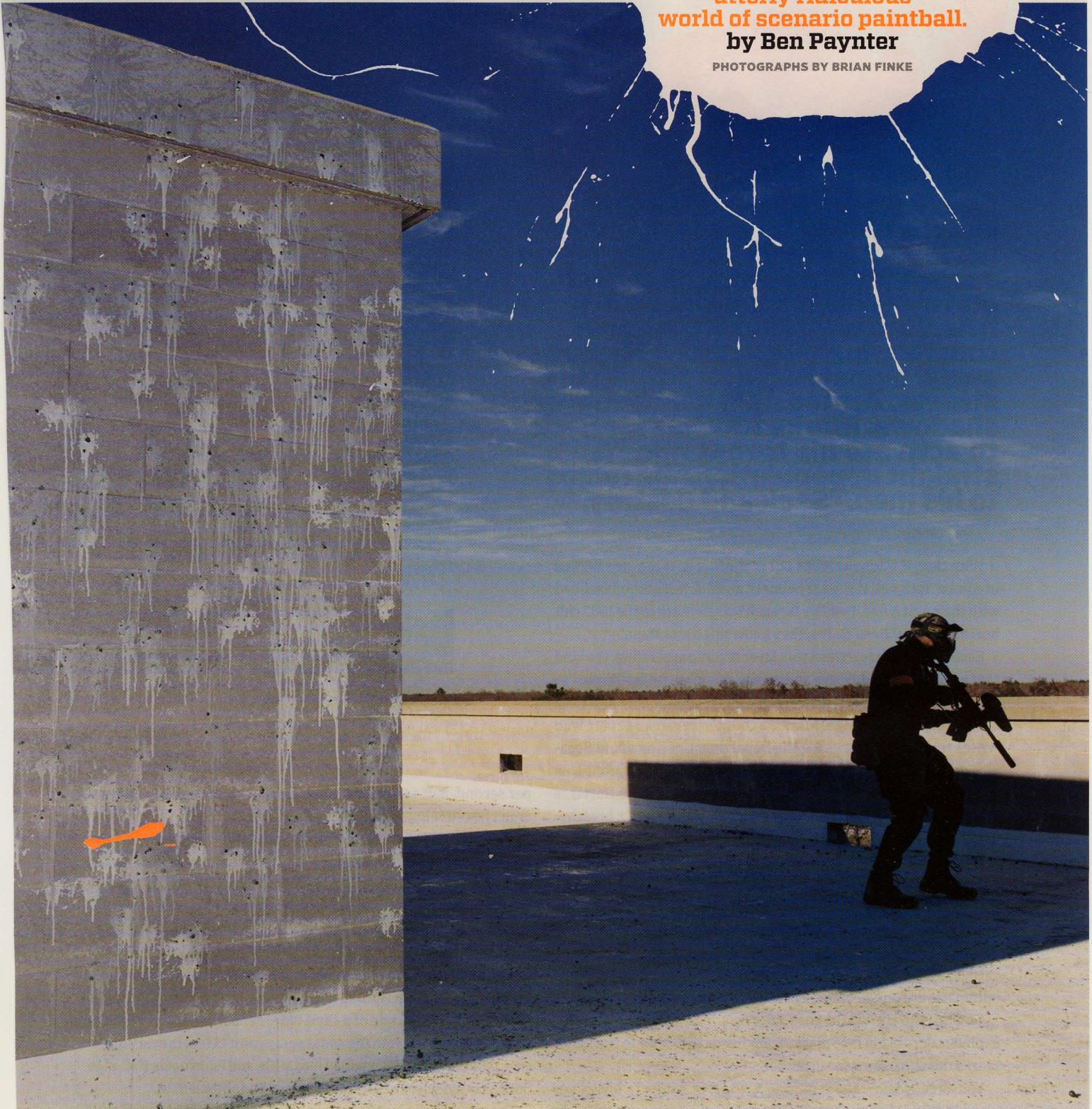


**SPLAT.  
YOU'RE  
DEAD.**

Inside the totally  
awesome, surprisingly scary,  
utterly ridiculous  
world of scenario paintball.


by Ben Paynter

PHOTOGRAPHS BY BRIAN FINKE



1980s and 1990s, when the sport was mostly a military training exercise. Today, it's a multi-billion-dollar industry with a growing number of professional players and teams. The sport has become a popular pastime for many people, and it's no longer just a military training exercise. It's a fun and exciting activity that can be enjoyed by anyone. The sport has become a popular pastime for many people, and it's no longer just a military training exercise. It's a fun and exciting activity that can be enjoyed by anyone.

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**Squad leader Michael Marks kneels, hidden by trees, surveying his target through the night-vision scope on his weapon, a paintball gun modded to look like an M4 rifle. He's watching a cluster of concrete buildings about 50 yards away. Signal flares sputter in the streets. Armed men dart between shadows. Marks touches his neck to activate his throat mic. "A straight depopulation," he radios to his men. "Seek and destroy."**

With that, the squad creeps out of the forest, three men decked in combat fatigues, riot-gear helmets, and flak jackets emblazoned with their unit name, Dead by Dawn. It's a reference to the 1987 cult horror flick *Evil Dead II*. Yes, they know this dates them.

Each soldier also carries a thin layer of natural padding, the kind that comes with middle age and a daily commute from suburbia to a desk job. They all have macho call signs they probably don't use around the office, though. Marks, a counterterrorism expert who writes training programs for the Department of Homeland Security, goes by Marksman. Ted Deeds, the COO of the nonprofit Law Enforcement Alliance of America, is Gunslinger. Mike Harris, a computer systems engineer wearing thick glasses and a breathe-easy nose strip, is Dr. Doom.

Staccato gunfire rips the air; Dead by Dawn charges into one of the buildings for cover. The guys flatten themselves against the interior wall as paintballs rain through a window, exploding in wet pops behind them. Deeds drops to the ground, rolls to the opening, and rises to flash short pulses from a retina-burning white-LED tactical flashlight. Marks and Harris unleash their own barrage of semi-automatic fire on the blinded hostiles, but they are outgunned.

*Thwap!* Harris' world goes gray as a lead-colored paintball explodes across his face mask. Then Deeds gets shot in the hand. Marks raises his arms in surrender.

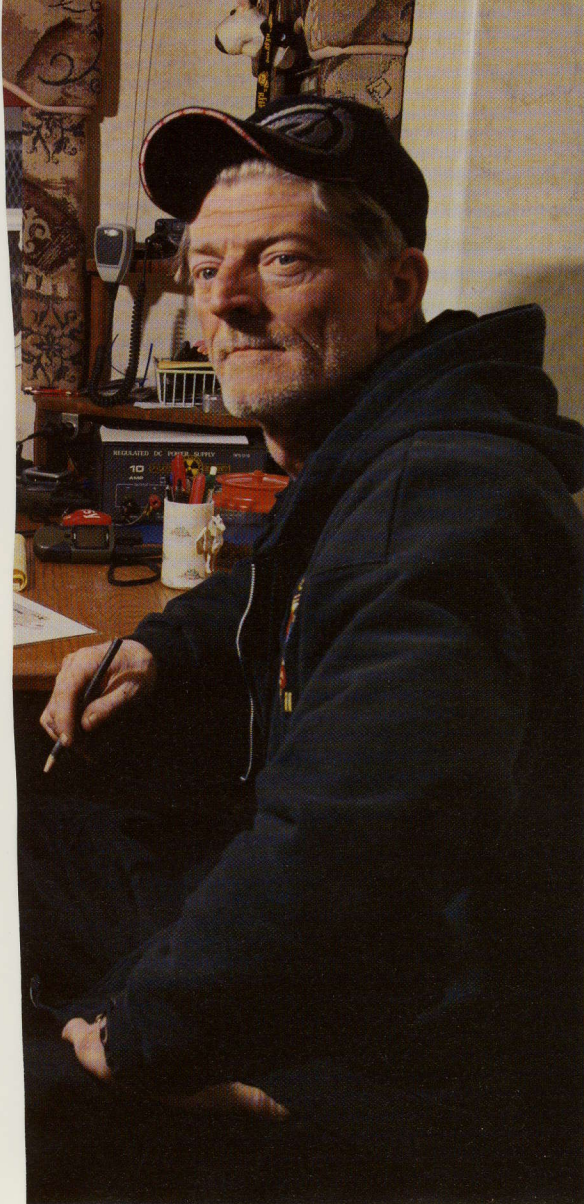
You already know about paintball, a sort of tactical game of tag played with nonlethal—but really quite painful—ammo. In the early 1980s, men stalked each other through the New Hampshire woods with single-shot, pump-action paint guns used by foresters to mark terrain. Now the game has gone professional. Modern guns have piezoelectric triggers and pneumatic muzzle velocities of 280 feet



per second, half as fast as a bullet from a .38 special. And players aren't just running around undeveloped land in the exurbs anymore: Cruise past ESPN2 at the right time—wee hours are good—and you might see the National Professional Paintball League play its version of the sport, a sort of special ops adaptation of soccer that confines the play to seven minutes and an arena just 180 by 100 feet.

Dead by Dawn is playing something called scenario paintball. In this latest splatter-sport spinoff, players go on 24-hour missions across battlefields drawn from Vietnam, Iraq, or *Halo*. A behind-the-scenes "producer" scripts all the action, assigning ranks and duties with the verisimilitude of a Civil War reenactment. The result is Rambo meets Boba Fett: Grenades spray paint 15 feet in every direction, paintball guns get modded into M16s, and homemade PVC-pipe bazookas launch Nerf rockets the length a football field.

These vicarious warfare experiences now attract huge numbers of fighters—1,200 of them came to the National Guard's Joint Training Center for Military Operations on Urban Terrain at Camp Blanding, Florida, on this cold Saturday night in mid-February. Scenario games have gotten so popular, in fact, that the same big companies



Diane Howe and Patrick McKinnon (above) use walkie-talkies to control the battlefield action from a trailer east of town. They give each team specific missions to accomplish, from gathering intelligence to launching assaults.

and smart engineers who professionalized tournament paintball are starting to pay attention to scenario players, too. Sports equipment manufacturers, private entrepreneurs, and tournament types are all vying to build weapons and tech for the most active members of the role-play crowd.

**D**iane Howe sits in the country-themed kitchen of her trailer, overseeing this weekend's game from the staging area to the east of town, like a minor god of war. Clad in a camouflage jumpsuit, she's chain-smoking Benson & Hedges menthol lights while reading a map of the battleground and radioing coded deployment orders to commanders. "Mike, Juliet-Nine, Paul, Quebec," she says—and on the field, that means something. Specifically, she has just directed an Alliance squad to take and hold the dilapidated row of buildings where, it turned out, Dead by Dawn was prowling.

Howe has been a paintballer for 20 years; she met her husband, Patrick McKinnon, while playing against him in 1996. They eventually decided the biggest problem with paintball was that it didn't

have a compelling narrative—the stakes of the game didn't match the level of ultraviolence most players seemed to bring to the field. From his ranch outside Houston, McKinnon posted a 24-page scenario rule book on the Web. In 1999, he and Howe launched Mackz Xtreme Sportz to produce giant, scripted battles; they said they wanted to make "blockbusters."

This weekend, the scenario is The Battle of Iron Forge, loosely based on the online role-playing universe of *World of Warcraft*. Howe has divided the field into two factions: the Horde, a malicious mob of goblins and orcs, and the Alliance, a benevolent band of elves and humans. Players get a character card with their name, role, and motivation. Dead By Dawn is assigned to the Horde. According to his card, Deeds, the firearm-friendly COO, is now Blood Point, an orc who has "sworn to do anything required to protect the Clan from enemies." "You are a huge, green-skinned Warrior, whose hide is resistant to just about any attack," the card reads. "You're red-eyed with fury and can't wait for the battle to begin." Deeds is cool with being an orc as long as he still gets his assault rifle. But he won't dress up. The few guys who go all comic-con and don ghoulish cos-

tumes just turn themselves into easy targets, he says.

Howe and McKinnon set up their games like a movie crew on location. They choose big, empty locations and truck in props, sets, and pyro—lots of pyro. A typical MXS production features flares, smoke bombs, and noise-making bird bangers, all detonating in a kind of orchestral cacophony. Howe loosely scripts a plot, then stays up all night directing it over walkie-talkie, calling out missions to opposing field commanders every 20 minutes. Field referees report in regularly, and Howe adds plot twists per their intel. McKinnon claims, perhaps hyperbolically, that his productions have actually induced flashbacks in Vietnam vets.

To win, a team—Alliance or Horde—has to score the most points, which accrue with the completion of specific missions like assaults, patrols, or photo recons with digital cameras. Or players can go questing, trying to retrieve objects with meaning in the game (like the War Axe of the Tiger, hidden in a building called Maeva's Mystic Apparel). Though every game has a high-scoring MVP, individuals can't win on their own. As in real war, they are just cogs in the machine. Some become demolition experts, empowered to fire Nerf rockets that "destroy" buildings and "kill" everyone inside. Others—designated engineers—repair Nerfed buildings by touching them; players called griffins give characters safe transit across the battlefield (because, you know, griffins can fly).

Or you can just open fire. Get hit with a paintball and you're out; you can reinsert 20 minutes later.

It all runs pretty much according to Howe's whims. Back in the trailer, she runs her hands over her maps and codebooks and lights another Benson & Hedges. "You tell me where you want it to happen," she says, "and I can make a fight."

**O**n Sunday morning, 19 hours into the game, the members of Dead by Dawn rally. Having "died" and reinserted several times (and taken a four-hour sleep break), they roll out the Necronomicar, a tank built from an 11-horsepower Jacobson turf hauler

and parts from Home Depot. It has a welded steel frame with windows screened in netting to provide 360-degree visibility and to slough off incoming paintballs. It's festooned with novelty maces, swords, and zombie heads attached like macabre hood ornaments. Atop the gunner's hatch is a turret boasting two clip-fed, electro-pneumatic PVC barrels capable of firing 30 Nerf rockets per minute. The guys on the team pooled their money, about \$7,000, to build the car.

Sensible transportation was worth the money, especially given their middle-aged aches and pains. There are 22 men on Dead by Dawn, and few of them are as spry on the battlefield as they used to be. "Listen, we know our age. We're not the fastest. We're not the best shooters. We're not a lot of things," Marks says. "So you sit there and you say, 'Let's play smart.'"

When the tank sputters into the city, the sun has barely risen and the temperature is just above freezing. There's a Diet Coke in the cup holder. The men have traded flak jackets for sweatshirts. Someone cues up an MP3 player hooked into the 1,000-watt waterproof boat stereo and cranks their war anthem: Rob Zombie's *Dragula*. The enemy Alliance troopers open window shutters like saloon doors and rain fire on them, steam rising from their muzzles in the cold morning air. Most of their shots bounce right off the Necronomicar's hull.

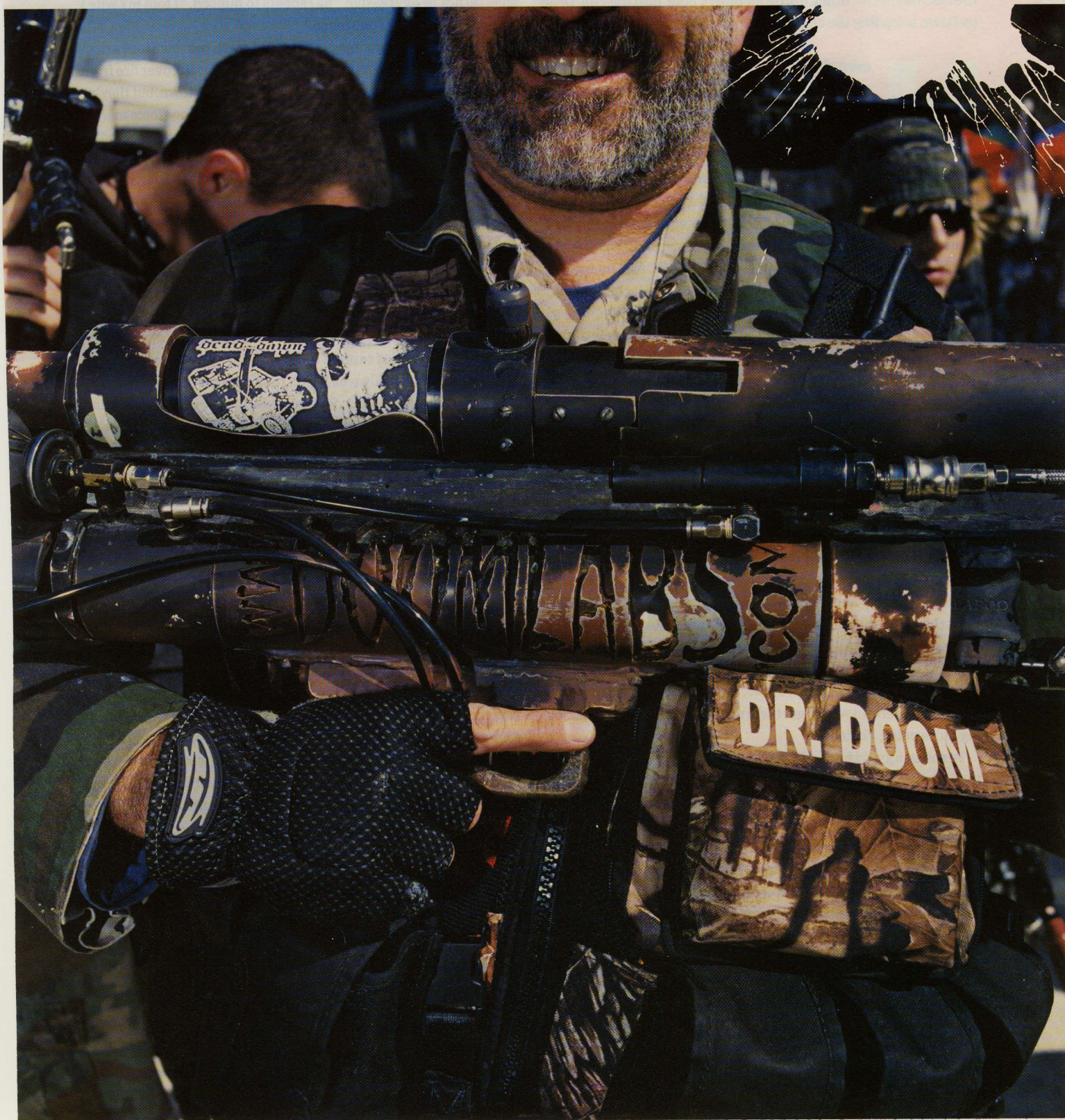
Marks grasps the wide motorcycle grips on the turret cannon and lines up his sight—a vertical tab notched with marks for 50, 75, and 150 yards—with a screw set farther down the barrel. Then he starts blasting, launching Nerfs into each hideout to disqualify the players inside. Mike "Emeril" Cawthon, an industrial-printer salesman who, at age 35, is one of the youngest guys on the Dead by Dawn team, pokes his gun through the netting and casually picks off soldiers like he's in a shooting gallery. Marks fires another 10 rounds to take out two other tanks swiveling toward them 100 yards uprange.

Then Marks gets overeager. Rather than alternating fire from each barrel to allow the cannon to recharge, he double-presses one trigger. The air tank is nearly empty. The shot poofs lamely and drops to the ground. Premature evacuation.

A National Guard training center (below left) provides the setting for the Battle of Iron Forge—mask required, orc getup optional. Originally a turf hauler, the Necronomicar (right) was tricked out by Mike Harris (facing page) and the other team members.



The guys all have macho call signs—  
**Dr. Doom, Marksman, Gunslinger—**  
they probably don't use around the office.



"I just couldn't recover quickly enough. I limped it," Marks shouts over the din.

"Don't worry, I won't tell your wife," Cawthon chuckles. Behind the Necronomicar, other Horde members pour into the city. Dead by Dawn is leading the charge.

**H**owe designed her battle royale with profit in mind. Paintball field owners and game producers don't make their money on admission fees; they make it on accessories. At Camp Blanding, companies set up at booths near the staging area are hawking all kinds of spiffy gear. Ben Tippmann, scion of the dominant paintball gunmaker, will sell you a \$110 kit to mod your gun into an AK-47 replica. Austin, Texas-based nanotech firm Nanohmics is focus-grouping a nonlethal flash-bang grenade with LEDs and a siren that it designed with a Defense Department grant. And Duane Bell, inventor of scented paint grenades (watermelon, mint chip, and root beer), is letting Marks field-test his new H8 Tactical Rifle.

But as any arms dealer will tell you, the real money is in ammo. Cases of paintballs containing 2,000 rounds each were \$75 at the door (\$60 in advance), and Howe won't reveal her markup. She gets them wholesale, and this weekend she sold about 2,000 cases, literally a semitrailer full. That's 4 million shots. Orchestrating 24 hours of on-demand firefights means a lot of shooting, which means more money. At an MXS event, the last man standing will probably be the guy who shelled out the most for paint.

Then there's the overhead. For *Iron Forge*, Howe cut a deal with the National Guard to use its base—she won't say how much it cost, or how much she spent to rent the portapotties, air-filling stations, and dumpster. Each player paid at least \$45 for an advance ticket, with the price going up as game day drew closer. It was \$75 at the gate.

"Is this a lucrative business? Absolutely not," Howe says. The last thing she wants is to sound like a profiteer. But she has no problem ramping up the carnage to boost the bottom line. "I try to get players in as many firefights as possible," she says. "They want targets to shoot. If there's a way to get them to a place where they're shooting more paint, I'll do it."

To ensure a grand finale, she dispatches a set of identical commands to multiple team leaders, ordering soldiers to converge at three points around the battlefield and hold their positions at all costs.

That's when Dead by Dawn gets word that for the final battle, tanks must be pulled from the field. Losing the Necronomicar will put them at a serious disadvantage. Plus, Howe has eliminated the 20-minute insertion delay. Players who are killed can simply check in at a launch point and then resume fighting immediately. Lots of Marks' team members simply opt out. The guys are exhausted.

At their base camp on the sidelines, most of the team has collapsed into folding chairs beneath a canopy tent filled with picnic goodies. But Cawthon wants to make a stand. He watches exhaustion crease his teammates' sweaty faces and decides not to offer a rousing speech. He just stands up, says he's going back out, and asks for ammo donations.

A few people trade this-guy-is-nuts glances. But team tradition kicks in and they pass around a big cardboard box, dumping in the

few paintballs they have left. It slowly fills with pearl-gray ammunition. A few friends carry it to the field.

For all that, Cawthon is still a little conflicted. "Do not be aggressive. Do not be aggressive," he repeats to himself. "I told my wife I would come home in one piece."

From Cawthon's vantage point in the forest, the town looks riotous. Fighters crisscross the main road. Snipers rain cover fire from the rooftops. The Alliance is charging the center of town, but they've also managed to pull off a flanking move, sending a huge force marching down a side street and across a small field lined by squat buildings. A few Horde stragglers give chase, but they're quickly forced back against a bunker under a shower of paint.

Cawthon dashes across the main drag toward the pinned soldiers, outrunning a few shots at his heels. Stripped of his usual toys, he clutches only a basic AKA Excalibur. Somehow, he makes it to the Horde hideout unscathed. The stragglers turn out to be a bunch of teenagers. Then he takes a peek around a corner and sees the real problem: a line of about a hundred Alliance troops advancing down the fairway. Like real war, paintball games are always populated with plenty of cannon fodder; this is the kind of situation where Cawthon usually would pull rank and direct one of the spry 16-year-olds to go get 'em. But Cawthon looks at the kids around him and sees fear in their eyes. They're green. They need a leader, a veteran, someone brave enough to rally a charge.

Cawthon breathes heavily. Beneath his fatigues he wears a brace to protect his left knee, which he sprained playing paintball a few years ago. He rotates his left shoulder, grimacing—it gets stiff in the cold ever since he dislocated it in a game last year when he fell and planted his elbow in the dirt.

A sort of clarity comes into his eyes. "I drove 800 miles to play paintball," he says. "If nobody shoots me, I'll be pretty upset."

Cawthon breaks cover and runs past the kids around him, slanting across open turf toward a far-off tree line. He waves an arm for the boys to follow. But they don't. They gawk, rooted in place.

The hostiles see him; his chest glows with pinpoints of light from laser sights. The volley sounds like popcorn crescendoing in a microwave. Paintballs zip past just ahead of him, perhaps where someone faster might already be. Cawthon ducks, swivels, and returns fire. It's pointless. The air is swarming with ammo, coming so thick and from so many angles that rounds are actually slamming together in midair and exploding.

He feels a sting in his gut and reaches to cover it. Another shot pelts him square in the chest. A few more ping against his legs and mask, rocking him back on his heels.

Cawthon stops running. He slumps and raises his hand. He's out.

Dejected, Cawthon drags himself back to the launch point, wiping paint off his clothes and trying to avoid collateral hits. The sun rises in the sky. His knee hurts. But he catches his breath, checks in, and is suddenly reborn. He rubs paint off his goggles and heads back toward the Alliance line. That's where the fun is.

**BEN PAYNTER** (paynter.ben@gmail.com) wrote about meteorites in issue 15.01. For additional images from the *Battle of Iron Forge*, visit [wired.com/extras](http://wired.com/extras).