



Photo by Phil Audibert

Two attackers cautiously cross the bridge in the Operation Market Garden scenario, inspired by the movie, "A Bridge Too Far."



Photo by Susie Audibert

Communicate, maneuver and fire: it's all about teamwork. Attackers leapfrog toward their objective, alternately providing cover fire and advancing.



Photo by Phil Audibert

Dewayne Young takes cover behind the guard house at the entrance to the bridge he is defending. Note the hopper of paintballs mounted on top of his gun.



"I got one at 11 o'clock and one at 2 o'clock," shouts Dewayne Young from his position behind a guard house across the bridge. His brother in arms, Geoff Ward lays down a murderous cover fire as Young, all muscles and tats, reloads. Ward, with his chest-length blond hair and beard peeks cautiously out from behind a log pile just in time to take a direct hit to the head. **Bang! You're dead!**

Here in Orange County it is not quite that complicated. But for \$60 (which rents you a high-quality Tippman A-5 gun, unlimited compressed air and 1,000 rounds of paint) you can have a lot of fun. "You play all day long or you play until you get tired," says Gunny, smiling knowingly. Usually "until you get tired" comes first.

Here's how it works: Participants are divided into two teams: one attacks, one defends. Teams are identified by different colored flagging tape. Referees wear orange, and are scattered throughout the playing field. At the two-minute warning, everyone dons his protective mask. At 30 seconds to go, the barrel covers come off and everyone can test fire his weapon. Then it's 5-4-3-2-1 Go! The clock starts counting down 20-25 minutes, and the paintballers go at it. They scurry from cover to cover, even crawl on their bellies while trading volleys of marble-sized paint balls.

Every now and then the Chief Ref announces how much time is left. If the flag is successfully captured, the game ends right there. If the flag is not captured and time runs out, everyone breaks for 12 minutes to rest, get a drink of water, load up on ammunition and refill their compressed air tanks. Then they switch roles; the aggressors become the defenders and vice-versa. And they go at it for another 20 to 25 minutes.

During the battle, if you are hit, you must put the barrel cover on the gun, raise your hand and a referee will escort you to what's called a "spawn" area. There, another referee makes sure you stay for anywhere between two and four minutes, at which point you may rejoin the game...risen from the dead, as it were.

This is where WarPlay Paintball is different from some other fields; you can come back to fight another day. "The kids like it because they don't sit out," explains Tor, adding "it cuts down on cheating." It also allows for "wave after wave of opponents." So, depending on the pre-set wait time in the spawn area, the battle can change momentum.

The success (or failure) of a paintball game depends on its referees. The WarPlay crew is made up exclusively of local kids. "Tor and I make sure they're really paying attention to that game... they're helping to make

sure the game is run effectively, efficiently, making sure that it's fairly run and making sure people are having a good time. A lot of time people get really upset when they think somebody is cheating. Tempers flare and then it's hard to break that down. If the refs are on top of it, the players are cooler about it." Combatants will often ask the refs for a "paint check" on themselves or on someone they think they hit.

"Fire, maneuver, flank!" responds Tor unhesitatingly when asked how to be a successful paintballer. "Who

ever moves and shoots best, wins." And there is a lesson to be learned here. It's called teamwork. Gunny elaborates. "Leapfrogging; you basically have a maneuver element and a base of fire. The base of fire provides suppressive fire, cover, keeps their (the enemy's) heads down. As they keep their heads down, the other element is moving. They move into a position in front of them, now they become that base of fire and they suppress. And as they're suppressing, this element moves."

Just like on a real battlefield. "Fire and maneuver is the same whether you're getting shot at for real or you're shooting paintball. Here you don't get shot for real; it's neat from that perspective. You can practice without having to get injured, and it also teaches you a lot about human nature. I like that part of it," continues Gunny. "If you shoot at somebody in a certain way or you do a certain thing, you see how they react to it and if they're not conditioned correctly, their reactions are almost predictable and you use it to your advantage."

It's interesting to note that 150 VMI Cadets, active duty servicemen and even some spooks from that intel facility in Charlottesville have come to experience WarPlay Paintball. "It's a really good training tool," says Gunny. And Tor has noticed that even beginners and impatient kids learn something. "By the end of the day, they're developing teamwork."

Up at the storage shed that serves as an office, a group of orange-shirted referees, several of whom are girls, are hanging out during a break in the action. They work for WarPlay Paintball and receive a discount on paint and equipment rental. Head referee, Rhonda Mann is pretty much a military lifer: National Guard, Volunteer Reserves, a former M.P., and a veteran of the Desert Storm among other things. Needless to say, she doesn't take much nonsense from anybody.

She recalls a conversation she heard amongst these teenagers during their break, a conversation about the American flag. "They were discussing how to handle the flag," she says proudly. "I never hear kids talking about that. These kids were passing it on to each other."

Hmmm. There might be more to this paintball thing than just "the primal instinct of killing other humans."



Photo by Susie Audibert

"Incoming!" They even have artillery at WarPlay Paintball. Here, Tor Strom and his Dad Jurgen send a paintball "shell" into the Khe Sanh compound.



Photos by Phil and Susie Audibert

Top photo, Geoff Ward takes cover behind sandbags and a bunker. Note how the impact of paintballs has ruptured some sandbags. Ward and his friends traveled 100 miles from Maryland to play at the Orange County field. During the week, Steve Guth is a mild-mannered lawyer and author in Old Town Alexandria. On weekends he is a paintball warrior. Here, he helps his stepson, Mookie Voss, adjust his protective mask.



That gives father and son team, Sean and Mike Heming of the 101st Airborne, the opportunity they're looking for. They leapfrog forward, alternately charging and providing cover. They trap Young in the guard house. As more and more German defenders fall, Mike ducks and dodges across the bridge, snatches the red flag, and sprints safely back to his lines. Game over!

On come the barrel covers and off come the face masks. "That was a great game," says the elder Heming wearily as he and his mortal enemy of just a few moments ago amiably chat and stroll back to the staging area. After a 12-minute rest, they'll be back at it again, this time in a Vietnam-era jungle scenario.

Welcome to the world of paintball, in this case, WarPlay Paintball. Located in an 18-acre patch of woods alongside Route 20 just west of the Mine Run Bridge, this is where you can live out your lifelong fantasy as a combat warrior, whether you're 14 or 40.

Take author and Old Town Alexandria-based lawyer Steve Guth. He's here to bond and unwind with his stepson. He describes paintball as a harmless exercise in "the primal instinct of killing other humans."

Maybe it's a guy thing, although there are several young ladies playing this game too. But, no matter how we try to suppress it, somewhere deep down in our Id, we have this need to hunt, to evade, to ambush, to attack, to defend, to capture, to fight. It's as basic as two dogs gleefully tussling in mock battle; as fundamental as playing cowboys and Indians. And for a brief moment, Steve Guth can come here to escape the complexities of torts and testimony, and experience an adrenaline rush on a truly basic and fundamental level.

"We try to simulate combat," says WarPlay Paintball co-owner and combat veteran Tor Strom. It's just that here you escape with a

painful bruise at the worst and none of the uglier consequences of mortal combat. "You get all the good stuff without the bad," he sums.

As paintball fields go, this is a good one. "They have a tremendous reputation," says Steve Guth who comes here just about every weekend. Random comments from players and posts on a web site called PaintReview.com also give the Orange County field high marks.

Tor's comrade in both arms and business, Ward "Gunny" Roberts, explains that there are basically two kinds of fields: woodsball and speedball. The latter is what you see on ESPN Extreme Sports; combatants play in close quarters in an enclosed space and hide behind inflatable obstacles. Woodsball is much more open, played on as much as 20-30 acres. Its drawback is, "You don't get the contact right away," points out Gunny.

So, what he and Tor did was create a hybrid. "We kind of made woods ball on a smaller field so that contact's faster. The kids really like it because it's kind of like speedball; they're throwing a lot of paint; there are a lot of hits, there's a lot of action, but the woods ball guys like it because they're still snooping and moving around with objectives; they gotta take the bridge or they gotta move the flag."

Other good reasons to play here are the realistic scenarios. Tor and Gunny took two whole years thinning the underbrush and erecting structures. Currently they have four chillingly realistic battlefields:

Operation Market Garden- Based on the World War II battle in Europe that inspired the film "A Bridge Too Far," attackers must take a bridge from defenders.

Khe Sanh- Viet Cong ambush and try to prevent a relief column from rescuing their buddies who are trapped in a jungle fort and must fight out.

Air Force One- Terrorists shoot down and capture the President who must be rescued.



Photos by Susie and Phil Audibert  
**At left, paintballs are marble-sized gelatin capsules containing biodegradable, vegetable-based, water-soluble, non-toxic paint. But when they are propelled at 300 feet per second they pack a painful wallop. Above, with the help of suppressive fire from his father, Mike Heming steals the flag and runs back to his own lines. Game over! At right, the yellow badge of courage. Geoff Ward shows where he's been hit in the head. He must now retire to a "spawn" area, clean the paint off his mask, and wait two to four minutes before rejoining the action in the 25-minute game.**

King of the Hill- pretty much self explanatory.

"It took me years to plan this," says Tor as he conducts an impromptu tour. Part of his inspiration stemmed from video games he saw kids playing: "I kind of wanted to replicate what they play." The attention to detail is really quite extraordinary. Camouflage netting, sandbags, bunkers that really look like they're made out of concrete, even rusty barbed wire (it's actually made out of soft leather).

Many more scenarios are planned, limited only by Tor's and Gunny's boundless imaginations. They include a World War II-era secret rocket installation that must be destroyed, a D-Day beach assault complete with a landing craft and ramps and in the distant

future, an urban warfare facility named Stalingrad that could cost as much as \$100,000.

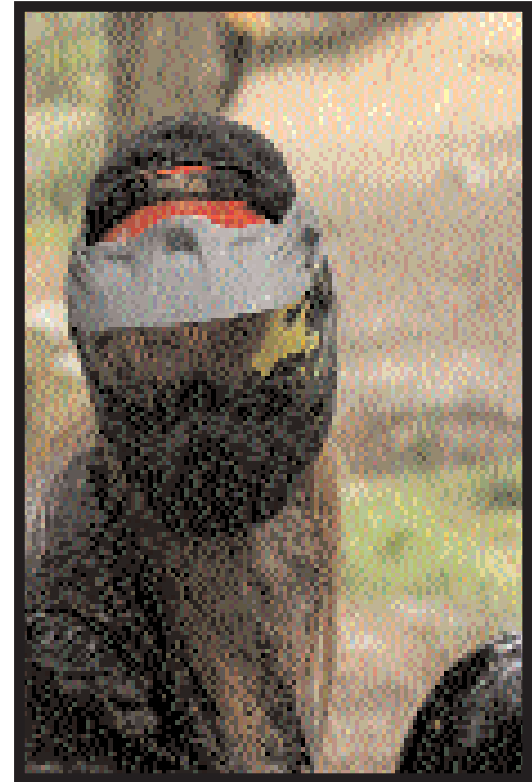
But for now, the action is hot and heavy at Khe Sanh, with as many as 70 participants exchanging fire. The scene is made all the better by machine guns, the occasional hand grenade that actually explodes with a bang ("It scares the hell out of them") and even artillery!

"Incoming," they yell as Tor's 80-year-old father, a WW II combat veteran from Norway, launches a paint filled balloon mortar attack. And it's all harmless, biodegradable, vegetable based, water soluble, non-toxic paint. "You can eat it," smiles Tor, "but it tastes terrible."

That doesn't mean it can't hurt you. Rhonda Mann, who lives just across Rt. 20 from the field is the head referee. She points to an ugly purple and yellow bruise on her calf where she was inadvertently hit. At just under 300 feet per second, the gelatin capsules pack a wallop before bursting as blossoms of brightly colored paint.

Which brings us to the all-important topic of safety. "These guys are all about safety," says Steve Guth. Coming from a lawyer, that's a significant statement! Before entering the field, all paint guns must be muzzled by a barrel cover, so if someone accidentally discharges a weapon, the ball goes nowhere. Also, WarPlay Paintball will lend torso and throat protectors to anyone who wants them. And prior to each game, paint guns are "chrono'd" on a radar device that measures muzzle velocity...no faster than 300 feet per second.

Most importantly, everyone must wear a mask that not only protects the eyes, but also the mouth and ears. "Getting hit in the face hurts," says Tor in a tone of voice that suggests it has happened to him. During the mandatory safety briefing prior to each game, he repeatedly emphasizes that the protective masks must stay on dur-



ing the entire game. Combatants nod somberly in understanding when he tells them that if an unprotected eye is hit, "it will turn white, and you'll lose your eyeball by lunchtime."

As it is, the only injuries suffered at WarPlay Paintball in its two years of operation have been two bee stings and one case of heat exhaustion. Then, of course, Gunny, twisted his ankle once. "Twenty years in the Marine Corps and I never hurt myself and I hit a patch of mud and I hyper-extended my knee...I was making a run for glory type of thing and I just stepped wrong and rolled my ankle."

Ah, boys will be boys, and Gunny and Tor are no exception. It's interesting to note that horsing around is how this extreme sport got its start. Loggers in the woods would use pistol-like paint "markers" to indicate which trees to cut or leave standing, "and a couple of guys, doing what they do, they started having fun, started shooting each other and it just kind of grew from there," says Gunny.

That was back around 1980. All they used for protection were ski goggles. Nowadays, just like everything, paintball has gone high-tech. "The pistols weren't fast enough, so they wanted rifles," explains Gunny. "And then they became higher rates of markers, shooting more fully automatic kind of thing." Today, rifles can cost as much as \$3,000 and can fire 26 rounds per second!

On any given Saturday and Sunday during the summer months, cars accumulate in the parking area along Route 20 by mid-morning.

"We came 100 miles here today," says Geoff Ward as he and his friends, dressed in head-to-toe camouflage, check their gear. It's like going to different ski resorts; paintballers like to sample new fields, and they're willing to travel to do it. There is even a week-long D-Day re-enactment in Oklahoma every year that draws 4,000 participants fighting on a "beach," with "tanks" fashioned out of go carts, and a strafing "airplane" mounted on top of a car!



Photo by Susie Audibert

**Tor Strom says future plans for WarPlay Paintball include scenarios based on D-Day, the German Vh-1 Rocket program, and the urban battlefield at Stalingrad. He met his close friend and future business partner, Gunny Roberts when they were in a Light Armored Vehicle together for five months in Kuwait.**

# BROTHERS IN ARMS

And so Marines, Tor Strom and Robert "Gunny" Ward, found themselves in an LAV-25, an eight-wheeled, light-armor reconnaissance vehicle in Kuwait. But it's Tor who's the gunner, not Gunny. Gunny's the Vehicle Commander.

Anyway, "it was an Oscar and Felix kind of thing," smiles Gunny. "He was the dirty one and I was the clean one. His side of the vehicle was dirty and my side was clean. Five months we spent in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait," he shudders.

At the time they were more worried about FROG missiles than each other's living habits. "You never knew if there was gas because at the time Saddam had weapons of mass destruction, stockpiled chemical weapons, and he had used them on some of his folks and the Iranians. A lot of times we

had to suit up and wait and hope nothing bad was in the shells."

Just prior to the five-day ground war in Desert Storm, they marked mine fields to make way for the invasion. The enemy was a scant 1,000 yards away and shots were exchanged. "We had contact with the enemy but nothing like Fallujah or anything like that," shrugs Gunny.

Still... this was the real thing, not paint. And at the time this odd couple had no idea they would start a business 20 years later where people could harmlessly shoot each other for fun. They formed a lasting friendship in the LAV 25, went on to play paintball when it was a fledgling sport in the early 1980s, and four years ago, applied for a permit to establish a field at Locust Grove.

This is when "Tor felt like Custer at Little Big Horn." Gunny is referring to the crowd of neighbors who showed up at the first public hearing. "With all things that are kind of unknown, a lot of people hear paintball and it's an extreme sport and they think it's a bunch of kids shooting at cars as they drive by," says Gunny. "It's not that. Just like any sport, there's a couple of bad apples that give you a bad name."

At the next public hearing, "we came more prepared. We

had answers to the concerns that the folks voiced at the first one. We were able to convince the board that we were legitimate." Restrictions included building a \$25,000 turn lane, and establishing netting to keep errant paintballs from reaching Rt. 20. It would still be another two years clearing underbrush and building structures before they would open.

Today WarPlay Paintball just keeps getting better and better. However, the partners are not quite ready to quit their day jobs just yet. Gunny is an engineering manager for Lockheed Martin. Tor is the history department chair at Oakton High School in the much vaunted Fairfax County public school system. They run the paintball park on weekends.

Their next project is to build a clubhouse. It will feature restrooms, a fireplace, vending machines, the rental shop, and maybe even a deck with a Plexiglass shield so parents and spectators can watch the action in relative comfort and safety. And they are hoping to buy an additional 25 contiguous acres so they can expand.

WarPlay Paintball is open Saturdays and Sundays throughout the summer from 9-3:30 (beginning of the last game of the day). The rest of the season it is open Saturdays only.



Photo by Phil Audibert

**Ward "Gunny" Roberts goes over the rules of the game. The 20-year Marine veteran saw combat action in Operation Desert Storm. He and business partner, Tor Strom established the local field four years ago.**