



## F & M INTERVIEW

# JOHN HILL All American

by Rodger MacGowan

**F&M:** John, please tell us something about yourself: your background, work, hobbies.

**John Hill:** Unlike many wargame designers with bizarre backgrounds, I am fairly conventional in that I did what used to be expected of the American Male. I went to high school and to college and opened a business while getting married and having 1.4 kids. I bought a house in suburbia, acquired a dog, and began to save for my second car and a summer house on a lake (socially mandatory if you live in Indiana!). While not all went without a hitch — I lost my hobby shop in a flood, for example — I have completed the American Dream, and my biggest worry is a screwed-up swimming pool vacuum.

**F&M:** How and when did you first become interested in wargaming?

**Hill:** I have been interested in wargaming ever since I started playing with toy soldiers, and I was the first kid on the block to own **Tactics II**. My prime intellectual pursuit has always been the Art of War and why, historically, certain people or nations were better at it than others. The practice of organized conflict is mankind's oldest profession (prostitution being but the second). I am totally fascinated by the mechanics of battle, and at the same time totally appalled by its senselessness — a classic love-hate relationship, I guess.

**F&M:** You ran your own wargame company, *Conflict Games*. Will you tell us that story?

**Hill:** I started *Conflict Games* simply because I felt there was a market for "fun" games, playable, designed for "effect," different from what SPI and Avalon Hill were then bringing out. I did have the advantage of being a hobby business man first and knowing how to market games. But the enterprise grew to the point that it ceased to be fun — imagine a living room decorated in early box. At that point I sold out lock, stock, and barrel to GDW. Unfortunately, GDW at that time was inexperienced in merchandising. But they learned, and I now rate them as one of the best in marketing strategy.

**F&M:** As the award-winning designer of **Squad Leader**, how do

you view that game today? How do you explain the great success of the series?

**Hill:** **Squad Leader** was a success for one reason: it personalized the boardgame in a World War II environment. Take the "leaders," or *persons*, away from it and it becomes a bore. Though this may sound surprising, the game has much in common with **Dungeons & Dragons**. In both games, things tend to go wrong, and being caught moving in the street by a heavy machinegun is like being caught by a people-eating dragon. **Squad Leader** was successful because, underneath all its World War II technology, it is an *adventure game* — indeed, **Dungeons & Dragons** in the streets of Stalingrad.

**F&M:** Your "design for effect" philosophy, in **Squad Leader** and other games, has come under some attack for being simply an excuse to "fudge." How do you respond to such criticism?

**Hill:** I'd have to say that such criticism is a premature judgment. The whole hobby of wargaming is one gigantic fudge. In absolutely no way can we simulate the horror and fear and confusion of a battlefield. Any person who believes we are obtaining "realism" in any game of ours has very little understanding of war. On a realism scale of 1 to 10, the highest possible rating we can hope for with paper and cardboard is a 2. Since the whole effort is such a monstrous fudge, it seems amazingly silly to scream that some little nuance is fudged. The only way you could possibly approach an accurate simulation of the battle environment and its tension would be if both players had the clear understanding that the loser would be shot.

**F&M:** You have proved quite clearly that a designer does not have to belong to a wargame company in order to be successful. Your independent work is very much admired and your talents are now being sought after by several companies. Have you ever toyed with the idea of joining a company as a staff member?

**Hill:** Yes. As a matter of fact, I talked very seriously with a number of them. But, as yet, no one in wargaming could afford to pay me on a full-time basis. This is a reflection not on any one company, but on the whole industry. This wargame industry

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simply is too small to pay its professionals what they are worth. When faced with the decision of hobby industry versus wargame industry, I have chosen, and will always choose, the hobby industry. It is bigger, and hence has bigger bucks in it.

**F&M:** Apart from your free-lancing, what position do you hold in the hobby today?

**Hill:** I am an advertising executive for Boynton & Associates, who publish the leading hobby trade magazines, along with some beautiful catalogs.

**F&M:** I'm sure you are working on many new games. Would you care to name them?

**Hill:** Too many to enumerate! I am still refining my Civil War miniatures game **Johnny Reb** and, along with Dave Parham and Dana Lombardy, some exceptionally interesting World War II encounters will be brought forth. On the back burner are a monster game on the Tet Offensive in Vietnam, a kinky fantasy game, a bizarre simulation of the Mexican Revolution (more fun than history), and so on...

**F&M:** How do you view the wargame industry today? Are the companies doing all they can to give the gamers their money's worth? And what could the gamers do to help bring about improvements?

**Hill:** In terms of giving the customers their money's worth, they are overdoing it. Board wargaming is the most underpriced hobby I can think of, the biggest bargain in the history of leisure time. A \$15 **Squad Leader** game can easily provide a hundred hours of amusement — that works out to less than 15¢ an hour. Quite honestly, in terms of consumer versus industry, it's the industry that is getting ripped off.

**F&M:** How do you see the future of wargaming?

**Hill:** I think wargaming is about to emerge as a real business. Right now, all the major companies are still stymied as none of them knows how to push ahead to break into the world of "real business." The industry is in the birth pangs of evolving from a big little industry to a little big industry, and the major publishers are floundering about how to do it. But when it does happen, we'll see a breakthrough in growth so big you wouldn't believe it.

**F&M:** How important are physical systems and graphics?

**Hill:** As the hobby attempts to become a real business, graphics become the key. In many respects, they will become the most important ingredient. To compete, good graphics will no longer do, they must be outstanding. As an example of where we must head, look at the new Italian wargames from the *International Team*: in terms of box graphics, they make our whole industry look like a kindergarten. Good graphics become more important than good design. This may sound like heresy from a game designer, but it's going to happen — and it is a good step.

**F&M:** Who are your favorite designers?

**Hill:** My favorite designers — that is like asking what my favorite food is. I find very good stuff in the games of them all. But if you push me to declare any particular preference, I might say I'm partial to Richard Berg, simply because his games make fun of themselves. Of all the designers, he takes himself the least seriously, almost mocks his own work. For that reason, if for no other, I really have a soft spot for the guy.

**F&M:** What about developers?

**Hill:** I have only worked with three: Don Greenwood, Dana Lombardy, and John Butterfield, and all have their good points. Don, I respect because of his experience. John approaches development more as sophisticated playtesting, and that has merit. Dana probably is the most creative in his approach, and his sense of humor and tradition in graphics help him visualize how best to produce a game that will be fun. The ideal developer might very well be a blend of these three.

**F&M:** And which critics do you listen to?

**Hill:** I have an overall preference, and that is for the older critics, who are much better able to analyze what is right or wrong with a game. Also, I much prefer to be judged by those who have actually been in combat and know firsthand how really screwed-up military operations are. The older critics have much more maturity, having had many more years to reflect on the nature of war and how history has presented it.

**F&M:** Did you follow the Great Debate of critics versus designers? What was your reaction?

**Hill:** This debate is very healthy. The only problem is that it seems too easy for both designers and critics to pass themselves off as experts. But, given time, the good critics will still be with us, as will the good designers. The public, I think, will eventually come to realize who has talent in either or both capacities. I'd urge critics to keep poking at us designers — that keeps us honest — and I'd urge designers to stand fast on their work and not be afraid to punch back. After all, the public loves a good fight.

**F&M:** How do you view the hobby press today?

**Hill:** At this time, the hobby press needs to mature. Generally, they "have arrived" in terms of graphics and presentation, but they have reached a point of stagnation in terms of quality growth. The problem is that all the hobby magazines exist on the charity of their authors. Sooner or later, qualified writers will tire of producing for no return. I personally know several very talented and knowledgeable writers who have been turned off by the lack of any reasonable financial remuneration. Unless the wargame press starts to pay their contributors regularly and decently, I fear an exodus of writing talent.

**F&M:** Richard Berg, in his final *Forward Observer* column in *Moves #44*, expressed his fear that the hobby had fallen under the curse of the "Three N's: NATO, Nukes, and Nazis." How do you feel about this?

**Hill:** I believe what Richard means is that, right now, NATO, Nukes, and Nazis are what is selling games — and he is right. But I would certainly not call it a curse. Given a year or so, something else will be hot, and I'd never call any theme a curse if it sells games. We would be presumptuous when saying, since Nazi stuff sells, all wargamers are sick. That is ridiculous. The so-called "love affair" with the Nazis only proves that in World War II they were the only outfit with really sharp-looking uniforms. Moral issues aside, a black SS uniform *is* neat!

**F&M:** Games on contemporary topics have lately been criticized as morally wrong, being science fiction, etc. Would you let us have your opinion?

**Hill:** How can a game be morally wrong? War may be right or wrong, depending on your religious bent, but not a game. Games are neutral. They are like mirrors. Perhaps, by portraying a moral wrong, they might perform even a moral good by calling attention to some great evil.

**F&M:** How do you feel about the hobby awards?

**Hill:** What can I say? They lack class. The whole presentation is run like a bowling banquet. At ORIGINS, the winners are treated like those of a backgammon tournament. And the highest award, the *Hall of Fame*, has become a PR contest \_between the big publishers.

**F&M:** What are your personal goals in life?

**Hill:** My mind is too small even to begin to comprehend what I want out of life. At least I have enough intelligence to realize that the hardest thing to understand is one's self. So I settle for one short-term goal after another. Right now, my most immediate goal is a really good heater for my swimming pool...

**F&M:** We wish you good luck with that, and with everything else!