

written by: Jeanne Beker

NATIONAL POST



Jeanne Beker joins Trevor Born and Mitchel Raphael, who, with his brother Avi, threw a party in Toronto recently where all the guests were asked to dress along a military theme.

Fighting fashion's last battle with the urban glam guerrillas

Fatigue is setting in on combat fashion, but it's not too late to wear your camouflage thong



JEANNE BEKER

Oh, yeah. The camouflage thong is definitely the way to go — very of-the-moment.

I was dishing out style advice to my teenage daughter, Becky, and her friend a few days ago at the trashy lingerie store we'd wandered into, on a mission to find a provocative gag gift for one of their school-mates. But it was strange to be promoting anything "camouflage."

Just last March, in Paris, I vehemently pooh-pooched the notion of combat fashion over dinner, telling a couple of Canadian retail buyers on the lookout for what would be hot come fall, that military dressing seemed so "last year" to me.

Sure, the cheap and cheerful shop windows in St. Germain were chock full of trendy takes on camouflage and fashionable fatigues, but I wasn't buying any of it: To me, it spoke of nothing more than a transient zeitgeist, an temporary obsession with the whole cool survivor notion we'd been seduced into subscribing to by all that reality TV. No, siree — this wasn't a trend worth investing in, I told them. By the summer, it would be on the wane.

Fast forward to last week. My friend Mitchel Raphael,

the *National Post's* hip counter-culture reporter, and his younger brother Avi, who helps distribute the hot Parasuco jeanswear line in Canada, are throwing a blow-out party at their groovy downtown Toronto loft. The theme is "military," and the guest list is eclectic — from artists to lawyers to media types to politicians to drag queens.

I know there'll be a wide range of esthetics on display, so I ask my hunky young plastic surgeon friend, Trevor Born, to come along for a laugh. "Mitchel suggests we go to an army surplus store for something to wear," I tell him, quickly adding, "but I don't know if I'm really into the whole dressing up thing."

Born, ever the good sport, takes Mitchel's recommendation seriously and comes to my door in a way-tight khaki T-shirt and cool camouflage pants. I'd been too busy running around to the trashy lingerie store that day, and didn't have time to shop for the perfect *quelquechose* for myself. So I raid my daughter's closet instead.

Fortuitously, she'd recently bought a teeny Lycra camouflage dress, which I manage to squeeze into. "Mom, don't you think that's a little tight?" she asks annoyingly. "Not for this party," I tell her, tugging at the way-short number in the mirror, trying to convince myself I can carry it off.

I complete the look with khaki tights I found on sale at the trashy lingerie store for 99 cents, and a pair of DKNY combat boots from the early '90s that have since been relegated to the back of my closet. My new, hip-hugging, studded belt completes the look.

In case it gets chilly, I bring along a little black felt military jacket I have left over from a late-'80s London shopping spree, the last time the military thing was in.

Born and I look like a couple of urban glam guerrillas as we sail down the neon streets in

his red Porsche convertible. I'm feeling tough and ready-for-action, suddenly appreciating Mitchel's decision to get people to dress the part.

We follow the blaring music coming from Mitchel's deck. You can hear it all the way down the street. The neighbours in this Little Italy community must be freaked.

As we walk up the dimly lit stairway, I get the creeping feeling we're in an episode of *Boot Camp*. Mitchel greets us at the top of the stairs, an ominous tour de force in his black stormtrooper get up, complete with dangling grenades and a

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machine-gun backpack.

And here come the characters: buxom blonds with the moniker "Hotlips" emblazoned on their army shirts, Mitchel's gargantuan dad in a dazzling white admiral's uniform, various and sundry khaki-clad drag queens, including the babe-acious transvestite Enza Supermodel, a former Toronto mayorality candidate, who's wearing my dress; and "Madame de Sade," a zaftig, she-wolf type who'd leading around an older, nebbish of a gentleman on a dog leash.

The "slave" scrambles to bring her cheesies, while Madame hands me her business card for "Canada's Finest Bondage Hotel" — a B&B for fetishists. I'm thrilled to have such a conversation-piece of a card in my possession, and wonder what this has to do with the "military theme," other than give the concept of "armed forces" new meaning. Most of Mitchel's friends are the creative ones — the hand-

ful of cool DJs orchestrating the pounding music; the pastry chef Troy Kulchyski of Edible Art, who's concocted the tasty cream-puff grenades and chocolate fudge cakes decorated with plastic soldiers in combat scenes; the art college student Matt Bahen, whose powerful collection of 8-foot canvases depicting urban riot heroes are strategically strung out on the deck. Most of Mitchel's brother Avi's friends are the cute ones — giggling young blonds in camouflage Spandex drinking in the exoticism of this downtown club crowd and coming on to Born.

It's getting late, though the party invite promised it would go till 5 a.m. But we're bushed from all this eye-candy and decide to call it a night. We find Mitchel on the way out, who looks a little frazzled. "The cops were just here because the neighbours complained about the noise," he informs us. "They started asking lots of questions, so I had to really scramble to try and placate them. They were threatening to shut us down."

All this just moments before one DJ called Mandra was about to spin a thunderous 30-minute Madonnathon. What must they have been thinking, as they looked into the sea of khaki? Certainly not that the military look is over. Not just yet, anyway.

I dare say we have a good few weeks left to wear those camouflage clothes into the ground. Fashionably speaking, Mitchel's party was a sort of last hurrah for the military chic sensibility that permeated Paris runways last season. Now that the trend has just about played itself out, maybe we can start to work on some less obvious reminders of our survivor skills.

Meanwhile, enjoy those camouflage thongs, kids. By next fall, they'll definitely make you look like a victim.

Jeanne Beker is host of Fashion Television.

ARTICLE HIGHLIGHTS

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