ORIGINS '76

by
Al Bisasky

Once upon a time, in a shabby backroom at the offices of Avalon Hill, a few of the members of Interest Group Baltimore decided that it would be a neat idea if they held a convention in the town where wargaming (the cardboard version) saw its birth. They would get Avalon Hill to sponsor it, put on tournaments, a trade show, and all the other miscellaneous things you have at a convention, and -wargamers from near and, far would come to have a wonderful time. So with their spirits high and this half-baked idea in their heads, Interest Group Baltimore(IGB) managed to pull off the ORIGINS I convention in July of 1975. It turned out to be **the** most successful wargaming convention to date. So much for ancient history.

With such a successful convention last year it was only natural for IGB to shoot for the hat trick and try for a repeat performance this year. To make a long story short, they pulled it off. Not only was ORIGINS II a success, but the people involved managed to take a good thing and make it even better. But to paraphrase Bill Shakespeare, I came to tell you what went down, not to blow the horn for the guys who made it what it was. So with tongue-in-cheek and a chagrined look on MacGowan's face, I present to you THE BAWLAMER CON STORY...

`Bawlamer', for those of you who may not be natives and/or do not speak the local lingo, is Bawlamerese for Baltimore, Maryland, the site of this year's, and last's, ORIGINS convention. The con was held during three of the hottest and most raunchy days that this town has become famous for. The location site was on the beautiful Johns Hopkins University's Homewood campus, right in the middle of 'Charm City.' So much for the weather report and commercials. Anyhow, wargamers from as far away as California, Canada, and Florida came in droves to participate in the tournaments, to meet their fellow wargamers, and to see what was new in the hobby. They were not disappointed.

Of all the things that went on during that weekend in July, the most interesting and successful had to have been the trade show. This is where all the big and small producers of wargames and related paraphernalia came to show off their new wares and seek that which is all important to the design, development, and production of wargames. That certain something that makes this great hobby of ours what it is today: Money. A brief description of what went on at the trade show regarding the gainers in attendance would be: **they came, they saw, they bought...and bought...and bought.** It was like watching a 57,000 cubic foot body with two million arms all holding twenty dollar bills and shouting at the company reps for games over a din that made the '69 Superbowl sound like a New England church service. To say that there were wall-to-wall wargamers is no exaggeration. Needless to say, all of the company reps that I talked to were extremely pleased.

Hawkin', Horsetradin', and the Kid with the California Tilt

Probably what most of the troops that weren't there are interested in, as far as the trade show is concerned, is what games everybody seemed to be buying up in great numbers. Interested or not, you're gonna hear about it anyway! Now then, over at the Avalon Hill camp, that was strategically placed right in front of the main entrance (I wonder how they managed to get that location?) the big sellers were: **RUSSIAN CAMPAIGN, CAESAR: THE BATTLE OF ALESIA,** and (the biggest seller) **STARSHIP TROOPERS.** This year AH has reverted somewhat to the back-in-the-old-days type of simplicity. I for one am glad to see the resurrection of the simple, easily learned, fun-type conflict simulation. And from what I can gather, anything that **doesn't** have a rules booklet that looks like an army technical manual is like a breath of fresh air to most wargamers.

Meanwhile, over at Simulation Publications' digs, the big number from the Big Apple was **TERRIBLE SWIFT SWORD.** The rumors and the vibes have it that **T.S.S.** is probably **the** best design ever from SPI. And at twenty bucks a shot, it damned well ought to be! Another new one that was much in evidence was their super deluxe, bookcase-boxed and window-dressed **RUSSIAN CIVIL WAR.** I didn't get a chance to look at the game itself, but with the number of copies that I saw floating around perhaps I should have taken' a closer look. I understand that the mapboard is even mounted, which in itself deserves a close inspection. Could this possibly be the start of a trend over at SPI?

GDW, which stands for Game Designer's Workshop, (not `goddammed wargames' as many wives and girlfriends will tell you) was doing quite well with their two new efforts: **BATTLE FOR MIDWAY —** Decision in the Pacific, 1942 and **AVALANCHE —** The Salerno Landings. This was the first time that I have had a chance to even give a casual look at their designs and I must say that I am very impressed, especially with their **Europa** Series. The **Europa** Series is comprised of, at the present time, four indepth simulations of major campaigns of the European Theatre of Operations in World War II. The first of the series, **DRANG NACH OSTEN!** won the **CAMPAIGN/PANZERFAUST** Magazine Subscriber's award for the best wargame design of all time. If the award sounds like a mouthful, you should see the game! Would you believe 'Fall Barbarossa' done with five, count 'em, five mapboards and 1700 unit counters? If that's not enough for you, they have the continuation of the Russian Campaign, compatable with **DNO, UNENTSCHIEDEN.** If you're an Eastern Front freak, this definitely looks like **the** way to go (not to mention SPI's **WAR IN EUROPE).**

Also on the subject of the Eastern Front is **EAST FRONT** by Control Box. Control Box Inc. is probably the smallest company producing games — they have but one game and one designer. That one designer, Stephen Bettum, was once a computer programmer for SPI and while it doesn't look like Stephen will offer any great amount of competition to his ex-employer at this time, it's hard to overlook a game like **EAST FRONT.** It is the first game that I know of that uses hexagonal shaped unit counters. Overall its graphics are very well done. There is, however, a drawback to this game; namely, the $15.00 price tag. And, unfortunately, alot of people are going to pass it up because it's from a small company. Which is a real shame as this is such a good design. If you took the same exact game, unchanged, and stamped Avalon Hill on the box, you guys would pay fifteen bucks without batting an eye!

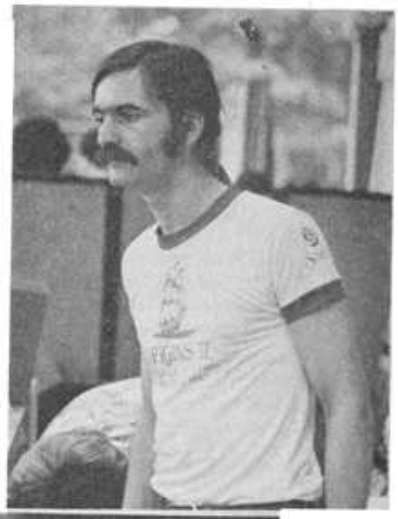
VON MANSTEIN was doing a decent trade for the Rand Company, I'm very pleased to say. Of all the games on the Eastern Front in World War II, this one in my opinion, stands among the best. Now if Rand could only manage to do something about the errata that almost ruins their designs.

Since **FIRE & MOVEMENT** is a 'forum', I can make the following statement and get away with it. Of all the new games that made their debut at ORIGINS II, there were only two that I considered buying. They were **SUBMARINE** and **AIR FORCE,** both from Battleline Publications. They also just happen to have been Battleline's two biggest sellers next to their little plastic trays (which much to Battleline's surprise sold better than all their games combined). I don't have the space, unfortunately, to go into the why's and wherefores of why I like their two latest efforts. I will, however, direct your attention to issue #3

Paul Richard Banner of GDW

Mike Williford & Steve Peek of Battleline

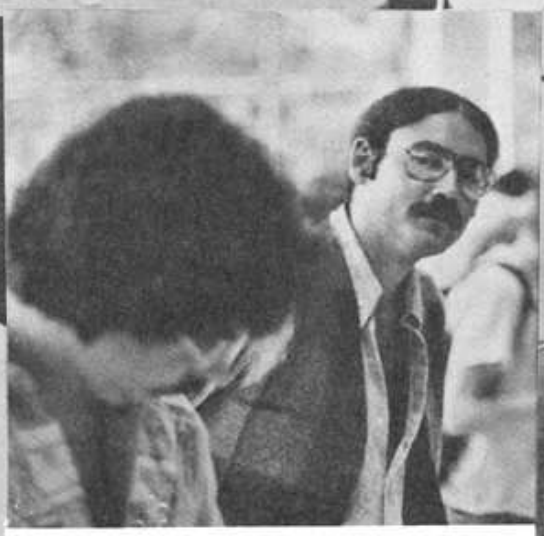
Jack Greene Jr.



Richard Berg of SPI

Photography by Al Bisasky

Randy Reed of AH



John Prados of Morningside

Marc Miller of GDW

of F&M and the Battle Report on AIR FORCE by Contributing Editor Ray Lowe and my report on SUBMARINE in an upcoming issue. If this all sounds like blatant favoritism for Battleline Publications it is not meant to be, I assure you. I could care less if Battleline, or for that matter any other game company sells their games and/or makes any money doing so. My only concern is with the betterment of the hobby and if I see a game that I feel is decent and is a good addition to the hobby, then my only intention is to pass the word along about it.

The two most captivating booths at the show were not ones representing board wargaming. The were Der Kriegspeilers and the GHQ Company who both deal in military miniatures and their related accessories. Der Kriegspeilers, a division of Custom Cast, Inc. had a set up that looked more like a small department store than just a trade show booth. And all the goodies! Just looking at what D.K. and GHQ had to offer was enough to make me seriously consider going the route and getting into miniatures. If I could only afford three or four dozen of the sailing ship miniatures! The big sellers for both companies seemed to be (what else!) armored miniatures.

JAGDPANTHER Publications, winner of this year's Charles Roberts Award for best amateur wargaming magazine, looked to be doing a bang-up business with their current and back issues. Stephen Cole told me to say that, didn't you Steve? At any rate, JAGDPANTHER is a nicely done publication containing game variants, scenarios, rules changes, reviews, and tactical type articles. The magazine is really neat, but the best thing I can say about the games that come in every issue is to put them away somewhere (for when you don't have anything better to occupy your mind).

Despite rumors to the contrary, Simulations Design Corporation **(Conflict)** is alive. Dana Lombardy of SDC told me that their big sellers at Origins II were **JERUSALEM!** and **CROMWELL.** Dana told me that he was most surprised with his sales (most of his products have been around for awhile, but they were all selling well at Origins).

Other heavy sellers included **NUCLEAR WAR** from Flying Buffalo and **DUNGEONS & DRAGONS** from TSR. I know that I've left out some items about the trade show, but my excuse is that I couldn't be everywhere at once. If I failed to mention one company or another it is only because with the limited amount of time that I had it was impossible to try and get interviews with everyone. My apologies if you feel offended. (Editor's Note: Al's time was limited in part because he co-officiated the WS&IM tournament at Origins II.)

FIRE & MOVEMENT, I'm happy to say sold out at the trade show. If you were looking for a copy; but were unable to obtain one, the reason was that we underestimated our sales. We're sorry and we hope that you'll order a copy or subscribe sometime soon.

The aforementioned 'California Tilt' was a phenomenon that was quite evident with the younger wargamers in attendance. They eventually seemed to develop a thirty-degree starboard list from carrying the stacks of new games under their arms. I noticed one individual with nineteen games in tow! What I would like to know is where they get all the time necessary to learn, set up, and play all those games. I would sell my soul for just three hours a week to devote to just playing for my own enjoyment. There is no justice in this world. For those of you who may think that writing for a wargaming magazine is really fantastic, consider the fact that the time spent on writing could be spent playing instead. Philosophical, but quite true.

The People You Meet At Conventions

Aside from the trade show, the new games, and the tournaments, the greatest interest to wargamers at a convention is in meeting with other wargamers and the people responsible for the games themselves. Unfortunately my time was extremely limited, much to my disappointment. I did, however, get a little more time to talk to the people who design, develop, and write about the games. I have found that the average wargamer has more than just a casual interest in what goes on behind the scenes with the various companies and more specifically, the people involved. It is for this reason that I write about some of the zanies that I met while covering the con for **F&M.**

During the trade show, I had the opportunity to meet very briefly with Jim Dunnigan and Richard Berg of SPI. I had heard that the people from SPI could be aloof to the point of being rude when approached by someone from another game company or magazine. I found this not to be the case at all. Jim Dunnigan has been described as legendary', an enigma, **the** most radical designer of all time, and some other things that the editor would not like me to print. What he is, or isn't, is a debate that I'll leave strictly to philosophers of wargaiming. I would describe him as being friendly and down-to-earth. In fact he gave me the impression that he was actually glad to see someone from **F&M.** Much the same is true for Richard Berg, SPI's game reviewer. Richard, however, is alot more jovial than Jim and seems to show more of an interest in the gaming business outside of SPI. He doesn't mince words and his criticisms, positive and negative, are straightforward. Richard's view of **FIRE & MOVEMENT ...something that** wargaming has needed for a long time. I personally am glad to see it.'

The Boys from Battleline, or should I say the Good 01' Boys could best be described as Stephen Peek's Flying Circus. **The** word 'circus' pretty well sums up their booth at the trade **show** too. Somehow, standing there watching the goings on, I **had the** feeling that I was watching the reincarnation of **the Marx** Brothers. They were having fun selling their games, the people were having fun buying their games, and I **had a rather good** time watching all the clowning around. I was surprised **to find** out that everyone on the Battleline staff works **only part-time** for the company. Craig Taylor, their chief designer, is **a** supervisor for a liquor distributor, which probably explains why they have such a good time while working on their games. Steve Peek works for Atlanta Gas where he gets his jollies talking on the phone to customers while doing his Groucho Marx impersonation. I spent the better part of an hour in **the JHU** rathskeller with Craig and Steve listening to a blow-by-blow account of how they came up with **AIR FORCE.** Actually I spent the time rolling on the floor doubled **up with** laughter listening to them describe how **AIR FORCE** was **put** together. The convection went something like this:

Al Bisasky [F&M]: AIR FORCE looks like a difficult game **to** learn. The rules and the game system might be difficult **to** comprehend.

Steve Peek: Yeah, well, there was alot more to **it, but we had to** edit out many of the rules. You see we have **to do our rules** booklets in multiples of four pages. So we **had to leave out some** minor stuff, like the **combat rules!**

Al: Well, I still don't think that you guys are a **'shoestring** company'...

Steve: Oh yes we are! In fact, we just got a warehouse **for our** stock. Up until then we were using Craig's basement.

AI: Why did you make the counters so thick for **AIR FORCE and SUBMARINE?**

Steve: Notice anything about Craig's fingers?

Al: Uh, not really.

Steve: See how fat and short they are? We had to make the counters thick so he could pick them up. Besides that, he can't play any game that you have to stack counters in.

AI: There's a rumor spreading that AH wants to **buy SUBMARINE.** Is **that true?**

Steve: Probably not. We like it just the way it is. Give it to those guys and you'll probably have to roll the die every **turn to** see if the crew of the sub gets scurvy or demoralized or some other dumb thing like that.

Steve (describing **AIR FORCE): ...** so we're doing this scenario where I have to strafe an airfield. So I get everything lined up and figured out down to the last hex and speed factor so I **can** get in and get out fast. So, I have to overdive the **Jug (P-47)**

(which can dive like hell anyway) and I roll the die and do you know what happened? The damned wings fell off!

AI: What did you do then?

Steve: Well, we changed the damned overdive rules. Now when you overdive the wings fall off automatically. You don't have to roll the die for it!

As much as these guys joke and kid around about their games they do take them seriously. Seriously enough that anything that they make financially on one game, they pour right back into the next. Perhaps it's because they have such a good time designing that their games are so enjoyable to play.

John Prados designs for Rand Games (among others) and is also a contributing editor for **F&M.** His design credits include **VON MANSTEIN** for Rand, **YEAR OF THE RAT** for SPI, and **THIRD REICH** for AH. Need I say more about John Prados the game designer? John Prados the man, however, is alot more difficult to describe. John is very serious; he gives you the feeling that each word or phrase that he uses is carefully thought out and thoroughly analyzed before it is spoken. I get the impression that being methodical and paying close attention to detail are obsessions with John. I asked him about the errata problems that Rand has had. The problem seems not to lie with John at all, but with the publishers of Rand Games. The publisher can prove to be the designer's headache...it would seem.

I spent quite a bit of time talking to John Mansfield, the editor of **SIGNAL** Magazine. John is very outspoken and has more than a few good ideas regarding gaming conventions. He feels that the best location for a con would be in a hotel where all the facilities are close at hand rather than being too spread out (as on a college campus). The drawback to this is that most hotels are located in downtown urban areas. We got into a discussion about how most wargamers continue to show favor towards the `Big Gun' companies and have a tendency to ignore the really good designs that come out of the smaller companies. Wargamers **are** their own worst enemies.

Steve Cole of **JAGDPANTHER** is strictly business to the point of being excessively so. In my conversation with Steve and Al Eldridge I couldn't really get either one of them to take a stand on any of the questions that I asked. Most of the interview was spent listening to how good **JAGDPANTHER** is. I did get the impression that Cole was a bit miffed at the organization of the convention. **JAGDPANTHER** won the Charles Roberts Award for the Best Amateur Boardgaming Magazine. In my opinion, they deserved very much to win. My only objection to their winning was having Cole walk up to me after the awards and say, 'We won. Make sure you mention that.' Okay, **JAGDPANTHER,** you've been mentioned. But I would keep in mind that when someone attempts to throw their weight around to the point of becoming irritating, they should first make sure that they have the weight necessary to throw.

One of the most enlightening conversations that I had at the con was with Mike Malone, owner of the Hamilton Bookshop of Seattle, Washington. Mike is not a designer or writer, just a wargamer and retailer of conflict simulations. But when you come right down to it, it's people like Mike whose opinions really count. Mike's biggest criticism of the wargaming journals is their inclusion of historical-type articles rather than presenting strictly game oriented topics. Quite a few people that I talked to share Mike's view. Personally, I don't agree with Mike, although I respect his opinion. I think that it is very important to give historical information to supplement gaming articles where it is applicable.

I met quite a mixed cross section of people at Origins II. I formed many friendships and got a chance to meet many new people, which for me is always a pleasure. I look forward to ORIGINS III in New York to meet again with people like Mansfield, Miller, Prados, etc. It is really a shame that you don't run across people like that except for once a year.

And Now Friends, The Bisasky Busted Bogey Wheel Awards for Origins II

Over the past year or so, the BBBW Awards have become somewhat of a standing joke with the editor and staff of **FIRE & MOVEMENT.** They're basically my lampoons at some of the stuff that sees print in **F&M** and since they seem to have somewhat of a warped sense of appeal with the staffers, I thought what the hell, I'll do some on the con and see if the readers get a charge out of them. They're all strictly tongue-in-cheek and if anyone takes offense to anything that I may say I am not only prepared to retract it, but to deny, under oath, that I ever said a thing! Without any further ado, the Bisasky Busted Bogey Wheel Awards for the Unsung Zeros at Origins II:

THE T-SHIRT AWARD: To SPI for having more t-shirts on the backs of more people than AH and TSR put together!

THE WHAT ME WORRY? AWARD: To Don Greenwood for not getting upset once during the entire weekend.

YOU CAN DRESS 'EM UP, BUT YOU CAN'T TAKE 'EM ANYWHERE AWARD: To Randy Reed for his apology for the non-appearance of scheduled guest speaker Admiral Wade McClucky who unfortunately passed away before the convention.

THE WOW, AM I SURPRISED AWARD: To Jim Dunnigan on his being named to the Wargaming Hall of Fame.

GROUCHO MARX LOOK ALIKE AWARD, DEMORALIZED WITH SCURVY DIVISION: To Steve Peek

THE BIGGEST-DAMNED-MOTHER-OF-A-GAME-FOR- '76 AWARD, BUT WILL ANYBODY REALLY PLAY IT DIVISION: To SPI's **TERRIBLE SWIFT SWORD.**

THE BOY DID WE EVER SCREW UP AWARD: To **FIRE & MOVEMENT** for not bringing enough copies of the magazine to sell at the trade show.

THE GREATEST BULL-SHOOTER IN WARGAMING AWARD, MARATHON DIVISION: To Jim Dunnigan for his one hour seminar on game design that lasted over six hours!!!

THE GEE I FORGOT THAT RULE AWARD: To Jack Greene, Jr. while helping to judge the **WOODEN SHIPS & IRON MEN** TOURNAMENT.

ORIGINS II: AN OVERVIEW

There were minor slip-ups here and there, a lot of things could have stood improvement, and better administrative coordination was needed. Perhaps John Mansfield is right; wargaming conventions should be held in a large hotel and not on a college campus. There could have been more room at the trade show for exhibitors. The dormitory rooms were uncomfortable and the food service inadequate. The running of the tournaments needs to be standardized. There should have been more time for the seminars and perhaps even more seminars. But all these things were minor compared to the overall success of ORIGINS II. It was a great deal of hard work by many unselfish people that made it a success. Of everyone that I talked to, not one person, exhibitor or person in attendance felt that anything major was wrong with the convention. Most had a good time and most came away happy. There was a feeling of satisfaction when it was all over. And there was a feeling of sadness that it was in fact over.

Next year, ORIGINS III. will be under the sponsorship of Simulations Publications, Inc. and will be held on Staten Island in New York City. I think personally that the whole 'ORIGINS' concept will be lost in New York and it should not even carry the name ORIGINS. For the whole idea of ORIGINS was to hold a convention in the city where wargaming was born. Next year, it will be sorely missed. And, as far as this writer is concerned, whether it's held in New York, or Chicago, or Ottawa, it won't be ORIGINS again until it returns to

John Mansfield

Al Nofi

Elise Gygax of TSR

Dana Lombardy of SDC

ORIGINS II NOTEBOOK
A Personal Perspective
by Jack Greene Jr.

I'd like to share with you some of my experiences from Origins **II.** This is not an in-depth look at the convention, but rather a personal perspective on the 'big show'. First off, Origins II was quite a successful event. Over 2,300 members of the hobby were in attendance (compared to 1,500 in 1975 at Origins I).

Somehow a rumor got started within the ranks of the professionals and semi-professionals that **Fire & Movement** only had a circulation of a few hundred at best. This rumor was in evidence at Origins II and I decided to track it down. In doing so I got into a conversation with Steve Peek of Battleline Publications and he told me that he had recently been told that **F&M's** circulation was more like 2,000. This was more like it and considering **F&M** had but only two issues out at Origins this was quite an impressive circulation in this hobby. Steve also mentioned to me that his company was going great guns and that the intial print run on **AIR FORCE** of 2,000 games was nearly sold out after only three months. That is a hard act to follow for a little company. I was left with the strong opinion that if GDW is the China of the hobby (The Third World) then Battleline must be the India.

There were two pieces of electronics of notable interest at Origins. First there was Battleline's TV monitor which played a newsreel of their three new games being played. This was both funny and enjoyable to watch. In the demonstration of the **AIR FORCE** game cardboard counters with airplane silhouettes were shown exploding in mid-air on a backdrop of a hexagon boards. The other piece of electronics (also must be seen to be appreciated) was Howie Barasch and Richard Berg 'wired' with walkie-talkies trying to find out where the other was amid all the interference caused by the campus buildings! One of the SPIers asked me (jokingly!) if Tom Shaw of A/H was 'wired' to record the entire goings on at the SPI Roast! The 'Roast', by the way, was much tamer than had been expected. Instead of questions like 'Why doesn't SPI produce quality games?' or 'Why does SPI run off at the mouth?', most of the questions were aimed at particular game-playing problems in **SINAI** or **TERRIBLE SWIFT SWORD** and the like.

Trafalgar inched its way up to $90 a copy at the auction — this is an 80 percent increase from last year. What was the game that 'sucked in' the person looking for the unusual? Last year it was Martial Enterprise's **LA BATAILLE DE LA MOSKOWA** (Borodino). This year it was the **SIEGE OF JERUSALEM70 A.D.** by Historical Perspectives, PO Box 343, Flushing Station, NY 11367. For $10 one gets a board, counters, and **five** rule books! It is a game for the tactician who enjoys street-to-street fighting. It looked good and was certainly worth the price. It is a most unusual game and I look forward to seeing other titles from them in the future. Richard Berg's **TERRIBLE SWIFT SWORD** (SPI) was another game that I found interesting — I look forward to getting into this game the next time **I** have a weekend to spare.

David Isby (SPI) and I got into a discussion on naval games at the naval seminar sponsored by Andrew Smith. I got to talking about the progress of **BISMARCK** (which I was working on at A/H) and how, in the historical action, everything revolved around a few days in May of 1941. The game therefore could not cover much of a larger span of time and be accurate historically. I made the point that SPI has had a philosophy of covering everything with the 'same system', while A/H has just tried to pick a moment and make it as accurate as possible — such as **TOBRUK** representing May of 1942 and nothing else. I went on to say that A/H was at work on a possible game covering the German air invasion of Crete in 1941. I said that if SPI were to cover this subject they'd cover all the paratroop landing in WWI, WWII and WWIII! David said that it would go more like this: with the SPI 'waffle production system' they'd first release **CRETE** as a quad game. Then this would be followed closely by a **monster** version with eight mapboards and fought at squad level. Finally, a year later, it would become a power politics game involving six players or more!

The most classic moment for me at Origins came when a nearly-broke customer came up to the SDC booth and told Dana Lombardy, 'If I buy **JERUSALEM!** I can't eat.' Dana told him to eat instead!