Life in the line of fire

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Assault rifle in hand, J.R. Gonzalez takes aim in a military operation simulation at Hard Knocks.
Photo by Isaac Babcock — The Voice

By Courtney Gilmartin
The Voice

It's 9:25 p.m. as J.R. Gonzalez bursts through a black door and races across the dimly lit floor of an Oviedo warehouse in a running crouch with an M-16 in his hand. Shouts from behind identify enemy snipers only a few yards ahead. He picks up speed to cross into the shadows.

Special forces operations come naturally for Gonzalez, but this recent UCF grad has never taken orders in olive drab. Heart pounding, he kneels behind a wooden crate with his assault rifle's laser sight peeking just over the top. He squints his right eye and squeezes his right index finger. This is as close as he may ever come to real combat. He's not saving the world or fighting in a war; He's leading a mission at Hard Knocks, an indoor combat sports arena and gaming lounge.

Tucked behind a row of warehouses a mile north of UCF, the unassuming tan building hides another world inside.

Gamers simulate situations such as freeing hostages and diffusing bombs in Hard Knocks' two 15,000-square-foot combat arenas, where players take down their enemies by shooting infrared beams at their targets' vests and guns.

Helping to pump the adrenaline harder is the smoky war zone that reverberates with blood-curdling screams, rapid gunfire and alarms. Heightening the stress factor are grenades and anti-personnel mines scattered about the Coliseum that look all too real.

Although combat is intense and realistic, the fun of Hard Knocks is that the only bruises the touch-free combat will leave are on participants' egos.

Gonzalez, 25, already seems like a pro, though he's been to Hard Knocks only a handful of times. Players often take the simulations quite seriously, he said. Gonzalez has several friends in the military, and has seen gamers utilizing combat strategies such as fire team tactics and squaring the target.

"If you have military training it helps, but it's just free-for-all fun," Gonzalez said. "It's like paintball or anything else like that. You get into it."

Hard Knocks owners Joe and Dena Wheeler left their respective jobs as a consultant and schoolteacher to create Hard Knocks, which opened in 2007. They were inspired by action movies and video games, and wanted to turn them into a live, interactive business.

The Wheelers designed the facility, arenas and missions so that they would appeal to different audiences and age groups.

Joe said that birthday parties and summer camps were profitable no-brainers, but that in order to succeed as a business, they would have to market the business to different segments of the community.

"Coming from the corporate world, I knew that there's not a lot of edgy, instructional entertainment for team building," he said. "Even though companies are downsizing and having tough economic times, they're still looking to better engage their people."

Hard Knocks' corporate team building clients have included Hyatt hotels and Chili's restaurants. To set the corporate stage, the couple set up bookcases, cubicles and copy machines and even has office tunes playing in the background to set the mood.

Dena said that law enforcement, like police officers and military groups, were another easy customer bracket because those groups typically have smaller budgets and lack training areas within their own facilities.

Hard Knocks also hosts everything from youth group gatherings to bachelor parties, and offers promotions to students from local colleges and those who bring in good report cards.

UCF student Ashley Baldwin, 19, frequent Hard Knocks on Thursday nights, which is Ladies Night, for free, unlimited combat.

"There are different tasks you have to do every time, so it's never repetitive," said Anton of the 35 different 3- to 7-minute missions.

Hard Knocks
Hard Knocks, a combat simulation venue and gaming lounge, is located at 5707 Dot Com Court, Suite 1025 in Oviedo.
To learn more about Hard Knocks visit **www.indoorwar.com** or call 407-359-9091.