

John Hill's biography on Wikipedia



John and his wife Luella at Historicon 2014 in Fredericksburg, Virginia (Courtesy of P. J. O'Neill)

John Hill grew up in Indiana. He had founded the Conflict Games Company in the late 1960s and owned a hobby shop, The Scale, in Lafayette, Indiana, for several years. He reported that the hobby shop was lost in a flood. Conflict Games was sold in its entirety to Game Designers' Workshop. He later worked as an advertising executive for Boynton & Associates, which published trade magazines for the hobby industry.

Wargame designs

John Hill's first published wargames were released in 1972 and included *Kasserine Pass* (Conflict Games), *Verdun*, *The Game of Attrition* (Conflict Games) and *The Brotherhood* (Conflict Games). The next year he published *Hue* (Conflict Games), based upon the fighting near the City of Hue in the Vietnam War and *Overlord* (Conflict Games) based on the Normandy campaign. In 1974 and 1975 he published two games on the Arab-Israeli conflicts and in 1977 a game on the fighting in Korea. It was that same year that he sold *Squad Leader* to Avalon Hill. He also worked on the first module for *Squad Leader*, *Cross of Iron* (Avalon Hill, 1979).

His standing in the commercial board wargaming industry was sufficiently high that when Simulations Publications Inc. published his *Battle for Stalingrad* in 1980, his name appeared on the box top copy. Few games at the time were marketed on the strength of name recognition of the designer. Once again, when *Eastern*

Front Tank Leader was published by West End Games in 1986 his name featured prominently on the cover.

Hill developed a well known miniatures rules set for regimental level American Civil War miniature gaming, the *Johnny Reb* series (published by Game Designers' Workshop). He was noted for his elaborate 10mm miniature wargaming layouts for Civil War battles at Historical Miniatures Gaming Society conventions such as Historicon, Cold Wars and Fall In!. He founded and owned the Johnny Reb Gaming Company, which published the third version of the *Johnny Reb* rules.

Hill was a frequent contributor to the Johnny Reb Gaming Society's *CHARGE! magazine*, offering rules interpretations and strategy advice for *Johnny Reb* players.

Awards and legacy

In 1977, Hill received a Charles S. Roberts Award for defining Squad Leader.

In 1978, Hill was named to the Wargaming Hall of Fame, receiving the Charles S. Roberts Award at the Origins gaming convention in Chester, Pennsylvania, on June 23, 1979.

Later life

John Hill lived in New Mexico in retirement after spending many years in Virginia. He also served as an analyst for the U.S. military. Hill died on January 12, 2015.



John's hobby legacy is his influence on wargamers now and in the future. We owe him so much. Grant and Curt Daniels' & Scott Mingus's Gettysburg Day 2 Johnny Reb 3 game at Historicon 2013. (Courtesy of P. J. O'Neill)

Ask John Hill!

The 25th Anniversary Questions

2008 marks a significant milestone in the history of American Civil War miniature wargaming, for this is the 25th anniversary of the publication of the original version of the popular *Johnny Reb*TM gaming system. The editor-in-chief of the Johnny Reb Gaming Society's *Charge!* newsletter discussed the history of *Johnny Reb* with Wargaming Hall of Famer John Hill.

Mr. Hill, a native of Indiana, is most known as the designer of the popular Avalon Hill board game *Squad Leader* in 1977. John founded Conflict Games Company in the late 1960s and owned a hobby shop, The Scale, in Lafayette, Indiana, for several years. Among his many titles were *Verdun*, *Kasserine Pass*, *Overlord*, *Battle for Stalingrad*, *Tank Leader*, *Eastern Front Tank Leader* and many others. He also designed *Hue*, based upon the fighting near the city of Hue in the Vietnam War.

In 1978, Hill was named to the Wargaming Hall of Fame, receiving the Charles S. Roberts Award at the Origins gaming convention in Chester, Pennsylvania, on June 23, 1979. Hill developed what arguably is the most popular rules set ever developed for regimental-level American Civil War miniature gaming, the *Johnny Reb* series (published by Game Designers' Workshop). He was noted for his elaborate 10mm miniature wargaming layouts for Civil War battles at Historical Miniatures Gaming Society conventions such as Historicon, Cold Wars and Fall In!. He founded and owned the Johnny Reb Gaming Company, which published the third version of the *Johnny Reb* rules.

John today is a contributor to the Johnny Reb Gaming Society's popular *CHARGE!* magazine, offering rules interpretations and strategy advice for *Johnny Reb* players. He now lives in scenic New Mexico after spending many years in Virginia. He is an analyst for the U.S. military.

Here are John's comments in response to JRGS's questions.

JRGS – John, you have been a major force in the wargaming hobby for many years. When did you first get interested in wargaming, and do you recall your first wargaming experience?

I probably first got interested in wargaming when I was about 12 and began to look for a way to bring more structure to “playing with toy soldiers.” And, it was

about that same time that Avalon Hill came out with their first wargame — *Tactics II* — and, from then on, with both boardgaming and “toy soldiers” I kept tinkering with the idea a more “realistic way” of doing it.

JRGS – What are your favorite board games, both wargaming and recreational? Why?

In many ways, I do not see that much difference between “wargames” and “recreational games.” After all, do we not play wargames for recreation? And, don't almost all “recreational games” have both strategic and tactical aspects to them? That said, my favorite game would not be a constant, but would change over time. For a long time — after it first came out — Avalon Hill's *Battle of the Bulge* was my favorite simply because it was the best available—at that time. And then, as I got into the designing of *Squad Leader*, that became my favorite because I was totally consumed with making it as best as it could be. Since then, *Johnny Reb* has been my favorite, because it took the basic concepts of *Squad Leader* and turned it into a more simultaneous system—also, and this is a BIG also — *Johnny Reb*, for me, combines multiple interests into one game environment. I like to paint figures, model scenery, study military history, and design games, and Johnny Reb brings all of those together. So, for right now — at this point in time — it is my favorite.

JRGS – When you were a child, did you have toy army men? What are some of your fondest memories of playing with them?

Of course, I played with “army men” and even then I got into the history of it and became fascinated with WWII's Eastern Front. I built an entire Russian bombed-out village, complete with rubble and “imagined” Russian language posters and signs painted on the wall of the buildings, and then turned my Russian and German “mini-tanks” and AirfixTM soldiers loose in it for many, many a battle. And then, there was my Pacific War period, when I made complete Japanese and American “mini-fleets” and then, my continuing fascination with the Civil War.

JRGS – What was the first Civil War battlefield you visited? Any strong memories of early visits to battlefields? When was the first time you visited Gettysburg?

For me, the most “impressive” Civil War battlefield has always been Gettysburg, since so much is there — the long rows of cannon and the fact that you could stand at

the “high water mark” and know that this was when it was decided that the South would not win this war. It didn’t mean they would lose it but, after that moment, a clear victory was not possible. For about ten years, I lived in Manassas and got to be very familiar with First Bull Run and developed the “contrarian” view that it was not a clash of “amateurs” — but a very well fought professional battle — by both sides. There were some very fine tactics and grand tactics in that battle. But, that’s another story...

JRGS – You were a re-enactor for several years. How did that experience help you as you began writing the original Johnny Reb rules?

There is no question that the re-enactor experience shaped a lot of my views of what was happening on a civil war battlefield, and that the soldier’s perception of what was happening was probably more significant of a factor in determining the momentum of a battle than the actual reality of what was happening. And, in the smoke and clutter of the fight, perception became very, very local. As an example, if the soldiers thought they were about to be flanked and rolled up, for all practical purposes they were, and they would react to that “perceived reality” and rout — even if they really were not being flanked. This observation was key to the rule of rolling “snake eyes” in a morale check and you route.

JRGS – I have been told that JR in its infancy was supposed to be a character-driven rules set, with points assigned to the player's "general" based upon certain characteristics and traits. These points would change with battlefield results. Tell us a little more about this concept, and why it was abandoned.

That was an alternative path — which was driven by the “marketing view” — at that time, that for a wargame or miniatures game to be really, really successful, the ideal combination would be a blend of a tactical simulation and “role playing”, or, as Duke Seifreid liked to call it, “Adventure Gaming.” This was a major theme in wargaming at that time, and was driven by the marketing desire to come up with “historical and realistic” miniature games that could be packaged and sold like *Dungeons and Dragons*. I became less enthused with that path as I began to believe that such an approach would become more and more “Indiana Jones” and less and less historical simulation — and really doing a good historical simulation was more important to me.

JRGS – Johnny Reb is in its 25th year of publication and still going strong with its third version. What have

been of your fondest memories of games played using these rules?

Oh, that is hard to say. While I probably played hundreds and hundreds of *JR* games, I probably “game-mastered” even more — and in both categories, there were some spectacular games. And those that gave me the most pleasure were probably those scenarios where the gamers were so totally into the situation that for eight hours they thought and acted like Civil War generals and at the end, reached a historical conclusion almost as if it was scripted. But, of course, it was not. There were not a few games like that and one of the best was one year at Historicon, where we put two complete Union corps on the table and refought Resaca — and it went down to the wire. That was a good one.

JRGS – I understand you are dabbling with a variation of JR for company-sized actions such as the battles in New Mexico and Arizona, near where you live. Tell us a little bit about this concept and how it is coming along.

Oh, I am still playing with that — trying out different ground, figure, and time scales and determining what can change and what cannot. The main criteria is that that all the rules would be a variant of the existing *JR III* and that you could use your figures as they are mounted now. There would be no remounting of figures so you could play either game. The final game — in theory — would fill the niche between *JR* and *Brother Versus Brother*. But, I am still not convinced that there would be a sufficient market and sales potential to justify all the work it would take to make the rules a published reality. Bottom line — how many copies would you really sell?

JRGS – You sold the inventory of rules books and the Johnny Reb Gaming Company to Doug Kline when you moved out west. What are your hopes and dreams for the next 25 years of Johnny Reb?

The most obvious one would be that 25 years from now I am still around to play *Johnny Reb* in whatever version that is in vogue at the time. Beyond that, I would hope that it is still being played and that its basic system continues to spawn similar games for other periods — such as Dean West's excellent *Final Argument of Kings* for the Seven Years War. I would also hope that *Charge!* would have continued to evolve and get bigger and better. Finally, it would be nice to see Norris Darrall's *Johnny Con* get enough support that it could become an annual event.