

Tales of the Old Guard at SPI

By John Positano



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Editor's Note: Ready for a trip? John Positano is taking us to 44 East 23rd Street in New York City to meet a few people. Oh, by the way - the date is 1973! Enjoy - RHG

I was lucky enough to be within a few subway miles of the old SPI headquarters on 23rd Street in Manhattan and got to playtest at SPI as well as apply for a job there after college. I was lucky enough to turn down the offer to work there because SPI manager Brad Hassel advised me that SPI had its extreme ups and downs financially. But first things first.

I read about the old SPI in a *National Lampoon* magazine back in the summer of 1973, fully fifty years ago, which featured an ad on *The Destruction of Army Group Center*, a magazine game, and now a classic. *National Lampoon* and SPI's *Strategy & Tactics* shared a common demographic market: they also were almost neighbors in Manhattan. Both attracted college and younger males of middle-class income. I clipped the coupon from the *National Lampoon* full-page article.

I got the worst possible magazine issue, *Fall of Rome*, which was revised to the horror of everyone. Just then, the Yom Kippur War broke out, and I was drafted by my editor at the Long Island University student newspaper *Seawanhaka* to do an article on the war. I decided to also

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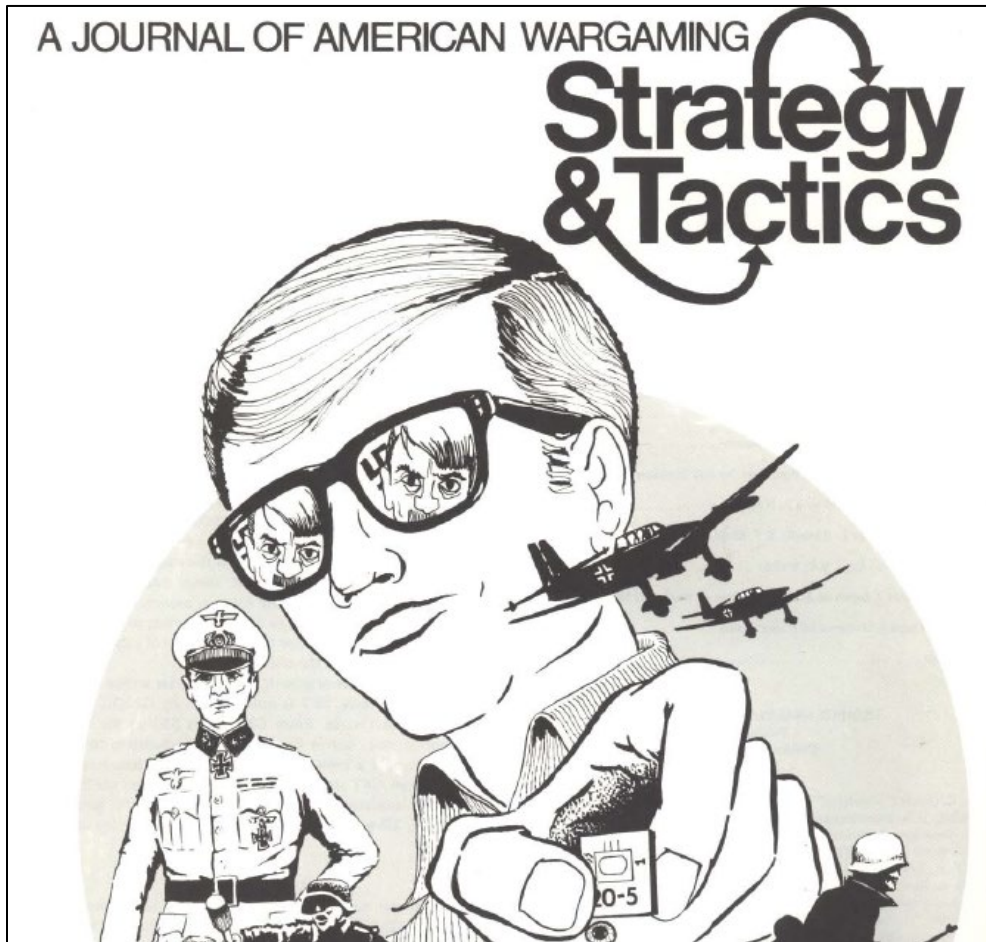
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Above: *Destruction of Army Group Center* ad from June, 1973

interview the psychology department chairman, Dr. Gustav Gilbert, who wrote the *Nuremberg Diaries* from his attendance as a psychologist at the Nuremberg trials. With the brazen courage of youth, I also called SPI to arrange an interview with none other than Jim Dunnigan, who needs no introduction.



issuing a year earlier the steadfast *Red Star/White Star*. SPI sprang up, it must be noted, in a generation which produced iconoclastic magazines and colorful media characters. There was *National Lampoon*, *Strategy & Tactics*, *Moneysworth*, *Playboy*, etc. Same market too!

I wrote and published the article which was unusually well received. About a year later, I started attending the fabled Friday night play sessions wherein every game was thoroughly played by real wargamers at all hours of the day and night at 23rd Street.

Dunnigan was designing *Sinai*, a game based on researching the 1956 and 1967 scenarios, and held the presses for a stab at simulating the 1973 get-together which was either ongoing or just ended. Dunnigan and his offices were everything I expected: they ran what appeared to me to be a college newspaper office which made me very comfortable. It was very informal, very creative and very honest.

Dunnigan was a youngish man (I think he was around thirty or so), balding and heavily myopic. He was, and is, brilliant, well-read, somewhat radical. I liked him.

Dunnigan explained that the recent wars involving the United States, like the Vietnam wars, were not good topics for simulation. World War II was safer...less controversy. SPI was just delving into modern topics and wars,



I brought on at least two occasions real New York pizzas to the sessions, with anchovies and beer. (I recommend these to you). I met a real graphic genius, Redmond Simonsen, who attended the scholarship only *Parsons School for Design*. I also met what can be called the most eccentric collection of young men and college students almost all of whom had a great love of wargaming. I can say that everyone there was brilliant or close to it or fawned it.

In 1977-1978, I applied for an R & D job at SPI, which was moved and headquartered nearby at a cheaper location. I interviewed with Brad Hessel, a bright and affable man who leveled with me: SPI was a great place to work but had its

financial ups and downs.

Needless to say, I declined a semi-offer to join the writing staff. I still bought SPI games which were well developed. Some years later, TSR seized SPI's assets for a debt, shutting them down and effectively setting up TSR's takeover.



HELP WANTED

More than most people realize, the process of designing and publishing historical games is very much a co-operative effort. While the amount of input from outside SPI varies considerably from project to project, very little happens here at SPI that is not affected by opinions and/or in-

R&D Employment at SPI. We are always on the lookout for people with experience in gaming, historical analysis, and writing who are interested in working on games for a living. Starting salary for a full-time R&Der ranges upward from \$7-8,000, with swift raises to the regular Staff level (\$12,500) for those who can hack the work. Write to Brad Hessel.

I can also personally attest to the fact that many foreign governments and militaries sent delegations to SPI 23rd Street to play or at least observe both modern and World War II war games at SPI. There has been some recent criticism that SPI played up this connection, but I can swear that it took place routinely at SPI.

I will say to my dying day that one wargamer was none other than Vlad Putin, though I cannot prove that for obvious reasons. That is especially ironic because one of my most recent books "*Dinner with DiMaggio*" has been published in Russian and was allowed into Russia past government censors (no book or magazine is allowed into Russia without clearance today).

The golden age of wargaming has moved to the West Coast with the present SPI (as I call it) Decision Games (*Strategy & Tactics* is still published, as is "*Modern War*" and "*World at War*" magazines. The current SPI'ers I have not physically met but I wrote a recently published article, "Marshal Zhukov as Wargamer."

The owners and staff at Decision are good: I do miss more statistical analysis of wargames and attendant magazines, which was the old ace card of SPI. It must be admitted that Decision Games got it right: it has published only as many games as can be profitably developed and has actually prospered. Nothing succeeds like success, though as a grognard, I miss the chaotic innovations of the old SPI. --- John Positano 1/21/2024

