
F&M Wargaming Biography:

CHARLES S. ROBERTS

by Rodger B. MacGowan

"I could never really decide whether I wanted to be a publisher or a soldier. I became a publisher."

The year was 1952. Charles S. Roberts designed **Tactics**, the first modern era board wargame in his apartment in Catonsville, Maryland. He did this in his spare time, his main job was in advertising and marketing. The game was printed in 1954 and distributed by the Stackpole Company of Pennsylvania, a company better known for their books on military science. Charles Roberts named his new game company Avalon Hill — coming from the site of an historic village near his place.

Between 1954 and 1958 Charles Roberts sold nearly 2000 copies of **Tactics** — in his own words, "...I came within \$30 of breaking even." By 1958 Charles Roberts was convinced a living could be earned in the game design and sales field. By the Fall of 1958, The Avalon Hill Game Company was officially formed by Charles Roberts -- we consider this the "official" founding of board wargaming. But, Avalon Hill was **not** founded for the primary purpose of producing wargames. Charles Roberts felt that "adult games" had been ignored by the big publishers — Milton Bradley and Parker Brothers.

Charles Roberts priced his games at \$5.00 when other companies were selling theirs for \$2.00. This brought resistance from the wholesalers and retailers who thought such a price was too high. Roberts said that if people were interested in a game, "...they would pay \$5.00 for it; if they weren't interested, they wouldn't pay fifty-cents for it." Thirty years later we see an entire industry and hobby that has proven his theory correct in every way.

Not long after Avalon Hill got started, Charles Roberts quit his advertising job and devoted his full-efforts to making A/H grow. He hired Bernard C. Schramm from his former place of employment -- he was experienced in the printing field -- he was involved in management and production at A/H. Another member recruited from his old advertising firm was Thomas N. Shaw — he worked as a game designer and is today Executive Vice-President of The Avalon Hill Game Company and founder of the A/H **General** magazine. From 1958 to 1963 Charles Roberts designed the following games (most of which have become "classics") while running

Avalon Hill: **Gettysburg, Tactics II, D-Day, Chancellorsville, Dispatcher, Management, NieuChess, Air Empire, and Civil War.** He co-designed **Bismarck** and **Stalingrad** with the team of Tom Shaw and Lindsley Schutz. During this same period Shaw and Schutz designed **Waterloo**. Among the playtesters at A/H was Lou Zocchi who would later go on to design **Luftwaffe** and **The Battle of Britain** (and who was recently inducted into the Origins Awards Hall of Fame). There were also "outside designs" at A/H from 1958-63 -- the first was **Verdict II** (designed by two attorneys and developed by Shaw) and **Le Mans**.



By 1962 Avalon Hill was doing a million dollars in sales, but the first signs of serious financial problems appeared. 1963 became the year of crisis for Avalon Hill; the growth of discount houses rivaled retailers -- A/H had distributed exclusively through retailers; trying to hold the line on prices, discount houses undercut A/H's retail prices; and through A/H's expansion its debt burden grew quite large and then 25% of A/H's dealers went bankrupt. Cut in cash flow, promotional problems, cut

in sales due to holding prices combined to cripple the company. Charles Roberts had two choices -- bankruptcy or turning the company over to the A/H's creditors.

Charles Roberts made the tough decision, but the decision that has made The Avalon Hill Game Company a major success. He turned the company over to his largest creditor, Monarch Services, under the direction of Eric Dott. Charles Roberts had the choice to stay, but chose to leave, as did Schramm.

Tom Shaw chose to stay and has remained with A/H ever since. Avalon Hill was reorganized. Charles Roberts last design was still on the "drawing boards" when he left — **Afrika Korps** — another game destined to become a wargame classic.

The early growth of Avalon Hill reflects Charles Roberts' personality -- outgoing and assertive. The comment most often heard concerning his administration of A/H was "integrity."



A Photo Album: Charles Roberts (above) today at his home in Maryland; and (right) Charles Roberts during the "building years" of Avalon Hill in the late 1950's, early 1960's. (Photo above by John Vanore; Photo right from Avalon Hill's 25th Anniversary Booklet)

F&M Exclusive
INTERVIEW

CHARLES S. ROBERTS

Founder of The Avalon Hill Game Company and
Founding Father of Board Wargaming

*The moment I heard that they were going to drop Charles Roberts name from the Origins Awards I knew what to do. I asked him for the honor of adding his name to our **Fire & Movement Awards** -- awards dedicated to historical conflict simulation games and people only. Charles Roberts agreed and in so doing we arranged an F&M Interview with him so you might get to know this man who started it all... **RBM***

Editor-in-Chief

by John J. Vanore

It was a crisp autumn morning when I set out for the Baltimore area to interview Charles S. Roberts. I made great time heading up I-95 and I was almost (very) early for my appointment; until I got lost and found myself in a state park. When I stopped to ask a woman for directions back to Gun Road, she said, "You're not going to see Roberts, are you?!" When I found my way back, I realized what she meant. Charles Roberts lives in a home perched on top of a hill, at the end of a narrow, meandering, largely dirt road. If I had done this interview during the rainy season, a Jeep in 4-wheel drive might not have been much help.

I couldn't have asked for a more cooperative interview subject. Too cooperative, in fact. Charles S. Roberts epitomizes the "Ask him for the time and he'll tell you how to build a clock" type. But he was extremely gracious and, in spite of the time distance between him and his wargaming roots, he remains genuinely interested in the hobby and the hobbyists.

*Herewith the contents of our hour-long discussion for **Fire & Movement**.*

F&M: How heavy an influence was your military experience on your eventual design of **Tactics** and **Tactics II**?

ROBERTS: I've always been interested in the military — but for an accident of fate, I would have made a career of being a soldier. So I'd have to say that my experience was a big factor. In a way, I really designed it (**Tactics**) to see if I could gain some more general applications for the study of the principles of war. It did serve in that regard, though not in the way I thought it would.

F&M: So your primary aim was in designing a kind of training aid?

ROBERTS: Yes, at least in an operational if not strategic sense. It was

later, in the early days of Avalon Hill, that I designed **Game/Train**, which I understand became the basis for **Squad Leader** and other tactical games that Avalon Hill produced. I got that from Tom Shaw, who was involved with me and Bernie Schramm (Vice-President TAHGC). The map (for **Game/Train**) was at least as long as this room (twenty-plus feet).

F&M: Could you tell us a bit more about **Game/Train**?

ROBERTS: We evolved the system as a training aid for the U.S. Army Infantry School — without regard to space. The Army wanted to buy it, but the civilians — how the hell they got involved I'll never figure out — they put the *kabosh* on it.

F&M: Let's jump ahead in time. If you were somehow to come back into the business now, perhaps at the executive level at Avalon Hill, do you see any things you would change, perhaps in the commercial aspects of wargaming?

ROBERTS: Well, you want to be careful where you point that question (*heartily laughter*). Eric Dott (President of Monarch Avalon Inc.) and I are still friends. I'm out of date with the marketing situation, for example. Nowadays, in marketing, you have operations like Toys "**R**" Us, which account for a huge percentage of the market (recently lost by Avalon Hill — Ed.). There was nothing comparable in my day. You also have something which didn't exist in my time; that is, a dedicated distribution system for

wargaming. We had to go through toy lines for distribution.

F&M: How about the games themselves, and their designers?

ROBERTS: One of the things I have admired — I admired Jim Dunnigan (founder of SPI/Designer) in particular — is the deep involvement in military history and the technical detail; orders of battle, and such. However, I have difficulty — and I don't mean this as a criticism, just an observation — with the fact that they (*wargames*) have gotten so damned complicated that they're not really games anymore, and I wonder if they haven't gotten away from the essential elements of the practice of military art (i.e., simplicity). But you can't argue with success. People buy them. I remember a few years ago I ran into John Hill (Designer), and had a very brief conversation with him. Obviously, he's a very intelligent, very thorough individual, but I get the impression that very few of these people have ever been soldiers. You have a lack of feeling coming back the other way. Yes, I think wargames are too complicated. In trying to describe reality, I think you can get lost in the detail. It's easy.

But there are other things that affect the problems in the hobby that have nothing to do with game design. They have to do with fewer people joining in. The number of newcomers in the hobby — typically 11-to-14 years old — have been dwindling for the past several years. It's a simple factor of the declining birth



rate and its having an impact on other industries as well. At the same time, you have competition from other sources. Thirty years ago, (when Charles Roberts founded TAHGC), there weren't personal computers and other things to attract attention.

To get back to your original question, if I were to return to the industry today, the first thing I would do is reconnoiter (more hearty laughter).

F&M: From your contact with the hobby, especially at game conventions, do you see any disturbing trends in the hobby?

ROBERTS: The appeal of Nazi Germany was a problem twenty years ago and it still disturbs me quite a bit. In fact, I once had a long conversation with Tom Shaw (Vice-President TAHGC) concerning this problem. He agreed with me entirely and they cut it off in the *General*, just put the *kabosh* on it. There was just an overall disgust and horror with anything even remotely associated with *Nazism*. It's probably a race between that and Communism as to which is the biggest "squirrel thing" around, but I think *Communism* comes in second place. So there's a great deal of distaste that remains to this day.

F&M: Any observations on the state of the wargaming industry in general?

ROBERTS: I'm still surprised, as I've always been, that the industry (as a whole) is as healthy as it is. We could never have anticipated this back in my day, when we were struggling to survive. Let me cite an example. I was out west in Southern California on business not too many years ago. I had finished my business and was just roaming around, and happened to see a hobby store and stopped in. I noticed a lot of Avalon Hill games in there. The young man looked up and asked if I needed any help and I said, "No thanks, I'm just nosing around. My name's Charlie Roberts..." Well, he just jumped up and said, "I've got to shake your hand!" and startled the hell out of me. How the hell did he know who I was??

F&M: And from your humble origins in the late '50s and early '60s arises *The Avalon Hill Game Company*, big daddy to *Victory Games* and a subsidiary of *Monarch Avalon*. How does it feel to have founded a company whose stock is now publicly traded? (NOTE: This interview was conducted before "Black Monday"; and recent reports of Avalon Hill being up-for-sale and major staff departures from both *Victory* and *AH* — Ed.)

ROBERTS: I'm only vaguely familiar with the corporate evolution from that time. Eric's (Dott) printing company was called *Monarch* and operated nationwide, and it evolved into *Monarch Avalon*. The net result is that the shares are traded over the counter. But it's still very satisfying to see a company that

very nearly went under now in such good financial shape. I've got to give a lot of credit to Eric Dott and to Tom Shaw, who played such an important role in the company's success.

F&M: GAMA has recently decided to restructure the gaming industry awards, fitting them into fewer, broader categories and re-naming them the "Origins Awards," obviously dropping your name from the title. Fortunately, **F&M** has swooped in and attached your name to the old "F&Mmies." How do you feel about being such a celebrity and having a series of awards named after yourself?

ROBERTS: It doesn't do much for me one way or the other. Whatever my other faults, false modesty isn't one of them — my wife will be happy to fill you in on my other faults. But I just don't see where I really did anything to warrant all this. In fact, it was 50-50 whether I would even agree to it when they (the *Charles Roberts Awards*) first came out. You see, after I left *Avalon Hill*, my name was removed from **all the game credits!** I guess there was some fear that I might go and start another game company, so my name was never mentioned under any circumstances. So I was very surprised back in 1972 when they asked to use my name. I guess I agreed to it at least partly to aggravate Eric (more hearty laughter). Don't misunderstand me, Eric and I are still friends, but at the time I couldn't resist the jibe.

F&M: Looking back at the evolution of wargaming up to the present, it seems we are now presented with two phenomena that were never considered in your day. First, the "monster game" with multiple maps and thousands of counters. Second, we have quite a few games now on the market covering current and possible future wars.

ROBERTS: Well, *Avalon Hill* was formed only nine years after World War II. We found through experimentation that WWII was a popular subject. We published **Waterloo** and then **Stalingrad**, and **Stalingrad Waterloo** by a great deal, so the evidence was there. In that context, in the early years, we just published what we thought would sell.

F&M: We now have games on the market on *Central America*, *Viet Nam*, and a possible major war in *Europe*. What do you think about this grappling with contemporary affairs and future wars?

ROBERTS: Well, I don't see any harm in it, unless you subscribe to the vocal pacifist element who feels that buying a child some toy soldiers for Christmas will warp him for life. But I dismiss that attitude as drivel. My only real observation, and I think it holds true throughout wargaming, is that the people designing games don't really know enough about what they're trying to present in a game.

F&M: However, we now have two modern air combat games on the market — *GDW's Air Superiority* and *AH's Flight Leader* — which were designed by active duty U.S. Navy and Air Force pilots. Certainly they are intimately familiar with the material?

ROBERTS: Exceptions prove the rule!! I gave a game convention seminar in Detroit once which was attended by some thirty-forty people, and when I asked, I found that only two-or-three in the audience had any military experience. How about you — any military experience?

(NOTE: The interview started to deteriorate here, as the interview subject started asking the questions!)

F&M: Nine years on active duty in the U.S. Navy, and I'm still in the Reserves.

ROBERTS: Oh, so you're a swabbie!! And you're an exception.

F&M: Thanks. I think. But I'm not a designer, just a reviewer. And I know quite a few active duty and former military types who are active gamers.

ROBERTS: Okay, but my experience has been that your avocational interests, generally speaking, are just the opposite of your career. In my case, I'm a model railroader, and this is something completely different from what I do for a living.

F&M: From the very first *Avalon Hill* advertisement I saw, I recall wargaming being described as a way to take command and change history. The better games around will contain rules and systems to enhance this realism factor. How do you think the hobby does on this score?

ROBERTS: Well, as a line officer, do you think playing naval games helped you to maneuver a ship? Probably not. It's the same thing with infantry. When you're talking about a rifle platoon, that's what it all comes down to, and there isn't a single game that will tell you how it's done. You can't get that flavor in a game.

F&M: As a case in point, designer John Hill took a unique approach with **Squad Leader**. He looked long and hard at many of the factors, tangible and otherwise, that effect soldiers at small unit levels, and devised the means to represent those factors in a boardgame.

ROBERTS: Sure, but you don't have the pressure of bullets flying overhead, and as a leader you don't have to make decisions in real time. In fact, my old design **Game/Train** was intended to train non-coms and platoon leaders in the variety of circumstances which they would be facing and which would require

We hope you now have a better idea who Charles Roberts is and why we're so proud and honored to have his name join ours. Please fill-in your 1987 **Fire & Movement** + **Charles S. Roberts Awards** Nomination Ballot enclosed in this issue. Let's make the F&M Charlies the best awards possible, thanks...