

'Enemies' stalk as the sounds of warfare echo over the East Sussex countryside

By Nicholas Farrell

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GUN-FIRE echoed over the countryside yesterday as two opposing armies tried to "exterminate" each other.

Dressed in dark green overalls, goggles and face-masks and brandishing .68 calibre pistols, the teams of Londoners stalked each other though the undergrowth.

But it was only a game—titled Air Pistol Combat. The guns, powered by CO₂ capsules, fire pink balls from 10-round clips. And no-one dies.

The company behind it all, California Commando, refuses even to regard it as a war game. It prefers "adult hide-and-seek."

Like that other American import, the film Rambo, air-pistol combat is catching on fast.

In their infancy

In America it has become so sophisticated that the "dead" are ferried back to base in helicopters, mortars lob large canisters of paint—and they even have pink-firing tanks.

But in Britain, war games are still in their infancy with only a handful of companies involved.

The game in East Sussex yesterday is one of a number of alternatives available to Britons with a taste for playing soldiers.

There are numerous survival courses run by former army officers where participants are taught how to skin rabbits and live rough.

Other activities include one which allows those taking part to fire real weapons such as magnums and Kalashnikovs at a firing range.



War games at Ashwood Farm near Crowborough in Sussex. The outing was organised by two brothers, Terry and Derek Barrett, from Highgate. "It's a bit like the OK Corral. It really gets the adrenalin going," said Terry, 28, a heating engineer.

Anxiety of hunted

California Commando's brochure sports a photograph on the cover of a glamorous blonde in combat gear brandishing the gun used in the game.

It informs potential clients: "You will experience the excitement of the hunter and the anxiety of the hunted."

The teams at yesterday's game, mainly in their 20s and 30s, included a heating engineer, an estate agent and an advertising executive. They were all friends or friends of friends.

Driven by ex-army troop carrier to base camp, a large marquee in a field near Crowborough, the teams were given an introductory talk on safety by the firm's director, Mr Ian Storey, 26, dressed in camouflage overalls.

All regarded it as more like reliving their childhood than anything sinister.

The game, which goes by the motto "Who Cares Who Wins," costs £20 per person per day.

No objection was raised by the Home Office as the guns are classed as non-lethal non-fire-arms and therefore do not require any licence.

Imported from America and costing £80 each, the company has had many requests to buy the guns.

But said Mr Storey: "We took the decision to refuse to sell them for obvious reasons. If you are not wearing the goggles and you're hit in the face, you could be blinded".

Then followed target practice where participants got the feel of the weapons by firing at a human dummy.

It was then time to play the game in earnest, the object being to capture the other side's flag. I joined the blue team.

As I crouched in the undergrowth with my goggles over my eyes, waiting for the enemy, my heart pumped furiously.

But my number was soon up. An enemy appeared from nowhere and one of the pink bullets struck me on the forearm, causing a nasty stinging sensation like being hit by a squash ball.

I then donned the red "dead man's vest."

The bullets are capable of blinding someone, hence the compulsory goggles. The guns have a range of 200 yards and are accurate up to 100 feet.

'Only a game'

Mr Storey insisted it was only a game and did nothing to encourage latent aggression in participants.

"I was watching an Alfred Hitchcock film the other night on the television. It was half an hour showing us how to get into someone's house and strangle them with a piece of wire. That's what should be controlled," he said.

"Television has a far more powerful influence than our game and, unlike a film, you can be John Wayne or Luke Skywalker for the day.

"You are not idealising someone else. You are out there doing it yourself.

Mr Storey founded California Commando last year with his brother, Keith, after taking part in a game in America where both were working at the time.

Childhood relived

They bought the 43 acres of former farmland, unused for 15 years, for £55,000 and spent £46,000 on equipment.

Only one of the 20 people taking part yesterday did shooting as a hobby—firing at clay pigeons with a shotgun.

Ghoulish offer

Swindon
EVENING ADVERTISER
Saturday, August 22, 1987

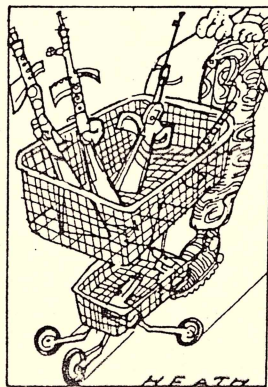
THE boss of Michael Ryan's gun club says he won't satisfy the macabre interest in memorabilia of the mass killer.

He refused to confirm or deny reports that an American had offered £100 for one of the shells fired by the crazed murderer. "We certainly wouldn't sell them. They may be needed in investigations by the police or coroner's office. We are not interested in catering for ghouls," said Andrew White, a partner in the Wiltshire Shooting Centre at Devizes.

The club has cartridges fired by Ryan at the range the day before he launched his rampage of death in Hungerford. Mr White added: "There are many genuine cartridge collectors throughout the world. If somebody found the cartridge that killed President Kennedy there would be a market for it."

HEATH'S VIEW

The Mail on Sunday
August 23, 1987



re-cycled paper

RYAN'S ARMOURY

The Mail on Sunday, August 23, 1987

POLICE yesterday revealed the full extent of gun maniac Michael Ryan's arsenal. His firearms licence listed a 9mm Beretta pistol, a .22 Bernadelli pistol, a .32 C.Z. pistol, a .30 Underwood carbine and a .762 Kalashnikov semi-automatic rifle.

Ryan also owned two or three shotguns.

On his killing rampage he carried the Underwood carbine, the Kalashnikov and the Beretta pistol. He shot himself with the Beretta. The C.Z. pistol was at a gunsmiths for repair but the Bernadelli pistol is missing. Police believe Ryan had sold it to a gun dealer. Police also revealed that they had found 80 bullet holes in 15 vehicles.