



INTO THE BATTLEZONE

*The
making
of a
woman
warrior*

BY NIKKI MEREDITH

IT IS A DARK—VERY DARK—WAREHOUSE. Fog obscures what little visibility there is, and the sound of gunfire fills the air. A group of men clad in combat uniforms scatters, and one darts for cover behind an abandoned '78 Chevy. He is being shadowed. He ducks, his tail ducks; he runs, his tail runs; he crawls, his tail crawls. He is followed with such precision the scene looks choreographed.

Is this tandem maneuver designed to confuse the enemy? No, it's one woman's response to a terrifying situation. When in danger, hide behind a man.

I am playing a war game at Battlezone in San Pablo, a small town north of Berkeley, California. Battlezone is situated in a district of oil refineries and warehouses, not unlike the final shoot-out settings of old gangster movies. A taped phone message describes it as "16,000 square feet of alien atmosphere within a maze of walls, fog and strobes."

Battlezone is one of the nation's first indoor war games. The outdoor sport has been expanding for the past 10 years; there are an estimated 400 war-game sites across the nation. The game has been touted as ideal for women because quickness and agility are more important than strength. Nonetheless, only about 12 percent of the players are women.

The reasons for limited female participation seemed clear to me as soon as I pulled up to the entrance and wedged my car into a line of pickup trucks and jacked-up Ford Broncos. I walked in behind a guy

dressed in a SWAT uniform, complete with combat boots, and carrying a rifle case.

Inside, I was issued a camouflage vest, a foam pad to shield my chest, a helmet, protective goggles, two magazines of paintballs and an air gun powered by carbon dioxide. The guns shoot paint pellets that explode on impact—impact that can hurt a little and sometimes more than a little. As the evening wore on, players began acquiring welts that looked like the work of killer bees.

Warriors Fight It Out

I didn't know it beforehand, but the night I came—Saturday—attracts many hard-core players. It's the only night players are allowed to bring their own air guns. The ones issued at the desk look like toy pistols and fire one shot at a time. Saturday nights bring out an array of automatic and semiautomatic, high-velocity, infrared-sited weapons that cost anywhere from \$75 to \$1,000. Despite their nonlethal label, they looked like Uzis to me.

Signing a form that released Battlezone of all liability for my health and safety, I felt my heart rate accelerate. When I was asked to list my next of kin, I verged on my first panic attack. Thoughts of escape flitted through my mind, but my fear of humiliation appeared to be greater than my fear of, well, death.

My vital signs were steadied somewhat by the reassuring voice of Gary, our referee for the evening,

who explained the safety precautions—because the impact of paintballs can blind, goggles must be worn at all times—and the rules of the game. That night 30 warriors divided into two teams and played a version of Capture the Flag. The goal was to retrieve an illuminated key from the other team's territory. Anyone hit by a paintball during the pursuit was dead and had to leave the war zone until the next round.

Some of the guys on my team already knew each other: Four worked together at a car agency, two worked at a supermarket, one was a soft-drink deliverer who discovered Battlezone when he came here to refill the Pepsi machine. There were two other women on my team, Esther and Casandra, also first-timers, and none on the other. Our team had a gentler look than the enemy did. We had glow-in-the-dark circles taped on our helmets, raggle-taggle uniforms and, for the most part, low-tech equipment. The enemy had bold X's on their helmets and Darth Vader masks. Several looked like police sharpshooters on their way to a hostage crisis. Two had headset walkie-talkies so they could communicate during battle.

Mercifully, I Was Shot

During the first round I glued myself to my protector until he got "killed," and then I quivered alone behind a barricade until someone, mercifully, shot me. As instructed, I raised my hands over my head yelling "I'm hit, I'm hit" and made for the door, hoping everyone remembered the rule that prohibited shooting a dead person.

I joined two other corpses in the observation booth, where we tried to make out some of the action on the darkened battlefield. One of them was married, so I asked him if his wife had ever played. "No, she thinks I'm crazy," he said. The other fellow, who wasn't married, said he had played against women who were very good shots, but he thought most women were too frightened to play.

Julie, who works at Battlezone, says that there are a few female regulars but usually when women come it's for a special event—like a staff party or a Saturday night date. A lot of these are coeds from the University of California, Berkeley, whom she calls muffies. "They come in asking, 'Oh, will I get dirty?'"

The fear of being hurt certainly ruled my thoughts and viscera during the first few rounds, but after I survived several episodes of being killed and my adrenaline output stabilized, a different fear surfaced. In round four I was assigned to guard the key. While I crouched in the dark waiting for the onslaught, I suddenly realized that "guarding" meant I was supposed to shoot anyone who tried to get it. I had yet to fire my gun. I imagined my victim reacting with a jerk or a yelp and felt sick at the thought.

I had never taken note of this reluctance to hurt people before—it doesn't come up in my day-to-day life—but it seemed closely related to my being a woman, wife, mother. I started thinking about the early pacifist line of the women's liberation movement: We wouldn't have wars if women ruled the world. The likes of Golda Meir, Indira Gandhi and Margaret Thatcher had convinced me otherwise. Now I was reconsidering. Perhaps women like that

are not representative of my gender's leadership style. Battlezone was all I'd seen of war but the male enthusiasm for it—versus mine—made me doubt that war was invented by women.

I didn't have much luck proving my women's-inhibition-against-hurting theory that night. Casandra seemed to have no qualms about shooting people. She unloaded all of her paintballs. The only problem was that many of them hit members of her own team, usually her boyfriend. And Esther didn't shoot anybody because she was afraid of retribution.

Pain Excites Men

At least some of the women who play paintball regularly would like to minimize the painful part of the game. According to *Action Pursuit Games* (a magazine about paintball), women regulars are generally not enthusiastic about the high-tech, higher-pain-provoking weapons that the men favor. But several of the male paintballers I talked to admitted that the "pain potential" was part of the excitement. Russell Maynard, editor of *Action Pursuit Games*, calls it the spice of the sport.

From the time they are little boys, males are exposed to aggressive sports that often involve hurting and being hurt. It's unknown how much of male aggression is innate and how much is learned, but the widespread acceptance of it is tied to the belief that war is natural, even inevitable. Proponents of paintball maintain that pseudo-combat situations siphon off aggressive energy and promote peace.

In Ernest Callenbach's fictional utopian society, *Ecotopia*, (Banyan Tree Books, 1975), war games are an integral part of society. Although they play with real weapons that result in a few fatalities each year, Ecotopians believe the ritualized games are essential to maintaining an otherwise peaceful society. To them, if man's inherent physical aggression is not channeled, real wars will result. In *Ecotopia*, although women have equal status in other areas, they never participate in war games.

Ecotopians may have had a point. Men may need opportunities to express aggression in controlled, ritualized settings, but activities that seem to diminish aggression in men may actually produce it in women. In one evening on the battlefield, I began to feel desensitized to violence.

To the extent that women are a moderating influence in a violence-prone world, maybe we should protect against the erosion of our nurturing, life-preserving impulses. Meanwhile, let's wear out our aggressive menfolk by establishing paintball playgrounds in every neighborhood.

As I went to turn in my unfired gun, I noticed Julie standing at the counter. I didn't want her to call me a muffie, so I went back into the war zone and played another round. Then I fired a few shots at the wall and gave the rest of my ammo to one of the men. Only later did I realize that in doing so I was perpetuating the war effort in the way women always have—by providing support to the men who wage it. [H]

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