

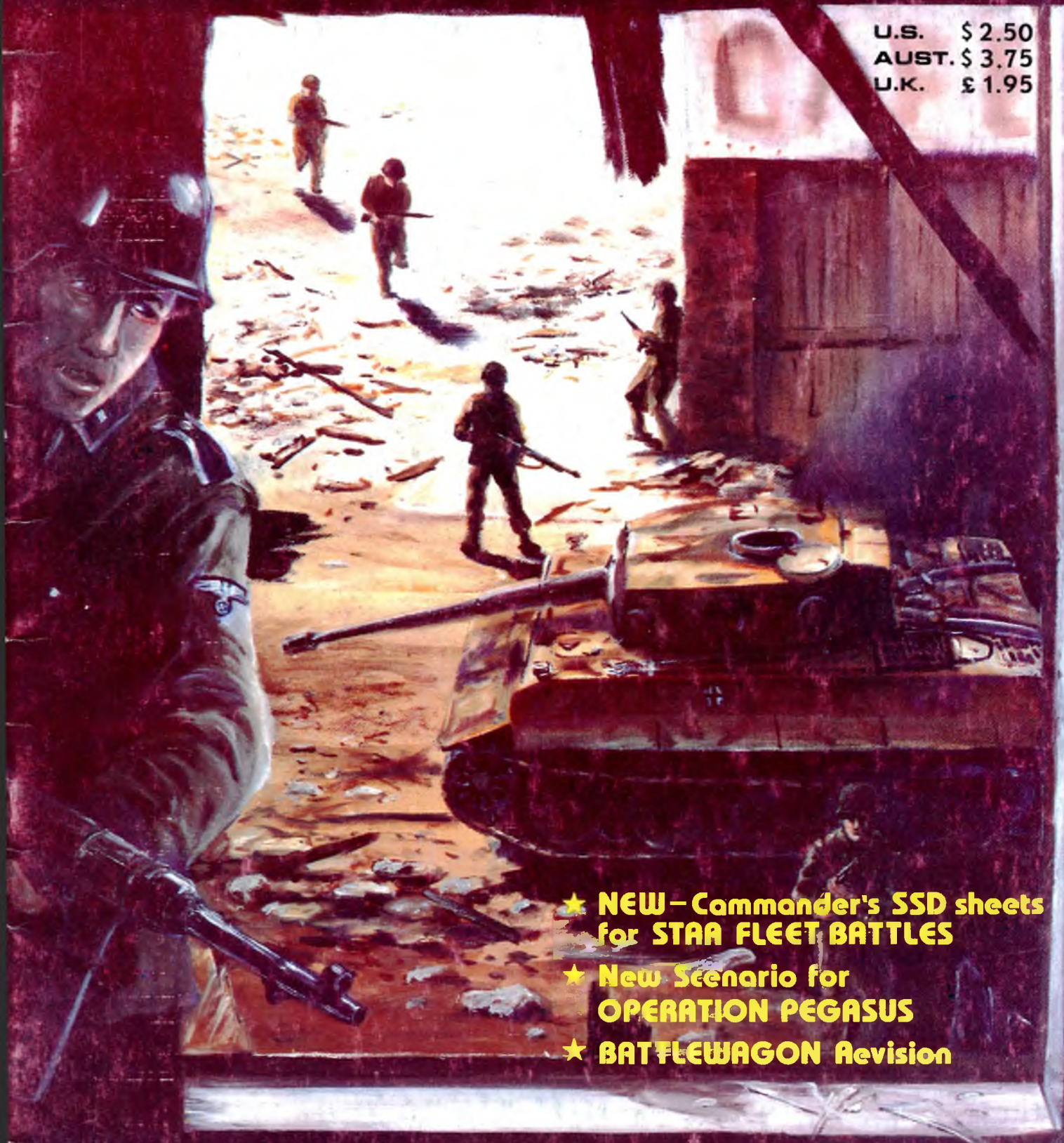
From Task Force Games

# NEXUS

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## “History is bunk!”

So declared Henry Ford at the beginning of this century. The typical adventure gamer apparently agrees, since, by and large, he has left the dark forests of the Bulge and the cannon-swept fields of Waterloo for the empty space between the stars and the relative silence of gleaming alien machines. The mundane armored corps falters in the face of Klingon supremacy, while the battleship awaits the final assault by a rag-tag collection of Orcs, Hobbits, wizards, and knights.

It was not always this way, as the story books proclaim. In the 1960s and early 70s, STAR TREK was making a mediocre showing in the Nielson ratings, while the Hobbit was the sole province of J.R.R. Tolkien fans. During this period, Adventure Gaming was Wargaming. If a gamer took the role of a mounted man with sword and armor, he was usually being shot to pieces by the English longbow at Agincourt, or he was skewering Saracens outside Jerusalem. Magic was unavailable.

It is obvious that times have changed. The “wargame” — that semi-simulation of history with its varying degree of technical accuracy — has now become the poor relation to games fabricated from whole-cloth. The man on the horse with his enchanted plate mail and +3 sword would hardly be tickled by the English long bow, and his game-given morals don’t allow him to ride down peasants for sheer sport as his historical cousin did. Reality, even near-reality, is in disfavor in gaming.

That trend isn’t all bad by any means. People need some form of escape from the daily grind, and the pure amusement of gaming fits the bill. Role Playing requires social input from those playing, and this is also a healthy aspect of Adventure Gaming.

What I regret is that the trend toward unreality is so overwhelming. It is estimated that somewhere in the neighborhood of three million people participate in role playing games. And most of the people who engage in role playing do so exclusively. It’s possible that a million people have at least tried their hand at a board wargame over the history of this type of gaming, and thus, the role playing sector of

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## NEXUS

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# GAMES ACROSS THE WATER:

## An Interview with Keith Poulter

In this issue we examine several historical boardgames, and so it's only fitting that we should talk to Keith Poulter, the only major wargame publisher outside the United States. Some things have changed, though, since we caught up with him at last year's Origins convention in Baltimore. Once again the British are coming, because Keith has decided to move *World Wide Wargamers* and its magazine, *THE WARGAMER*, from its birthplace in Essex, England to Oakland, California. As of 1983 *THE WARGAMER* is being produced entirely in America.

For those of you who aren't familiar with *THE WARGAMER*, it's a magazine oriented exclusively towards the historical board wargame. It's published bi-monthly, and a complete game appears in each issue. The current circulation of *THE WARGAMER* is 8,000, and growing fast.

Why does a man who is teaching American political science in an English school suddenly drop everything to publish his own magazine?

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**NEXUS:** Keith, I'd like to ask you a two part question; first, how did you get into wargaming as a hobby, and second what caused you to take the first step toward publishing wargames?

Keith: Well, I was walking through London one day, and on the side of building was a sign advertising a store called The Game Center. I'd never heard of board wargames, although I'd always played chess and other games of that sort, and was always interested in military history. So I walked into the store and it was like Aladdin walking into the cave and discovering incredible goodies! There were Avalon-Hill games, and some of the original SPI stuff.

**NEXUS:** How many years ago was that?

Keith: That was not too many years ago. It was 1973. I bought AVALON HILL's *Luftwaffe* and *Gettysburg*. Despite that I stayed with the hobby. (Laughter.)

**NEXUS:** Wise decision.

Keith: Anyway, I was teaching political science and finding it less and less satisfying. At the same time I was becoming more and more interested in boardgaming as a hobby.

I figured there must be other frustrated wargamers in the UK — like me — who had difficulty finding opponents. I decided to publish, purely as a hobby, an offset newsletter that would bring these guys together. Then I discovered that printing costs were incredibly cheap, and that I could actually produce a proper printed magazine if I wanted to — still as a hobby, of course.

**NEXUS:** When did you start the newsletter, and what made you decide to go full time on the magazine?

Keith: This is mid 1976, and the first issue appeared in April of '76. I was very green. I knew nothing about graphics, production, typesetting, advertising, distribution — none of it! It was a completely new world. One of the things I discovered is that printers charge you three times as much as they say they're going to. (Laughter.) This created a problem. I had to pay for the first issue with all the subscriptions for which, of course, people were expecting three more issues (it was then a quarterly magazine). So I had to grow in order to stay in business and not let these people down. I set out to grow. As it happens, I met a guy in the course of setting up the first issue who'd designed a game, and so we decided to put it in the magazine. It was purely a wild decision, but it proved popular; so we took the step to put a game in every issue. That's the origins of it. It started with very humble beginnings, really.

You say you wanted to know why I decided to go fulltime?

**NEXUS:** Yes, what made you decide to take that big leap? It must have been a bit scary to suddenly give up your secure teaching job and go into something new.

Keith: Well, the magazine lost money for the first three years and at the worst point, I was \$50,000 in debt. Remember, this is on a teacher's salary. But I had faith in the magazine. I reckoned it was going to make it, so I carried on.

We gradually overcame the problems. The fourth year after we started, the magazine made a little money. In 1982, it made a reasonably large income, and its future is obviously secure.

**NEXUS:** Well, that leads us into the next question. Considering the fate

of SPI, and the troubles that some other companies have been having in these hard times, it's amazing to see that your circulation has virtually doubled in the last year or so. To what would you attribute your phenomenal growth?

Keith: It may be that we're committed to historical titles in a way that a lot of other people aren't. A lot of other people, if they see sales of historical titles falling off, can put more resources and time into science fiction, fantasy, role playing or anything else. I made a decision very early on that I was interested in doing historical games because they interest me personally. We've got to produce historical titles that will sell, because we don't, by our own definition, have any other market.

**NEXUS:** So *THE WARGAMER*'s dedication to the historical boardgame is also a personal commitment on your part?

Keith: Yes. I guess it's whatever turns you on. I don't find fantasy games personally interesting. If I'm playing a game, I like to compare what I'm doing with history.

**NEXUS:** Do you find science fiction and fantasy games tempting from a business point of view?

Keith: No. Not at all. Because I can see that in four to five years the way *THE WARGAMER* is going — I'll have all the income that I really need. Who needs more?

**NEXUS:** Well, doing a historical game isn't an easy task. SPI had, at times, over a dozen people working on various historical projects. How many people work full time on your staff?

Keith: My son Wallace and I are the only full time employees. I have a personal assistant for thirty hours a week, but all the rest is freelance. I think that's another reason for our success. If you've got an in-house team of designers and you want to produce a game on the battle of Gettysburg, then you have to give it to one of that team. None of them may actually want to do it. If you work with nothing but freelancers, they send you whatever games turn them on, and you get good games.

**NEXUS:** I notice that you've designed some games yourself. What are some of the titles you've had a hand in?

Keith: I co-designed *NAPOLEAN AT AUSTERLITZ*, and I did development work on *FORWARD TO RICHMOND* and *CARRIER STRIKE*. I'm currently working on a game about *SHILOH*.

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