at parties with other officers who would be silently comparing him and his social status to all of his colleagues gunning for the same promotion and said cushy job and that if he didn’t get them then he would have to give up on this ill-fated career that

his father warned him against and end up going to law school or getting his MBA which was what his father wanted him to do all along but that he didn't think he was ready for because he just barely made it through Penn State as it was and he wasn't exactly what you'd call intellectually minded but neither is that god damn corporal and he sure as shit didn't need to build up a rolodex so just what the hell does he think he's doing?

I politely declined.

Cheney then stuck a box of shells in my hand.

"Shoot the god damn shotgun," he breathed up into my face.

I was only an inch taller than him but I made sure he noticed every bit of it. He didn't care. I couldn't give in, not to him. I was afraid of what might happen if I did, though I didn't know why. I'd love to get all poetic and revisionist and say it was my guilt over Cody's death driving me, but it was more than that. It felt celestial. All I know was there was something telling me to resist, refuse. Someone had to say, No.

I stretched myself taller and looked down into his pale colorless eyes and he laughed.

And all my feelings of resistance evaporated.

I took the shotgun and loaded the shells. "PULL," Cheney yelled for me, and I fired. The two white clays landed softly in the grass, untouched. I missed.

Humiliating, I know. To fast forward a bit: after I was mercifully done with Cheney, I ended up back in the react room. And because I apparently hadn't learned my lesson from the last time I needlessly hung out there, Sgt Zak again voluntold me for another assignment, this time as a road guard checking IDs of people trying to get to Aspen. Fun fact: The

cabins and buildings aboard Camp David are named after trees, which I rather liked, to be honest. Dogwood, Eucalyptus, Redwood, Sequoia, Willow, Birch, Walnut etc. Aspen was the presidential cabin where POTUS and his family lived while they were here. It was also where all the important meetings would be taking place. I doubt you want to hear about me standing at the end of Aspen's driveway for a few hours, so I'll fast forward some more.

After standing at the end of Aspen's driveway for a few hours with not a soul to come by, save the occasional Secret Service agent, a man in khaki slacks and a blue polo came striding towards me. He was older, seventies perhaps, and looked vaguely familiar to me, but only in the sense that all old white men tend to be. He wasn't wearing any badge, so I stepped in his path and asked to see some identification, my one responsibility. "I don't have time for this," he said, waving his hand dismissively. He tried walking around me. You could say I was still smarting from earlier but his self-importance annoyed me and when he got close I grabbed him by the arm and yanked him back in front of me, it didn't take much effort. He fucking exploded.

"How dare you touch me," he said with a disgust so genuine it bordered on self-parody.

"No unauthorized personnel past this point."

"Are you dumb or something?" By the look on his face you'd think I had a dick growing out of my forehead.

"Of course I'm authorized, I'm the god damn SecDef!"

That's right it was Don-fucking-Rumsfeld! As soon as he said that I recognized him, and yes, I know, as a Marine I should have recognized Donald Rumsfeld, the Secretary of Defense, his picture did hang in every one of our offices, after all. But, to be fair, I had only ever seen him wearing a suit and glasses, neither of which he had on then, and neither did he

have his usual entourage of aides trying to keep up with him. Anyway, fuck that guy.

"Get out of my way, I have meetings to get to."

He tried shoving past me again but I held him in place. Even though I recognized him I remembered Sgt Zak, "check IDs and badges." My failure to stand up to Cheney had put me in a work-to-rule kind of mood, and I told Rumsfeld that I couldn't let him past without some identification. This did not go over well.

"Listen here you dumb grunt, I am your Secretary of Defense and I am ordering you to let me pass."

"Do you have identification to prove this, sir?" I was feeling myself a bit and let it show. I was also thinking of Cody again and wondering if his Humvee had been properly armored.

"I don't have to show you anything. Do you not recognize me? Call your commander up right now."

"He's busy, sir."

"I said now!"

It was then that Sgt Zak drove up in a golf cart, doing his rounds checking on all the posts.

"Tell me you outrank this imbecile," Rumsfeld said, nearly running towards the cart.

"I am the Sergeant of the Guard, yes. Is there a prob—"

Rumsfeld cut him off, "I want this moron relieved of duty! He assaulted me and refuses to let me pass."

Sgt Zak looked at me with a "Is that true" kind of look.

I shrugged. "He's got no ID or security badge."

Rumsfeld nearly choked.

Zak looked exhausted—being SOG during a visit is no rose garden after all, having to coordinate with half a dozen different agencies and staffs.

“Let him pass, Corporal.”

“Cant. No ID. Goes against the General Orders.”

“I don’t know what sort of incompetent operation you run here, Sergeant, but you can guarantee I’ll be speaking to your commanding officer about it.” Rumsfeld knew he had won.

“I’m ordering you to let him pass, Corporal.” Sgt Zak said, emphasizing my (lower) rank.

Now I’ll say here that I love Sgt Zak, he’s a good guy, but I fucking resented him in that moment. There were rules for a reason. Guidelines we were supposed to follow and adhere to. I’d be failing my duty if I were to allow Rumsfeld to just walk around them and it pissed me off that I was being told to do just that. I clenched my fists and stared hard at Rumsfeld, but I had done all I could. It wasn’t enough, not even close, but I had to let him pass.

Sgt Zak relieved me after that. Told me to go back to my room and get my head straight before my shift tomorrow morning, it’s been a stressful day for all of us, he said. My room was the last place I wanted to be, though. I couldn’t just lay down and stare at the ceiling, Cody and my orders and Iraq all floating around my head with nowhere to hide. I wanted to unthink. Ignore everything, pretend I could go back to a few weeks ago when everything was clear and not complicated. Before the inconvenience of Right versus Wrong, when duty still granted a sense of agency in the face of the inevitable. Even now, more so even, I wish that were possible. I skipped my room and headed over to Eucalyptus where there was a bar and pool tables and a small arcade. Sometimes that’s enough.

Golden-Tee was my game of choice. You know, arcade golf. There was something soothing in the way you had to roll your hand over the big white ball on the controller, how, if you were good enough, could get the perfect backspin for Pebble Beach, or hit just the right angle on the doglegs of Torrey Pines. I wasn't the best player, but I had been marching my initials up the leaderboard since I had arrived at Camp David. The one legacy I'd leave behind.

Anyway, I was two strokes in to the fifth hole at TPC Sawgrass when someone elbowed me in the ribs during my swing, causing me to slice into the woods. I turned around ready to cuss out the offending asshole when I came face-to-face with Trailblazer himself.

Of fucking course.

"Nice swing there, hoss," he says in that long-practiced drawl of his, like we all don't know he's a fucking WASP from New England. And then do you know what he said?

And this is no shit, but he says "How bout we play a game? They've had me in meetings all day and I'll be damned if I don't need some relaxation." I was done with this shit. Should have just stayed in my room and sucked it up, faced my emotions head on, or at least pretend I could ignore them. Or read a fucking book. Anything other than falling into the same traps with these fucking guys. To be humiliated over and over, to be used and discarded. Like Cody and the countless other wasted youth of our generation—American or otherwise—to get churned up in the political machinations of the feckless elite, selling our sacrifice as something heroic and victorious rather than the pointless political capital it truly is. Yes, that's right, I said it. Every death was meaningless. Past, present, and future. And before you start calling me cruel, defeatist, or un-American or whatever, remember that I was there. Witnessed it all first-hand.



To the extent that any of it meant anything is completely limited to whether you survived or not. Some of us did. A lot of us didn't. Of course, we're at fault too, which is honestly the most angering part of this whole fucking mess. We can't escape our own complicity in the things we did, the things we wished for, the things we allowed to happen. None of that excuses those at the top, however, and I'll continue to vent my fucking rage for it all towards them, the most deserving. I thought it took years for my anger to show itself, long after my first deployment, but retelling this story now I can see it manifested much earlier.

Now listen fucking close because this is what I've been building to. Cheney, Rumsfeld? Fucking appetizers for the main course. Absurdity injected into the veins. So absurd it can only be true, and that's no shit. Here it is:

I stopped playing right away, not bothering to finish the hole, and headed for the door.

"Sorry, sir, but I need to get some sleep before my shift in the morning."

He grabbed my shoulder, stopping me.

"Now hold on their, honcho. I could really use something to

take my mind off all these damn dreary meetings I been in all day."

"I really have to sleep, sir."

"Am I gonna have to pull rank here?" He laughed. "Come on, son. Join me in a game."

That spark came back. That feeling from earlier with Cheney. Maybe it was the drawl, or his buddy-buddy good-natured attitude, but something told me to push back.

"Let's play."

Bush ordered a Frito Pie from the bar and then picked out which course we would play. He chose one of the computer-generated maps where each hole was a Frankenstein collection of memorable hazards, greens, doglegs, and fairways from the various PGA courses. He called it an even playing field, which I assumed meant that he thought I had memorized all the real-life courses, which I had.

The first hole was a narrow but straight par-four with a sloping green. We both drove the fairway easily and ended up just short of the rough that sat between fairway and green. I decided to lay my next shot onto the green down-hill of the hole. There wasn't much green there, so I had to be careful with my backspin, I didn't want the ball rolling back into the rough. I thought of trying to lob my ball over and letting it roll down toward the hole, but I was afraid of hitting it too far and landing in the bunkers behind the green or again, have too much backspin and watch it roll right past and into the rough. So, I played it safe. Everything went according to plan; my ball landed right where I wanted it, and I made a firm, but smooth four-foot putt for a birdie.

"Not bad there, sport," Bush said.

I allowed myself a knowing smile. It was a challenging, but

fairly routine shot and putt to make. Nothing you'd brag about back at the clubhouse over beers, but still a solid display of knowledge and skill.

Bush was up and I figured he'd go for the same safe play. I didn't expect his short game to be as good, but he could at least make par. Instead, he hit a high arching shot over the hole, landing at the top of the green. The ball rolled downhill straight for the hole, picking up speed until it hit the cup and bounced three or four inches into the air and came right back down. An eagle.

"You'll have to do better if you wanna beat me, chief," he said, nudging me again with his elbow.

His Frito pie arrived and he took a big spoonful before quickly spitting it out and blowing out his mouth.

"Hot hot hot!" he said, a string of melted cheese dangling from his chin.

I had to beat him. There was absofuckinglutely no god damn way I could allow myself to be humiliated by this asshole. It. Wasn't. Going. To. Happen. This was where I'd make my stand. Like the fucking Spartans at Thermopylae. Gandalf and the Balrog The Alamo. I got down into a proper fighting stance behind that big white ball and pressed the button for the next hole.

The battle that ensued was an epic on par with the greats of Marine Corps legend. And like those battles many of the details have since been lost to history—and traumatic brain injury. I can tell you that Bush pulled ahead early, and for a while the issue was in doubt. My short game became inexplicably bad as I put my ball into bunkers and rough and even a water hazard. But Bush had his slip ups, too, and I managed to keep within five strokes. By the third hole, the other Eucalyptus patrons had begun to gather round and it didn't take long for sides to form along strict class lines.

Political appointees, staff members, and officers were all Team Trailblazer. Bar staff, along with my fellow enlisted; soldiers, sailors, airman and Marines; stood on the side of the righteous. The cheering was quiet at first, respectable golf claps, oohs and awes, but devolved into near chaos during the back nine as insults were traded, bets made. At one point, an NSC staffer and Navy Seabee stepped outside to settle an argument, returning bloodied and shirtless minutes later. The biggest shit talker was Bush himself, never missing an opportunity to jab my ribs and point out a failed wind consideration or improper club choice. I remained quiet. Focused. I made no fancy shots, but also never repeated a mistake, and slowly caught up one birdie at a time.

By the final hole we were even. Bush had finished his swings and putts, making par. I was on the green, one twelve-foot putt away from a birdie and the win. The room was silent. I approached the console.

The bar door burst open then and we all turned to see Angler stride in visibly annoyed.

"God damnit, George, do you know what time it is in Iraq right now? We have to get back to the matter-at-hand." Cheney said.

"Don't get your panties in a wad, Dick, my game is almost over." Bush replied, gesturing towards the console and me.

To my surprise, he recognized me.

"Ah, look who it is," Cheney said, smirk on his face.

This was it. That earlier feeling of resistance that had been simmering all game suddenly rose to the surface again. It was more intense this time and I felt it give me strength, felt my body fill with the force of something cosmic. This fucking subconscious primal instinct told me that this, this was the most important thing I'd ever do, that I had to hold firm no-matter-fucking-what, that I wasn't just doing this for myself

but the whole god damned human race, and this moment right now would change the fate of fucking planets. I thought of Cody and myself and the nameless other thousands whose fates were not theirs and I got down behind that white ball and rolled it back and then forward with my palm in one smooth motion and the golf ball marched forward towards the waiting maw of the cup and it marched and marched with the curves of the green and it slowed and then slowed some more until it reached the edge of the cup and teetered into oblivion.

The crowd erupted and someone was shaking me, congratulating me. "New High Score" flashed across the screen and without hesitating, I entered Cody's initials. I turned back toward Bush and Cheney, triumphant and defiant.

They both smiled and shared a look between them as if they were gods among mere mortals, and laughed.