

WAR STORIES

TALES FROM THE FRONT
by Barry Hilton,
embedded correspondent
at HISTORICON 2010,
Valley Forge, PA



One of our favourite (and quite regular) contributors, Barry Hilton, penned this After Action Report based on his recent trip across the pond to visit HISTORICON 2010. It's an interesting exercise in comparing and contrasting the types of shows (and their attendees) in the UK and the US.

HIT THE LZ

After a scouting mission to The Host, Lancaster, PA in 2005, I decided to return and get 'stuck in' at HISTORICON 2010's new venue; The Valley Forge Convention Center. For international visitors the journey from Philadelphia Airport is an unchallenging 40 minutes by car. Just as well, the temperature was 103 when I landed. There is a lot of web chat about whether 'change is our friend' regarding the location switch. I found the new venue excellent. Most of the après-event cyberspace whingeing is tediously predictable. The usual suspects inexorably increase their post-count to gain another gold star on True Wargaming Addict Talk.com! If however, your most constructive comment is 'the elevators had wonky lights' or 'the Philly Cheesesteaks were too small' then its time to get out of the basement and inhale some oxygen.

The scale of HISTORICON calls for a level of organization well above the norm. Right from the point of arrival you can't fail to be impressed by the set up. Bob Giglio and his team are attentive, enabling, and keen to run a top quality event which, in my opinion, they more than succeeded in doing. Maybe I'm easily impressed and too used to village hall picnic tables and fold up chairs, but the four-lane highway, exhibition style registration area made me feel like a VIP arriving to see Kiss at the O2 Arena and not a punter at a wargames convention! Replete with my 'Speaker' badge and my little polybag full of freebies I jumped out of the Huey and hit the LZ!

TUNNEL RAT

Clarence Harrison and I were at Historicon primarily to showcase our rule sets *Republic to Empire* and *Beneath the Lily Banners* to as many American gamers as could stand listening to

my Glaswegian brogue. To that end we'd signed up to a fairly ambitious programme which would leave us little time for indulging in those other pre-eminent wargaming activities: Chatting, looking, spending, eating and beer! Arriving on Wednesday is a good idea. It offers a chance to find your way around and settle in. I blame Clarence for the schedule of six, three hour games each taking ten players. I also rashly agreed to deliver three talks on subjects related to wargaming in the Pike and Shot era (1600-1699 was the theme) and to participate on a panel discussing the transition from pike to bayonet. On paper it looked OK. In reality, it meant not stepping outside the Center between Thursday 0900 and Sunday 1300. The labyrinthine corridor complex of Scanticon is akin to the Mines of Moria or perhaps a Vietcong bunker network. I had developed Seasonal Affective Disorder, lost several pounds, and walked at least five miles without seeing daylight by the end of the weekend.

LANDSCAPE

The scope of HISTORICON is immense. If you are an active contributor it greatly curtails your ability to put the entire experience in perspective because there is simply no time or opportunity to get around it all. Convention is a very accurate descriptor because such a wide spectrum of the hobby fraternity is catered for. The 'Talks' programme (aka The War College) is extensive and features a range of speakers from 'celebrities' like Dale Dye to authors, historians, professors, artists and gamers. Many attend for this component alone and have no interest in wargaming.

There was a section of the convention containing 50 'club' games. I am unsure just what a club game is. I think, some kind of private or invitation only affair. This was probably where most of the sexy stuff was, alas I never saw a bit of it as it was hidden away in another section of the complex. In the main gaming hall there was a savannah-like tournament area for Ancients. Next to it the equally expansive *Flames Of War* tourney zone was, in itself, bigger than many UK shows. Some really nice terrain in the latter area but tourney gaming has never been my scene. I am extremely fond of *FOW*, it is an innovative and entertaining game. Unfortunately, wall-to-wall tank syndrome seems to have set in pretty deeply. *FOW* tourneys may be the new refuge for list sniffers who previously inhabited the gloomy recesses of points driven systems predicated on malleting your opponent into the tabletop. I am certain *Battlefront* will have an eye on that and ensure their super system does not suffer 'brand vandalism' in the way a certain European beer did! From 'premium lager' to 'wife beater' only took about 10 years.

Otherwise, there were many games but few that really stood out visually. I do recall three on the Dealer Hall level which caught my eye; a 54mm version of the Alamo, The Siege of Vienna in 28mm and a Napoleonic game in which Alan and Michael Perry were participating. All very nice and my comments are ALL very British because what it looks like is not the pre-eminent criteria at HISTORICON. What it plays like is a far more important consideration! There was a substantial area set aside for more than a dozen games by Duke Seifried. My understanding was that these were all for sale. Perhaps that is why it was on the Dealer Hall level.



COMMERCE

The D-H was very large but as a comparison, not as large as SALUTE or so it seemed. The differences between UK and US trade offerings do not lie with the big brands. These, like most world high streets these days, are common. It is the small producers, who have neither the money nor the motivation to advertise beyond the local market, who provide the flavour and something that you might not be able to get back home. Another noticeable difference was the American love of T-shirts, war DVDs and most prominent of all, military art. Several artists, including Keith Rocco, were selling and displaying original works and Osprey had an artist (Peter Dennis) working 'live' on new plates during each day. That was interesting and different.

I cannot fairly comment on the vast array of products which caught my eye or those that I missed (obviously!) I would however like mention a few gems. Eureka Miniatures 28mm Early Napoleonic range is outstanding and growing. It contains some beautiful sculpting and imaginative vignettes. Their new Suvarov vintage Russians were on display and I thought these were beautiful. Sash & Saber have been around for a long time but seeing their 40mm stuff up close is a real joy. I had to buy some and their 28's are very good too. There was a company selling charming, modern design 54mm toy soldiers with the featured range being The War of 1812. Although not a toy soldier collector myself, these were really tempting and beautifully painted.





INTERNATIONAL TRADE

US Dealers seem, on the whole, more willing to engage with the milling throng than those at home, particularly with passing prey. This hawking is done in a nice, polite and 'easy to back out of' way so it's not like shopping in a souk! I spent an hour or so on Saturday evening sitting with some dealers discussing the perceived differences between Brits and Americans when it comes to THE HOBBY. I did not initiate any of these conversations. The topic was raised with me at least five times over the convention. The views are remarkably mirror image like, something I remarked on when I wrote about HISTORICON five years ago. The desire to discuss it, however, appeared undiminished. Someone said, without any edge, that Americans tended to distrust the Brits in terms of commercial situations. A curious comment, I thought. Are they too naïve? Are we somewhat brusque? I was myself described as 'difficult to deal with' in a negotiation simply because I was not willing to agree to the first offer made by the other party. I felt rather proud of that and took it as a compliment! The view of a few US traders is a touch insular insofar as many claim to be the sole US distributor for something. That in itself is a precursory positioning statement staking claim to unfeasible trade discounts often on negligible volumes. Often the US, in this context, appears to mean the trader's state or county line. There is a perception in the UK that the US is a vast and massively under exploited market for wargaming products. I suspect this is pure myth. The population of the US is five times that of the UK but I do not believe there to be five times the number of gamers, historical or

otherwise. I reckon the differential to be slight with the edge going to the US.

Most traders are running hand to mouth hobby businesses and that was very clear from the conversations. Many could not afford to trade at HISTORICON this year because the increase in costs made it non-viable. I have the privilege of travelling a lot in my job and I would say that nowadays Americans have a rather more small 'c' conservative attitude than we Brits and tend to look more inwards than outwards. Britain's modest size in global terms and proximity to numerous accessible foreign destinations has precipitated an adjustment in perspective. We are far more outward looking than 30 years ago. It's almost a role reversal. The USA has been around long enough to lose the young nation tag and people there seem pretty set in their ways about many things. To some extent it appears they have become generally wary of outsiders... even we very friendly ones!

I tried my theory of why British shows are different from US shows on several people with whom I spoke and most bought it. For those unfamiliar with said theory: American gamers generally get less chances to game than their UK brethren and so max out at conventions by playing as much as possible. British gamers, spoiled (?) by more numerous and more proximate club options, use their shows to talk, showcase their skills and buy gear. As most people are residential at US conventions, gamers can cut the crap at the table and talk crap all night over a beer! We Brits just tend to talk crap at the table. Same needs, different solution! The UK needs at least one 2-3 day residential event of this type to shake up the show scene and add a bit of variety. OK, so who's volunteering to organize that?



COVERT - OPS

At a convention of this size the action takes place on many levels. There are the standard activities already described. There are also discussions which take place in quiet corners; murmurings of discontent and less positive views of what is going on. As a foreigner, it was remarkable to experience the extent to which political issues prevail. The UK has no overarching control body for wargaming like HMGS. If it did, I suspect no one would pay the slightest attention to what its office bearers had to say or wanted, rather like our Government. At HISTORICON the buzz often focused on decisions about who decided what and why. Intrigue, speculation and scepticism added strong spice to the stew. The power plays within the elected body and their personalities generated much muttering, little of it positive. Two plus two always seemed to make more than four. I am in no position to comment, but a show report would be incomplete without nodding recognition to what many people were openly and frequently talking about. The pages of TMP are full of it and it is generally an unedifying spectacle revolving around those old favourites – money and power.

FOLKS

My abiding memories of HISTORICON 2010 are not games, products, politics, venues, food, weather, or transport. They are people. The overwhelming sentiment was unbounded and unqualified enthusiasm. That is a big difference between the US and UK scene. British gamers will no doubt want a word in my ear about that comment, but lads, it's true. There were also far more young gamers around, filling the place with noise and energy and, well, youth! The UK wargame scene is a ticking time bomb demographic on a single fare concession to oblivion and unless we can attract young gamers in, we're extinct in about 30 years. What can be done to get even a handful of smiling, happy, hobby-wise women and enthusiastic youngsters participating in British shows?

We ran two games involving the most witty and lively septuagenarian. John, from somewhere in the Greater New York area who was just a pleasure to be around. Sharp as a tack and crackling with impish humour, he had the whole table laughing with him. Big George, who played King James in our Boyne game, was a senior with the enthusiasm of a 10 year old. Damn the tactics, let's get into the enemy! Jim, a very high ranking military gent kept Clarence and I giggling with his colourful service stories and his personal pipe-tobacco rebellion

against the petty rules of modern PC America. We assisted a Dad to finally bring his son over from the dark side of Fantasy gaming to the sunny Historical uplands and they both came and told us about it as the convention closed! A trio of gaming buddies had me in stitches. One, a policeman, assured me that he frequently carried a weapon to games and had once, whilst GM-ing at a convention, asked a guy to leave a game for unacceptable behaviour. The "Perp" fitted the usual profile: backpack, beard, soap allergy, no social skills. Here is the abridged exchange:

Officer Wargamer: "Sir, could you please leave the table. You are upsetting the normal people"

Perp: "Why do you want me to leave the game?"

Officer Wargamer: "Do you really want me to tell you?"

Perp: (pauses)... "eh, no."

Perp gets up and leaves. Incidentally, the weapon did NOT appear at any point!

MISSION ACCOMPLISHED!

Our HISTORICON was a complete success. We guided 60 people through our games and had easily the same number at the table watching. We picked up two nice trophies including *Best Themed Game* for the Battle of the Boyne. I managed to ship two complete armies across the Atlantic and get them back in one piece despite the best efforts of six sets of baggage handlers and US Customs (this probably the greatest achievement of the entire trip). Clarence wasn't too put off by his first HISTORICON and so, I think we'll have another crack at it in 2011!

HISTORICON 2011 returns to the Valley Forge Convention Center on 7-10 July, 2011. For unfolding details, keep an eye on:

www.HISTORICON.org