Grant Gillette and Gary Ruizzo think that war is hell but that playing war can be a helluva lot of fun.

They should know. Together they run the Rhode Island version of the Northeast Survival Game. Their place of business is a plot of land near the reservoir in Smithfield. There, witnessed only by an occasional solitary fisherman or the half dozen rusting cars just outside the militarized zone, New Englanders of both sexes and all manner of brackets come to do battle.

The game, strictly for adults, is an updated combination of childhood capture the flag mixed with cowboys and Indians. Two teams of 25 players decked out in fatigues, with a few vintage war helmets, arm themselves with Splatblasters. Splatblasters are plastic guns that look like semi-automatic water pistols, but are instead equipped with CO2 cartridges that propel paint-filled pellets.

Members of the opposing team are eliminated by shooting them below the head (goggles are worn at all times). Upon impact, the pellet bursts, leaving a blood red mark signifying a "kill".

The wooded battlefield, cordoned off by rope, is split by a winding dirt path. Each team has a flag hanging on a tree in its territory. The capture of the opponent's flag is the ultimate goal.

The most common strategies are either a high-risk, high-casualty full-frontal assault, or the slow war of attrition (a series of small firefightes for high ground and defensible trees). The central trail aids mobility but is visible to snipers. Ledges of limestone become miniature Maginot Lines; other boulders are pillboxes.

Success is dependent on communication and teamwork. The winning side acts as a posse, encircling outnumbered victims and catching them in a crossfire of pellets.

Elimination comes in various forms. Premature use of limited ammunition or uncalculated bravado are quickly followed by the scarlet splotch and the unhappy march back to the POW camp. The laws of the Old West apply; a shaky trigger finger and a yellow belly separate the winners from the losers.

Despite the militaristic trappings, Gillette and Ruizzo, the Pete Rozelle and Peter Ueberoth of the operation, stress that the main objective is to have a good time.

It is not a paramilitary camp, schooling civilians to be soldiers of fortune in Latin America. It is not survivalist training nor preparation for post-apocalypse life. Although the game is played in all weather, often deliberately after a blizzard to replicate "deep snow" conditions, it is not designed to reenact famous battles. For that, go to Williamsburg or the town green during the Fourth of July.

Gillette, an audio engineer during the week, says "we deemphasize kill and reenactment. It's for people who like to be outdoors and get some exercise, and get out a little aggression. Maybe it's for those people who had a great time at summer camp and wish they didn't have to grow up."

At its best, it combines hiking with team sports. Ruizzo, a police officer by day, says it requires the stalking skill of a woodsman and the strategic prowess of a chess player. Their answering machine describes it as "the intellectual
The game itself originated about 5 years ago during an argument between a stock broker, Hayes Noel, and two countrymen from New Hampshire. They debated whether the qualities that allowed Noel to prosper on Wall Street were transferable to a backwoods battlefield. Noel lost the first contest, but the idea traveled faster than a speeding Splatball and today some 78,000 weekend warriors test their Darwinian instincts.

Further, the game has developed into more than a slightly esoteric hobby or an alternative to bowling as the business community has taken a special interest in it.

Nationally, corporations are increasingly renting out fields and sponsoring games for their employees. Gillette thinks that the trend has been shaped by several forces. As a stress reliever, the game rivals the Industrial Softball League and is more American than lunchtime calisthenics or boardroom yoga.

As a way to raise morale, improve company loyalty, and integrate new employees, the game has unique qualities. Ruizzo argues that "it's better than softball, because although that's a team sport, it includes a lot of individual heroics. Any successful sortie is dependent on team unity. Often you literally can't make a move without someone covering you. Even though it's only a game, you feel more responsibility than making a relay throw from the outfield."

On a deeper level, businesses may hope to instill values of teamwork, competition and victory, particularly given the dramatic backdrop and almost tribalistic undertones of defending one's colors in the wilderness.

The game itself, to this correspondent, was educational in the verities of war.

War is chaotic. On this day there were no pre-arranged teams but two loosely organized squads of friends and friends of friends. One man was from a video company sent out to discover if the game could be taped, edited, voiced over, a scoreboard superimposed in the left hand corner, and made into a half hour cassette.

The two teams, arm banded in orange and yellow, set out with little knowledge of the terrain, and tactics gleaned from Risk and Bonanza.

The first lesson is that the main action is hard to find. The champagne-like uncorking of the Splatblaster was everywhere, but combatants were few and far between; a decisive Pickett's Charge was nowhere to be seen.

At base camp after the first of four battles, the out-of-breath group more resembled a band of Contras. Gillette and Ruizzo handing out ammo from a small tent looked like disappointed CIA advisors. A contraband halfpint of Southern Comfort was spotted.

But, after a bit, we learned to march together, though hardly being mistaken for the Green Berets. This reporter, in the role of participant-observer, tried to lead a Blitzkrieg after declaring a Jihad on the enemy.

After the third match, my photographer had to leave. On his way out, one of his teammates, in true Grenadian fashion, shot him in the back because he looked too clean. The only good photojournalist is a dead one.
Beneath the good-natured surface of the game lies some subtle dangers, or rather it may generate attitudes contrary to the intent of the founders. For one, it is not war; once-shot players are "recycled" and return to action in half an hour. Quasi UN peacekeepers with walkie-talkies roam the woods looking for ungoggled eyes and blowing whistles when it's time to come in. To some, this could foster a belief that war is safe, immortal, and civil.

A Red Dawn-like view was expressed by one warrior who thought that "because America hasn't had a war on it's own turf up north in 200 years we are flaccid, and if the Russians come this might make us ready." Only one member of the group had ever seen real combat.

On the whole, most players kept within the spirit of the game, and zealous commandos were labeled "Rambos". After the Armistice, the teams shook hands like Pee Wee hockey players, and swapped Labbats and war stories.

This battle was a success, but to Gillette and Ruizzo the business of war is a bit shakier. They do not expect to get rich, but to break even or to make a small profit is necessary. Essentially, they are a dealership, given a territory by the national Survival Game Inc. They buy supplies and are insured through the parent organization. They charge players $10 an afternoon plus extra for additional ammunition.

One problem has been a rival group knicknamed by them as "the Renegades" who also hold battles but without a national affiliation. Survival Game Inc. is currently involved in a lawsuit over the rights to the term "Survival" and other aspects of the game which it feels have been illegally mimicked.

Gillette moans that his product is "exotic, unique, but unfortunately non-visible". The operation is largely dependent on word-of-mouth advertising. Gillette says that 95% of players return at least once, often bringing friends. Still, with full time jobs they are strapped for time to make the necessary contacts with large businesses.

Some nations have tried to hide their military activities. Gillette and Ruizzo could use the publicity that William Randolph Hearst gave the Spanish American War and maybe another catchy slogan, "Remember the Splatblaster".