

The Brotherhood of the Hexagon

BY RICHARD F. DeBAUN

It's been a lot of fun.

It began by playing cowboys and Indians. Then Robin Hood vs. the bad knights, Yanks vs. Rebs, and GIs vs. Nazis.

The kids in my neighborhood and I would die glorious deaths over and over again as we defended the Alamo, charged up Cemetery Ridge, and planted *Old Glory* atop Mt. Suribachi in the vacant lot at the end of our block.

Other times Jimmy Eldore and I would conquer my mother's flower bed with plastic armies molded by Marx or built from Revell kits (I love the smell of Testor's model cement in the morning. It smells like ... victory.) There we were: six against 6,000. And the Old Man turns to us and says, "What's the matter, you guys wanna live forever?"

When I was eight years old, I saw the movie *Alexander the Great* starring Richard Burton and learned "...only a king may kill a king." A few days later, Dear Old Dad caught me whacking away on a clothesline Gordian knot with one of my mother's best kitchen knives. Although my only-a-king-may-spank-a-king defense didn't cut any ice, the incident inspired my father to introduce to me the power of the library card.

I was knocked off my intellectual feet when he showed me that beyond the cozy Dr.-Seuss / Babar-the-Elephant corner of the Seattle Public Library were rows and rows of books on Alex and other exciting guys like Napoleon, Caesar, and Rommel - and The New York Times' *The War in Maps*, Levert's *Fundamentals of Naval Warfare*, and Creasy's original *The Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World* (which inflated to twenty decisive battles in post-World War Two editions).

Armed with an arsenal of anecdotes and factoids from Section 940 (Dewey Decimal System), I became quite obnoxious during history lessons at school. (I think it was Sister Mary Boudicca who wrote in the comments section of one report card, "Richie works well with others, but wants to conquer the world.") Although I've long since given up most of my plans for global domination, the passion for history sparked by this early reading has lasted throughout my life.

There we were: six against 6,000. And the Old Man turns to us and says, "Fix bayonets and form a square..."

On my fourteenth birthday, Dear Old Dad got me hooked on the hard stuff with a Pandora's box labeled Tactics II. I drafted as opponents Larry Kreig (who later would be drafted into the USMC), Steve Bartholomew (who would register as 1-0), and Bob Kull (who split for Canada), and we soon devoured all three wargames then on the Avalon Hill menu. After years of Monday-morning generalship based on the military lore we'd absorbed in books and movies, these games were our chance to show our stuff.

Our dueling die rolls brought history to life. They were also challenging puzzles that required a certain amount of smarts to play, and we

knew it. Let less gifted classmates fiddle with *Parcheesi* and *Risk*, we sneered. We were onto superior stuff. We had developed "perfect plans" for **Stalingrad** and **D-Day**. We were ready to change the world if they ever fought World War Two again.

Wargames fired our imaginations and poured gasoline on our adolescent egos. We got history and hubris in the same box.

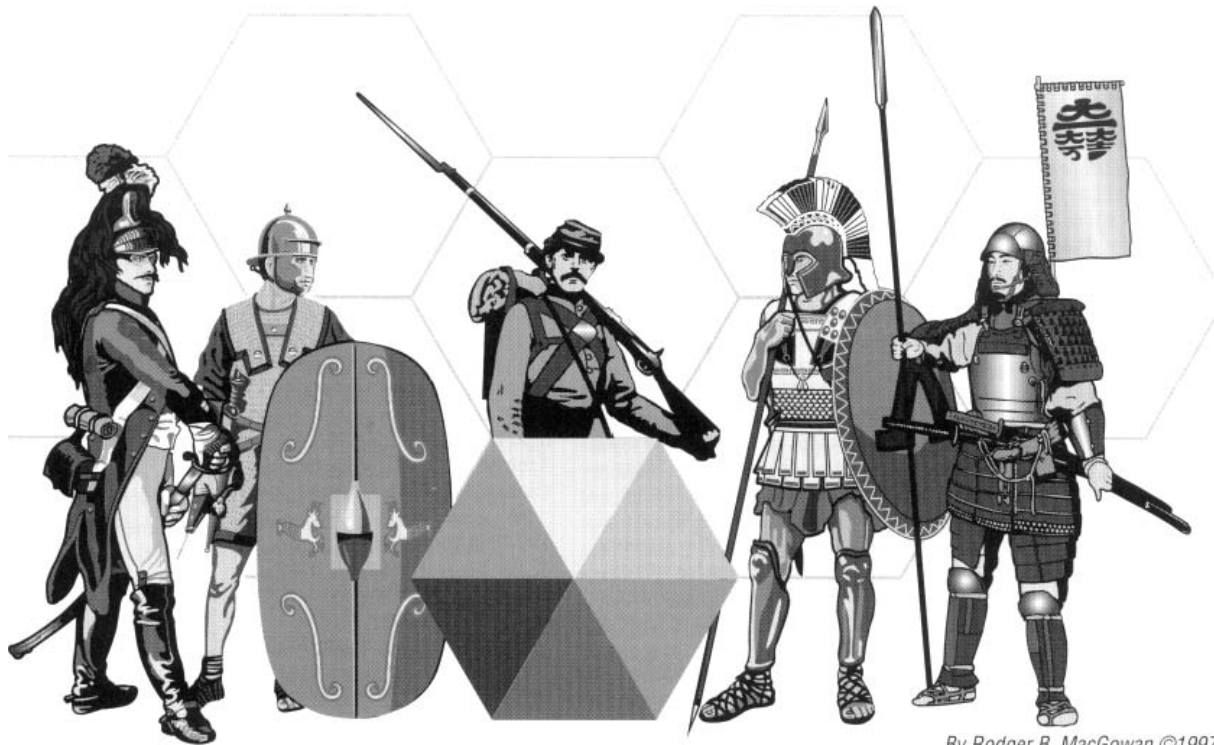
There we were: six against 6,000. And the Old Man turns to us and says, "Take no prisoners!"

After a brief hiatus in pursuit of girls and a stint serving in Lyndon Johnson's war, I rediscovered wargaming in college.

At UCLA, I was surrounded by legions of other overachievers with time on their hands. There were clubs, tournaments, and newsletters for wargamers. Best of all, a gang of talented wiseguys from the Big Apple had formed a company called SPI and started publishing *Strategy & Tactics*, a cool magazine with a new wargame in it every other month. More games began to appear from garage publishers like GDW and Battleline. Even hoary old Avalon Hill was publishing new wargames.

I was in grognard heaven.

Then one fateful day, Jim Dunnigan came to speak on campus and gave my name to Rodger MacGowan. (Rodger was putting together *Fire & Movement* magazine, and I'd just done a piece on **Oil War** for SPI's *MOVES* magazine.) I soon found myself writing game reviews, analyses, and other nonsense for Rodger on the avalanche of game titles that were coming out in the mid-'70s.



By Rodger B. MacGowan ©1997

In addition to twenty years of fun and games with the wiley MacGowan, my wargaming habit brought me in contact with Aker, Barasch, Bickford, Billingsley, Bronner, DeNardo, Dotter, Ellerbroek, Emrich, Fennelly, Kranz, Laughlin, Saha, Simonsen, Verssen, Zyzkowski, and many other addicts who enriched my life with their intelligence, talent, and friendship. It was with only half my tongue in cheek that I labeled the fraternity of wargamers back then "The Brotherhood of the Hexagon."

There we were: six against 6,000. And the Old Man turns to us and says, "DeBaun, we need a volunteer..."

My sons say they have two types of memories about the vacation trips we took when they were growing up. My wife was a geology major, so whenever we drove past an "interesting" road cut we had to stop for rock samples and her lectures on local sediments. I'm a wargamer, so we frequently took side trips to the middle of nowhere in search of the crossroads of history.

In Germany, we climbed the hills outside Nordlingen, where it was

instantly obvious why Swedish cavalry had a tough time dislodging Spanish pikemen from their slopes.

In France, we stood on the ruined walls of Alesia and wondered how Caesar's outnumbered legions, armed only with hand-tools and sweat, could build a double-ring defensive line around the natural hilltop fortress to trap Vercingetorix and defeat a quarter-million wild Gauls.

In Scotland, breathless after we ran through the marshy field of Culloden, we marveled at the suicidal loyalty of the rain-drenched Highlanders who stood there unwavering in 1746 as British volleys cut them to shreds.

If it hadn't been for my wargaming, we would have missed these and dozens of other battle sites that are today marked by inadequate toilet facilities. We wouldn't be as prepared to answer esoteric game show questions on caltrops and kernes. We wouldn't have the same feeling for the reality of history, the sense of being connected to the past, that we do.

There we were: six against 6,000. And I'm telling you, buddy, they were the toughest six guys we ever went up against...

A short time after we married, my wife, Marilee, started making ominous noises about the amount of storage space my wargames were taking up. But I had a plan.

In an attempt to get her interested in wargaming, I challenged her to a game of D-Day. She chose to command the Allies, landed at Pas de Calais, and blew me away in about four turns thanks to a series of wildly improbably victories at 1-to-2 odds. She declined further combat observing, "It's too easy..."

That was nearly thirty years ago. Now, even though my wargames, history books, memorabilia, and miniatures fill the garage, even though I smell like the bottom of a gym locker when I return from game conventions, even though our home is occasionally invaded *by guys* who make tank noises and play bagpipe music during marathon gaming sessions, Marilee no longer complains. Now, when I invite the usual gang of suspects over for a gaming session, she just smiles. It's the same kind of smile Crazy Horse gave Custer at the Little Bighorn.

It's been a lot of fun.