

# THE GAME OF: LIFE ON THE FRONT

by Chris Wattle  
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I could hear the enemy moving through the bush somewhere ahead of us. I signalled "Mad Dog" Hammond, my photographer and the best point man alive in the Eastern Theatre, but he'd heard it too. Narrowing my steely eyes with cruel determination, I huddled lower in the dense undergrowth to await my quarry. Mad Dog's face showed that he was thinking the same thing I was: let the Commie bastard make the first move. We professionals always think alike.

The cool barrel of my trusty pistol lay motionless against the line of my iron jaw, ready to strike another blow for democracy and the American Way. With silent cat-like movements I rechecked my cartridge and took off the safety. Now all we had to do was wait.

Suddenly he was in sight. Slinking like the pinko subversive that he was, our target crept out from behind a tree not twenty feet away from where we waited in ambush.

He turned his beady little eyes left, then right, seeming to stare right at me. I remained as motionless as a rock, though my trigger finger itched with anticipation. Any second now I'd have one more enemy of free enterprise to add to my tally.

His suspicious KGB-inspired mind satisfied, the enemy began to scurry across the open ground to my right, never suspecting the torrent of righteous death I was about to unleash. My pistol leapt into action with a life all its own. I lined up the swine in my sights, drooling at the thought of his socialist head exploding into a red mist.

"Die Commie pig-dog!" I screamed in triumph as I squeezed off my shot. For a split second he turned in disbelief, horror as my round sped toward its target.

SPLAT! My bullet had homed in on its mark, thanks to my expert marksmanship. The enemy sank slowly to the ground as a wet sticky substance began to spread from a point directly between his eyes.

Another agent of the Kremlin bites the dust, I thought with satisfaction. I felt no more remorse than if I had squashed a fly. He was just another enemy of the American Way. And besides, the paint I'd shot him with would wear off in a day or two. That's right. It wasn't Vietnam in the '60s, it wasn't Angola in the '70s, it was somewhere near Perth, Ontario on September 18, 1983 and Strike Force Charlatan was here to play the National Survival Game.

The National Survival Game was devised a few years ago in (where else?)

the United States by someone with a sense of fun even more warped than my own. The idea is to give jaded North American thrill-seekers the feel of combat without messy blood and bodies cluttering up the landscape.

There are four game sites in Ontario, and a few others across Canada. Through some advertising but mostly by word of mouth, the game's popularity has mushroomed in its two-year existence here. Games happened every day this summer in Perth, and we waited two weeks before getting our chance to don fatigues, grab our gear, and test our skills. Most of the men (there were three women), were in their late twenties, early thirties, and many have been here before.

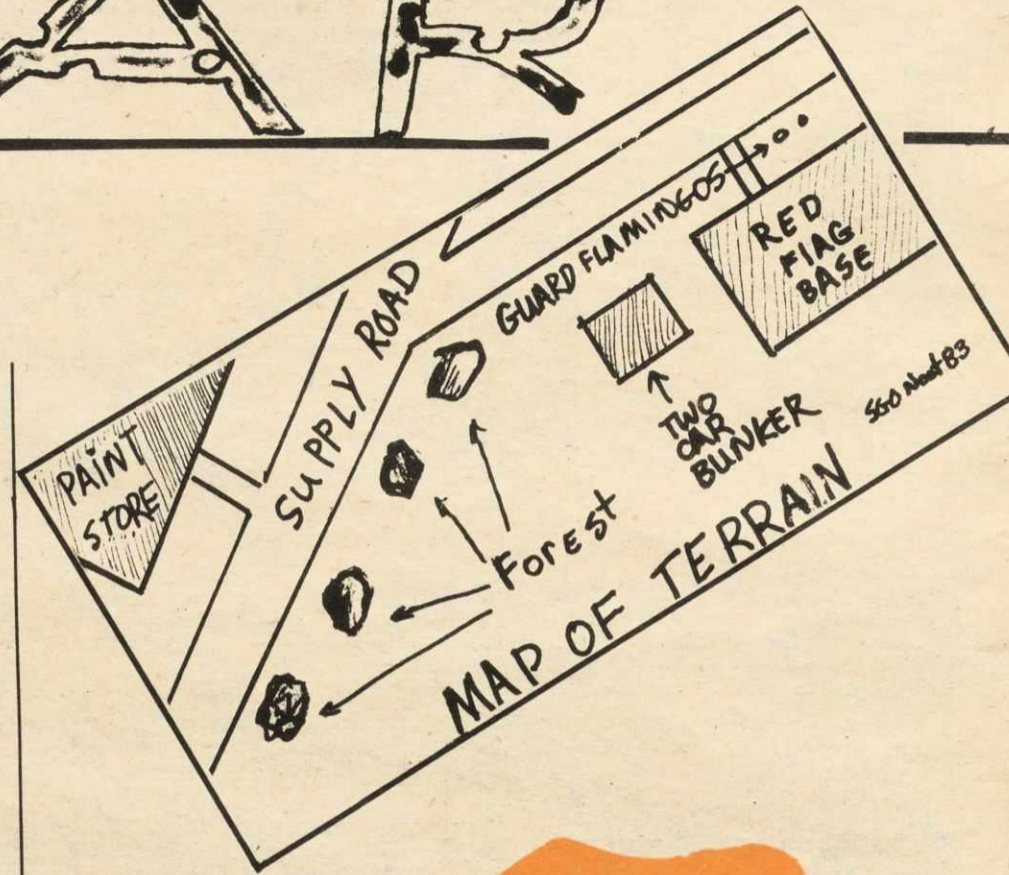
The game site is about one square mile of bush and swamp just outside Perth with boundaries marked off with bright orange tape. Each of the two 18-man teams has a flag set on opposite ends of the playing area, and the object of the game is to capture your opponents' flag and bring it back to your own flag area first.

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To achieve this goal each of the combatants is given a carbon dioxide pistol and 30 bullets full of paint. What makes the whole thing worthwhile is the prospect of nailing a member of the other team with a large dollop of paint. If you're hit by one of these little wonders you are "dead" and get to sit out the rest of the war in the comfort of your command post along with a commemorative welt on the spot where you were hit.

As I stood over my somewhat bedazzled victim, Mad Dog Hammond moved up to me with his usual cat-like swiftness. "Christ, Wattle, calm down," he muttered, uneasily scanning nearby trees for snipers. "It's only a game."

"Only a game?" I screamed, wiping the froth from my mouth. "Don't you realize what we're doing here? Don't you see the crucial point of this entire bizarre excursion?"



"Uh, have fun?" he asked, nervously backing away from the sight of a khaki-clad, war-painted, screaming and heavily armed reporter. Mad Dog was obviously losing his grip, something that happens to the best of us under combat conditions. How could I make his alcohol befuddled brain understand? This was no game, this was war.

Mad Dog and I had been drinking heavily since the beginning of the game, a medical necessity considering the warped atmosphere surrounding this entire venture. What had begun as an

innocent search for adventure on a boring Sunday afternoon had become something much more ominous.

"Look," I said, speaking as slowly and clearly as I possibly could. "If we wanted to get the feel of a war situation, we'd probably have to go to someplace nasty like El Salvador or Lebanon, right?"

We had been wandering around for half an hour now, ostensibly on a mad dash for the enemy's flag. Tactics in the Survival Game are rudimentary at best and most games tend to devolve into running firefights after about ten minutes

of maneuvering. Our team's agreed upon plan was to send most of our people on a frontal assault of the enemy's defences, leaving a small defence force at our flag, while an elite commando force snuck around behind them and stole their flag.

Mad Dog and I agreed to join the commando force largely because it offered the best opportunity to slip off and do what we were there to do. Blast away at anything that moved.

We had nailed four of the suckers between us and we were feeling very sharp.

At Mad Dog's nervous insistence we left the scene of our ambush in search of new prey. Racing silently through the forest, we listened for the telltale sounds of unwary enemies ripe to be pounced upon by seasoned veterans like ourselves. Already we had nailed four of the suckers between us and we were feeling very fine, very sharp.

Our first intimation of trouble was the terrifying pop of a pistol and the slap of a paint bullet against a tree six inches away from my head. We threw ourselves into a small hollow in a rather unelephant and panicked swan dive.

"Shit," I swore as enemy pistols sounded around us, "where the hell are they?" It sounded like about fifty angry Viet Cong out there zeroing in on our woefully shallow cubbyhole.

Mad Dog began swearing furiously as paint bullets whizzed over our heads. "If you'd stopped screaming 'Die Commie Pig-Dog' every time you hit someone, this wouldn't have happened," he snarled at me between expletives.

"Shut up," I replied, "I'm trying to think." Actually I was trying not to wet my genuine Israeli combat pants. It was impossible to tell where the buggers were shooting from or how many there were.

This was rapidly becoming an extremely unpleasant experience. Being the focus of attention for ten or twenty armed and vicious maniacs was a good excuse to go into a panic-stricken frenzy of terror.

"Hey," I said as casually as I could to Mad Dog, "why don't you stick up your head and try and see where they are?" This seemed like a good plan to me, but Mad Dog apparently didn't agree.

"Have you lost your alleged mind?" he asked.

"Listen, don't worry. I'll cover you," I replied, trying to sound sincere. I actually had no intention of exposing myself to the wrath of those lunatics out there, but why tell him that?

"Besides," I added, "you'll only have to show your eyes up there. They'll never hit a target that small." Fortunately the medicine had done an adequate job of twisting Mad Dog's already marginal brain, for after a few minutes of cajoling, he agreed to take a look.

The poor fool never knew what hit him. The next thing I heard was a loud "gish" and when I looked over at Mad Dog he had slipped back down into our foxhole with white paint covering most of his head.

This called for quick thinking. Faced with the prospect of staying in the foxhole with a very upset partner, dealing with the enemy outside seemed downright inviting. I scrambled out of cover and began sprinting in whatever direction looked promising.

I was hit almost immediately. Three high-velocity paint bullets struck my left leg, right armpit, and left hand respectively. They hurt. I hit the ground, covering my head with both arms and wailing "Komerad" as loudly and as often as I could. I had no desire to add any more welts to my collection.

The camouflaged enemy that bounded out of the undergrowth didn't look particularly dangerous, but there's no sense taking chances so I kept on whimpering pitifully. "Help (gasp) ... wounded (wheeze) ... Geneva Convention ..." I groaned.

"Pretty good shot, eh?" my assassin remarked smugly. He noticed my condition of total personality breakdown and asked what was wrong.

"I'm hit (gurgles) ... medic ... need medic ..."

"Hey, calm down man," he said with what passed for a placating grin, "it's only a game."

