

KILLER

BY STEVEN BLAIR WHEELER

Under a whitened Douglas Fir, Kevin Glover lay atop a snowbank. The cold was defeating his layers of clothing and he checked his watch. It was 8:36. He had been in position for nearly an hour on a particular stretch of Route 26 where it snaked along the north shore of Detroit Lake. In the early dawn he had trimmed branches to clear his line of sight working quickly in case the rebel convoy arrived earlier than expected.

But this long, slow, freeze was changing apprehension into impatience. He was about to dig out a Cliff bar when he heard approaching west-bound traffic. Since the lookout posted in the town of Detroit had sent no radio alert, he doubted that this was the rebels. But he forgot the snack and prepared to target the approaching vehicle.

Kevin was part of a militia team sworn into service with the mobilizing Oregon National Guard. Responding to an uprising by right-wing militias whose numbers were reportedly growing by hundreds each day, the Guard had been authorized to coordinate with volunteer units.

Rebels across the country were taking up arms incited by the first American president to dispute a general election. In Oregon, a rebel leader had announced his intention to occupy the statehouse and topple the government. A gay state senator had called on him to denounce violence and had been gunned down in the driveway of her home. Although no one had claimed responsibility, an informant said that the killer was leading the convoy the team was set to ambush.

Kevin could not understand how anyone calling himself an American could be so deluded. His country was coming unglued at the behest of an egomaniac with the help of brainwashed followers in all levels of government. Moreover, the disloyalists were supported and incited by right-wing "news" outfits seconded by unprincipled social media.

With American democracy at stake, Kevin had to do more than make political contributions, protest, and write letters. At 66, with his daughter and son using their degrees to build their careers and his ex-wife doing well, Kevin had secured consulting work and retired from the 8-5 to put his convictions into action.

Regular exercise kept him reasonably fit, but it had not prevented cataract surgery. Still, his eyeglasses prescription was up-to-date and his only medication was an eye drop. He was profoundly thankful to be much better off than friends battling cancer, diabetes, or early onset. His older brother had died at 56 from colon cancer. As rough as that would be, Kevin found the prospect of losing his marbles the most terrifying. No

one in his family had met that fate, but genetics didn't seem to be the whole story. At least he'd avoided playing football.

Since his mother was a teacher, education was highly prized in the family. Middle and high school civics classes had nurtured his love of history and taught him about democracy. Being a Boy Scout had taught him about civic duty, and he was proud of his father's service as an infantryman in World War II. After high school, Kevin had served his country honorably as an infantryman in the 1st Armored Division in West Germany. He'd seen Paris and London, and earned the GI Bill which paid for his liberal arts degree. Thereafter he had maintained his marksmanship skill as a hobby and had always kept up on current events via reputable news sources.

And so when the country's worst president and his enablers succeeded in dividing America to a degree not seen since the Civil War, he'd recognized the danger. To his disgust, millions of ignorant assholes swallowed the "stolen election" lie and right-wing propaganda hook, line, and sinker. Purveyors of arch-conservative horseshit preyed on the basest motivations of people who had been marginalized, or were hung up on "right to life" and the second amendment. Apparently, millions were willing to see the country in flames as long as they could own guns and impose reproductive decisions on their neighbors. Climate change, social justice, even fixing roads and bridges took a back seat with the God-n-guns zealots.

He asked himself what was the point of living the rest of his days in a failed democracy, even with good health? He was not about to sit by and watch his country be destroyed from within. And if he got killed taking out a few traitors, it sure beat withering away in a hospice bed, a miserable burden to his family.

Having anticipated that his age would be an issue, he bought the civilian versions of a military sniper rifle and scope and took instruction from Charlie Bales, a highly skilled Marine veteran from the Iraq war. Kevin's skill at distance shooting had impressed Mike Sinclair, himself a veteran of Afghanistan. At Charlie's recommendation, Sinclair had invited Kevin to demonstrate his ability. Kevin had consistently hit targets out to 500 yards, and scored well on moving targets out to 300 yards. Moreover, Sinclair had liked him and that was mutual. Even so, had this mission been more physically demanding Kevin would have been left on the bench.

He now sighted through the scope to practice lining up his shot. Two hundred yards of plowed roadway gleamed in the gray morning light. The still, clear air was perfect for shooting.

He ignored a Steller's Jay that squawked overhead and focused on attaining a proper lead on the vehicle. It turned out to be a 90's era Ford F-150 with some old bearded guy in a navy watch cap and butternut barn coat at the wheel. Kevin got him properly sighted before he swept by on whatever errand he was running.

Then over the headset the lookout said, "Eyeball to team. Targets approaching. Repeat: targets approaching."

Sinclair said, "Affirmative, Eyeball. This is it! Prepare to engage."

Kevin said, "Overwatch ready." His heart rate increased as Sinclair verified that east-bound traffic was stopped. Kevin controlled his breathing to steady himself. In his mind he could hear Charlie saying "breathe evenly and caress the trigger."

Engine throb preceded the lead vehicle. It was a big black Hummer with a crash cage on the front and a frayed American flag whipping above the roof. Kevin sighted on the driver; a bearded redneck wearing a red MAGA cap and sunglasses and imagined it was one of the traitors who'd been in the January 6th mob. He led the target properly and pressed the trigger. It broke crisply, the rifle barked, a hole appeared in the windshield and the driver jerked backward.

At that instant, a boom sounded. Eighty yards away a fir crashed across the road. The truck smashed into it.

Kevin flinched as he fired at a silver crew-cab. He had no idea where that shot went as the driver braked and swerved to avoid the Hummer. But now the team unleashed a torrent of weapons fire. The silver truck side-swiped the Hummer and skidded into the top of the tree. The driver's door opened and a man bailed out. He was wearing combat gear and had a black rifle in one hand. He crouched behind the truck for a moment and Kevin shot him.

A dark-colored pickup behind the first two, also flying an American flag burst into flame. Kevin targeted a white pickup further back in the convoy where the vehicles were stopping. At a distance of 200 yards, he sent a string of bullets into the cab as the driver tried to reverse. The vehicle halted.

In his headset, Mike was shouting, "Disengage and pull back! Rally at Point X-ray! Time to boogie! Make for X-ray!"

Kevin said, "Overwatch. Roger." Yet he remained in place. It was his job to cover the team as it withdrew. He shot out tires of the first two vehicles.

"Lead to Overwatch. Good luck!"

"Roger, Lead," Kevin replied. "See you at the dam."

He scoped the road. Rebel trucks that could were backing away, but there was no movement in or near the halted vehicles. The rebel he had shot in the road lay in a heap.

Now the team, all nine of them, emerged from the trees across the road running for three parked trucks. The curve of the roadway kept the vehicles out of sight from the kill zone and they piled in and drove off.

There was no east-bound traffic because Mike had foreseen the need to prevent it. Two team members had set up a bogus work zone back by the dam complete with orange cones and an electric sign. Mike's teenage son Mark wore flagger gear.

A minute passed, and another as Kevin estimated that the team would be nearly half-way back to the dam. He'd leave pretty soon.

The clouds had closed in and snow began falling.

He wondered if the rebels would still come ahead. They'd taken casualties. Maybe their leader was killed or injured? How determined were they?

He thought to swap magazines and rotated the rifle recalling his first shot. He'd likely killed the driver: his first kill. He could see him in his mind's eye: a burly, bearded guy with his stupid red cap and his shades to look cool. Had he been married? Was a family on some ranch now without a husband and father? Would the man's old parents be grieving at his gravesite?

That made him uneasy. He inserted a fresh mag and put the other in a pouch with the disturbing realization that he had relished hitting the man. He'd felt a thrill like he'd meted out justice.

That felt like a sin.

And wasn't that why he'd joined this team, and volunteered for this mission? Hadn't he wanted to kill some rebels?

Of course he had.

But his thrill in doing it felt sick. It was a stain on his soul.

He had learned or confirmed something about himself that felt shameful.

And here he was, expected to kill again if the rebels tried to clear the road.

A disgraceful conjecture bubbled up from some dark place that maybe the man had been a boozing wife-beater who would not be missed. But he scorned it as a slick rationalization.

While it was true that he'd killed in time of war defending his country, even a noble purpose could not remove the darkness of blood lust.

Movement in the trees above the road caught his eye.

That answered the question of the rebels' determination. It was time to go.

Kevin scoped the halted trucks. Someone was aiming at him with an optical sight. He instinctively flattened into the snow.

A bullet whizzed overhead and whapped into a tree.

Heart racing, barely breathing, he stayed as low as possible to crawl backward getting snow in his clothes and gloves and hearing wicked zips like deadly wasps that thocked into living wood. Once behind the snowbank, he rose to a crouch. He resisted the notion of firing toward the enemy.

Let'em think I'm dead.

He turned and ran for his truck. Slogging through 200 yards of knee-deep snow along the slope below the road was awkward going, and while mature trees gave him cover he still feared catching a bullet between his shoulders at any second.

The rebels would approach cautiously, wouldn't they?

But once they see I'm not there, they'll come running!

He floundered up the embankment toward where he'd left his truck dreading a shout or shots behind him. He topped the rise short of breath, vastly relieved to see his RAV 4 parked pointing west.

He jogged to it and had the presence of mind to not use the keyless entry. He put his rifle in the passenger footwell, got in, and started the engine as he closed the door. He put it in gear and mashed the accelerator.

The tires churned gravel as he checked the rear-view scared of seeing rebels in the road, rifles raised. He had to make 400 yards before the next curve hid him from sight.

“Come on, baby! Let’s move!”

He steered to the right shoulder to gain cover as soon as possible and heard a loud bash.

There was a hole in edge of his rear window.

He swore in angered fright, but he was now well into the bend.

With a deep breath he eased up on the gas for the next turn.

In the couple of minutes it took to reach the dam and the rest of the team, he realized that he’d been sweating. And yet his mouth was dry as dust. He’d cut it too close and he’d been lucky that the rebels hadn’t shot his gas tank.

The team was glad and relieved to see him in one piece, but Kevin was in no mood to celebrate. Aside from his gut-wrenching narrow escape, he now knew about the darkness within.

... ..