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Splat! One Less Mutant to Deal With

By HOWARD M. UNGER

IS that all you've got?!"

A soldier shouted taunts at the enemy while rapid fire from the nearby woods pelted the wooden tower he was ordered to protect. Another soldier called out for a team to assemble behind the two-story outpost. Crouching in a corner, a medic, no older than 15, shouted in a cracked voice that he was prepared to handle casualties.

The attack intensified. Now the genetically enhanced mutants were lobbing in artillery shells.

Suddenly, a rocket struck the garrison. Death had come in the form of a mini Nerf vortex football.

"We're dead!" shouted Davi Velasquez to his human comrades, most of whom were unaware of the rocket attack. "We're all dead!"

Now the group would have to sit out for 10 minutes.

War is hell.

Throughout a weekend this spring, scenes like this were repeated again and again. Figurative helicopters were downed, tanks destroyed and squadrons erased. Streams ran yellow with exploded paintballs.

Nearly 400 players took sides for Dark Angel, a 26-hour "scenario" paintball game based, in part, on the television show of the same name and set in a part of [Virginia](#) known more for Civil War battles than the war between the Transgenics and the Breeding Cult.

"Most people still want to play G.I. Joe," said Ronn Stern, an owner of SplatBrothers Paintball, which staged the event at its 92-acre park in Prince George, southeast of [Richmond](#).

But scenario paintball is a bit different. Unlike regular paintball, scenario games have themes — military battles, alien invasions, drug-cartel wars, struggles between species set in some dystopian vision of the future — and players do not win simply by shooting their opponents.

They must complete elaborate missions, as in Dark Angel, where the humans had to hold off mutant supersoldiers. At some games, which can run well past midnight, players are given "character cards" to aid in the storyline, while others choose specific roles defined by an unofficial rulebook, an online tome adopted by nearly 80 paintball parks.

Mr. Velasquez, a polymer chemist who goes by the nom de guerre Coyote and used to compete in standard paintball tournaments, said he almost quit paintball altogether until he attended a "Lord of the Rings"-inspired scenario game. Mr. Velasquez said he went to the game because he is a fan of J. R. R. Tolkien, and he thought he could sell off his paintball equipment. He came away a scenario fan.

“I found a completely different perspective of paintball,” he said, “one where all types of people can have an impact on the field and, because of that, where all players — young, old, skinny, fat — are accepted readily.”

Patrick McKinnon — he and his wife, Diane Howe, are producers of the Dark Angel battle — puts it another way: “It’s big boys and their toys, a real American thing.”

Mr. McKinnon, Ms. Howe and their chief referee, Bobby Goedecke, sat in an RV, which served as central command for the event. Mr. McKinnon was quick to defend what, at first glance, looked like hundreds of commandos readying for deployment.

“There are people who spend \$1,000 for a paintball gun,” Mr. McKinnon said. “Well, I’ve seen a set of [golf](#) clubs sell for \$7,000.”

As he spoke, Ms. Howe, whom he met at a scenario paintball game, radioed coded instructions to generals in the field.

“It’s a glorified game of tag,” he said.

“At 200 miles per hour,” Mr. Goedecke added.

THE scenario concept has been around almost as long as paintball, which sprang up in 1981 in [New Hampshire](#) when two friends found a new way to use a device primarily used to mark trees and cattle from long distances. More recently, scenario has grown as paintball gear producers have fed a demand for realism and high-end equipment.

In the late 1990s, games usually attracted about 50 players. Since then, the sport has exploded. The first Invasion of Normandy event held by Skirmish USA drew 1,700 players to its field in Jim Thorpe, Pa., in 2002. For this year’s Invasion of Normandy, next month, Skirmish USA is expecting close to 5,000 entrants.

According to the National Sporting Goods Association, from 2001 to 2006 paintball was the second-fastest growing sport in the country (after football), growing 44 percent to more than eight million participants. (The sport had a moment of adverse publicity in May, when it was reported that five of six men charged with plotting to attack Fort Dix in [New Jersey](#) had played paintball as part of their preparations.) Paintball equipment sales last year were \$340 million, according to the trade group.

“The sport is constantly evolving, and you’re seeing the market develop,” said Mr. McKinnon, who turned down a Ph.D candidacy in neuropsychology for a life of paintball entrepreneurship. Before staging science fiction-, history- and war-inspired events around the country like the Living Dead, Hellchild and Guardians of Grayskull, Mr. McKinnon owned a paintball field near [Houston](#).

Camouflage outfits of the top scenario teams are festooned, [Nascar](#)-style, with logos of equipment manufacturers, which have recently discovered the market for paint land mines or paintball guns resembling M-16’s. Sponsored teams are usually paid with free gear and are obligated to use only their sponsors’ paintball grenades and other products. In addition, makers of night-vision equipment and radio communication systems have found a new market for supplies intended for police and military personnel.

Not surprisingly, many scenario players have military backgrounds.

“I’ve learned more about taking fire while on the paintball field than I did in the Marine Corps,” said Mark White, a

casualty of the Nerf football attack in Virginia. “It’s much more fun and I get to wear my hair long.”

But a large number of white-collar professionals battle alongside their khaki-collared brethren. At Dark Angel, one “tank” — a converted golf maintenance cart painted black, decorated with skulls, blaring heavy metal [music](#) and dubbed Necromoncar — was manned by a network engineer, a systems programmer and a portfolio manager.

“All of this stuff is what I’ve seen on the job and I know what it does, so one day I started tinkering,” said the tank’s driver, Mike Cawthon, an industrial printer salesman, about the tank’s equipment.

With a computer and the help of a co-worker’s programming skills, as well as aluminum and PVC pipe from a Home Depot, Mr. Cawthon built the tank’s twin-missile firing system, which launches mini footballs up to 150 yards. In all, he estimated that he and his Dead by Dawn teammates spent more than \$8,000 on the creation, which makes it to about a half-dozen scenario games a year.

Outside the playing field, goggles came off and the atmosphere relaxed. Most teams set up camp in a grass field that was part Woodstock (without the drugs), part Nascar (without the beer) and part U.S.O. club (without Toby Keith). Players hung out by concession stands, watched videos of past games or wiped off paint and waited to be re-inserted into the game near an area one observer called the Green Zone.

Dressed in full camouflage, Bruno Vadala, a computer technician from northern New Jersey, said he discovered scenario paintball after he took his son to a birthday party at a local paintball field. Later, while giving a party for his son at the same field, Mr. Vadala said someone mentioned a local scenario game.

Four years later, Mr. Vadala and his son, now 14, are scenario regulars, and Mr. Vadala has even served as second in command for a “Vietnamese” team that beat the “Americans” at NJ Nam, an annual event at a Williamstown, N.J., airfield considered among the most realistic games around.

“The Americans were being dropped into the playing field by a real helicopter, there was smoke and dust everywhere, and I’m there with this guy who served in [Bosnia](#),” said Mr. Vadala, whose body is not exactly combat-ready. “We’re watching this, and he turns to me and says, ‘It looks just like the real thing.’”

He was talking about James Graham, who was also at the Virginia event and looked like he could still be in the Army.

“When you’re out there, you don’t worry about bills or your kids,” Mr. Graham said. “There’s an esprit de corps, and when you find friends in this sport, they’re your friends for a long time.”

Moments later, Mr. Graham and Mr. Vadala checked their equipment and prepared to re-enter the battlefield with several other colleagues as AC/DC played from loudspeakers overhead. In the distance, the popping of paintball guns and soldiers’ calls could be heard from the darkened woods, where the Transgenics lay in ambush.

Friendship would come in handy.

MORE PAINTBALL EVENTS

Most scenario paintball events start on a Saturday afternoon and run until well after midnight, although most players without night-vision equipment or industrial-strength flashlights opt out of night competition. Games restart on Sunday morning and usually end with a final battle in the early afternoon.

Event organizers generally use rules published by the scenario entrepreneur Patrick McKinnon and available online, at www.scenariopaintball.com.

The Invasion of Normandy, with close to 5,000 players, begins July 14 at Skirmish USA, in Jim Thorpe, Pa. (800-754-7647; www.skirmish.com).

On Aug. 11 and 12, Deadwood will be staged by Strategy Plus Paintball - Bear Swamp Road, [East Hampton](#), Conn. (www.strategyplus.com). The citizens of Deadwood will be split between those backing the saloon owner, Al Swearengen, against those aligned with his rival, Cy Tolliver.

D.E.A. vs. the Cartel II looks to be a popular late-summer event (205-672-2860; www.paintball-aaa.com). It will be held Sept. 1 and 2 at the [Alabama](#) Army National Guard's urban training facility in Anniston, [Ala.](#)

Dates, locations and Web sites for these and other games are at www.scenariocalendar.com.

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