

A container of bullets and a couple of small American flags become a counter display at the G.I. Surplus in Wayne.

Buy military — surplus style

By Greg Kowalski
staff writer

The winds of war that stormed across the Kuwaiti desert have calmed. In their wake, tons of military ordinance, used and unused and mostly Iraqi, clutter the sands. Gearing up of the military war machine meant an accompanying growth of military gear.

Technically, it's called "materiel," and it represents the guns, tools, clothes and equipment it takes to keep the military functioning.

But even with the fierce rate the military was using equipment in the war against Iraq, from overhead and on the ground, it often orders more than it needs.

And what doesn't get used, gets sold. After World War II, a flood of Army, Navy surplus hit the market and gave birth to such stores as Silverstein's, in Detroit, which is legendary among many longtime "surplus" (surplus buyers).

Need a tank periscope? Silverstein's had it. How about some pontoons for a plane? See Silverstein's. Ditts for shell casings, ammo boxes and just about any other military item short of a 50-caliber machine gun (which were on display but not for sale).

Silverstein's is long gone. But if you still have a hankering for a 100-pound bomb, take heart. There are still plenty of surplus stores in the area that can supply you with more bombs than a late night TV film fest.

"THE DAYS OF" stores like Silverstein's are gone forever," said Jeff Goldsmith, owner of Joe's Army Navy Supply, 311 S. Main in Royal Oak.

After World War II there was so much surplus available that it could be bought by the boxcar at 5 cents on the dollar, Goldsmith said. Gradually, the World War II goods filtered through the market. Even Korean and Vietnam War-era goods are largely gone.

And with Pentagon belt-tightening and the skyrocketing costs of military hardware, it's unlikely a massive glut of surplus will ever occur again despite the current war. But that doesn't mean the surplus supply is in danger of drying up.

On the contrary, sales are booming, said Goldsmith. They took off like a Patriot missile on Jan. 16 when the United States attacked Iraq.

"Most of the goods we get now are foreign-made," Goldsmith said. "The majority of it comes from West Germany. Joe's carries surplus from armies around the world including Israel, Austria and even the Soviet Union."

Why army surplus?

Three reasons. First, patriotism. People are buying flags, pins and other items relating to Operation Desert Storm.

Second, fear. Some people worry that the country may be attacked by terrorists. They've sent sales of gas masks soaring.

THIRD, IT'S trendy. Remember, we are a culture that promotes shredded blue jeans as a fashion statement.

A camouflage shirt and military pants are stylish to many. These days, desert wear is in. The market is also especially strong for pins and patches.

Trench coats also sell well, adds Goldsmith. But there's been little call for bulletproof underwear (used by helicopter pilots) or flack jackets. (These weighty coats won't stop a bullet but will protect against shrapnel.)

However, most surplus shoppers are more interested in stitching than style. Hunters, campers and outdoors people especially like military surplus because it's well made.

"The Army may pay \$5,000 for a wrench, but it's a good wrench," said Goldsmith.

A lot of Goldsmith's customers are women — "They do the shopping for the family. I have things for everybody, and we try to give a lot of practicality for the dollar."

As the economy is sinking into the doldrums, that is becoming more important.

"In a recession, people put off traveling for a vacation. Instead, a lot go camping, so they come here for supplies," he said. "You get a lot of value and quality for your money with surplus."

AT SURPLUS CITY, 3766 W. 12 Mile Road in Berkeley, business is up. Way up, said Tammy Dubin,

wife of owner Jeff Dubin.

"Never in a million years did I think we would be this busy," she said.

Now a big seller there are Israeli gas masks. "Some people here are actually afraid that we may be attacked," said manager Brian Wais.

Others like the masks for their novelty. "And they're cheap," said Wais. They sell for \$14.95 here compared to about \$100 in Israel.

Gas masks, in fact, are the hottest selling items around.

"After the war began," Dubin said, "people were buying masks to send to Israel."

But now that the Israeli government has distributed masks to its residents, people are buying them for themselves. Sales have been so brisk that Dubin depleted her stock of 140 in two days.

Another trendy favorite is camouflage clothes worn by "paint ball" enthusiasts. Paint ball is a game in which participants stalk each other and try to shoot each other with harmless exploding pellets of paint.

Over at G.I. Surplus, 34932 Michigan Ave. in Wayne, the demand for surplus has blossomed, says owner Walter Littman.

THE BIG sellers are flags, pins and, of course, gas masks.

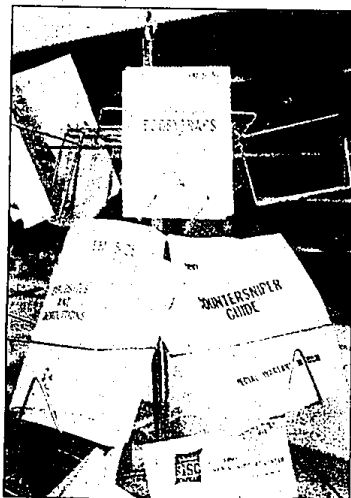
Even Littman feels that there is a bit of "hysteria" surrounding the fear of chemical warfare here.

He has seen parents coming in with their children to buy gas masks. "And they're scaring their kids," said Littman.

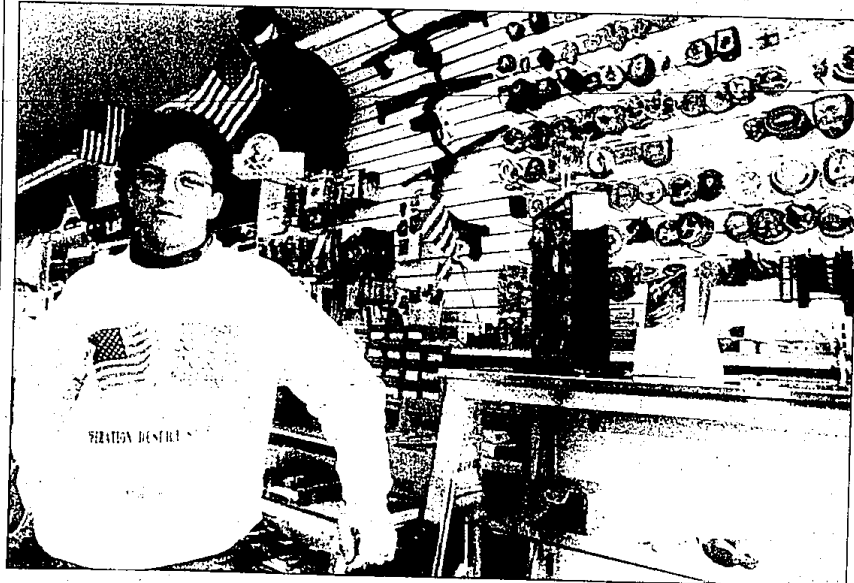
He added that war aside, military surplus clothes are "always in style." Hunters and campers make up the bulk of his regular customers.

"We get a lot of sophisticated hunters," Littman said. "They really know what they want." That includes clothes, sleeping bags, knapsacks and other typical outdoor accessories.

But if you still find a certain charm in a hand grenade, if an AK-47 assault rifle (that "cannot be made to fire") appeals to you, or if you want to steep yourself in a "Countersniper Guide," surplus stores can still deliver the goods.



Army manuals and bulletins of such things as boobytraps, explosives and demolition equipment are part of the surplus available at G.I. Surplus store in Wayne.



Jeff Goldsmith of Joe's Army Surplus in Royal Oak is surrounded by surplus military paraphernalia that have become hot selling items since the start of hostilities in the Persian Gulf.



Ronni Garbacz and Stacey Dechert check out the "camp" outfits — tank tops and bib-style shorts — for summer wear.



Among the authentic war surplus available are canteens with canvas covers and folding shovels used to dig fox holes.