

Two countries separated by the same hobby?

An innocent abroad

It was with a real sense of anticipation that I travelled to Historicon 2005. Never having attended a US wargames convention I didn't know quite what to expect despite being primed by various people with comments such as "It's totally *different* from British shows". I always seemed to detect just the tiniest bit of topspin on that word different. But what *did* it mean? Better? or, poorer? or simply, different? My original plan was to visit as a punter but things moved fast and with the assistance of a very helpful ex-pat friend I was given access to a table both on the Thursday and Friday and was thus able to put on a game, but more of that later.

Being no stranger to foreign travel I assumed my passage to Lancaster, PA would be relatively straightforward however in the land where the car is King there is little need for public transportation particularly outside of the big cities. My logistical challenges in getting from railhead to field of battle may well have drawn nods of sympathy from many a front line commander. I finally arrived at the convention centre early on the Thursday morning (having debussed in Lancaster on the Wednesday evening!) and was a little disappointed by what I found. Of course, only the real die-hards and those with unfortunate travel schedules like me arrive at that time. It was a little bit like being backstage at a large musical event before it starts – lots of hustle and bustle but no sign of the stars and no rock n' roll. I needn't have worried. The registration process was first class, confidence inspiring and way superior to many of the swankier business functions I have had the misfortune to attend. I was instructed in the 'basics', well sold on some Historicon merchandise and generally made to feel welcome. I had arrived!

Encouragingly by ten o' clock games were springing up everywhere. I ambled, I observed, I'd move on to look at something else and by the time I'd doubled back a couple of hours later those games had gone and been replaced by something new! The convention organizers prepare a voluminous and highly detailed events programme which I admit on receiving, rather over faced me. Like the bloke who buys a new TV, ripping it out of the box, switching it on and not getting it to work whilst totally ignoring the instruction manual, I tucked the 'programme' into my bag and continued around the venue like a lost sheep. As the convention unfolded I began to understand its value. There is simply no other way of comprehending the scope of such an event. A thirty minute recce of even the larger UK shows such as SELWG, Triples or Salute gives at least a clear picture as to where everything is and what you'll need to see. That concept is impossible at Historicon as things are constantly changing. You really need to have it together if you want to find yourself anything other than a bobbing cork in a typhoon. The mental adjustment was probably a bit too much for my wee brain.

I met a bewildering number of people each of whom I would gladly have spent all day talking with but that is not possible either. Walking around with Duncan Macfarlane (as I did on the Thursday morning) I was introduced to Herbt Gundt, Phil Barker, Richard Hasenauer, Pat Condray, Bob Giglio and George Nafziger all in the space of about ninety minutes. Now I do apologise if that sounds like a bit of name dropping but it sort of puts the scale thing in perspective. The reaction that all of this produced in me was total indecision. I really could not make up my mind where to start or what to do. So, like any true Scot, I went to the bar, it wasn't even noon!

Enter the guide....

There is nothing quite like one of 'yer ain' to help restore the balance. I got lucky, two of my countrymen now permanently ensconced in the US came to my aid. Lindsay Gauld and Brian Kelley sat me down, bought me beer and explained the ropes. Many years in the US had done nothing to moderate their accents and soon I was right at home. Lindsay very graciously acted as guide and advisor for the next two days. He instructed me in the lie of the land, what to see, when to hit the Flea market, where the hot games would be, who was who and all that inside info that is essential for survival in an unfamiliar environment. I was feeling better already It was a bit like the innocent arriving from the home country in to the colonies and being rapidly educated by the wily backwoodsman. And of course, Lindsay does now reside in rural West Virginia which I have been told, is an 'in joke' to Americans.

The Dealer Hall

My wife's motto is 'when in doubt, go shopping!' so that is exactly what I did. Spending money kept my mind off all of the complicated decisions about which games to see and what sections of the convention to visit. Separated from the main gaming area, the Dealer Hall was excellent both in layout and in quality. I avoided any products that I could see in the UK for obvious reasons and concentrated on things I'd never come across before. Prices were in the main keen, helped of course by the exchange rate. The variety was as you would expect from the larger UK shows with perhaps only Salute having more traders (I could be wrong but that's how it felt). I have focused on WW2 now for some years and recently have majored in collecting 15mm kit. I was impressed by True North's 15mm Poles, Belgians, Dutch, Hungarians and Romanians together with TwoTin Soldiers 15mm Winter Finns and early war Russians. Painters like Tommy Gunner were able to offer handsomely finished Battlefront Miniatures vehicles for kit cost + 50% which amazed me (I bought some too!). They were not the only company offering this but in my opinion amongst the best. Custom made terrain was also of extremely high quality and to my mind superior pound for pound to anything commercially available in the UK. The find of the show was a superb range of 1/100th scale combat aircraft moulded in resin to a very high standard. The company Armaments in Miniature, also produce telescopic stands on which to mount the planes. I purchased two Sturmovik, two Ju87 and a Hawker Typhoon. The prices were under \$16US each. Like some of our UK traders it would not be commercially viable for these companies to travel out of their home market which is understandable but a pity. The web however makes that much less of a problem than it would have been five years ago. All companies I spoke with said that shipping to addresses out with the US was not an issue. I mention this because in the past I have experienced difficulty in getting some US manufacturers to sell me anything because I did not have a US Zip code. There were a few items on sale that would perhaps not have been allowed at a UK show. Three T shirts in particular caught my eye: William Tecumseh Sherman's BBQ Tour of the South (ouch.. try wearing that when you take the kids to Disneyland Florida), the SS Tour of Europe and an SS Leibstandarte motif which may have raised a few eyebrows. But hey, if you don't like 'em don't buy 'em!

Demonstration Games

The concept as we know it in the UK simply does not exist at Historicon. At first I found this somewhat disappointing particularly as I myself have tended to put that kind of game on frequently in the past. I wanted to see aesthetically pleasing games US style a la Duke Seifried. I was told by many and repeatedly, that these types of games are not what the people really want. A demo game US style is one in which you demonstrate something such as a set of rules, a scenario or a battle, not how good you are at painting or making terrain. I found that a little difficult to reconcile as many US Wargamers are wonderful painters and terrain makers. Why wouldn't people want to see that good stuff? It all begins to make sense when you consider that the gaming club structure that exists in most reasonable size UK towns is not mirrored in the US. Although there are some clubs in bigger cities, many gamers can really only get a 'fix' when they

attend a convention often after driving for over 14 hours to do so. The emphasis is thus, play and not, look. This is not to say that there were no visually impressive games at Historicon there were many but the esteem in which they are held is calibrated on a different scale. What was impressive was the way in which very high quality set ups were quickly and ingeniously created out of simple materials with the breakdown being just as efficient. This pragmatism is largely a consequence of high demand and tight scheduling on available tables.

A comment that really tickled me came from a US gaming friend who asked me if it was possible to speed up my ultra fast-play set of Grand Alliance rules 'Under the Lilly Banners'... only in America I chuckled!

I do think it is important to put the other side of the story in the interests of balance. UK wargamers enjoy their gaming every bit as much as our cousins in the US. Our access to games is in the main a little more regular. When shows such as Partizan or Claymore run I often make a conscious decision not to play my game as invariably many visitors want to talk about how this or that was made or painted, what rules are to be used and where such and such was bought. My point is that with no compelling demand to meet an unfulfilled gaming need, the exhibitors at UK shows often choose to add hobby value by discussing the techniques employed in creating their mini masterpieces. This *is* a genuine public service at UK shows and in my experience warmly welcomed by visitors and fellow gamers alike. Many gamer-exhibitors make the same decision as I often have. Generally we do not have the option of a meal and a drink after a one day show as most of us are traveling home. In that respect the social element of British shows is often around the gaming table and not the dinner table a la Historicon. So this apparent differential is merely a matter of timetable. It must also be said that many British gamers do game at shows and unfortunately in a few instances the paying punters are almost seen as a bit of an inconvenience. The net effect of this is that these inconsiderate, anti social and generally self absorbed types are vilified by the masses as bringing the hobby into disrepute as a result of their social inadequacy. Paradoxically at Historicon where focus is on the table, this is the preferred behaviour with spectators being by and large ignored and nothing said about it. With the exception of the grumpy anti social types in the UK, both sets of behaviours described are driven by local circumstances and exactly meet the needs of their target group. Another possible conclusion you can arrive at is play or chat you are going to upset someone. I have on more than one occasion heard dark mutterings at shows along the lines of *"League of Augsburg never play their games, it's just a static display, what use it that?"* Often these comments come from clubs who take between five and ten people to any given event. This allows time for all sorts of activity. The largest group I have ever 'demo-ed' with is three and over the last couple of years I have become the League of Augsburg in the singular. So spare a thought for us 'teams of one' who also like to enjoy their shows but may find it a little stressful to continually run round the table exhibiting the first signs of schizophrenia.

The Games

There is insufficient space to even summarise what can be seen at Historicon. Over 220 games (excluding between 100 and 200 competition games) in the two days I attended. In total over four days I would guess in the order of 700 wargames would be run. Everything from the prosaic to the preposterous and without exception all were there for the punters to play. These games are not run by clubs they are hosted by a small number of individuals known as Games Masters (often only one) and played by attendees who have reserved a place. You turn up, often playing with total strangers and have to learn the rules and sometimes a potted history of the period and your forces as you go along. No mean feat. The Games Masters obviously vary in quality but most were good and some were magnificent in their handling of the players, the rules, the information, knowledge of period and the participating forces. Admittedly there were a few glazed faces at tables employing rules of labyrinthine complexity but all in all the enthusiasm and keenness to learn were impressive. Games that stick in my mind are Martin Baber (another ex pat Brit) and Sam Scott's Cecil B. DeMille version of Operation Market Garden; sixty feet of modelling magnificence, a Moby Dick game complete with whaling boats and two scratch built white whales – wow, a beautiful AWI game using Sash and Saber 40mm figures (I was dribbling

all over that one) and a Wild West game which appeared almost as long as Route 66 and covered as many terrain changes! This totally inadequate summary cannot begin to describe the spectacle of Historicon.

Having been given the golden chance to run a game myself I needed to gather together terrain, buildings, trees and some more vehicles. The aforementioned Dealer Hall provided all of that. As my game was literally an eleventh hour affair (Lindsay Gauld altruistically curtailing his Steel Bonnets game to the Saturday slot) I had no idea if we'd get anybody turning up for it. These so called 'pick up' games could be a hit or a miss but we were blessed with a full house for every run and all participants seemed to enjoy it. I ran the game, Lindsay managed terrain, artillery, waiting lists, players, explained rules, generally schmoozed the public and we both had a hoot. I used Panzer Ace which is ideal for multiplayer situations and has much opportunity for mishap, glory and general shenanigans.

Competitions

This is not my scene and never has been. I tend to cross myself and sprinkle holy water around when I go into competition rooms at places like Triples. It is a very important component of a lot of shows I admit and just because my head rotates 360 degrees when I see it doesn't mean I'm right. At Historicon the competition hall was very big and very crowded. It also seemed rather good natured when compared to some of the handbag fights I have hitherto witnessed in the Old Country. I have written least about this and that in some way may belittle the important contribution it makes to such a big convention however there is not too much to say other than the terrain was as usual in competition games; pretty pants but there were some lovely armies. Next.

So what's different?

The biggest differences I noticed between Historicon and any largish UK convention may to some people seem a little surprising. The first was the profile of attendees. I saw far more women and children by proportion than at UK shows. This stretched across all aspects of the convention from organization and trade to game hosting, participation and spectators. I also noticed a far higher number of active service military types involved in gaming and on investigating a little deeper many of these were of relatively senior rank. Another difference and I don't think there is a delicate way to phrase this, the air generally smelled far sweeter in Lancaster PA (despite temperatures of 95 degrees and high humidity) than it does in most of the less well ventilated British summer show venues. Nuff said (or perhaps niff said) on that one but maybe Lynx should target wargames conventions in the UK. There was a lower backpack quotient too but the beards were as PJ Woodhouse's Lord Walperstone put it "a solid mass of beavers" so no change there!

Energy level at the tables was in general much higher than in the UK with the emphasis solidly on playing as often as possible. This was sustained around the clock and consistently evident over my two and a half days of attendance. It was almost like a massed adrenalin hit for hundreds of gamers. I recall several conversations cut short with the likes of *"sorry must go, I just can't get enough of this place and I love it"*. I confess to never having heard anyone say anything remotely resembling that at a British wargames show (particularly since that particular comment came from a very down to earth, no nonsense Ayrshire laddie!). Aesthetics although not absent ranked well down the list of what attracted attention from the masses. Coupled with a total lack of static display type games this formed the largest materiel differential with British shows and you know, it didn't matter a bit!

The approach to rules I have touched on in articles before but only when talking at length to many US gamers does the real difference in approach become apparent. What US gamers want is clarity, detail, total absence of ambiguity, full explanation of what is happening and why a rule writer decided on a particular approach. In other words justification for decisions. I was myself gently cross examined on several rule mechanics I had created for both Panzer Ace, the game I

ran and Under the Lilly Banners, the set of Grand Alliance rules which I have produced. Whether I acquitted myself well in the witness stand remains to be seen although my closing remark of “if you don’t like it, change it yourself” seemed a bit too British! A revealing comment by one of the leading traders perhaps sheds a slightly different perspective on the detail issue. He told me that in the US thick rule sets are a quantitative index towards value for money. Illogical but understandable. People are judging value by the quantity not the running mechanics. As an example these was one game I saw (but didn’t play in so I can offer no real balanced critique) which simulated WW2 squad level combat by the second with the game running a full three hours! Another comment which interested me was that of a veteran gamer who said “ complex rule sets come and go but the ones people end up playing are those which are easy to understand and fun”. A nice article by Howard Whitehouse in HMG Issue #1 touches on the same subject.

I particularly liked the idea of the self managed bring and buy known as the Flea Market. Not a term that I think we should adopt in the UK in case some choose to interpret it literally but the concept is good. Hire your own six foot table for a set number of hours and sell your stuff. You are responsible. Seemed to work very well and gave people an excellent chance to punt their wares and cut deals. Not an option currently open to clubs managing chaotic Bring & Buys back in Blighty but in my opinion worthy of careful consideration.

Finally, I heard very little moaning about the hobby, life, the universe and all that. No one said it was going down the toilet, no one was complaining about the usual ‘targets’; Games Workshop, Foundry, Flames of War, Fantasy gamers, ... I digress for a second.. I did visit what looked to be a very nice late WW2 game featuring well painted Panthers and panzer grenadiers on attractive terrain. Glancing over to view their Allied opponents I physically recoiled on discovering they were fighting gene stealers, large tripods, beastie type monsters and space creatures. Lindsay was close by with the smelling salts so I survived the trauma... but back to the collective morale issue, everyone seemed universally up about things, now that was refreshing!

And, what’s the same?

The scope and spread of wargaming interest seemed largely the same as in the UK. WW2 was very strongly represented (Flames of War appearing all over the place) as was ACW, Napoleonic, Ancients (all the more so for the WAB, DBM and Armati tournaments), Naval (the theme of the convention was Wooden Ships, Iron Men) and to a slightly lesser extent Victoriana/Colonial, Pike and Shot, Fantasy and Aerial combat. All scales were in evidence so in terms of areas of interest and scale no appreciable differences with the UK.

I heard many traders talk wistfully about the wargaming streets of England being paved with gold (UK traders does this sound familiar or do you think in reverse terms!). Some went as far as to refer to per capita spend/potential being far greater in the UK. Try telling that to the trader at Kelham who has just been asked by some overripe, rucksack totting anorak if he’ll split a three quid bag of 50 spears because the guy only needs seven. Another interesting mirror image view was the perception that traders on the ‘other side’ didn’t really know how to run a hobby business as a commercial venture. I stood in silence browsing over a trade stand as the two nice owners lampooned the tea drinking, work shy Brits as commercial pygmies with no entrepreneurial neurons in their bodies. Picture their embarrassment when I politely interjected in my best Glaswegian accent offering to spend \$200 of my hard earned on their kit. I later heard two Brits in the bar bemoaning the fact that there are only about two traders in the entire USA who know how to make any money out of the hobby. Laugh, I nearly did.

The types of people I saw and spoke with at Historicon were exactly the same kind of people I meet and know well at Kelham, Leeds, Crystal Palace, Edinburgh or any other show. On the whole; friendly, enthusiastic, inclusive people mesmerized by the finest hobby there is and totally absorbed in their next great project.

My highlights of Historicon 2005

Historicon was a great experience and widened my perspective on a hobby that I thought I knew extremely well. It is highly probable that I'll adopt a totally different approach to my own display games at UK shows with more participation from the public being the key. This in itself will I think influence the size and type of games that I put together.

Reflecting on my highlights of the convention the most surreal was being asked to read Great War vintage Scottish poetry (impromptu) in my best accent to a small audience in the Dealers Hall! Mony a mickle maks a muckle! The most exhausting was running a multi player participation game four times in less than three hours. The most spectacular was seeing so many games running simultaneously and the most enjoyable was meeting so many enthusiasts who shared my own passion for this fantastic hobby. In the words of that well known American Arnold Schwarznegger... "I'll be back" (that's a joke incidentally for those in rural West Virginia).