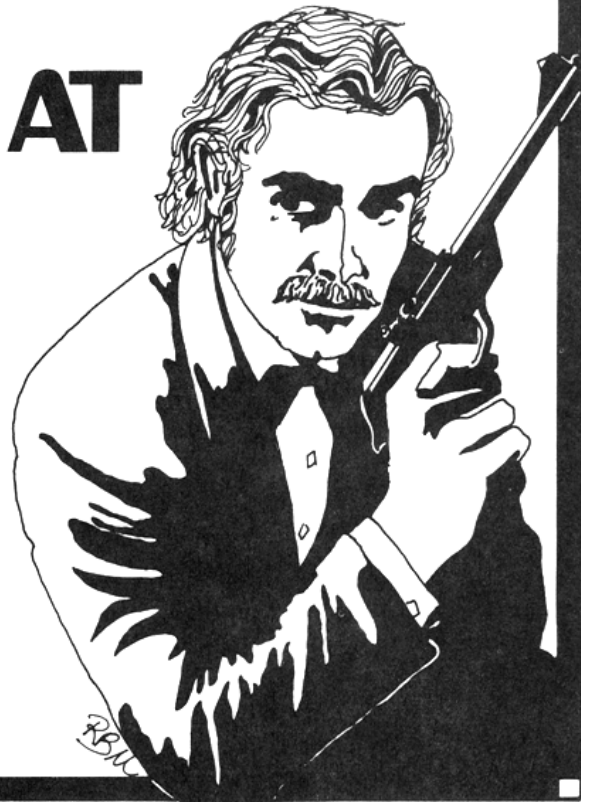


by Richard DeBaun

i WAS A SPY AT



In past issues of F&M, we have run excerpts from the infamous 'Dunnigan Tapes' — interviews with Jim Dunnigan, president of Simulctions Publications, Inc. But Dunnigan is only one of many creative people at SM. To get the rest of the story, I was recently ordered by 'M' to New York City to determine if Valhalla really is at 44 East 23rd Street. (I suspect MacGowan thought the best way to get the inside dope on SPI was to send the inside dope from F&M after it...) After landing by submarine off Jamaica Bay, my journalistic quest for Truth began with F&M's contact at Canarsie, Howard Barasch...

Fire & Movement: — (buzzzzzzzzzz) — Never get this damned tape recorder to... Aha! It's work... — (buzzzzzzzzzz) — Last time I borrow equipment from Rosemary Woods... Ok, Howie, tell our readers who the hell you are...

HOWARD BARASCH: My name is Howard Barasch, and I am Operations and Marketing President of SPI.

F&M: What does that mean?

BARASCH: I'm Number Three in the SPI hierarchy, after Jim and Redmond. In terms of running the business operations, I'm Number Two. I'm the man who fills in when Jim is gone. I run the daily routine of SPI, the daily operations, the mail, the computer problems, the people who vomit on Redmond's beer -

F&M: Wait a minute!... Do you mean vomit from drinking too much of his beer or literally on his —?

BARASCH: — What happened was, at our last Christmas party, some poor kid got sick and had to barf. He went to the garbage can, and in the garbage can was all the ice and the beer and that's where he barfed, so... He's on the shit list...

F&M: Sounds like exciting work...

BARASCH: I like it. I think I do a fairly decent job. I'm a wheeler-dealer, and that all seems to run together... It can be a thankless job. Most gamers don't realize that the business end is extremely important. Rand ran into that problem — Where Prados and Nofi and the other people who worked there were all game designers and graphics people and developers and

there was no real business end. They were all creative artists, and nobody wanted to get his hands dirty... But someone has to devote a good portion of their work time to the business end just to maintain the company's existence. People see a lot of glory in being with SPI, but when you've got to get down and do the hard work, it's not that glorious... We're not some shoestring operation where, ho-hum, let's play some games, then let's get the mail out. SPI is run as well as any large corporation. We're lucky at SPI because we've got a lot of really bright, top-notch people. And that's not just the game people, but the people generally, the administrative people...

F&M: Yet SPI seems to have a high turnover in personnel...?

BARASCH: The pace at SPI is quite demanding, not everyone can take it. And it's not just the work load itself, but the long hours, the Friday nights, projects have to be on time... Getting into SPI's R&D Department is a real trial by fire. A lot of people find out it's not for them. I think we have a good system, though it's hard on the individuals. People are promoted through the ranks...

F&M: So, when they fade away, it's the result of the 'Peter Principle' at work?

BARASCH: Precisely. People tend to keep rising up to their level of incompetence...

F&M: Is that why you're number three in the company?

BARASCH: (laughing) Yeah...

F&M: God help us if anything happens to Dunnigan?

BARASCH: Oh, I don't know. I think that'd be all right... In fact he's always threatening to go on vacation for a month and see what happens. But that would be kind of fun...

F&M: I have a hunch he'd come back and find the office moved by the new manager...

BARASCH: Several offices should be... Maybe we'd get a paint job or something...

F&M: Which brings us to the next burning question — is Jim Dunnigan made of asbestos, or will he fry like the rest of us?

BARASCH: Jim is the man everybody sees... He is an excellent designer. He's very good with history. Jim can put one or two innovations in a game and make a beautiful game, a playable

game...

F&M: But...?

BARASCH: ...But he's totally crappy in terms of coming across with something that allows the developer to get off and roll...He's a split-second guy when it gets down to the wire. He scribbles things down, gets an outline put together...When the developer says, 'Hey, we've got a problem here...' Jim says off the cuff, 'Well — wait a second — do this!' But he won't sit and playtest it out, he'll leave that up to the developer. I feel sorry for the developers; they should get a lot more credit. Pick up three or four games designed by Jim with different developers, see if there isn't a difference. There is. There's a **big** difference. The developer can make or break a game. He does the work...People buy products by brand names and labels. SPI is a game company, a brand name, but what's more important are the wide variety of individuals at SPI. Everybody should realize that there's more than just Jim and Redmond...

F&M: What do you think of your business competitors?

BARASCH: I like being competitive. It keeps you going, it keeps you moving...I like the idea of a GDW being around because it makes the staff at SPI aware that there are other young people around making good, other creative people...I admire GDW, I like them, but I think players put too much confidence in them for the type of company they are and the type of product they're putting out. GDW puts up a front — they give the illusion of information. When you get all those nice-looking GDW charts and diagrams and breakdowns, you get the illusion that they're really right, that they really know what's going on. Yet they make mistakes in research, just like us...But beyond the research problem, I'm really happy with their types of games. There's a need for hairy, complex games. They spurred us on to explore big games, and I think we outperformed them in that area. I think that **Wellington's Victory** and **Terrible Swift Sword** are outstanding games, and I think they'll stand up to any GDW game for a long time...

F&M: When I euphemistically asked about your 'business competitors', I was really thinking more of Avalon Hill than GDW...

BARASCH: Avalon always giggle at AH's statistics and their numbers in terms of what the hobby is like and who they are catering to. What's their market research like? They have no feedback system. Where do they get their ideas about what people in the hobby want? Do they call a few people on the phone? Just talk to people at conventions? Rely on their Interest Group Baltimore interviews? If we spent our time talking only to people who came in to playtest on Friday nights, I'd feel sorry for us. We'd be selling voodoo dolls or something...

F&M: Avalon Hill seems quite sensitive about the competition with SPI...

BARASCH: Of course, of course they are...The real field of battle is the retail market, which AH has dominated for years. They are really out there, and they can throw out any crappy title and do well. And on a title-for-title basis they will outperform us because of their distribution net. But on an overall performance, since we have more titles, we overwhelm them. We're not backing away from retail competition because we know we can beat them. They obviously feel threatened, so they are moving into the non-wargaming field where they assume they can be king...

F&M: What do you think of Avalon Hill's shift to become a 'general adult game' company? They've bought out 3M, Sports Illustrated, Alladin Games...

BARASCH: I don't think it will be as lucrative for them as wargaming is. First of all, they'll be competing against giants — Parker Brothers, Mattel, Milton Bradley — I don't think AH is in the same league...Another problem is that they're going to have to come up with some new, non-wargames...

F&M: Does SPI have a spy network that tells you what Avalon Hill is up to?

BARASCH: Oh, sure...Of course, we guess wrong most of the time...This espionage thing is just a silly little game, of course, that exists only because AH is such a closed company. The 'spy network' is really just the openness- of the people in the hobby...The ironic thing about it is that the information we get out of AH is public relations for them. If we announce a game

they're working on, it only helps them by arousing people's interest in it...But I always like people to call me up or drop me a note and let me know what's going on — **There's** a message for the **F&M** readers...

F&M: An invitation to come in from the cold?

BARASCH: Yes...I will never divulge my sources...SPI is pretty open. We have very few secrets in the company. In fact, we have our own spy in our midst — David Isby. David's always eavesdropping, listening in all the time, and passing on all the gossip at SPI to John Mansfield of **SIGNAL**...One time we had our revenge on David. We decided to plant one... We told David we were buying stock in Nationwide Check. Nationwide Check is the corporation that owns Monarch, which in turn owns Avalon Hill. So, of course, David picked that up and quickly wrote **SIGNAL** that we were buying up a fair share of Nationwide Check: 'SPI is going to buy out Avalon Hill!'...Poor David...

F&M: One of the things we've found since starting F&M is that there is an incredible grapevine in this hobby. Sooner than later, everyone seems to know what everyone else is doing...

BARASCH: Almost...Don Greenwood tells me that there is still one big AH project that's out there that I haven't mentioned in **S&T** yet. So, if anybody out there knows anything...

One of Howie's nominees for unsung hero at SPI is Terry Hardy. 'Irad B. Hardy', as he is identified in design credits, is head of SPI's Research and Development staff. He has designed a number of games (eg., Wagram, October War, Chickamauga, co-credit on FireFight), and he is the chap who rescued Highway To The Reich when the original designer burned out on the project. Terry and I slipped out of SPI's offices and talked over pastrami sandwiches and beer at a nearby bar. As he fondly reminisced about the 'good old days' at SPI, I quickly learned that Hardy is a gentleman and a scholar. He paid for the beer...

HARDY:...The old days were something else...There used to be all sorts of fuzzy thinking about how the business should be run. Jimmy had an idea one time that everybody should earn at least \$5 an hour, that the object of business was to enrich the employees. And we had, in the packing and shipping end anyhow, a piecework system, where if you packed and shipped a game you earned so much. It worked fairly well when we were small, but as we got bigger, some of these characters were achieving an enormous economy of scale. Such that at one point

we had a guy who was nothing but a shipper who was hauling in seventeen/eighteen grand a year — on a piecework system!...Well, that's somewhat unfair, considering he was the highest paid employee in the company. Not that he didn't earn it, according to the rules, but it was just patently unfair. But what was worse was, when you have a piecework system, you go back periodically and drop the rates, and **that** creates bitterness. So the guys in the back room formed a union. We threw them out and got involved in a fight with the NLRB, which was right up my alley. We were one of three companies in Manhattan to beat a labor rap that year. We had all sorts of fun with it...Those were the old days, though. Over the past two years we've come along in pretty good shape. We have a good staff, and they earn a reasonable amount of money with periodic raises. We still break all the child labor laws in the world, but we're not exploiting anyone. And we manage to get the stuff out the door in what I consider a reasonable amount of time...

F&M: You oversee the development of the some thirty-odd games that come through the SPI pipeline each year, in addition to designing games, too. That can't leave much time for you to play games 'just for fun' anymore?

HARDY: That's true...But it makes it more fun when you do have an opportunity to play. With the people we've got around us, we get some pretty good tilts going. I usually manage to tangle with Simonsen. He usually wins, but he's a helluva player...

F&M: I hear it's all in how he rolls the dice. Something in the wrist...?

HARDY: No, he just refuses to play games he doesn't think he can win...But we have fun with the games. One of the games we're doing is **Oh, Canada!** We're doing it because of all the yelling and screaming we got from Canada when we suggested the subject. We'd be less than human if we didn't want to be accused of starting a civil war. What a great thing to have on your tombstone...

F&M: Speaking of Tombstones, it seems a lot of aspiring game designers have been buried when they tried to make it on SPI's R&D team. What do you look for in a guy who comes in and says, want to be a playtester, a developer'?

HARDY: Wanting to be a Playtester is an ambition that can eventually be satisfied. All he has to do is keep showing up on Friday nights for the sessions, and sooner or later he'll get in. Anybody who wants to and is at all competent ends up playtesting...As to getting hired on here as a developer or designer, I would only say stick around. That's how most of the staff got their jobs, including me...

F&M: You've been both a designer and developer. How do the tasks differ?

HARDY: The designer will walk away content when he has a game and a system that reflects history — that works in the sense that if you take the French and perform as they did historically, and I take the Germans and perform as they did historically, the end results will be historically accurate. The developer worries about the fact that 99% of the players aren't going to try and duplicate history, but change it...The designer worries about the game as 'history,' the developer worries about the game as a 'game'. Sometimes, however, the design system is so boring, there's nothing much the developer can do to save the game, to make it interesting...

F&M: Can you think of a game where that happened?

HARDY: Combined Arms...Combined Arms is the albatross around Jimmy's neck. There was nothing Kip Allen, the developer, could have done to help that game. Kip was a fairly inventive scenario writer, but **Combined Arms** was just a 'who cares?' type of design, almost too pat. It's one of those things you just give up on, and the game was given up on early on and it was a disaster. 30,000 subscribers got royalled...The funny thing is, the work on **Combined Arms** and the lessons we learned were brought out in games like **FireFight** and **Highway To The Reich**. I guess you could say having done **Combined Arms** we knew a lot of things **not** to do. That failure advanced the state of the art considerably...

F&M: So we can expect no more square wheels?

HARDY: Hopefully...

*When Hardy and I returned to SPI, we heard moans, curses, and the gnashing of teeth coming from one of the playtest rooms. It was bon-vivant Richard Berg, trying to pound out the kinks in **The Conquerors** with SPI's rising star, Mark Herman. Berg is easily the most prominent game reviewer in the hobby. An attorney and former editor of **AHIKS's Kommandeur**, he has lately tried his hand at game design (most notably with **Terrible Swift Sword**). Terry Hardy calls Berg, 'one of the best original designers we've come across in years...' I asked Berg if he enjoyed wearing the game designer's hat:*

BERG: Designing a game is easy as hell, within certain parameters...Designing is simply solution-finding time...

F&M: Have some solutions been more elusive than others?

(Berg cast a rueful glance at the **Conquerors** playtest material, then:)

BERG: Ancients are tough to deal with...They'd campaign for three years and have only one battle during that time. It doesn't lend itself to a very exciting game...Frank Davis had the same problem with Frederick the Great, and they were picking up the pace by 1759 with one battle a year...!

F&M: I have a friend who thought your Conquistador was the greatest S&T game to come along since Panzergruppe Guderian — The Game in the Previous issue of S&T...

BERG: Conquistador was a problem. It was a game that had been rattling around in my head for several years...It had been envisioned as a two-map game, and I had all sorts of stuff I

wanted to try, and the first time we played it, it was the world's worst game. Redmond and Frank Davis and Howie and I were playing it, and it took us 3¹/₂ hours to do the First Turn... We had a navigation system where you had to roll for each hex you went into. The Portugese sailed around the Caribbean for nineteen years without landing. And Redmond just kept shaking his head...Tom Walczyk would stick his head into the room and ask: How many miles per gallon? It didn't work at all. It was just dumb...

F&M: But it turned out to be a fairly interesting game when you finished with it...In the short time you've been designing games, you've covered a wide variety of historical settings. Is there no subject too tough for 'designer' Berg to tackle? You've even delved into fantasy with 'Lord of the Rings'...

BERG: The Tolkein game was a very strange problem. We were recreating a story line. It's not history, but it is. The problem is that the dyed-in-the-wool Tolkein freak is going to want to play the game, but he's going to want it to finish exactly like the book did. They get upset if the Dark Power wins. They don't see how that could have happened. And we've had people come in and say, 'Well, the Ores had six toenails and not five and therefore, etc...' You have leeway when dealing with history, you can make interpretations. Here there isn't. I don't know whether I'd like to tackle a novel again...

F&M: Other than your own games, what excites you?

BERG: I'm always excited about the stuff GDW does. I know the folks at GDW, and I like them a lot. I think they do exceptional work on subjects most companies wouldn't tackle...They do have problems with their rules, though. They think up good rules, but have trouble letting you know what they are. **Their Finest Hour** was almost incomprehensible as written...Obviously, a lot of time and effort goes into their games, and you know they're putting out the best they can...Some of their games don't work, but they fail better than some other company's games work...

F&M: How about the people in Baltimore?

BERG: Avalon Hill?...They play Alexander Dumas with their people over there, they put iron masks on all of them. That's fine, it's their business. If Eric Dott wants to muzzle his people, what the hell? He's paying them. I just think it's kind of silly...And their design philosophy is completely different than ours at SPI. They buy up games. They have a stable of outside designers. They do not do much in-house designing. The only one they've done for awhile is **Starship Troopers**. I can't think of the one before, was it **Richtofen's War**? You can't say **Tobruk** was, Harold Hock did that. That's not to say that AH isn't coming out with good stuff...

F&M: Now that you've sweated out a few designs of your own, do you have a different perspective when writing game reviews?

BERG: No, not really...In a way I'm tempted to be lenient towards designers, although I'm sure that not very many of them would think me that...I'm lenient towards designers and nasty towards developers. Most of the time, they happen to be the same person. It's the developer half of the person who screws up the game, not the designer...

F&M: You must see more games than just about anyone else in the hobby...?

BERG: You wouldn't believe some of the games that are sent to me for review. Some of them are really bad. I also get unfinished games with guys asking, 'Do you think SPI would publish this?' Or ideas for games — one guy sent us a list of 29 games, including something called 'Battle of the Nine Yak Tails.' Can you imagine trying to sell something with a title like that? It's about Genghis Khan. We feedback Genghis Khan about once a year. When I was a kid, I thought he was a fascinating figure. Obviously, I'm the only one because it doesn't get any bite with the feedback...

Berg began fondling a loaf of Irish soda bread Dunnigan had given him that morning, so I left him to ponder the mysteries of cardboard hoplites, and snuck down the hall to the Art Department. I hoped to learn whether success had spoiled

[Continued on Page 45]

[Continued from Page 39]

Redmond Simonsen. I cornered SPI's Art Director (and Editor of MOVES) in his office by holding aloft a silver crucifix and sprinkling the floor in front of him with holy water. I felt the key to understanding Redmond was figuring out what kind of guy would run the 8,000 to 1 article in MOVES...

F&M: Redmond, would you call yourself a really competitive game player?

SIMONSEN: That's why I play games. I don't play to know where the 4th Panzer Division was on January 1, 1943 —

F&M: I mean, are you really competitive?

SIMONSEN: You say that like it's pathological...I'm on the borderlands of being compulsively competitive when it comes to playing games. I wouldn't commit harikari if I lost, but I'm not one of those guys who jumps over the net and says 'Great game!' I am probably more competitive in a game environment than most people who play wargames. Most wargamers strike me as not being terribly prepared to play...

F&M: In what sense?

SIMONSEN: Well, if you go out and play chess, you're prepared to play in the sense that you know that the object is to win. You familiarize yourself totally with the moves and the implications of the moves, and take it seriously within the context of it being a game. It seems like a lot of people who play wargames are just pushing wood and dawdling around...

F&M: Isn't that because the games also serve another function besides being forums for competition? I'm thinking of the role-playing aspect —

SIMONSEN: — the fantasy projection, yes...I suppose...I do very little of that as far as I can tell...

F&M: No imagination at all, eh, Simonsen?

SIMONSEN: Basically I treat it as a game. I think it appeals to me because it has a military aura and I've always been vaguely interested in military history, but I don't have a deep and undying, serious interest in military history. I'm not a military history buff.

F&M: You've started to include articles on games from other companies in Moves...?

SIMONSEN: Sure, why not? It's really a matter of what kind of submissions we get from people. I can't print articles on other people's games if I don't get good articles on them...By and large, people send us articles on SPI games, but there's not policy of any sort of exclude other people's games...

F&M: I get the impression that the Art Department catches the ball around here when everyone else has dropped it...?

SIMONSEN: The Art Department is the last creative reserve between the game and the customer...

F&M: You're the goatee...?

SIMONSEN: Perhaps by virtue of our not being as close to the game for so long as the designer or developer, we can sometimes invent a system that cleans up some aspect of the game, makes it easier to play...Usually, it's a matter of the rules not being well-written enough or well-organized enough. And sometimes there are ways to do things more simply than the people who've been working on the game have come up with...

F&M: Why isn't there anyone else in the hobby that does what Redmond Simonsen does as well as he does?

SIMONSEN: Because it's a small pond and there's not much money in it...Most people loose sight of how small this 'industry' really is. It's only a few half-dozen million dollars total sales all wrapped up into one. I know some people get dispirited when you mention money, but that's one measure of the energy in a given system. If you look at it strictly as that, wargaming is not a large system. The creative population is relatively small. I happened to be a professional artist to begin with, and had sort of an engineering orientation that dovetailed well with the problems involved in designing graphic systems for wargames — who happened to get interested in wargames. There are a lot of filters there, a lot of chance involved with my being here at all...Also, who says I'm right? I do, or I wouldn't be doing it, but I'm sure there are any number of people out there who don't care for the way I do things. They say, 'I like

GREAT LAKES CONVENTION

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DATE: September 16 - 18, 1977

TIME: Gaming starts 8:00 P.M., Friday, September 16th
Doors Open to General Public
10:00 A.M., September 17th

- Seminars and Slide Show Presentation
- Modeling Contest
- Awards Banquet
- Opening Ceremonies by Local Re-enactment Group
- Boardgaming Competition
- Miniature Competition
- Dealers

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the way so-and-so designs components...'

F&M: Name a so-and-so...

SIMONSEN: (embarrassed chuckle)...Uh...I can't...Based on what I've seen, frankly, I don't think there's anybody out there who's making a serious effort at it...

F&M: Have you rehearsed your Charles Roberts Award acceptance speech yet?

SIMONSEN: (bemused)...No...Frankly, I don't put much stock in (a) industry awards, and (b) awards in an industry as small as wargaming. The field is so limited to begin with, with so few operators, that basically all they're saying is 'Hey, you're a great guy — Yeah, well, you're a great guy, too...' What does it all mean in the final analysis? The real test of whether a game is a good game is whether a large segment of the knowledgeable wargamers gets together and says 'yes, this is a good game,' and continues to play it over a period of time...Awards don't hurt anybody, I just don't think they mean very much...

F&M: You gonna pull a George C. Scott on us?

SIMONSEN: No...If somebody gives me an award, I'll say 'Thank you very much,' thank all the little people, walk off the stage, and that's it... The voting in the Roberts Awards is so limited that it's not as if the gestalt of the garnerers are approving you. It just represents a bunch of people at a convention voting on the nominees chosen by a relatively few people in the wargaming 'industry'. I'd be very happy to get the award, but...

F&M:...You'd prefer the cash?

(laughter)

F&M: One last question Redmond — is it still fun for you?

SIMONSEN: (pensive) On some days it's fun...(grins, then laughs) Sure it's fun...! • •