

While traveling across a road, you come across a discarded magazine. The front cover and “In Memoriam” pages are torn off, but it’s still readable.

Taking a break, you decide to read through “*PRESS, An Editorial News Publication - War through the eyes of the storytellers*”.

You can’t remember the last time you heard about current events outside of what your commander tells you...

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Letter from the Editor

In the fog of war that often descends upon the disputed Caoiva-Veli border territories, the scale of the chaos and destruction is so great, there is no hope of ever knowing every single story. Thousands of individual strands of history are lost each day.

Further compounding the problem is the raw hostility exercised by the Wardens and Colonial Legion towards each other, leading to widespread misinformation. Let no one tell you otherwise, this conflict is more than that of bullets and bombs. It is of narratives and culture. It is a war for the soul, and the truth that feeds it. How peculiar, that so many are willing to starve.

In the face of it all, our job is to serve you the truth. To bring you stories of humanity, history, hubris, and hell. It won't be pretty, either. Somewhere along the line someone got it in their head the public didn't need to use their head when it came to processing the truth. That it should always feel right; that it should always serve your purposes.

The *PressCorps* was created to remind people that wasn't always the case. As such, we are shunned by both sides. We are cursed by both sides. We are shot at by both sides.

Simply put, we must be doing something right.

Geoffrey Jennings
PressCorps Editor-In-Chief

In Memoriam

Art by Ejiro Sakuga

Fear and Loathing on the Overland

by Mari Sharp, Colonial Correspondent

Enduring Post, Endless Shore – I climbed out of the Garrison House where I had stayed the night, and I started mingling with some of the rear echelon troops outside.

“Do you think you’ll get to see the end of the war?” I asked the group, stoking some morning existentialism.

“Yeah, well, I’d have preferred it if [the war] didn’t take a century and a half,” a Foxhole occupant told me, “but old Callahan and his merry band of idiots that can’t let him die just won’t let it go.”

The day before, I was reporting on the Colonial effort to transition the region into a sort of ‘helmet highway’ between the factories in the southern regions and the front, which had made its way up to Caoiva’s snowy expanse. There was a lot of frantic energy then. Today, the mood has shifted to that of annoyance, doubt, and a shot of paranoia.

The Wardens had just begun deploying gunboats to both the Aging Ocean and the Endless Sea. While far from an overwhelming number, the lack of Colonial gunboats to counter them gave the Wardens control of the water by default. What followed were seaborne raids along the Collie backline. It’s still not clear if the Wardens have a foothold in the region yet, but the frustration is palpable. No one knew where the Colonial Navy was. Didn’t help the defensive emplacements along the road we would be traveling were shelled to hell.

Checking my gear, I waited outside of the Town Hall for my assigned Colonial bodyguard. The officers in charge of the garrison weren’t happy to be babysitting a pencil-pushing flunky like me. They already had enough to watch over and patrol: trucks, supply routes, bushes, alleyways, chest-high stone walls, bridges, and kilometers of shoreline. For them, the duty of protection really was as endless as this whole forsaken region.

A passing sentry offered me a quick hit of sulfur, but I refused. Last night was already well past my limit. I was surprised we weren't getting flogged after the accidental rifle discharge while we were all high as a shell in the garrison house. The officers must have been too exhausted to give a hoot. Or they were all tapping into their own private stash. At least, that's what the rumor was.

Huffing sulfur had become a big problem among the enlisted. Three months ago, some Howitzer crewman way in the backline got bored enough to start disassembling his excess shells and experiment with the compounds inside. No one knows how he did it, but he made a concoction that was safe enough to inhale without killing you. It was a unique enough blend for it to not be raw, while also making it unusable for explosives. Either way, it was a tremendous waste of materials, but I guess that's what happens when you slash leave time across the board.

Within a few weeks, the narcotic had found its way into nearly every Colonial backline town and garrison in the warzone. There was even a rumor going around of how a lost Private was able to trade it to a patrol of Wardens in exchange for his life. It made for a pretty good story. What *was* true was the massive raid in the Great March two weeks prior, which busted the ring of Officer Cadets selling the stuff wholesale to their superiors in exchange for commends. The fact there was a whole illicit drug economy flowing from the officer corps down to the enlisted was astonishing, and it definitely wasn't a story you were going to find in *Legionary Weekly*.

Even with the hub of the black market for it gone, there were plenty of other stashes hidden away, from 'mislabeled' crates to soldier's boots.

It was getting to the point where Quartermasters were assigned to 'manage the proper distribution of critical materials and equipment'. Everyone knew they were there just to guard the sulfur, which made it that much more perplexing when every single one of them turned out to have sticks up their asses. The Quartermaster here in Enduring Post had a habit of yelling literally everything as if he was under fire. Just

last week in the Heartlands, another one shot and nearly killed a truck driver for ordering too many mortar shells at once.

Morale was not doing great.

My bodyguard and I set out at around 0730 local time. We were supposed to leave with her squad earlier, but at the last minute the garrison commander decided to attach us to a convoy headed to Kelpie's Mane. Defenses were being bolstered after yesterday's bombardment there, and they were particularly worried about a major amphibious landing. The open-air motorcycle we were supposed to use had been replaced by a Colonial LUV, or Light Utility Vehicle. I was told it was for extra protection against possible Warden ambushes, but when the convoy left Enduring Post, my bodyguard and I were put at the very front of the column. It seemed my handlers were very eager to make sure I reported on *all* the action.

The ride was quiet, sans the sound of eight engines roaring across a dirt road. I had wanted an interview with the convoy officer in the rear of the column where they usually ride, but my assigned bodyguard and driver wasn't playing ball. I opted for small talk. Her answers were always 'yes' or 'no'. If I was really lucky, she'd actually say the words instead of vaguely grunting in the affirmative or negative. Once, she almost turned her head towards me.

Halfway through my question about whether she liked the LUV over the motorcycle, I saw her eyes widen as she slammed on the accelerator to go offroad.

"Hold on," she told me, jerking the wheel to use the LUV as a preemptive shield between the trucks and the threat. She drifted my side of the vehicle toward the enemy, got out with her rifle, and took cover behind the engine. I climbed over, got out the driver's side, and kept my head down. The *PressCorps* wasn't going to lose two reporters

in the same week. The truck behind us had been carrying troops. They piled out and scrambled to take a position.

“There’s someone behind the chest-high stone wall!” my bodyguard yelled out.

One of the soldiers from the truck immediately fired his rifle, hitting the wall square in the middle. It was an excellent shot if his target had been smack-dab in the center of the wall. Another soldier slapped him on the back of the helmet and scolded him for firing without actually seeing a target. They argued over whether it was really covering fire if there was no one to actually cover. My bodyguard sighed without breaking her eyes from the threat.

A pair of hands slowly came up from the wall.

“Don’t shoot!” the pair of hands pleaded, “I’m a Colonial!”

Sure enough, as he carefully got up, an olive drab helmet crested over the cobblestones of the wall. A collective groan erupted from the crowd of riflemen. My bodyguard stomped to the cause of all their trouble, rifle still at the ready. When she got to the wall, she checked behind to see if there was anyone hiding. When she decided it was safe, she reached over and grabbed him by the collar.

“You’ve got one chance to tell me what the hell you’re doing out here by yourself.”

“I’m...I...”

She yanked him partly over the wall, “You better get it together right now or so help me Maro-”

“I’m delivering a written message from Captain [REDACTED], ma’am!” he blurted out. “Our only radio got shot to hell an hour ago. Warden scouts were probing the bridge in APCs when I left. They might have already started shelling the area! They could all be dead by now-”

“Do you have the orders?”

“Huh?”

“The orders. The piece of paper-”

“Oh right...”

He produced the note, which my bodyguard snatched before he could even get it entirely out of his pocket. After taking a moment to read it, she shoved it right back at him and started walking back.

“Radio a motorbike pickup for one man on the Overland! We’re moving out! Those poor bastards at Kelpie’s need this crap yesterday!”

We went on in silence for a while until we started hearing a truck horn behind us. She checked her side mirror and saw the truck drivers waving their hands out their windows, indicating a non-threatening issue. She signaled back to pull over on the side of the road. I could already tell from the force with which she grabbed her rifle and slammed the door how she was already sick of this trip.

“What’s wrong?” she asked the driver of the truck directly behind us.

He leaned out and looked back, “I think Truck Five honked first.”

She breathed heavily out her nose. After a moment’s thought, she banged on the side of the first truck, “Everyone out! [REDACTED] and [REDACTED], you’re on watch! Everyone else, I want a perimeter patrol 50 meters out!”

Half a dozen riflemen lethargically stepped out the back. One even began stretching, as if his nap had been rudely interrupted by that pesky concept called responsibility. My bodyguard saw the sorry state of it all, but she ignored it.

My bodyguard and I moved to Truck Five. Walking up to it, we noticed steam coming from the seams of the engine’s closed hood, and the driver waving the steam away with a rag.

“What’s wrong?” she asked again.

“Well ma’am, that’s what I’m trying to figure out. I started hearing a funny clicking noise about ten minutes ago. I was ready to let it go until we got to Kelpie’s, but then my engine started overheating and, well, you can see the steam.”

“You wanna open it up?”

“I’d love to, but the hood is hot to the touch. Way more than usual. Let me check underneath the carriage.”

As he got on his back to check below, I saw an opportunity to get a one-on-one with whoever was in charge of the convoy in the back, “Hey, since we’re stopped, I thought maybe I could get an interview with-”

“No.”

I was genuinely taken aback, and I leaned in for a reason that didn’t appear to be coming, “You’re not going to tell me why?”

“No. My job is to make sure you make it to Kelpie’s with at least one hand still attached. There, I can dump you with another escort on the return trip to Enduring. I’m not parading you around for a survey of everyone’s feelings about a broken truck. Hell, I should have left you in the car.”

That was the most I had ever heard her speak up until that point, and it caught me so off guard I found *myself* at a loss for words, “Ok, well, for the record what you just said is technically a reason.”

“Get back in the-”

Before she could finish, the truck driver’s legs convulsed as he started coughing loudly.

“Hey,” my bodyguard asked, “you ok down there?”

When he didn’t respond and started kicking his feet harder, she grabbed his leg, and knowing what she was going to do I grabbed the other. When we pulled him out, a cloud of yellow dust followed. The distinct smell of sulfur hit us like a wave, and soon enough we were all coughing. It burned like hell, but a few seconds into contact I could tell it wasn’t the raw sulfur or the processed explosive material that could scar your retinas into blindness. It was the familiar sizzle of the stuff I huffed last night.

The drivers from some of the other trucks came over to make sure we were alright, pouring their canteens into our eyes. The driver that was underneath the carriage got the brunt of it, and his top half was completely caked in sulfur. Once it became apparent we were all going

to be fine, one of the other drivers noticed a half-exploded paper package under the truck.

“Hey, check this out! It looks like someone was trying to smuggle some sulfur under the truck!”

“Well that’s an easy way to burn a hole into your fuselage,” another driver responded. “You think one of the officers in Umbral put that there?”

Recovering, my bodyguard grabbed the package and flung it into the nearby field for the local wildlife to have fun with. Still coughing, she barked, “Everyone check your damn trucks for more contraband! If you see any, toss it! Someone grab the patrol and tell them to take all the crates in this truck and move it into another! I don’t care which! You, press boy, get in the car and lock the doors! Everyone, MOVE!”

Each person who took a good sniff of the compound reacted a little differently. Some, a little lot of differently. For her, it amplified her anger. For the man who was half yellow-green on the ground, he started sobbing. It was clear it was his first time.

Meanwhile, I was a little tired. I wanted to follow my bodyguard as she helped the crying driver to the trail of the convoy, mostly to genuinely help, but also to get the CO on the record about all of this. I decided against it.

I felt the high come and go while waiting in the LUV. I like to think the night before built up my tolerance. When my bodyguard came back, she looked me square in the eyes for a few moments with a face that told me she didn’t want to talk. I obliged. As the convoy finally moved out again, I saw Truck Five in my side mirror, abandoned and torched.

We were already one truck down, and still not a Warden in sight.

Our route was to take us through the Colonial-held town of Woodbind. It was the nearest town to the bridgehead at Kelpie’s Mane.

I think my bodyguard and I were secretly counting an intact Woodbind as a small victory. I tried asking her directly, but she only answered with a vague, "Sure."

As Woodbind came into view, we noticed black, billowing smoke appearing to originate from the town. My bodyguard waved her hand out the window and signaled to the truck driver behind us to slow down, which he passed on down the line. When she opened her window, we could also hear the faint cackle of gunfire and the distant boom of shells. I had already been covering the battlefield for years, but the first real threat of danger in a few weeks still put a pit in my stomach. I don't think I'll ever really get used to it.

She eventually guided everyone to a nearby scrapyard. It was abandoned and hardly a good defensive position, but it was better than out in the open.

"Lock the doors and wait in the car." She told me, grabbing her rifle.

"Shouldn't I stick with you?" I asked, hoping to get at least a statement from the CO in the rear. She paused for a moment with one foot out the door.

"Snipers," she replied, before getting out, not even giving me time to protest.

I tried looking out the rear window so I could at least identify the officer in charge, but the truck behind us had parked too close for me to see much. I probably should have been more aggressive and gotten out anyway, but the adrenaline rush from earlier was starting to bottom out. Might have been a small sulfur withdrawal too.

After about ten minutes, I was startled by someone pounding at my door. It was her again. I lowered the window, but she spoke before I could roll it down all the way.

"I'm taking a fireteam up to check the town. Follow me or sit here. Whatever you do, lock the doors and give the keys to the driver of Truck One."

I was getting a little tired of her no-eye-contact-tough-girl routine, but I was just thankful her CO let me go with her.

There were four of us in the fireteam, including me. My bodyguard took point again with her rifle. On her left was the radio operator. On her right was a grenadier. I was in the back rounding out our diamond formation, unarmed, of course. They must have been pretty confident Woodbind was fine, since we were walking down the middle of the road with their weapons laxed.

As we got closer, it became apparent the distant sound of shells and gunfire was actually further past the town. Most likely at Kelpie's Maine, our actual destination. But the black smoke was definitely coming from Woodbind. When a Colonial soldier stepped out of a garrison house, the fireteam slung their weapons back.

"Welcome to Woodbind, ma'am," he saluted, "what can I do for you?"

She returned the salute, "I've got a convoy of trucks back a ways headed for Kelpie's. You wanna tell me what that smoke is coming out of the town?"

"Motor accident, I think, or at least that's what I heard through the grapevine. They're trying to sort it out right now. Hey, if you're all headed for Kelpie's I'd be careful up there. Lots of fire erupted in the past hour, as you can hear. Everyone's saying the Wardens are making a play for the bridgehead.

The other two members of the fireteam shared a nervous glance, but my bodyguard pressed on, "Who's in charge here?"

"Well, it *was* Captain [REDACTED], but he took a couple of squads over to Kelpie's. It's Lieutenant Bacchus now. He's the Quartermaster of the stockpile, and he...uh..."

"You got something to say?"

"Well...just that he's...he runs a tight ship over his domain."

"Duly noted," she leaned in, "Listen, we've also got a guy suffering from sulfur withdrawal. You got any room for him?"

“No! I mean, yeah we do, just...don’t let the Quartermaster see him.”

With the town confirmed safe, she radioed for the convoy to move in, and we headed into town ahead of their arrival to find out more about the situation.

Woodbind turned out to be a bustling staging ground. Trucks and supply personnel were busy taking supplies from the local stockpile, presumably to bring up to the fight. Infantry were meandering from their garrison houses and slowly grouping up into their squads along the road that cut through town. The grenadier from my fireteam asked a squad if they had any sulfur to spare for him. They all looked down and away in silence.

As we approached the three-way intersection in front of the town hall, we saw the accident: A smoldering truck and LUV lay on the side of the road. Troops were still dousing them both with buckets of water, but had managed to move them out of the way with a construction vehicle. What still remained in the middle of the street however, was a Colonial soldier. He was face-up on the ground with a long piece of cylindrical rebar piercing clean through his abdomen. He was still alive and squirming, a medic kneeling next to him.

“Geez, how the heck does something like that happen?” our grenadier asked.

“I dunno,” said our radioman, “that stuff looks refined. Might even be attached to the ground too. And here I thought I’ve seen everything.”

My bodyguard turned around, “Just give the medic time to work.”

In the back of all our minds was the selfish question of whether or not the convoy of trucks could move around the tragic obstacle. The streets of Woodbind were too thin for two-way traffic, and the impaled soldier was lying perpendicular across the middle of the road. We kept our mouths shut.

“What’s going on here?!” an officer came out of the town hall screaming, “I leave this garrison alone for *fifteen minutes* and I’ve got a guy shishkebated to the dirt?!”

“Sir,” the medic saluted, “I believe he’s been struck through his major organs. We don’t have the necessary tools here to cut him loose from the ground, but I’ve already got a group going back to Enduring-”

“You can’t just yank the damn thing out?!”

“No, sir, not yet. He’ll need immediate surgery the moment the rebar is removed, and we have to move him into the field hospital for that. If we remove the whole thing first and then try to move him, he’ll bleed out on the way. I can guarantee it.”

“Dammit!! We need this road clear ASAP!! I’ve already got a convoy of seven trucks passing through here for Kelpie’s Mane!!”

“Six trucks, sir,” my bodyguard stepped forward, “we lost a truck due to mechanical error, but all the supplies inside were moved to another.”

“And who the hell are you?!”

“Staff Sergeant [REDACTED], sir.” she said, trying to keep as much cool as she could, “I’m the CO of the convoy that’s going to be passing through here shortly.”

I must have done the most obvious stare of dumbfounded amazement. Thankfully, everyone’s egos were too busy clashing to really notice.

“Where the hell have *you* been?!” the officer barked, “We were scheduled to process your supplies over two hours ago!!”

“My apologies, sir. We ran into episodes of trouble on the way.”

“What the hell does that mean?! You know what, forget it!! As Quartermaster of the Woodbind garrison, I’m gonna have your ass for this!!”

“Understood, sir. In the meantime, my trucks will be arriving, so we can have you and your men process them for us.”

“Well, a lot of good that’s going to do us,” the Quartermaster tantrumed, “what with the human foosball player here blocking the road!!”

Our grenadier chimed in, “I’m sure we can just drive off-road around the town, right?”

“Who gave you permission to speak?!” the Quartermaster snapped back, “And no, the forest south of here could be teeming with Wardens!! We don’t have enough men here at the garrison to spare a patrol!! You want to risk that?!”

“Sir,” my bodyguard stepped back in, “as the medic said, there’s already a team dispatched to get the necessary tools. I can have my radioman hail Enduring Post and check-”

“We don’t have time for this!!” the Quartermaster pulled out his pistol, taking aim at the impaled soldier.

My bodyguard unslung her rifle and aimed at the Quartermaster, “Sir, stand down!”

The other two guys in the fireteam looked at each other in disbelief. They unslung their rifles, but stopped short of taking aim at anyone. All other activity in the town came to a standstill as everyone looked on.

“Sir, you are aiming at a friendly unit! Lower your weapon!” she ordered, “Lower! Your! Weapon! Or I will be forced to take punitive action!”

The impaled soldier, his pool of blood expanding this whole time, let one hand go of the rebar piercing him and reached out to the Quartermaster, “Please...don’t...”

“I’m sorry,” he responded, “but we’ve got troops dying at Kelpie’s.”

“You’ve got one man dying right in front of you.” our bodyguard snapped back.

No one blinked, and no one dared move. If it weren’t for the sounds of battle in the distance, we might have thought time froze.

“Excuse me!” I held up my hand as everyone snapped their heads back at me, “Mari Sharp, Colonial Correspondent for the *PressCorps*. I’m embedded with this convoy? Anyway, sorry to interrupt you sir, but after you shoot this man, can I get a statement on the record?” everyone stared, too stunned to say anything, “Just as a heads up, at least one of the questions *will* be about you shooting him.”

The Quartermaster looked ready to turn the gun on me, but holstered it and stormed off into town hall. The radioman and grenadier nearly broke down trying to hide their laughter. My bodyguard looked relieved. The rest of Woodbind took a collective sigh and carried on with their tasks.

The two guys in the fireteam patted me on the back and couldn't stop laughing in relief. My bodyguard took a knee next to the medic as he tended to the impaled. We stopped celebrating.

After a few moments, we noticed the impaled man's arms lay limp, and the medic looked at his watch, "I'm calling it. 10:24."

It was deflating to think we had such an intense standoff for practically nothing, but at least the poor bastard died without a bullet to the head. The fireteam pulled the rebar loose and carried the corpse to the side of the road. Soon after, our convoy arrived. The Quartermaster refused to come out and sent his orderly to organize the processing instead.

The convoy also dropped off the sulfur-ridden driver at the field hospital. He was already fine by the time he checked in, but they let him go anyway to rest, making sure to label him as 'sick'.

When the processing was done, we were finally on the last stretch to Kelpie's.

When we arrived at the primary Colonial encampment for Kelpie's Mane, it was about 1100. The short drive there was mercifully uneventful, but the shells landing just a hundred meters away put us back on edge. My bodyguard parked her LUV nearby and got out. I followed, making sure to lock the doors.

"Let's go! Everyone pile out! Unload this crap!" she yelled, banging the trucks as she walked down the line.

This time, the squad was awake, hustling to move the crates to the encampment stockpile. My bodyguard pitched in too once she saw everyone engaged.

When all the supplies were finally unloaded, I caught up with her as her squad was gearing up to head into the fight at Kelpie's.

"So, you were the CO for this convoy?" I asked.

"Mmhm." she answered, looking off into nowhere like she had a dozen times before.

"Don't officers usually ride in the trail of a supply column? As opposed to the head?"

"Yeah," before I could give up on waiting for a full answer again, she turned to me, "but the guys on the frontline only give a damn about us when their wrenches get blown up."

I shot her a look. My face must have been real easy to read, but in my defense her line was incredibly morose. She grinned.

Her radioman walked up to us, "Ma'am, we're ready when you are."

As she walked away, she turned back briefly, still smiling, "For the record, I prefer the motorbike. Gets stuffy in the LUV, especially with you in there, press boy."

I watched them walk until the gate closed behind them. After, I met my new bodyguard, and we hopped into the empty back of Truck One to ride with the convoy back to Enduring.

Editor's Note: All names of military personnel currently serving have been redacted for their continued operational safety.

Bags or Burn?

by Ken Wrister, Casualty Analyst

Recent combined casualty reports gathered from official Warden and Colonial sources put the total number of dead at approximately 750,000 and at least twice as many wounded. Nearly 550,000 come from the last fifty days alone.¹ Without a doubt, we are in the midst of the bloodiest months of the most recent Conflict of the Foxhole War yet. Funeral homes and houses of worship are struggling to keep up with the requests for services. A growing class of limbless veterans is appearing. Most horrifying of all, cemeteries are reportedly running out of room.

A new death industry is booming, and so are the numbers.

Supplanting traditional burial - both private services and mass graves - is cremation. Both Colonials and Wardens have made extensive use of the practice in recent weeks.

“The Wardens have put us in an unfortunate position where we cannot guarantee the proper return of remains to their families,” says Velian Senator Cibus, the newly-appointed Head of the War Rationing Quorum that oversees Legionary logistics, including corpse handling. “We must prioritize the living, and if that requires us to cremate the dead so they do not contaminate living quarters and emplacements, that falls under grim, necessary action. That is the reality of war. I sympathize for the families, but if they need an enemy from their grief, I suggest the Wardens, who *actually* took their loved ones away from them.”

Despite the long-winded answer, the most recent quarterly report from the Legates reaffirm these notions of “grim, necessary action”, even if bitter resentment among grieving families grows.

Cibus pushed for cremation after the Legates’ report, which detailed the dire living conditions in bases across the war zone.

Logistics personnel were having so much trouble transporting bodies, it was not uncommon for corpses to be stacked at portbases. First, in rows of body bags, but as supply routes started getting busy or even under fire; later in open, decaying piles.

“Out on the frontlines, it’s not too uncommon to see the medics collect the stiff,” says one Colonial soldier, who wished to remain unnamed, “That I get. But those mounds of dead at the portbases? Geez, total nightmare. Last time I stopped by, there must have been two hundred of them in this mountain of corpses. The smell was terrible, and all their eyes...their lifeless eyes just looking at you. There’s a whole lot of depressing poetry you could write, I’ll tell you that much.”

Indeed, data from the Legate’s report show how quickly fatalities were outpacing logistical efforts to remove them. “Cremations” is already listed as a method of corpse disposal and a significant portion of it, although in the same report the Legates express “deep remorse” over the matter.²

Even impromptu, on-site burial failed to get the job done, since round-the-clock Howitzer shelling and constant frontline construction among shifting positions only resulted in inadvertent exhumation.

The crisis - covered extensively in the previous issue of *PRESS* - prompted the resignation of Mesean Senator Persolvere and the vacancy of leadership in the War Rationing Quorum. Enter Cibus, whose appointment as the Quorum’s Head allowed her to overhaul mortuary policy to pivot towards cremation, which has already overtaken burial as of Day 130 of the current Conflict.³

Since the switch to cremation, the horrifying scenes of dead bodies piled up at portbases have since gone, and early reports from the Legates claim disease has dropped significantly, seeming to vindicate Cibus’ controversial moves.

“The Legion has always pioneered innovation and improvisation in war time,” she writes in a statement regarding the matter, “and even in the realm of death, Colonials do not falter in this aspect.”

Initially, the Wardens proudly put themselves above mandatory cremation, calling the Colonial procedure “barbaric and unbecoming of human dignity”, according to a decree from the Royal Court. Promises to bring back every corpse have been put into the air.

But reports from both anonymous frontline sources and *PressCorps* Warden Correspondent Kathy Ernst reveal how Warden actions may not be in lockstep with rhetoric.

“The attitude among the troops here is very bleak,” writes Ernst from an incomplete draft she was working on while embedded with Wardens in Callahan’s Passage, “The funny thing is, they’re winning. The Colonials can’t seem to coordinate with their fire support, and every attack they launch is rebuked with authority. It’s just hard to actually feel like you’re winning when you have to keep reburying your battle buddy - each time their face becoming a little less recognizable from all the snow and decay.”

Sources from within the royal court claim stories like these became so rampant, mandatory cremation has slowly become the de facto method of body disposal. Publicly however, the royal court continues to deny a change in policy.

“We do not stoop so low as to force the burnings of our brave warriors,” says Greer Stehlen, Chief Justice of the High Court of Caoiva, “Either their clans shall bury them at home, or they shall be given a burial with honors on the battlefield itself as generations of Caoivish warriors have done. Anyone caught doing so shall see trial and appropriate punishment. I shall sign off on that order, personally.”

In an effort to block investigative efforts, the *PressCorps* was then denied access to any further statistical data from the Service of the Chief Calculator soon after that statement. But even if you can’t reach the numbers that are plain, there are always the numbers that amount to more than the sum of their parts.

While we were denied access to speak to the Chief Calculator, we still had access to the offices and data from the Service of the Chief Provender - the Warden government office in charge of logistics. With those numbers laid out, they began to suggest a different story.

Data pertaining to body bags shipped out over time shows the number rising as is consistent with previous Conflicts. However around Day 80, the number begins to trend downward as casualties stay the course. By Day 120, that number is in freefall, which highlights the inconsistency.⁴

Additionally, a separate chart covering the same time frame shows a dramatic jump in fuel shipments, again by Day 120. In that time, heavy armor such as Tanks weren't deployed, which would usually coincide with such an increase.⁵

Of course, as any good analyst such as myself should tell you, correlation does not equal causation. The spike in fuel distribution could just as easily have been more logistics trucks being used, or Warden commanders deciding to stockpile fuel in case of broken supply lines.

However, recorded interviews from Warden troops stationed in Callahan's Passage - conducted by Kathy Ernst - paint a much more macabre picture.

One Captain stationed at Solas Gate describes "teams of auxiliary soldiers who would collect the dead. We'd been waiting for them for a while, but when they got to our encampment, something was off. Some of them told us they were preparing the bodies to be shipped back to their families, but then we'd talk to another group and they'd tell us there were reburying them in temporary graves. Almost as if they didn't get their story straight."

In another interview, a Lieutenant driving along Cragroad noticed "a bunch of soldiers and a pair of trucks in an empty field in the backline. I wasn't aware of their presence in the sector, so I went over to say hi. They all seemed standoffish. I also noticed one of the trucks was full of fuel cans. As in, the whole truck was just piled to capacity with

fuel cans. I asked them about it, but after some silence, they gave me some half-assed answer about establishing a fuel depot. Yeah ok, building something like *that* so out of the way and without a construction vehicle. Anyway, I got creeped out, so I got back in my LUV. Just as I was driving away though, I swore I could see them pulling out shovels and digging together, like a trench or something. I later brought it up to my CO, and he told me to forget about it pretty quick. I didn't argue."

Perhaps one of the most interesting episodes comes from a Private who was separated from his patrol during a blizzard, winding up in a field between Solas Gorge and Luch's Workshop in Mooring County.

"I thought I was gonna die out there, and I was kicking myself for how stupid of a death it was gonna be. I could see it now: An icicle shipped back to my mother with some stupid look frozen into my face. But then, through the wind and snow whipping around me, I saw a light. My first thought was that I was already starting to die, and it was my dead Uncle Lorne himself getting ready to welcome me into the beyond," he laughs to himself, "but as I'm walking closer to it, the light gets bigger and bigger until...I find out it's a fire!"

"A fire?" Kathy asks in the recording, "In the middle of a random field?"

"I know! No campsite, no base, no signs of anyone, just this huge ditch and this huge fire ten, twenty feet in the air! Of course, I'm not thinking about that. I'm on my knees shouting thanks to Callahan for the miracle that is this oasis of warmth!"

"How long were you there for?"

"I don't know. Maybe an hour. I honestly lost all concept of time for a while. I kept thinking I'd leave as soon as the fire fizzled out, but it kept going. At that point I start thinking, 'what the heck is burning in there?' so I get a little closer. The warmth feels so nice, so I get even closer and pull down my scarf from my face, and then it hits me. The *smell!* I swear I can still smell it now...."

"You had mentioned before you worked latrine duty. Was it

similar to that?”

“Kind of, but not really? I know I’ve set up burn-out latrines on occasion, but nothing that big. Besides, it didn’t make sense for a latrine to be so far away from a base, unless they trucked a whole division out to the middle of nowhere to take a dump.”

“So what did you think it was?”

“Bodies. Had to be bodies. Warden bodies, too. Everyone’s been complaining about all the corpses lining the streets lately, and no one knows what to do with them without body bags.”

“What about the Colonial dead recovered by Warden troops?”

“Those we’d leave alone. Good for our morale, bad for theirs. And we already have enough to deal with. We don’t need some Collie having the last laugh from hell while we haul his carcass to a morgue. We dump it in no man’s land and let his buddies do the work.”

Dozens of more interviews corroborate these stories of auxiliary teams reporting to no one or random man-made fires in out-of-the-way places.

If mandatory cremation is indeed becoming de facto policy for the Wardens without them acknowledging it, this would mean the ashes of the dead are not being individually preserved or returned to their next-of-kin. Worst of all, mass graves of mixed ash may even be left unmarked, undocumented, and eventually lost to time.

Editor’s Note: Interview subjects were intentionally left unnamed at the behest of the families, who fear reprisals from the Royal Court, including the revoking of benefits.

In Veli, resentment is gradually rising among the populace over the mandatory cremation policy. Casualty rates have gone up as they usually do, but the appearance of urns in place of caskets has left families confused and without a means of closure.

“All her friends in the platoon told me they’d send her home,” a father protesting outside of Chamber Crest tells reporters, clutching his daughter’s plastic urn and fighting back tears, “and when I was waiting for the body to come back, I knew I had to make peace with it, that someone’s daughter had to die for this war.”

Squeezing it tighter, he raises his voice, “But this?! I can’t make peace with this! They burned my daughter, my Agatha, like some piece of compost!”

Holding the urn high for all to see, he proclaims, “Take a good look everyone, because *this* is what joining the Legion will get you! They can’t even be bothered to bring you back home after you’re killed! There will be no peace in this world for me! Not until that Cibus is removed from office one way or another!”

The woman in the urn is SSgt. Agatha Philomenes, who was killed in action in Endless Shore. Her father, Hank Philomenes, is one of hundreds protesting in the streets of Demokratos against the mandatory cremation policy pushed by Senator Cibus.

“No, I didn’t mean like assassination, but as a Velian you can be sure I’m not voting for anyone that supports her!”

Despite this powerful imagery both in word and presence, support for a reversal of Cibus’ legislation does not appear to have any traction in the Chamber or the Legion.

Meanwhile on the other end of the continent, the loved ones of Caoiva’s dead have yet to even know about the status of remains. If the pace of the war continues, hundreds of thousands may not be receiving anything more than a letter confirming their mother’s, son’s, or sister’s status as killed in action.

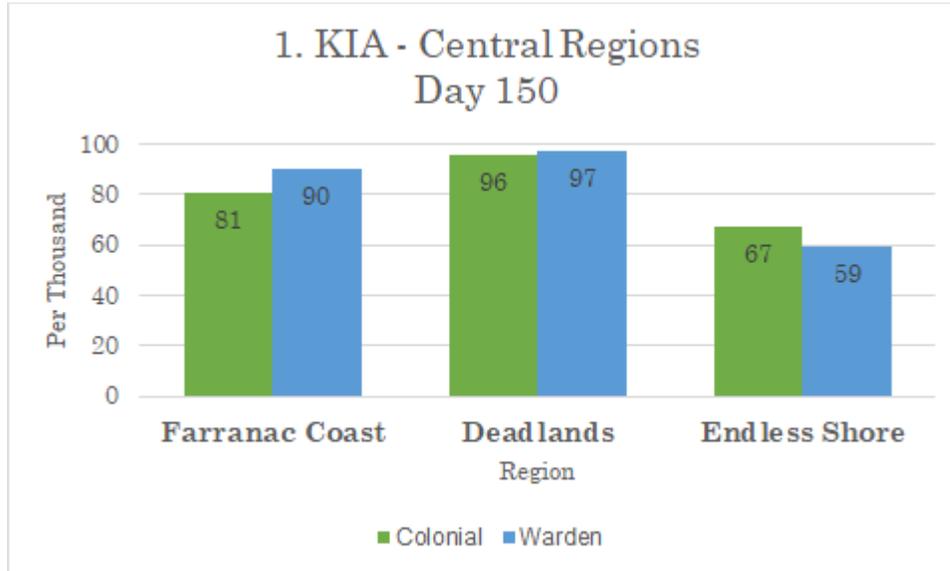
“I scoff at the illogical notion that I am somehow to blame,” says Chief Justice Stehlen. “The Royal Court issues a decree. The High Court enforces it. The Chief Provender and the rest of his Service is doing their best to recover every, single fallen warrior,” he proclaims to me in his office, pounding his fist.

After taking a moment to collect himself by collecting the fountain

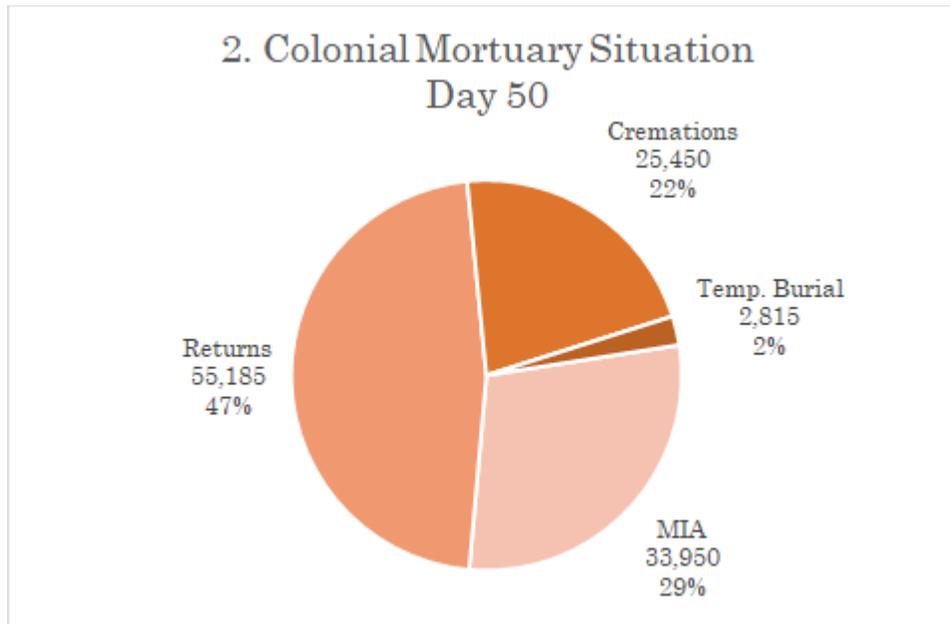
pens he knocked over, he reasons, “It is not always easy to stay civilized, to ignore the simple route of a savage tribe which has so little care for its warriors that it must burn them like refuse. But that is not the Caoiva Callahan envisioned, and that is not the Caoiva I shall bring upon us.”

Regardless of policy, the numbers don't lie: We have had more dead in this ongoing Conflict than in any Conflict previous.⁶ Corpses are mounting faster than they can be recovered traditionally, and a majority of people prefer the traditional casket to urn. And yet as the war drags on, one may have to consider the option of urn, to nothing at all.

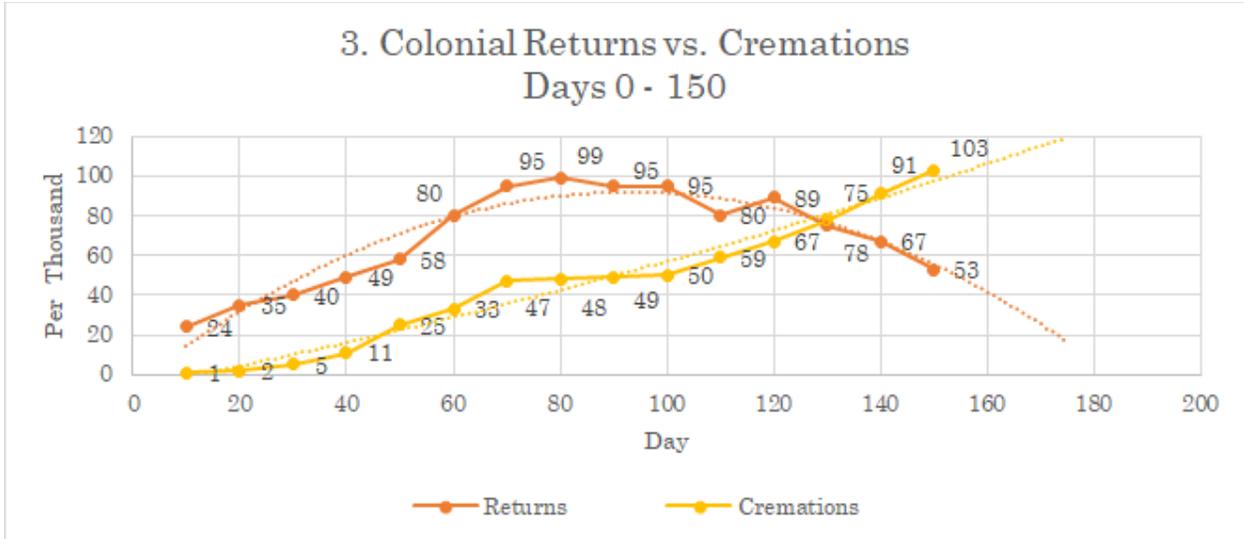
War, By the Numbers



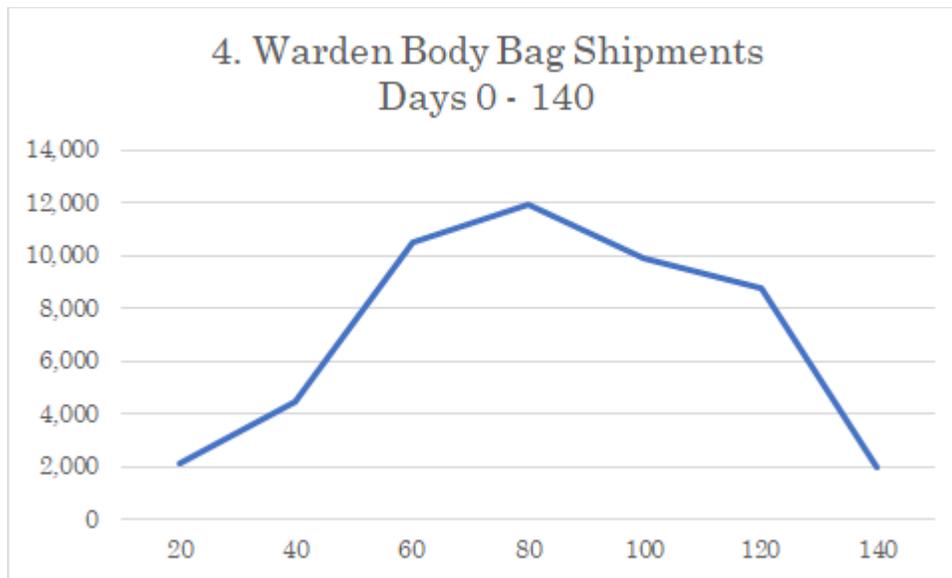
Sources: War Rationing Quorum (Colonial); Service of the Chief Calculator (Warden)



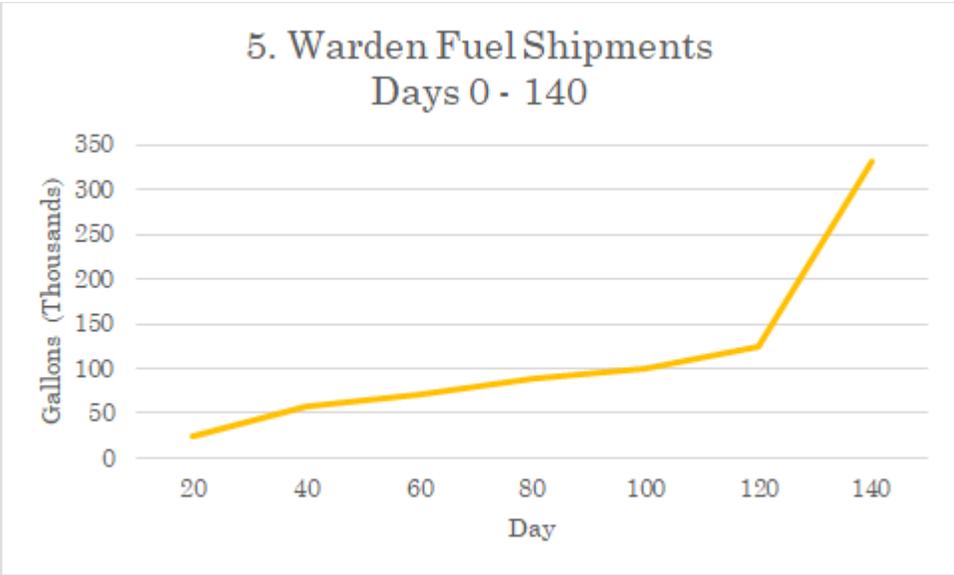
Sources: War Rationing Quorum



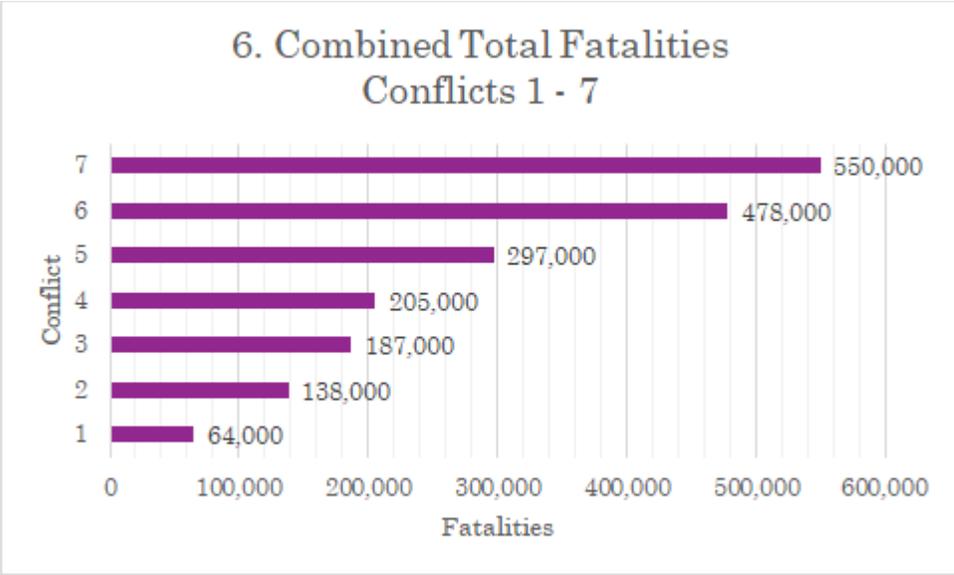
Source: War Rationing Quorum



Source: Service of the Chief Provender



Source: Service of the Chief Provender



Sources: War Rationing Quorum; Service of the Chief Calculator

Velian-Mesean Tensions on the Rise

by Mack McAllister, Political Correspondent

Chamber Crest, Demokratos – As the steel-eyed Senator steps out of her motorcade, paying no mind to the chaos about to unravel in front of her, a mighty fine mess of reporters mobs the infamous lawmaker. Her posse of secretaries and security frantically fights for breathing room. Woefully outnumbered, one of the guards eventually manages to push a couple of young bucks to the ground from sheer momentum. The critical mass, that has somehow moved up the imposing steps of Chamber Crest, is nigh in lockstep with one another. A few enterprising Tabloid Tabby's dared to use the words "abuse" and "brutality", but it seems the rest of this peculiar organism was too busy asking other questions:

"When can starving families expect to receive their rations?"

"Are the rolled back factory safety regulations really worth the '4.7%' increase in shirt production?"

"If the Wardens keep successfully pushing into the Heartlands, how will this affect the pivot to mass cremation you championed?"

I'll be honest, I can never make out a single question in its entirety. There's simply too much clamor. But I can guarantee you most of them are loaded questions. Somehow, someway however, one of these sons of scriptum still manage to surprise me in these daily performances.

"Do you serve the people of Veli or Mesea?"

Now, most Senators would stop dead cold, right then, right there to grind that reporter into the brimstone. And yet, she kept walking her line straight to the Council Chambers. After the security checkpoint, she turns the corner into the Long Hallway - the final obnoxious stretch of journey into the Chambers themselves. As the mob gets closer to the twenty-foot solid oak doors, the hollering picks up to the point where even the Senator has to put a finger in her ear. The other ear is still a slave to the noise, her other hand carrying her briefcase.

As the gaggle of journalists reaches halfway down the hallway, it passes a trio of other Senators also heading to the Council Chambers. Two of them move to the side, but a Junior Senator steps forward to intercept and steal some press attention.

“The Colonial people are united in their struggle...” but the horde has already moved past him in complete ignorance of his existence. The other two Senators begin laughing so hard, one bends over himself and the other seeks support from a nearby column.

As the crowd finally reaches the entrance, a pair of the Chambers’ Honor Guard - a couple of sixty-something senior members of the security team - open the giant doors into the Chambers proper. Senators, staff, and guests busy-body themselves with forests of paper.

But this peculiar organism that has caused such a ruckus, now breaks apart. Its nucleus releases into the Chambers, leaving behind the orbit of microphones and notepads - stopped by the Honor Guard who sternly redirect the hyper-wily writers up to the press balcony. There, they will witness the Colonial fist that holds the Legionary sword, and observe its legislative splendor in all its stubborn, indecisive glory.

Yet despite so many egos in one place, all eyes are on the woman who blazed a trail of shattered dreams, unanswered questions, and buried daggers:

The woman who just entered the Chamber.

The Senior Senator from Veli.

The new Head of the War Rationing Quorum.

The Scourge of the Senate.

The Princess of Pragmatism.

The target of countless rhetorical attacks, some of them true.

The silver-eyed fox who can send a whisper down a domino chain of backroom bastards and end your Demokratos career in an afternoon.

Formerly, Melinda Niobe Varvara.

Formally, Senator Cibus.

Both Consuls take their position at the two podiums that flank the third reserved for *oratores prima*. The legislative body rises and begins to quiet down, but some murmurs persist. The war has always been bad, but it has gotten downright unbearable lately. Together, the Consuls open proceedings as usual by reciting, in tandem, the Colonial motto:

“Sit primogenita indignatione
mea. Haec manu tenere gladium.
Coloniae deductae in defensione
nostri carissimi, per hanc inter-”

“Sit primogenita indignatione
mea. Haec manu tenere gladium.
Coloniae deductae in defensione
nostri carissimi, ut interfi-”

The Consuls stop abruptly, realizing their mistake. Long ago, days of Senate proceedings would have been spent verbally whipping them into dust, Senator by Senator, at such a blasphemous error. This time, without flinching, one of the Consuls picks right up where they left off, and the other quickly joins in.

“...ut interficiam ferrum
per hanc multitudinem.”

“...ut interficiam ferrum
per hanc multitudinem.”

Gaffe aside, the delivery was still terribly meek. It’s a sorry start to what is bound to be another six hours of exhausting pedantry. The body sits back down.

One of the Consuls calls upon the first Senator of the day:

“The Colonial Senate shall now
submit to Senator Doloribus.”

Not even fully seated, a burst of excitement strikes the Chamber. Reporters in the balcony pause mid sentence and begin rewriting their drafts. Even Senator Cibus leans ever so slightly forward in interest, though she hardly reacts past that. Her fellow Velian legislators are much more animated, as if they didn't know what their newest member was up to.

It is rare for a Junior Senator to speak as *oratores prima* at Chamber meetings, and Senator Doloribus of Veli is about to be the first Junior Senator in history to open as one. A Tabby behind me whispers theories of bribery. I reckon it's a harbinger of change. As Doloribus takes the center podium, ignoring the grumbling as he walks up, the room becomes truly silent.

"Senators of the Chamber, I stand before you a Velian-"

"Then stand taller, child! I can't see you over the podium!" a Mesean Senator heckles, prompting isolated laughter.

Doloribus ignores the interruption, "I stand before you a Velian: seeped in the pride of a million drawn swords, burdened by the memory of millions more dead. Velian dead. You may not think much of me, but I have thought much of them. Squirming on their backs, pleading on their sides, and lifeless on their face - the sons and daughters of Veli have suffered more than its fair share in this forever war."

He paused and allowed the words to breathe. No one was laughing now. He continued, "Our purpose, our very essence as a body, is to be the hand that guides the Legionary Sword. I ask: Where has that guidance gone? I ask my Mesean colleagues in particular: What happened to the weekly, then monthly, now *quarterly* report of the Legates? Did you stop caring as to the conduct of the war when the Velian people became the overwhelming majority of conscripted? Or was it when the Velian railways were pressed so hard into service, the entire system buckled and collapsed? Perhaps it was when Velian automobiles were requisitioned to make scrap for materials? I *beseech* my Mesean colleagues: When did you stop giving a damn about my people?!"

The Decade of Senators from Mesea are already shouting obscenities on their feet before he can finish the sentence. The other Decades are flabbergasted by the raw intensity of the words coming at them. The reporters around me are also dumbstruck for a moment, but soon begin gleefully rewriting their headlines once more, this time about Doloribus.

The Decade from Veli are not sure how to respond to one of their own shattering their reputation and agenda. In a single speech, no less. Some look around nervously. Some reflexively shake their heads at the mere thought of defeatist rhetoric. Cibus is unmoving, her face registering nothing as a wild card is thrown down onto the table.

All are caught unawares by this firebrand. Emboldened by the response, he continues, “How many names of the dead can you recite from memory? How many faces can you see? Does their memory haunt your soul? Or has this Chamber never had one to begin with? As of late, this Chamber has betrayed our noble symbol! Betrayed our duty as Colonials! This Chamber has let the Sword drown in a chasm of its own blood! This Chamber has failed Veli!”

Nearly the entire room rises to their feet. The collective clamor is too much to single anyone out, but Cibus and the Velian Decade remain in their chairs. The other eight Senators desperately look to their Senior leader for guidance. She remains an unreadable statue.

“I demand that-” Dolorbius continues, nearly stumbling over his own words in fervor, “I demand that a new Quorum be created to reassert our control, as a legislative body, over the Legionary Sword, and ensure the blood that coats its metal derives from Caoivish hearts, Warden veins!” he motioned to the seated Consuls on his left and right, “Noble Consuls, give me this Quorum! Give it to me so I may clot this tremendous wound that spills so much Velian blood!”

Another wave of uproar erupts, but Doloribus stands proud upon the lectern. The Consuls anxiously look at each other from opposite ends of the stage, unsure how to proceed. Cibus continues to sit.

Eventually, one of the Consuls rises and takes his podium,

“The Chamber will adjourn
and reconvene tomorrow-”

The shouting reaches ear-shattering proportions, and one Mesean Senator rushes the stage at Doloribus, but is restrained by Honor Guard. Meanwhile, Cibus immediately gets up and turns to exit the Chamber. Her walk is fast, but somehow void of emotion. The rest of the Velian Decade nearly fails to see her leave, and scramble out of their seats to follow. The reporters with me in the balcony evacuate to get every possible reaction from the body. I reckon to leave too, sensing there'll be a line of Senators ready to denounce their fiery colleague.

It was the shortest Chamber meeting in Senate history.

Nearly three and a half hours passed before the queue of Senators had finished talking to reporters, who ate up every word. Line after line about the ‘inflammatory’, ‘divisive’, and even ‘traitorous’ speech that had just transpired. A few even managed to touch on the actual problem Doloribus had addressed, but none of it was substantial. Now, the crowd of journalists outside the Chamber doors are champing at the bit to receive the young demagogue.

When the doors are opened from within by the Honor Guard, we are greeted by Senator Cibus, with Senator Doloribus standing beside her. The reporters are so perplexed by the reappearance of the Senior Senator - who had been the first one to leave - they forget to bombard them with a hail of trap questions, as is tradition.

Taking advantage of our bemusement, Cibus speaks, “Colonial citizens, my colleague and I have just finished talking to the Consuls. With their blessing by decree, Senator Doloribus shall be named Head of the new War Conduct Oversight Quorum. Its task: to ensure proper government accountability over Legionary forces and root out any

abuses, mismanagement, and criminality. The vote to approve the Quorum shall be held next week.”

It had been quite some time since the Consuls had issued a decree *sine senatus*. Nothing has moved this fast in ages. Like clockwork, the Tabby’s jump in with the wrong questions.

“Who else will be in this new Quorum?” one reporter on their right asks.

Cibus looks straight ahead, “We will be compiling that list and distributing it to you all in the coming days.”

“When will this new Quorum be up and running?” another asks.

“At the earliest possible opportunity once the appropriate Senators are gathered. Now if you’ll excuse us-”

“Senator Cibus,” I hold up my hand, “Mack McAllister, Political Correspondent for the *PressCorps*. With you having been named Head of the War Rationing Quorum just three weeks ago, and Senator Doloribus now installed as Head of this new Quorum, don’t you think that’s placing a tad too much power in the hands of your Decade?”

She turns her head towards me, those steel eyes targeting me with an intent I’m still not sure of, “I am fully aware of this startling precedent,” Cibus preempted, “but as my colleague so graciously queried the Chamber this morning, Velian blood has been gushing forth for too long. We need accountability, now. Thank you all.”

It’s a typical non-answer, but it was a shot in the dark. She and Doloribus make their way through the crowd and down the Long Hallway, the latter not letting out so much as a peep. Between them both, I can’t tell who was under whose thumb, or even who *thought* they had their thumb over the other.

In less than a month, after years of being in the shadow of more powerful counterparts, Veli had become the politically strongest non-Mesean Decade, with oversight leadership on food, fuel, minerals, materials, and, if approved, military conduct.

A target has been painted on both their backs.

As the steel-eyed Senior Senator from Veli steps away from her motorcade, the Junior Senator steps out of the same car and follows suit. It's not entirely uncommon for Junior Senators to carpool, but it is unusual for them to ride with their Senior leader - and with Cibus of all people.

The security escort has doubled since last week. They are still no match for the mob of Tabby's that has quadrupled in size. Quantity over quality from the other news agencies, it seems.

After ceremonial openings, this time with no gaffes, Cibus is the first to speak as *oratores prima*. She is expected to unveil the list of members of Doloribus' War Conduct Oversight Quorum. It would have been perfectly acceptable for her to release a statement from her office, but her choice to list them off orally to kick off a session is petty genius. The entire Chamber sits on brittle precipice, the entirety of Chamber Crest itself feeling like it's doused in fuel, ready to alight.

Taking the center podium, nervous Consuls sitting on her flank, she begins, "Much prattle has occurred over the last week about the validity of my colleague's new Quorum; if my colleague truly does care for his people, or if his intentions lie in power alone. Noble Consuls, to answer these questions I yield my time to my special guest, who had to arrive at Chamber Crest through the service entrance so as not to be harrassed by the press."

She takes a beat to motion towards our balcony. We're used to getting called out, often by each other, but coming from Cibus, you'd think cannons would follow.

She continues, "Ladies and gentlemen of the Chamber, I am humbled to present to you a Velian mother of incredible strength, Cinere Orbum."

It's a twist worthy of a radio play, and the entire room has just been had. Not quite bursting into flames, the Chamber burns soft with pure reaction. Cibus steps aside, and positions herself to this new

woman's left at the podium. Mrs. Orbum's sewn woodland dress contrasts with Cibus' grey business attire. Her face is haggard with terrible trauma, and eyes that look ready to cry themselves raw once more.

She attempts to speak, but she is unintelligible. Cibus intervenes to move the microphone closer, and reassures her she'll be ok. After a moment of shuffling her script, Mrs. Orbum collects herself and speaks softly.

"I would like to begin by thanking this Chamber for allowing me to speak on the floor today. I would also like to thank Senator Cibus for bringing me in and giving my story a platform." she closes her eyes and takes a long breathe. "My name is Cinere Orbum. My family used to live in the forests of the Umbral Wildwood, with our roots stretching from as far back to when the Colonial Legion first liberated us from Warden bullying. Growing up, my husband and I told our sons stories of fierce fighters clad in green uniforms, holding banners depicting a fist clutching the Sword of Mesea. To think: a weapon of war held back by a mere hand. The potential corrupting power of a kingdom held back by its subjects. Well, that must be one hell of a hand!"

The Chamber softly chuckles, but we can all sense a tragedy coming.

"So when the Wardens came back to Umbral and took my husband, the love of my life, away from me in the initial chaos, I gave everything I had to the fight. Like so many mothers around me at the time, I let my sons and daughters go to take up arms in the name of the Legion. To take back our homes and our livelihoods."

A burst of applause erupts from the Mesean Decade, and it spreads to the rest of the Chamber. Even the Tabby's join in. Yet Cibus stands firm, like a scientist waiting for her experiment to unfold. Mrs. Orbum purses her lips in a sort of smile, and looks down for a moment as the applause dissipates before continuing.

“I buried my last son two days ago. His ashes, to be exact, since apparently Legion procedure for handling dead now is to cremate the bodies of the dead and *then* notify the family with a cheap, plastic urn.”

A tidal wave of shock washes over and silences the Chamber.

“After losing a husband to invasion and three daughters to the service, my last child dies in a road accident because the truck driver was high on narcotics.”

Murmurs spring up among the audience.

“Oh, you didn’t know? About the *rampant* drug problem sweeping the frontlines?” She lets the rhetorical question linger, “You heard that right, our sons and daughters, already suffering enough anguish as it is, are being peddled filth by their higher ups! And you wonder why the Legates choose to report so little now.”

The murmurs are now gasps and open conversations. The Consuls look at each other, and one of them takes to his podium.

“The Chamber will have order. Order, please-”

“My son was impaled!” Mrs. Orbum cries out, “A piece of metal going right through his belly! The same belly I use to play with when he was just a baby, oh Mother Maro he’s gone! They’re all gone, and I have nothing!”

“Mrs. Orbum, thank you for your time-”

“His body was tossed to the side of the road to make room for more trucks, probably smuggling more drugs!”

“I’m so sorry for your loss, ma’am, the Chamber will be discuss-”

“Your Legates did this!! And you all let them do it under your watch!! All of you!! *Complicit!!*”

The Consul, with the best of intentions, is at a loss. Knowing the pot has been stirred enough, Cibus takes the rambling, grieving mother and gently forces her from the microphone. Cibus’ aides rush to the stage to take her away, her wails echoing from the hallway.

The Chamber is awash with shame, with everyone left dazed from the revelations; of a seedy drug trade among the military leadership, of a ravaged Velian family, of a mother’s immense pain. Cibus takes to the microphone.

“My guest now yields her time to Senator Doloribus.”

Normally, having two Senators from the same Decade speak back-to-back would cause an uproar, but there’s too much on the plate right now for anyone to care. The Junior Senator takes to the stage and to the center podium where he had lit the powder keg a week ago.

“I realize these are serious accusations, but I hope now you see and realize the extent of suffering my fellow Velians have gone through. How much, so many have sacrificed. And how much of that suffering and sacrifice can be avoided if we have the proper oversight in place to ensure accountability.”

Some Mesean Senators look ready to protest again, but their Senior member motions for them to hold them back. With an austere yet defeated look on his face, he realizes Cibus has put too much doubt in the air for them to make an argument.

“Rest assured, I am dedicated to victory over the Warden Empire and the security of our great Colonies. This Quorum shall stay out of the way of our Legion’s march to Wheadon’s Row, but it *shall not* let abuse march with them.”

Somehow, she has used the spontaneous chaos to insulte her next few moves. Somehow, she’s done it again.

“With that said, the following Senators I have chosen to join me in this hunt for justice are...”

The question still remains if Cibus worked with Doloribus to invoke the initial controversy or if it was a target of opportunity, but for the immediate future, it's a moot point. For now, the proposed Quorum membership stands at two Mesean and six Velian, with the remaining roster comprising of a mix of other Senators. Again, most would point out the clear lean towards the Head member's Decade, but after the spectacle that is sure to make headlines, the tides have changed.

The Quorum is approved in a landslide vote, and with it, a new era of Velian power.

Editor's Notes: The Colonial motto as translated (and poetically adjusted) from classic Mesean is as follows:

"May this birthright be my passion. May this hand so wield the sword. In defense of our dear Colonies, may this blade cut through the horde."

Their Stories Must Be Told

by Geoffrey Jennings, PressCorps Editor-In-Chief

PressCorps World Headquarters – Kathy knew exactly what she was getting into when I first gave her the assignment. I also like to think she knew what she was getting into when she reportedly rolled out of her Foxhole and crawled into no man’s land.

As she sat across my desk, I remember her beaming with anticipation to be embedded with a unit.

“I’ve covered Velian separatist raids, Geoff. I’m familiar with how loud a gun can get.”

I asked her if she knew how much a bullet could hurt. Still smiling, she looked down and replied, “I *need* to go. It’s our responsibility to cover these stories no matter what their setting is. C’mon, I’m preaching to the choir director!”

And she was right. Every word of it was right. She was right the moment she walked into my office, and I knew it. But it took one last phrase for me to finally let her go.

“Geoff, their stories must be told.”

I don’t remember how I said yes. Maybe it was stoically, or maybe I became just as jovial as she was. All I do remember is how a wash of guilt enveloped me, and struck me like a javelin straight to the chest. She would be the first reporter I’d ever personally send out to a warzone. At other publications, I had the luxury of having war correspondents be sent off by their immediate beat editors, with me simply signing off on the decision. One time, I didn’t even come into the office when they made the farewell rounds before leaving to get shipped off. I was a coward, then.

“And don’t you dare blame yourself when I come back with my arm blown off,” she laughed, “there’s a good chance I was feeding my tennis addiction with a grenade, so I probably deserved it!”

I would fail her miserably.

The first written transmission she sent back was entirely about her arrival and processing at the Warden (temporary) capital at Wheadon's Row. On top of being the first reporter I had personally sent out, Kathy was also the first Warden Correspondent for the fledgling *PressCorps*. The brass made sure to capitalize on it, and they put her on a closely-watched tour of the city and redoubt. The majesty of the architecture, the aggression of Commissar Jimbo's propaganda, the sophistication and pride from the Caoivish Clan Chiefs - it was a grand introduction for a capital that had been temporary for years now.

Yet when I received that transmission through the teletype, I could tell the censors had gone in and edited it. No one goes for *that* long about the fine pressings of a Caoivish uniform. Still, I could tell even through the heavy editing she was genuinely impressed by the innumerable defensive emplacements hidden among not one, but the two layers of mountain ranges guarding the city. Her writing especially came through when she interviewed the sentries from one of those mountain encampments, and readers made sure to highlight those pages as their favorite when they'd send me their letters.

It got a little easier for me to sleep each time her transmission came through. Sometimes I wouldn't even care if the censors laid it thick. As long as she was alive and sending, I was relieved. She eventually managed to break off and embed herself with a frontline Division. Floating between the various Companies, her output rose dramatically and to great reception - her story on Warden engineers under fire from both sides in no man's land receiving particular acclaim. Everyone at the office figured if she could survive a tank shell going off five meters away, she could write an encyclopedia before her assignment ended. It became a running joke at the water cooler that Kathy might even start reporting from Colonial foxholes, she was that close to the action.

But I was still losing sleep. Subscribers to *PRESS* were rising, but I was still going through a great deal of my day just hoping. My one thread of confidence was how every war correspondent at all the publications I worked for, came back. Every single one returned with all their limbs and digits still attached. They also all retired early after each of their brushes with danger, but I didn't care if we were losing good reporters. They'd be out of danger and, more importantly for my conscience, out of my hands. That one thread of confidence, however weakly it was holding on, was how I got through those months with Kathy deployed.

I didn't expect for the Wardens to send an envoy when I got the letter. Her husband had gotten one too, which became apparent when I called him. I spent a good half hour coming up with some grandiose eulogy validating her life's work: the duty of a journalist, the incredible way she told a story through her writing, etc. But when he picked up the phone, the exchange lasted less than a minute, and it was mostly me guaranteeing him that her death bonus would come in as soon as possible. Before he could put down the receiver to end the call, I could hear Kathy's 13-year-old mumbling in the background. That's when I completely broke down. I think I smoked a whole pack just in that hour alone, each cigarette smoked less than the last. I had known she had a son, Ralph, but realizing that in a post-Kathy world put the blood squarely on my hands. Or at least, there would have been blood, if her remains hadn't been most likely cremated.

As word of her death floated around the office, various people came by to express their grief or share condolences. Mack could tell I was guilty and tried to tell me it wasn't my fault, but I knew exactly what I signed up for when I gave her the assignment. I think at one point everyone was expecting me to make a speech in the main office, but after that phone call I knew the words weren't coming out of me.

Mari tried to say a few words, but his attempt at emotional strength just turned into anger. Ken just stayed at his desk, quietly crunching the numbers, realizing his coworker was now among them.

I left the building at four in the morning, after going through all the cigarettes I kept hidden throughout my office.

Kathy Ernst was found dead in a snowy field southeast of The Latch, Callahan's Passage, clutching a box with her recording equipment. According to an officer's report, she had dropped it during a tactical retreat at approximately 22:00 local time, and she was dragged into a foxhole after trying to go back and get it. As both sides exchanged heavy gun fire aiming for nothing but the muzzle flashes illuminating the night horizon, she was last seen crawling out of her foxhole straight into no man's land. A soldier in another foxhole nearby tried yelling for her to stop, and even attempted to halt Warden fire in his sector, but he was overruled by everyone else's frayed nerves.

The next morning, concentrated Howitzer fire forced the Colonials back, allowing the Wardens to return to their original position. That's when medics found Kathy's body. According to medical documents, five 12.7mm rounds hit her in the back, and a small blood trail led to her corpse, indicating she was still trying to crawl back when she eventually curled up and died. The box she had been protecting was open, but otherwise perfectly intact. In it were her recording equipment and dozens of records containing over a hundred hours of soldier interviews.

While going through them, I noticed I could always hear her smile. Every log started off the same:

"This is Kathy Ernst for the *PressCorps*, with..."

But you could tell she had been talking to her subjects before hand. Another common thread was at least two or three instances of "you had mentioned before..." in every recording, each one referencing something prior to the interview's start. She had genuinely gotten to

know each soldier before they were comfortable with letting her hit the record button. After cross-examining casualty lists, we found out 112 out of the 129 troops interviewed were already dead. The remaining 17 were missing.

I like to hold the title of journalist as one of the highest standards possible for a person. Kathy was more than that. She was a humanitarian. For those 129 soldiers she captured on record, they will be the only chance for their families to hear their loved ones' voices again. For a few without families, those recordings may be the only record of their existence.

For everyone's sake, both here and gone, their stories must be told.

This is hers.