

THIS MAN IS NOT A SOLDIER.

But he plays one on the weekend.

While most of us wake up on Saturday ready to watch football or hit the mall ...

... he and hundreds of men and women like him slip on their camos, load up their fake weapons, and re-create battles they've seen on CNN.

By Chris O'Connell • Photographs by Alec Soth

Saturday morning. Eight a.m. Pacing in front of 150 soldiers during a pre-ops briefing, John Lu drives home the need to follow the rules of war, especially in the sorts of murky, dangerous combat situations his company is likely to encounter over the next two days.

"Don't kill an unarmed civilian. That's against the Geneva convention!" shouts Lu, a squat man with a Brillo-pad crew cut and head-to-toe desert fatigues. He pauses to see if his message is sinking in, then adds, "It's also a 10-point deduction!"

There's a look of disappointment on more than a few camo-painted faces. These men and women (and even some couples) haven't paid \$90 and traveled hundreds, if not thousands, of miles

to the former Joelton Air Force Station outside of Nashville this weekend just to abide by some treaty signed in Switzerland decades ago.

Welcome to the new world of weekend war reenactment, where the soldiers aren't just biology teachers and insurance salesmen dressed up like Stonewall Jackson and Ulysses S. Grant. Many of them are real, recently retired soldiers with experience in Iraq and Afghanistan. On any given weekend, hundreds of combatants like these in Tennessee do battle with \$2,000 military-spec Airsoft plastic-pellet guns—along with actual and improvised combat equipment, such as grenade launchers that shoot Nerf footballs.

John Lu has organized this two-day operation to commemorate the 18 U.S. soldiers who died during the battle for Mogadishu—on which the book and movie *Black Hawk Down* were based. The main attraction? The opportunity to work under or compete against retired colonel Danny McKnight, the army-ranger commander who led the ground convoy on that dark day, October 3, 1993.

While reenacting famous battles has long been

AT EASE Joshua Vance, 22, enjoys a noontime cease-fire and a laptop picnic—PB&J.





BAND OF BROTHERS Not all the shooting happens between armies in the field. Here, a player snaps a team photo.

popular with history buffs and hobbyists, in the past year real-time war coverage has spawned a new variation: Increasingly, these simulations are revisiting battle scenarios that have played out in Iraq. A weekend's schedule might include everything from freeing hostages to searching for WMDs to holding safe elections or gaining the confidence of local religious leaders by any means available, including bribery.

As the war overseas drags on, the events Stateside grow ever more popular. Three hundred people participated in a battle simulation held at

the Zussman Urban Combat Training Center at Fort Knox—the same site used to teach real special-forces soldiers how to fight in close quarters. The battle, staged with the help of the center's staff, bore an eerie similarity to the street fighting in Fallujah. Dozens of Zussman's personnel dressed up as Arabs; tanks and huge armored vehicles rumbled through the grounds. The flames from burning cars in the street were turned on and off by someone in a control tower, as if they were on a Hollywood set. The event had sold out in two hours, three months in advance.

The faux soldiers in Joelton seem to fall into two general groups: those with a desire to test themselves in combat situations and those out for a good time.

Charlie Robinson, 34, a Web manager from Memphis, calls Airsoft “paintball and water guns grown up.” He enjoys the role-playing and social aspects of the weekends, and even met his girlfriend at an event. Robinson takes a bit of teasing about his passion from his uncles who enjoy hunting, but “I always rub it in and say it’s not fun to shoot something that’s not shooting back.”

Brandi Mertens, 24, came to Joelton for her combat fix. “It gives you a lot better idea of why we’re having so many casualties in those [overseas]



THAT'LL LEAVE A MARK The pellets are plastic, but they sting.



R & R A player lays down his arms during a break.

environments,” she says. Back in Lincoln, Nebraska, Mertens is a full-time student who works a 40-hour week while raising her daughter. On the battlefield, she’s a sniper who packs a PSG1 scope-fitted rifle and an MP5 submachine gun. “I want to join the military, but being a single mom, I can’t.”

Perhaps the biggest difference between the Iraq-inspired combat and the Civil War reenactments is that the battle of Bull Run never changes. The Union forces attack; the Confederates counterattack; the Union Army flees; both armies drive off to Chili’s for hot wings.

“A lot of the fun of reenactments is the romance of warfare of a bygone era,” says Tony Horwitz,

AS SEEN ON TV The event at Joelton re-created several real-life battle scenarios, including daring hostage rescues.





GI JOELTON At the end of the weekend in Tennessee, players exchanged phone numbers and took home memories—as well as a few *Black Hawk Down* action figures.



the author of *Confederates in the Attic*, an acclaimed account of a year spent traveling to Civil War reenactments in the South. "It's less focused on the minutiae of combat than on the grand pageantry of premodern warfare."

The new war games are less military play-acting than they are unscripted, adrenaline-raising competitions that test your mental quickness and ability to stay cool under pressure. If these folks weren't ambushing their friends and munching on homemade MREs, they might be playing their Sunday game of pickup hoops or Texas Hold 'Em.

The fast-paced action is a hit with the Nintendo generation raised on Doom. Psychologist Dr. Frank Farley of Temple University, who has studied the psychology of heroes, modern warfare, and terrorism, says Airsoft simulations can be especially appealing to those who love the idea of combat, if not the prospect of making the ultimate sacrifice. "They want some of it, but they don't want all of it," he says.

During Sunday's three-hour *Black Hawk Down* finale, McKnight and his unit battle the Somali stand-ins. Things aren't going very well. McKnight, wearing protective goggles and a bush hat, with an M-16 slung around his back and two canteens hanging off his hips, tries

LUNCH OFFENSIVE Even a pretend army travels on its stomach. Hungry participants take time out from combat maneuvers to stage an orderly assault on a food vendor.

to put a good face on an impossible situation.

"Break down into small teams, and we'll get to you as quick as we can," he says. "Just do your own thing, and I'll see you get out."

As in Mogadishu, there's a helicopter, but this time its passengers are a camera crew videotaping the action for a promotional DVD. Weary fighters seek cover behind a wrecked Ford Aerostar. By this time, several players sport nasty welts on their faces from the plastic pellets.

McKnight's squadron ends up rescuing 8 of the 12 stranded soldiers they set out to save. The event winds down with a raffle in which the weekend soldiers have a chance to win air guns and commemorative *Black Hawk Down* action figures, and have their pictures taken with McKnight.

As the sun begins to set, the troops fall out and begin their long slog back home to California, Florida, Nebraska, Ohio, and the workweek ahead. Addresses are exchanged and a promise is made: to meet up and shoot at one another as soon as possible, at the next Airsoft weekend. ■