FORUM: RANDALL REED

Randall C. Reed in Baltimore
TO HELL IN A HANDBASKET
Interview by
Al Bisasky

Randall C. Reed was 23 years old when he was introduced to the hobby, along with Donald J. Greenwood, on the front cover of the July-August 1972 [Vol 9, No. 2] issue of The General. **Randy had been an AH question-and-answer man and longtime Interest Group Baltimore member, while Don was founder and former editor of a magazine called** Panzerfaust. **They came to Avalon Hill at a time when the company was fast losing its leadership in the hobby it pioneered; when it was buying most of its designs from Jim Dunnigan** [PanzerBlitz, Origins of WWII, France '40, Outdoor Survival]; **while Dunnigan's own SPI was setting new standards of innovation for the hobby. The changes Reed and Greenwood helped bring about — at Avalon Hill and in the hobby — are no w legendary.**

Today, Randy Reed is something of a legend in his own right. Reed often puts in a full year and more of solid work on design or development of a new game — something few other people in the hobby can afford — which makes his work unique indeed in these days of 'instant' products. If Reed's design of Richtofen's War **shows more than casual debt to Dunnigan's** Flying Circus, **most people agree** RW **is the game** FC **'should' have been in the first place. The same high standards of design craftsmanship and clear thinking are shown in Reed's other development work on** Panzer Leader **and the conceptually revolutionary** Tobruk. **Among his more routine in-house assignments were redesigns of** Chancellorsville **and** Tactics II. **in 1974.**

Randy Reed, designer and developer, has produced some of the most solid games in the hobby. This appears to be mainly the result of hard work, clear thinking, and an eclectic taste. Sometimes Randy talks as hard as he work We thought you might be interested to hear what he has to say.

Al Bisasky [F&M]: Randy, let's talk about the 'secrecy question...'
Randy Reed: The secrecy question! (Mockingly) Ahh, yes!
F&M: Is there secrecy in game design, and why do you agree or disagree with it?
Randy: Let's take it from a slightly different point of view, then I'll come back and try to answer the question. OK—is there secrecy in wargame design is the first question; the second question is, are there rip-offs in wargame designs—and there certainly are. I am paid what I am paid because I'm a professional game designer. I didn't take a correspondence course for it, I didn't go to college for it, I didn't take night school for it, I learned by the school of hard knocks and by trying it. Now if I'm successful in that—that is my profession. My success and my knowledge become an asset. And as such if I no longer have it then I'm losing money, I'm losing professional security, I'm losing whatever else is involved with that. So, from the point of game designers — the question of one person ripping off other's ideas — it happens only subconsciously. I've done it, everybody has done it. You try to give credit where its due or you try to apply it in a disciplined form, but you don't just go into a game and say, hey theres a great idea, I'm just going to tear it out and use it and then say, ahh, look what I've come up with — original me. No, what you should say is, he's done that well this way, or why does he think that way. I have a certain way of thinking, Jim Dunnigan thinks his particular way, John Hill thinks a certain way, John Prados thinks his way. If we all were designing a game on the Third Reich, we'd each have vastly different games. So, as far as game design secrecy — I don't think there is secrecy. But as far as the policies and plans of game companies are concerned — yes, there is as much secrecy as a company cares to have. It's very simple. If I have a company, I can do anything I want to with it -- because it's mine. And if I say I don't want you to spill your guts — well that's my right, that's my priviledge. Now I don't happen to own this company. And if my boss says, `I would rather you not talk about new titles until we have the time and place that we want; that we have the arena we want for announcing new titles...' I'll say, 'fine, it's your company, you're the man who pays me'. So, it's not that we have secrecy, but you have a situation where if we start working on a title in September, chances are we'll have it out next September.

F&M: Would you describe this as common industrial secrecy?
Randy: Yeah, it's not even that — we're coming from a printing industry, we're also coming from the toy industry. SPI is not coming from either one of those things. And what we do in this company is standard industry policy — no more, no less. I take that back, it's probably less. Because we're a lot freer than let's say Milton Bradly or Parker Bros., mainly because of the

knock-off artists. There was one little incident that happened about six months ago where we had a big meeting down here and we decided what five or six titles were going to be. We had designers come in. A mutual associate who is also close with various people at SPI came down, and while I was out of my office, he put his butt down in my chair and started going through my papers — and saw all the notes to this meeting. I'm not saying anything — I don't like people going through my garbage, because it's my garbage — that's beside the point. But it was very curious that four out of those five topics appeared in S&T's feedback, the section asking about possible subjects for future game titles. And these were really off-the-wall subjects. They weren't very common subjects. **It was** an 80% correlation that was just too much for coincidence. And I object to that, I really do. Because what I do is my own thinking in this office before it hits that game box and then hits the stores is my business. I make a lot of mistakes that I don't want people to see.

F&M: So you think there's a case of — I hate to use anything as strong as Industrial Espionage, but that's basically what it is — do you agree with that? Do you think SPI is trying....

Randy: No, not at all. SPI is not trying. But one of the grognards comes down here and sees something and gleefully runs back and tells SPI, whether they're interested or not. What can I say?

F&M: Do you think SPI could care less?

Randy: I think they care more than they say, but I don't think they're overly concerned with it. And I'm not so much talking about us and SPI so much as A/H as a company, versus anybody else. Because as far as rip-offs and knock-off artists in this business is concerned, I don't think SPI has much to worry from us or us from them. But I do worry about those little tiny kids out in the midwest who are going to form a game company and copyright a title because they hear we're going to do it, and bingo we can't get a multi-million dollar title registered by the patent office. There are all kinds of little things a small company, if they know what they're doing, can do to screw us up. I would prefer to be in control of our marketing and not leave it to the whims of the hobbyists. Now, if people object to it, they can object — it's a free country, but this is the way that the people here care to do business.

F&M: This sounds like an anology comparing SPI and A/H to the Soviet Union and the US.

Randy: You were talking to Jack Greene.

F&M: Jack's a little flaky, but **I'm** a lot like Jack.

(laughter)

F&M: So you have this analogy comparing the two of you to Russia and America and the both of you know how powerful you are; you have respect for each other and neither one of you is going to do anything to really destroy the other — but what you're afraid of are the little game companies starting what could become a large holocaust.

Randy: Right.

F&M: What is your favorite game design?

Randy: What is my favorite game design besides **Tobruk,** how about that for a question?

F&M: Tobruk is your favorite A/H design?

Randy: Yeah. My next favorite would be **1776,** as far as A/H designs are concerned. And note that I did not design **Tobruk.** Besides, I rate my games on a different criteria entirely because it's something I've done. As for games of other people's designs that I've enjoyed the most — that's a hard question — I think **Jerusalem** is a great game; John Hill did a fantastic job. Although John did do some things that just make me want to scream and run up a wall. He did some very bad things in that game, but overall it's a beautiful game, it's a fun game system.

F&M: Who are your five favorite game designers?

Randy: At the head of the list would have to be Dave Williams. I've always been impressed with what that guy did back in '67-'69. When the state of the art was really low, Dave Williams was doing phenomenal things. You take **Goeben-Goeben** which was an **S&T** magazine game, you take **Anzio,** you take a couple other things he did. Just the ability to pack as much data, as much color, as much variation and history into one game system like he did (and though there were things wrong with it), and to go as far as he did was phenomenal. Dave Williams in my mind, has just so much talent that if he ever decided to get back into it, he could blow a lot of people away.

F&M: Dave just left the hobby?

Randy: Yeah, I'm not going to say anything more about it because I believe there were personal problems involved. Dave Williams stands out in my mind as a guy like Buddy Holly — he died and everyone says, 'Wow, Buddy Holly,' but like, what could he be doing today? Dave Williams is that type. Dave was in the hobby, he did some great things, and he left the hobby and I just wonder what he'd be doing today, because I was impressed with what he did almost twenty years ago.

F&M: Who else in the industry? You mentioned Hal Hock; is he...

Randy: Hal's not really a game designer. I don't consider him as that. It's funny, he's a very good friend of mine...

F&M: Is this a one time shot for Hal, this **Tobruk,** or will we be seeing more of his work?

Randy: It took Hal seven years to get the mechanisms and the data base together for **Tobruk.** If we do anything else — I don't think Hal wants to do anything on his own — it would probably be basically a spin-off and an improvement of the **Tobruk** system. So as far as Hal venturing into new territory, I doubt it. Would he come out with a follow-up, an advancement, a logical progression from his **Tobruk** design?... I think you can count on it. And we've had preliminary discussions on it, and if it's going to be what I think it's going to be... I might as well tell you, what the heck! We want to do a cleaned-up **Tobruk** version of **A Bridge Too Far** on the same scale. And we figure this — there was such an incredible range of equipment, of infantry weapons, of artillery weapons, of anti-tank weapons. The weapons systems in that particular little one-week, two-week period was just so phenomenal, because everything in the world that was germain to WWII practically was in that campaign and could be demonstrated in that campaign.

F&M: Is this game (based on **A Bridge Too Far)** going to be a melting of terrain and weapons systems together? As opposed to **Tobruk's** flat surface terrain configuration and weapons systems.

Randy: Yes, we're going to have a different emphasis here, we're going to streamline the infantry procedures so that you can work with a great amount of units. Because right now that was the most awkward system of the many inter-systems in the game, we're going to streamline that. And we're going to do different things in the game systems which show tactics, small unit tactics, not sniper level, as based upon the weapons you have to deal with. Tactics and weapons systems go together to spell success or failure. And what we're going to have is a large board that is going to be what they term geomorphic — it's not really geomorphic, but we're going to have a street level map of the bridge at Arnhem down to each house and corner store and lamp post. Also, in the other three sections of the mapboard, we're going to have terrain which is going to be essentially the Ulster containment — you remember the British First Paratroop Division got wiped — they were in an area approximately three kilometers by two kilometers wide, which is just the right size...

F&M: Fits the scale of the game.

Randy: Right, and we can put the entire remnants of the First British Division, plus all their opponents around them down to squad level, down to every tank, down to every mortar, down to every AT gun in that conflict. There was nothing else like it — it was a blood bath, it was a big killing in a small pond.

F&M: Do you think it will be very one sided, the favorite being the Germans?

Randy: No, because we're also going to have other scenarios, because we're going to be doing things with multiple use of terrain and overlays and lots of other new little fancy things.

F&M: Fantastic — do you think this is going to cost a lot?

Randy: Yes, it's going to cost a lot.

F&M: Do you think people will buy it?

Randy: Yes, **I** think they'll buy it, they bought **Tobruk** and **Tobruk** costs $12. I think if it's good enough , they'll buy it — its just that simple — if it's not good enough, they're not going to buy it. Before I'll put it out, it will be good enough or else I'll scrap the whole idea because it's not worth it to me. I

say this because the only other way to approach that game is from a large operational level; meanwhile there are just so many other nifty things happening on the small group level waiting to be explored.

F&M: What are your views on the 1976 Charles Roberts Awards?

Randy: I think the Charles Roberts Awards are great and they're great for the hobby and great for the industry. It was unfortunate that only about 10-12% of the people at Origins II. actually voted. I think it follows the pattern that you've seen in science-fiction writing where they have the Hugo Awards and the Nebula Awards. One is the popularity contest decided by the people and the other one is a popularity contest decided by the writers themselves. We've been talking about a Game Designer's Guild (Professional Game Designers Guild) which could be a reality by the next convention. At that time, what we'd like to see would be a parallel system to the sci-fi awards.

F&M: Who would make up this Guild?

Randy: Professional games designers who've had at least one game professionally published to their credit.

F&M: Do you think this would be something really good for the hobby?

Randy: I don't know about being good for the hobby, but it would be great for the people who get picked.

F&M: What do you think is really more important, the professional game designers rating one another or the general wargaming community rating the professionals?

Randy: If I wasn't a professional designer, I don't think I'd care too much what professional designers did, but since I am one, I'm equally concerned about both. I do sell to the wargaming public, but yet I am a wargame designer, and I care what my fellow designers think of my work.

F&M: What were your views on Origins II.?

Randy: I loved it. I thought it was great for the hobby. I think it shows that each year the hobby is getting stronger. Look at the fact that we could take thirty different companies and put them in one big room together and have them sell like crazy.

F&M: I think you're too sales oriented.

Randy: Well look, if my games were disasters, I wouldn't be here.

F&M: Do you think Origins II. was beneficial to the general wargamer?

Randy: Definitely. For a lot of reasons he wouldn't very readily see. That's because it's a long term of sort of benefit — from professionalism. I have had some correspondence with different groups like the Midwest Gamine Review and they say professionalism is bad because it becomes elitism. Well, I say I'm all for elitism. One thing it will do is make you either put up or shut up, and it will give you a consistently high level of achievement. If you want garbage games then fine, get away from professionalism because I don't want anything to do with you. But it you want good games consistently designed so that when you pick up a game, though it may not appeal to you, it may not set you on fire, but you're going to get your money's worth. If you want that guarantee, then you've got to expect professionalism and, I'll be frank, elitism.

F&M: How do you view Origins III.? What do you think will happen?

Randy: That's a nasty question. I just hope that with any future Origins, no company takes it over to become their show and their arena. People may criticize Avalon Hill for doing this, but I think a really sober person couldn't criticize us for trying to make it an Avalon Hill show. Avalon Hill put this thing together. We got everybody together. We're the ones who did it. Nobody else in the hobby even tried it until we came along and actually did it. We put together a show, we nursed it for two years (even when we didn't want to), and we're now going to throw it out in the world. So now I don't want to see it become a one company show. I wouldn't like to see it go out to Lake Geneva and become the TSR Circus. I wouldn't like to see it go out to San Diego and become the SDC Circus. I just don't want to see that. We've got a good thing going for the hobby; it's going to help us a lot to keep this thing a trade fair and a convention for the hobby and the industry, not for one company.

F&M: What are your views on the future of A/H and where do you think it's going?

Randy: We are going to become very, very big. we are going to take off. we are going to sell tons of games and get tons of money. I'm going to retire at age 55 very rich.

F&M: There you go back with the money. No wonder Jack Greene left.

(Laughter)

Randy: We are in a powerful, potential position because we are the only company of any prominance in the US now producing adult games for the non-wargaming market. And A/H has enjoyed quite a reputation across the country for a good many years of having a stable sales item in stores. With the addition of the 3M line (recently purchased by A/H) we're going to go crazy. We have already gone grazy. What you're going to be seeing, if I have my way, is us diversify into a lot of other product areas. Quite frankly, ten years from now, we're going to be in a heck of a lot more things — we might even be in plastic models giving Revell a run for their money. But we're going to exploit the military hobby sector.

F&M: How do you view wargamers today?

Randy: I think they're like me in certain respects, although I'm not like anybody else and neither are they — if you know what I mean. There has to be some sort of basic thread running through all of us, because I can talk to people at the convention and I can go up to a person who is completely obnoxious, just the antithesis of what my life wants to be. Yet, if I talk with him enough he'll hit on a subject or talk on something in a certain way that will appeal to me, e.g. the way his mind works. And I think as far as wargaming is concerned, whether you're into the history or the competition, whether you're just a collector or whatever it is, there are certain things about wargaming and the like which appeal to a certain type of mind. This has nothing to do with intelligence or creativity or artistic taste or anything — it's just the way the process of thinking works. And I think various people think in certain ways, and you have to have a certain way of thinking to really get into these games so that all the rules and garbage doesn't blow you away. And I think that the people who are impressed with games and who play them are able to handle certain waste products, e.g. the rules and all the complications of games, without being hassled by them and get down to some sort of abstract beauty of a system in motion. Even if they don't realize that's what appeals to them, I think that is in fact what is happening. And that's what I have in common with a lot of other garners, because certain parts of our thinking are impressed by that type of puzzle or system or little gizmo (whatever you want to call it). I mean, do you like to take cars apart, do you like to play with cameras, do you like to play with aquariums and play with all the tubes and all the air and stuff, do you like systems?

F&M: I dig women.

(laughter)

F&M: Why do you think most wargamers tend to choose the German side in the games they play? Why do they prefer playing the Germans?

Randy: Charisma, mystique — the common impression of the popular literature and media impression of the WWII German war machine as being something of super-human, robot-like efficiency. Basically, I think, the mystique comes from people who are not that familiar with the history. The less familiar you are with the military history of the period the more enamored you can become.

F&M: Where do you think the hobby, itself, is going?

Randy: Down hill, to hell in a hand basket. (laughter) I don't know, I used to think that I had a crystal ball, but I don't anymore. I keep thinking this great game glut is going to produce a tremendous fall for all of us and we're going to come to a time of just 'burn-out'. And one year we're going to turn around and come out with thirty-eight games from all the publishers in the hobby and nobody's going to buy any of them because they've had enough. And they're going to look for something different. The only thing I can hope is that when that time comes, A/H does have something different, and believe me we're working on it.