

JOURNEY PLANET FANZINE #50





AT EASE, YOU 'ORRIBLE LOT!
CAPTAIN HURRICANE HERE,
UNDER ORDERS TO INTRODUCE
THIS ISSUE OF **JOURNEY PLANET**
FANZINE DEDICATED TO THAT
GREAT BRITISH WAR-COMIC
BATTLE PICTURE WEEKLY.
GUEST EDITOR FOR THIS ISSUE
IS BATTLE-FAN SUPREME
PAUL TRIMBLE.
GIVE 'IM YOUR ATTENTION
OR I'LL GIVE YOU ME BOOT!

Battle

BATTLE PICTURE WEEKLY AND ALL RELATED
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Welcome to the latest issue of *Journey Planet*. I'd like to take this opportunity to thank James, Mike and Chris for inviting me onboard to participate in this issue focusing on *Battle Picture Weekly* as we celebrate its 45th Anniversary. I started to read *Battle* from the...

Well, maybe I'll build up the suspense for a bit before answering that one! Some of the comic's characters and storylines remain among my all-time favourites. *Action* has the notoriety and *2000 AD* has the classic status and longevity but *Battle* has been, to me, unfairly overlooked until now.

It's likely very difficult for those born in the last twenty years to understand the hold that the Second World War had on us growing up in the early 1970s. On television there was *Colditz* and *The World at War*, as well as *Dad's Army*, and there were two weekly partwork magazines focusing on the war. We all built Airfix models and had boxes of plastic Airfix model soldiers, and at breaktime in my primary school the war was re-enacted every day as the brave British and Americans armed with sticks for guns would try to capture the swings which were occupied by those who were taking their turn to be the dirty Jerries – a lot of what we shouted certainly wouldn't be considered PC nowadays! They were fun times.

The one thing we didn't have was a proper war comic, sure there were the various digests like *Commando* but they were a few precious pennies more expensive than the weeklies and the pocket money could only stretch so far.

In those days there were dozens of weekly comics for both boys and girls as well as all the humour titles. Outside of the British Marvel titles all the

boys comics were a mixture of war stories, adventure, historical and sport. I read the *Victor* from time to time as well as *Valiant* and *Lion* and of course there were Summer Specials and the hardback annuals which my friends and I all looked forward to getting for a birthday, if it was in the last few months of the year, and of course for Christmas.

And then, in September 1974 we got *Warlord*, the first comic completely devoted to war stories, and it became an immediate hit with my friends and me. A bunch of us joined the *Warlord* Secret Agent Club and would leave special coded messages for each other around the school. However, things were to get even better!

I must've seen an advert in one of the other IPC titles for a new comic coming out called *Battle Picture Weekly* in March 1975 and I knew straight off that I just had to get it, the stories looked awesome, and let's not forget the sheet of 'Free Combat Stickers'! My local newsagent was called Armstrong's and in my home-town of Castlederg Thursday was the day that most of the new comics arrived – comics took an extra day or two to get across the Irish Sea and distributed to the far west. I remember school seeming very long that day before I headed excitedly to Armstrong's to pick up that week's comics – eagerly I scanned the shelves but there was no sign of *Battle Picture Weekly* #1, heartbreak! I returned the next day in the hope that it was just late but there was still no sign of it. The lady behind the counter took pity on me and said she'd try to order a copy for me but it was little consolation to the ten-year-old me.

There was still no sign of it by the following Thursday so I had to buy #2 first (there's the answer for those of you who haven't lost interest by now).



Stations!

WE ARE VERY GRATEFUL TO REBELLION, THE EZQUERRA FAMILY AND THE CARTOON MUSEUM FOR PERMISSION TO USE THE CARLOS EZQUERRA COVER.

JOURNEY PLANET FANZINE ISSUE 50:
BATTLE PICTURE WEEKLY

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Read it as soon as I got home and that issue hooked me like nothing before from beginning to end. *Rat Pack*, *The Bootneck Boy* and *The Terror Behind the Bamboo Curtain* were my favourites but every strip was great. The free poster was really stunning as well and immediately went up in pride of place on my bedroom wall. My life was unexpectedly complete when, a few days later, Armstrong's did actually get in a few copies of the first issue. *Battle* was now my favourite comic, *Warlord* was way back in second place – now in the playground my friends and I were *Rat Pack*!

In September 1975 I went off to boarding school and my folks would send me a package of my comics every week, which was a welcome comfort and reminder of home. If anything *Battle* kept getting better and better with *Major Eazy*, *Hold Hill 109*, *Darkie's Mob*, *Panzer G-Man*, *Johnny Red* and *Joe Two-Beans* all appearing. For the boarders a film was shown on a Saturday evening, there was a steady stream of action films, the Bond films, war and westerns, it was likely here that I first saw the Spaghetti Westerns with Clint Eastwood, which remain favourites to this day, so when *El Mestizo* appeared in June 1977 it hooked me straight away and likewise remains a favourite to this day.

The classics continued with *The Sarge*, *The General Dies at Dawn*, *HMS Nightshade* and of course the amazing *Charley's War*, but by the early

1980s my interest in comics was changing. I had discovered a mail-order dealer who supplied the Marvel and DC titles on standing order so I could easily get all the books I wanted and all my money started going that way.



Looking back now, and rereading those old comics again, what strikes me is the sheer quality of the first four to five years of *Battle*, I'd even go so far as to say that it's as strong a run of a British weekly comic as anything else that came after. I've seen a catchphrase around Facebook 'Everything comes back to 2000 AD' but in reality it should be 'Everything comes back to *Battle Picture Weekly*', the first comic created by the Mills and Wagner team, the comic where so many 2000 AD writer and art droids got their start, the comic that set the standard.

Back in March of this year I brought my *Battle Picture Weekly* #1 back to the shop I bought it in 45 years ago, still a newsagent but has changed hands, and it felt like a circle completed. Please do check out my Facebook page – *Battle Fans* – for any follow-ups to this issue and join with fellow fans. Thanks to all the editorial staff, writers and artists who worked on *Battle* over the years, it remains my favourite British comic. Salute!

This issue's guest editor – *Battle Picture Weekly* fan extraordinaire Paul Trimble – is perhaps better known as the organiser of the hugely successful and popular Enniskillen Comic Fest!

EZQUERRA UNCOVERED

It's only fitting that we have a Carlos Ezquerra cover on this issue of *Journey Planet* as he provided so many dynamic covers for *Battle* over the years...

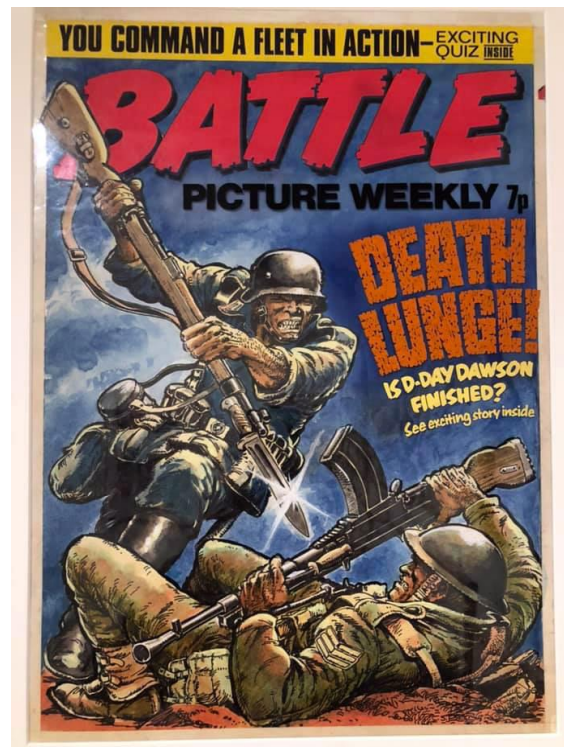
By Paul Trimble

It's a well-known story how Pat Mills and John Wagner head-hunted Carlos to work on their new comic via his agent Barry Coker, and when one looks at the body of work that Carlos created for the various IPC titles over the years you have to wonder if there ever was a smarter move made in the history of British comics?

Carlos drew *Rat Pack*, created by Gerry Finley-Day, in the early issues of *Battle*, a strip which immediately became one of the most popular in the comic and took over the colour centre pages. Carlos went on to develop a great working relationship with writer Alan Hebden with two classic characters in *Major Eazy* and *El Mestizo* coming from this creative partnership, as well as the team up series with *Major Eazy* and *Rat Pack*, a first for British comics.

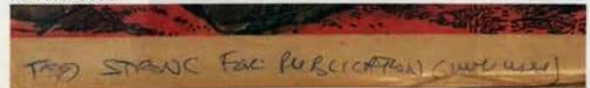
The first cover Carlos drew for *Battle* appeared on the 6th September 1975 cover-dated issue, another cover with a Bren gun being used, but it wasn't until the following year that he became a regular cover artist after *Major Eazy* was launched.

"But I don't recognise *your* cover," I hear you say, "which issue is it from?" The quick answer is that this cover did not appear on an issue of *Battle*: it wasn't published at the time. Fortunately it was saved and the original art was donated to – and is now on display in – the Cartoon Museum in London. Across the bottom of the page is written



Carlos Ezquerra (1947-2018)
Battle Picture Weekly, c. 1977 unpublished cover
India ink & watercolour on paper
Private donation

War comics were a staple of British comics in the post WWII period and remained popular until the 1980s. In 1977, *Battle's* sister publication *Action* got into trouble when a front cover appeared to show a policeman about to be violently battered. Media outrage ensued, and the comic was closed down; the publisher then adopted tighter controls over the cover content of its other titles.



"Too strong for publication-never used" and it is labelled as shown.

I'd seen this cover image crop up in a few places on the web but, after marvelling at its power and impact, hadn't really thought much about it. It was only after Rebellion kindly gave us permission

to use it as our cover that I started to get curious as to its origins and which issue it might have been intended for. Neither the Cartoon Museum nor Rebellion had any further details about the unpublished cover so I started to exercise the little grey cells. *Valiant* had been merged with *Battle* from the issue cover-dated 30th October 1976 so the cover couldn't be from 1977 as labelled, it must be previous to that, and could the *Action* connection be right? Thinking a bit further *Battle Picture Weekly* went up in price from 6p to 7p with the issue cover-dated 3rd January 1976 so our rejected cover must be from after that, and then after switching printers with the 3rd April 1976 issue the dimensions of the comic were changed and the logo was amended so it must be prior to *that*, which actually left a fairly small window of possibility.

Rather than a generic image it's a very specific situation that *D-Day Dawson* is in so I started to go through my back issues from this period looking at the *D-Day Dawson* stories. I was getting close to the end of the run when bingo!, there was the answer. In the issue cover-dated 20th March 1976 this panel appears on the final page of the story.



Score! Or maybe a "Gott in Himmel!" would be more apt. I could now say with confidence that the unpublished cover was originally intended for

this issue and had been pulled prior to publication. I proudly contacted the Cartoon Museum with my findings so they could add the information to their display and then ran my findings past Dave Hunt, the *Battle* editor at the time, and Steve MacManus, the *Battle* sub-editor at the time, to see if they could shed any light on what had happened back then.

Now, let's remember that this took place forty-four years ago and both Dave and Steve had a very busy job with long hours ensuring that a new issue of *Battle* was on the newsagents shelves every week. It wouldn't have occurred to them then that all these years later they'd be quizzed about things that happened, and expected to remember!

Dave Hunt commented, "It's an extremely powerful *Carlos* image and I vaguely remember the artwork, but I'm afraid I cannot remember being instructed not to publish it. At that time only two people would have had the power to censor it: John Purdie (Managing Editor for the Girls Department) or John Sanders (Head of the Youth Group). *Action* was a very difficult time for the Group and I can only assume John Sanders was reeling from the flak the media was giving him, so

perhaps he erred on the side of safety not wanting another publication to have its content severely restricted in future issues."

Steve MacManus commented, "Well, I can see why – the arrangement is exactly the same as the banned *Action* cover – man on ground being threatened from above. What with it already having the logo and cover line (and top-line and price) in position suggests the decision to pull it was taken at a very late stage. Other than that, I know nothing!"

So, the *Action* controversy would appear to be the cause of the *Battle* cover being pulled. *Action* had been developed by Pat Mills and

launched on 9th February 1976, a comic intended to be as powerful as *Battle* but set in the modern world. The feedback was immediate, the *Evening Standard* carried a review on 23rd February very concerned at the level of violence, The comic was dubbed “The Sevenpenny Nightmare” by the *Sun*, John Sanders was taken to task on *Nationwide* and



then *Action* was even debated in the House of Commons! The final nail appears to have been the cover of the 18th September 1976 issue which seemed to show a policeman cowering on the ground in front of a young hooligan with a chain. As Steve MacManus pointed out, this cover – again by Carlos Ezquerra – is very similar to the dropped *Battle* cover. In the end the negative publicity became too much. The 23rd October issue of *Action* was pulped (a tiny number of copies survived) and *Action* didn’t reappear in the newsagents until the 4th December issue, but now in a considerably toned-down version. If that unpublished cover had appeared on *Battle* back in March it might have drawn the same attention as *Action* and possibly suffered the same fate. Comics from that point on could have been very different.

Anyway, I had my answer – the unpublished cover had been intended for the 20th March 1976 issue of *Battle*. But something Steve had said came



back to my mind – “What with it already having the logo and cover line (and top-line and price) in position suggests the decision to pull it was taken at a very late stage.” So, if the original cover was pulled at the last minute, what was used in its place?

It was another cover by Carlos but this time featuring *Major Eazy*, and possibly based on this



photo with the unusual transparent shield to protect the user from the muzzle flash of the bazooka.

So, end of story? Well, no. It’s an eye-catching cover, though somewhat different with the tank only being shown silhouette and there’s the unusual weapon that Major Eazy is using. If this

cover was substituted at the last minute I wondered if Eazy actually used such a weapon in the story? The story starts off with Eazy and Sgt Daly driving up to a crashed American staff car. Eazy tells Daly to give his seat up for the American General who wants to check if a bridge is still intact and that he'll pick him up later. Turns out the Germans are going to blow it up. Eazy deals with the German engineers but the bridge is still guarded by two Tiger tanks. One of the Tigers is

there's a lack of background detail around most of the figure of Eazy.

In the middle panel Easy has immediately switched from the bazooka back to his rifle and is shooting at what looks like a crew member of the burning tank trying to escape. The story then concludes in the third panel. So, could the artwork have been changed to tie it in with the replacement cover? I put my theory to Dave Hunt to see what he thought.

Dave responded – “The Eazy cover smacks of Doug Church’s influence, On reflection, I think he came to our rescue when Carlos’ *D-Day Dawson* cover was pulled because of its intended violence. I’m not 100% sure, but when the *Dawson* cover was pulled I’m pretty certain that Doug dreamed up the replacement *Eazy* cover from artwork sitting in the *Battle* office and already supplied by Carlos for that week’s *Eazy* episode. Doug was

a genius at doing this. Another theory is that Doug, no mean artist himself, drew the Eazy figure firing the bazooka. Again, Doug might have taken the Eazy figure, maybe used in a previous episode, and added the bazooka. Sorry, mate, I can’t be more specific than that. As John Sanders might have said... ‘What fun it all is!’”

Doug Church was an Art Editor/Designer for IPC at the time and went on to work on *Action* and *2000 AD*. So, it would appear that when the late decision to pull the original *D-Day Dawson* cover was made Doug helped by coming up with a last minute alternative utilising art from that issue’s

Major Eazy story. As yet though this is speculation, informed speculation, but speculation nonetheless. Will we ever know the whole story? Maybe more information will come to light at some point and if so it will appear on the *Battle* Fans Facebook page, please do join us there. What we can be



dealt with by setting alight petrol leaking from the Bentley and we pick the story up mid-way down page 3.

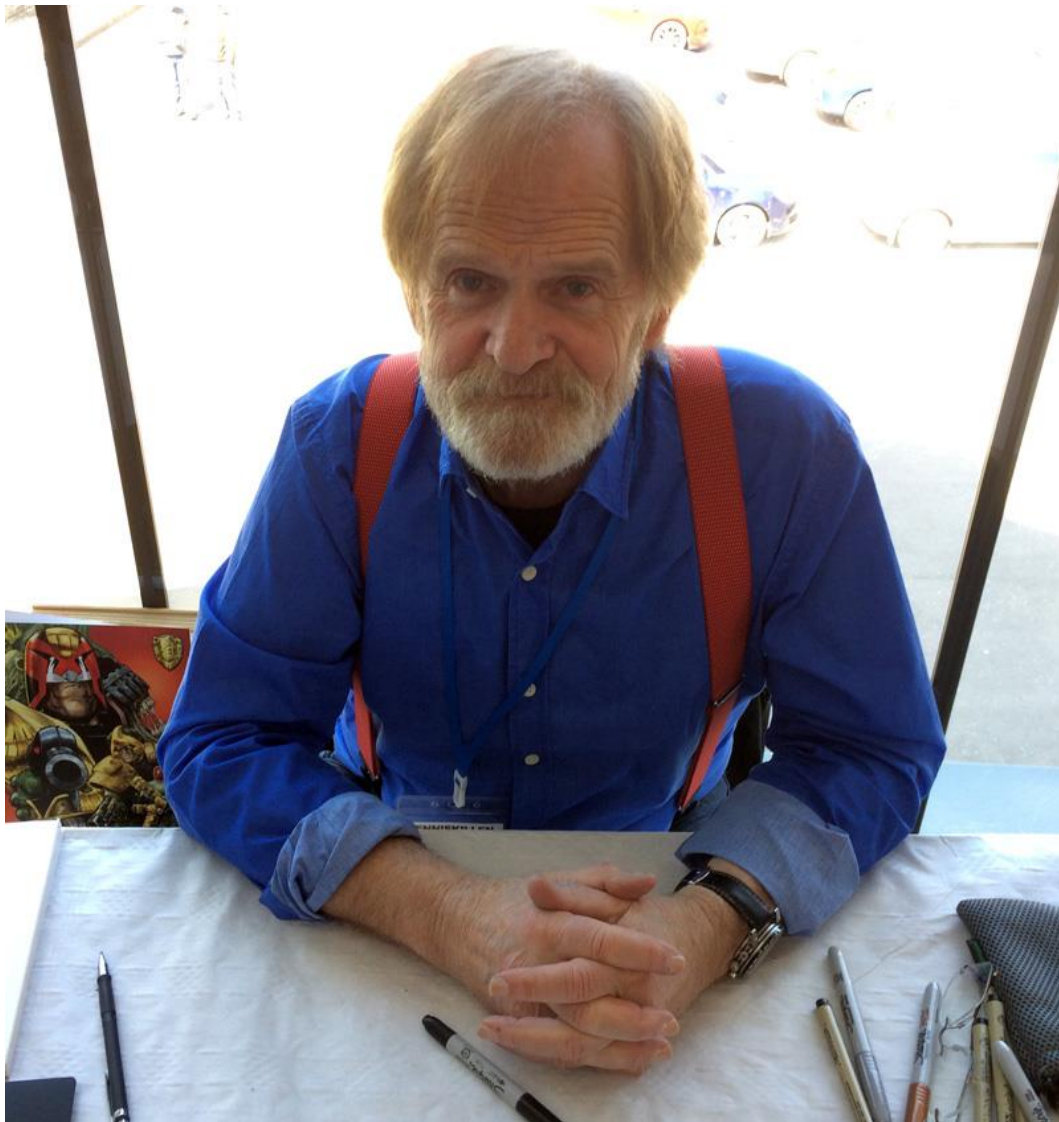
Out of the blue Sgt Daly arrives, carrying the bazooka pictured on the cover, saying “You dropped this Mr Eazy – thought I’d bring it forward myself in case you needed it.” But the bazooka hasn’t been seen, or referred to, in the story up to this point!

In the next panel, the first of the bottom row Eazy is seen firing the bazooka at the remaining Tiger tank, but this panel looks to me like it has been altered in some way, it seems cruder and



sure of is that a crisis had been averted and the 20th March 1976 issue was on the newsagents racks on schedule and that's the important thing. The controversy over *Action* would rumble on but *Battle Picture Weekly* wasn't affected by it – thankfully. It had been just another day at the office.

My thanks to Dave Hunt and Steve MacManus for their help with this article – and not forgetting the genius that was Carlos Ezquerra. Salute!



Carlos Ezquerra attending the Enniskillen Comic Fest, 2017

INTERROGATION: PAT MILLS

In 1974 the stagnant British comics market was rocked by Scottish publisher DC Thomson's launch of *Warlord*, the first weekly comic dedicated entirely to the genre of war stories. It was considered harder-edged and more realistic than anything that had come before and the sales figures that followed proved that readers loved it. Thomson's London-based rivals IPC were not slow to come up with their own weekly war comic and entrusted two young editor/writers – Pat Mills and John Wagner – to create *Battle Picture Weekly*, a comic that would take that realism to new heights in the years that followed. One story in particular stood out: *Charley's War*, the tale of a young soldier serving in the trenches of World War One, now considered by many as the greatest British comic strip ever written. Screenwriter and lifelong *Battle* fan John Vaughan sat down to discuss with *Charley's War* creator Pat Mills how it came about.

John Vaughan: Pat, before we get onto *Charley's War*, I have to ask about *Battle* and its creation.

Pat Mills: There had never really been a single genre comic before the war comics came along. *Victor* had some war stories, but it wasn't all war and then along came *Warlord*, and *Warlord* was a colossal hit, a colossal hit, I can't be sure of this but I have a feeling it probably sold something crazy like half a million? [Issues per week] Maybe more? So as a result, IPC Magazines came along to us, to John Wagner and myself and they said will you create a rival to *Warlord*? And it's important at this stage to say I have found with various comics I create that suddenly I find there are co-creators of who I never heard of who've suddenly materialized out of the blue. So let me make it very clear, *Battle* was my creation and John Wagner's creation and we spent long painful hours on it.

John and I were if you like children of the 1960s, and so our first reaction to a war comic was

very much, "Oh fuck, You know, I'm not sure that we want to do this!"

And they kind of reassured us along the lines of, "Well, they don't all have to be war stories!" or something like that and of course we realized that as we got further and further into it "Yes, they *did* have to be war stories." And so what we had to do was to find an identity in in our creation that made us able to live with ourselves.

So let me say where I was concerned and I know John felt similarly, but he wasn't as fanatical about it as I was, it was very very important to me to have working class heroes and to have no fucking officers in it. So that's why if you look at the early issues of *Battle*, you will find that there's plenty of NCOs and things like that, but there are

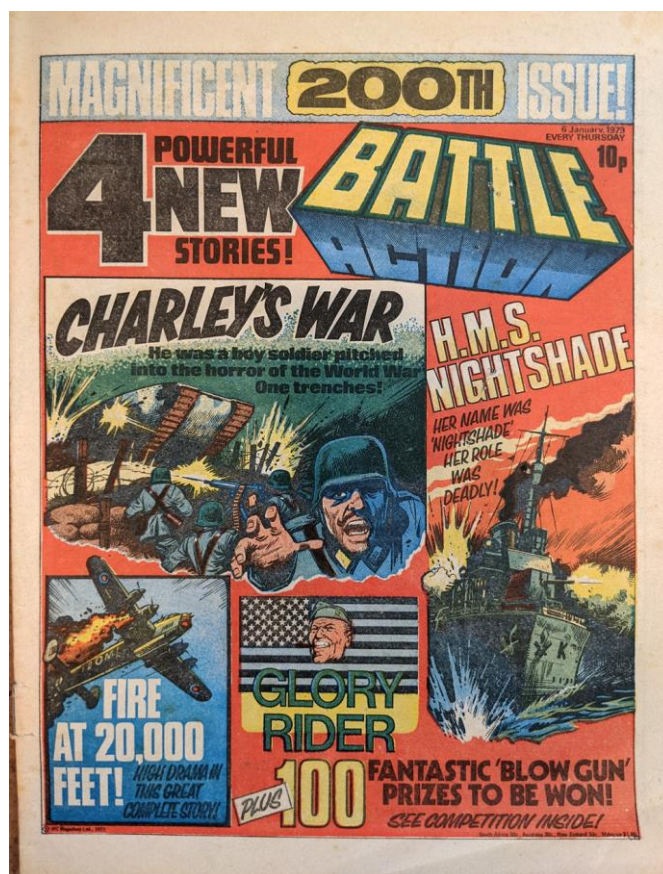


no officers. Now later we started to have officer heroes and notably *Major Eazy* and it was brilliantly done by Alan Hebden but I had to have something in that comic that made me able to live with myself because I wasn't happy with that compromise and ultimately that's where *Charley's War* came from, It's my way of saying, "Okay. I started this comic which on one level it could be argued glorifies war." So this, if you like – and this you'll relate to this as I regard myself as Irish –so you'll know where this is coming from, the kind of Irish Catholic penance, you know, a kind of riposte to it and if you look at John Wagner's stories, notably *Darkie's Mob* which he wrote much later and even *HMS Nightshade*, there's something of John coming out in those stories and what we stood for. In those early issues there was a proto-punk element. So what have you got in *Warlord*? You've got an aristocrat. You have an aristocrat who's regarded as the anchor character of the comic. You know, he's a Scarlet Pimpernel type and we (*Battle*) had *Rat Pack!* In other words, a dirty bunch of guys. So there's a difference.

And it's actually because John Wagner and myself were girls' comic writers that we stopped patronizing the readers. So *Battle* was the first, it was the start of a new generation of comics. We should have gone from strength to strength to strength and, a limited way, did.

JV: When were you first approached to create the story that became *Charley's War* ?

PM: Well, it was a straightforward thing on *Battle*. We were, I think particularly with John Wagner and myself, we were endlessly looking for new territory. So that's why John did a ship story with *HMS Nightshade*. We were looking for new ways to tell stories and I had managed to get the first German story away in *Action* [comic] with *Hellmann of Hammer Force*. So there was this one area [World War One] that no one had ever dared attempt because it had never ever been done in comic strip before except maybe a World War One aircraft flying story perhaps, but in the trenches? It's like, "How the hell do you do a trenches story?" I didn't know and neither did anybody else, but I talked it over with the editor [David Hunt] and he said to me "You know, maybe you can find a way of doing it?" I said "Well maybe, maybe?" and as a



carrot, as an incentive, he did something that's utterly unheard of, that no editor today would have the courage to do, he gave me his number one artist, Joe Colquhoun. Now, that would be like if Brian Bolland is working on *Judge Dredd* and you said, "Right, we're going to take Brian off *Judge Dredd* and we're going to put him on something completely new that's never been done before!" No editor today would have that kind of courage so full marks to Dave Hunt for doing that. He did the impossible and I thought, "Jesus Christ, I've got this brilliant artist who's doing this amazing work on *Johnny Red!* That's a lot to live up to, I got to make this damn story work."

I mean, I was always a bit of an expert on World War One, although I didn't know that much about the trenches, but I knew a lot about what you might call the political back story and I realized that's what I would have to do in essence. I couldn't write these stories as formula, I would actually have to write them with the same intelligence the same intellect and the same talent as someone writing... not necessarily literature, perhaps, but, you know, a skilful text story. And because they're in set in the trenches, you can't fill it up with lots of

crap like lots of tanks running around and stuff like that. It's going to be about personality, character and it's got to be a damn good story! And so what it did was it made me up my game, in other words I had to write this properly. I had to write this with quality, which is almost against the whole ethic of British Comics because British Comics are all about making a quick buck and which is why they've got such a bad reputation in many respects because you have these flashes of talent which come from individuals whether it's myself, John, Alan Moore, Brian Bolland, whoever! The overarching ethos is that it's all about making a quick buck and with *Charley's War* I couldn't, I thought, "Right. I have to write this with some real quality behind it." And Joe who'd already won his spurs on *Johnny Red* had to do exactly the same, as Joe said to me once, when I said to him, "You know, maybe you can take a few shortcuts because you put so much beauty so much detail into your work." He said "I can't. I have to draw it this way. I don't have any other option."

JV: How did the accuracy, the realism, sit with the editor?

PM: Dave Hunt, in terms of the horror of World War One, I cannot think off hand any place where he said to me, "You've gone too far. You can't show this." He pretty much left everything the way it was. Now later when another editor took over, suddenly, we got the real impact, if you like, of a typical company man who had no sensitivity for the material whatsoever. You'd start to see this in those fucking stupid logos where you suddenly start having a German [typeface] logo on *Charley's War* for no reason whatsoever and you know that complete lack of sensitivity and understanding of what Charley represented and so, so yeah, I mean Dave was very much behind it.

JV: I wanted to talk about that the censorship and the problems you would have with that later. I did want to ask this and it's more of a personal question. I know I loved, and the readers loved, *Charley's War* because you treated us as equals. You didn't talk down to us, but what always came across – and you don't have to answer this! -- is the tremendous sense of anger. Where did it come from?

PM: [gently laughs] More than happy to answer it. I'm just trying to think how to stop me

going on for the next ten minutes. Well, first of all, I would have a deep anger towards what you might call, what should we call it? The establishment, the state, whatever?

I mean, all these things psychologically always come on several levels. So let's deal with the most obvious one. First of all these soldiers in the trenches who went over the top at the Battle of the Somme were murdered. They weren't killed. It wasn't a tragedy. They were murdered, and they were murdered *deliberately* by British generals and by the British state. So there's a straightforward anger there and then, if you like. You have my own personal anger where my own experiences of what you might call The Establishment in one form or another were not good. So, although I wasn't aware of it on a conscious level, I had my own axe to grind and it was probably very good therapy for me. And then even on a deeper level that was possibly even a family element because I had a part-time stepdad and he always sort of treated me like I was fucking stupid.

So that's kind of reflected in Charley, who's this kid who – on the face of it – appears to be not very bright but actually is. It's fun bringing all those elements together. And you know, I think that would give it that tremendous sense of outrage. We've all got grandfathers and great-grandfathers who served in this conflagration and we're still told to this day, it's billed as as an honorable sacrifice, a noble sacrifice. So what we're told basically is it was all worthwhile. And just to keep this in a modern context, you have the head of the British army or something who – as he inaugurates all these measures against Covid-19 – said it's going to be another Battle of the Somme, and I thought, "Fuck off, the Battle of the Somme was a disaster!" It was mass murderer. You are saying that your attack, your war on Covid-19 is going to be a Battle of the Somme? Well, God help us all, we're screwed if that happened. Yeah, thinking in my mind today, probably the anger blazes as strongly as it did back then.

JV: The real enemy in *Charley's War* wasn't the Germans but Charley's psychotic platoon leader, Lieutenant Snell. I mean he was the true psychopath of *Charley's War*. I assume that's where he came from? That officer class?

PM: Yeah, There was enormous dislike towards Snell, and of course it was reflected very much in how the many of these officers were and to create a legitimate balance. I had Lieutenant Thomas, who was a reasonable guy and you'll know from *Ragtime Soldier* [Pat's latest work] that there was a real life Snell in a character called Pollard. This is one of the great villains that I can't wait to do more of his story because we love bad guys. Let's face it, they encompass everything that we disapprove of. We want to see them get their comeuppance and yet we're fascinated by evil.

So yeah, Snell represented that and on another level as well, he represented a class war and I knew what Charley was up against so I could get my head behind that, because only maybe fifteen or more years earlier I'd experienced that class war so I knew what these kind of characters were like. I didn't know a Captain Snell. I didn't know people are in the army, but I knew their equivalent, and I knew how they thought, their disdain for the rank and file and so, yeah, that's all injected into the story. Of course.

JV: Before I move on, were you were you aware how important the story was to readers? Did you realize early on the impact it was having?

PM: I did and there's a couple of qualifications to that.

At the time that *Charley's War* came out there was a general sense in literature and books and films that World War One was a terrible war and was a nightmare and then in recent years, from the 1990s onwards the revisionists have turned that around so that instead of World War One being the most appalling act of mass murder imaginable, it's now seen as a necessary sacrifice and that's particularly the case in the Centenary years where there was a media blackout on anything that was anti-war including *Charley's War*.

So surprisingly, to answer your question, *Charley's War* is now more important than when you read it because you may not have come across another story like *Charley's War* but there was literature and there were films that were still saying the same thing. *Monocled Mutineer* for example. [*The Monocled Mutineer* was a 1986 drama based on the life of Percy Toplis, a ringleader at the Etaples Mutiny: the closest moment the British

Army came to mutiny in the First World War.] You could not have a film like *Monocled Mutineer* in today's world. It would it just would not get off the ground. We're not going forward. We're going backwards.



JV: I remember reading about the outrage over the *Monocled Mutineer* in the papers in 1986 and questions in Parliament asking how the BBC could make this scandalous drama. And I was scratching my head in puzzlement thinking "What's the problem? I read about this four years ago in *Battle!*"

PM: Well. Yeah, and of course the thing was, I was basing my account [of the Etaples mutiny] in *Charley's War* on the book *The Monocled Mutineer*, which obviously came out a few years ahead of the television series, and yeah, and here's the thing, that to this day, they are still trying to debunk that television series. It wasn't shown in the centenary years and there's an attempt by academics and they're bloody good at this, but so am I, I mean in this area. I think I can cross swords with them and have crossed swords with them quite successfully.

They try to claim that Percy Toplis and the whole Monocled Mutineer thing didn't happen. It *did* happen! I've championed it on several occasions with academics because it's very very important to do so because it's the only record of this event in history where the ordinary squaddies said, "Fuck this, it's over!" What they try to do is they try to trash the original book and this is probably you know, the *original* source book and and you know why this is so important and why the establishment desperately downplays it and even *Charley's War*, there have been attempts to censor *that* at an establishment level.

JV: I have to ask... How much censorship did you face in the later years with *Charley's War*?

PM: That's when it started to creep in. Now in the case of the *Monocled Mutineer* [the Etaples mutiny], I remember thinking to myself "I'm going to really set this up properly." And I got my version of the mutiny absolutely spot-on and I think that was down to some fairly cunning planning on my part, and you can see the evidence for this where they even had it in a rather silly way. They had a rather silly cover with a general falling in the river. It has an almost slapstick quality about it that maybe... I mean I'm going to say something a little cruel now. I'm not sure that the editor concerned at that period was that bright and therefore I don't think he quite realized what was going on. Why that sounds possible to me is that if you then move on to late 1917 early 1918 [storylines] censorship was starting to come through then and the one that I'm on record as taking great offense to, I featured a black American soldier and of course they weren't really allowed to carry arms. I think they were allowed to carry arms in the French army, but not in the American army, and there was direct racism towards them and so I featured some white American soldiers who were Klux Klan members and they were being abusive towards this black soldier and naturally, of course, Charley comes into the scene and tries to, you know, interfere because this black guy is like himself. He's an underdog. And there were references to the Ku Klux Klan and the editor remarkably said I've got to take this out because "We don't want to offend anyone!" and I was thinking well *Charley's War* is all about

offending people, and I couldn't believe that he made that change.

And because the American war effort was relatively a sideline on *Charley's War*, I didn't protest that much about it. My primary reason was I thought, "I've got to keep this story going to feature the British Invasion of Russia." I was reading everything I could on the subject to get my facts right and the facts were a little thin on the ground and it was clear that it was a remarkable and terrible story so I bit my tongue because I thought as long as I can show that Britain invaded Russia in 1917 it's worth putting up with a bit of censorship before we get to that.

JV: I'm left wondering what was the thinking behind "Well, we can't offend the Klan?"

PM: People were so out of touch. They didn't understand what *Charley's War* stood for and and it's actually worse than that! We had a managing editor who covered his tracks but he knew that *Charley's War* was a threat to the status quo. So whenever I got overworked and I said, "look, I don't know if I can keep doing all these stories," he would say "Why don't you drop *Charley's War*?" This is the single most successful story in *Battle* – in its own way it's the equivalent of *Judge Dredd* – but he wanted it to go, and there's a simple reason for it: because it he recognized it was subversive. It was against the status quo and he, as someone who stood for the status quo, was not having it and so I was actually at the very end after the Russian storyline, which we may get onto. I was actually undermined by him, and these people...

You're wondering, "What *are* they?" They're not radical in any way. They have a conservative attitude towards their readers and worst of all, they don't understand kids. They don't understand and that's why so many comics were going down the toilet. Because nine, ten, eleven year olds, they've got very specific requirements. They're extremely smart and yet they want relatively simple stories and that's a hard nettle to grasp, which obviously I grasped, John Wagner grasped, Gerry Finley-Day grasped, and others, but for the most part it's people who want kids to be back in Enid Blyton land or they'd rather be working for older kids so they can call their comics "graphic novels" and they can get lots of praise at conventions. So if you like

John and I fitted that slot where both of us were quite happy because it's the most demanding, holy shit. If you can hold a twelve- or thirteen-year-old's attention, you're a fucking good writer. That's what works for me, you know, rather than some prestigious bullshit elsewhere. I would feel ten feet tall if I thought, "Right, I've made this story work and it's really popular."

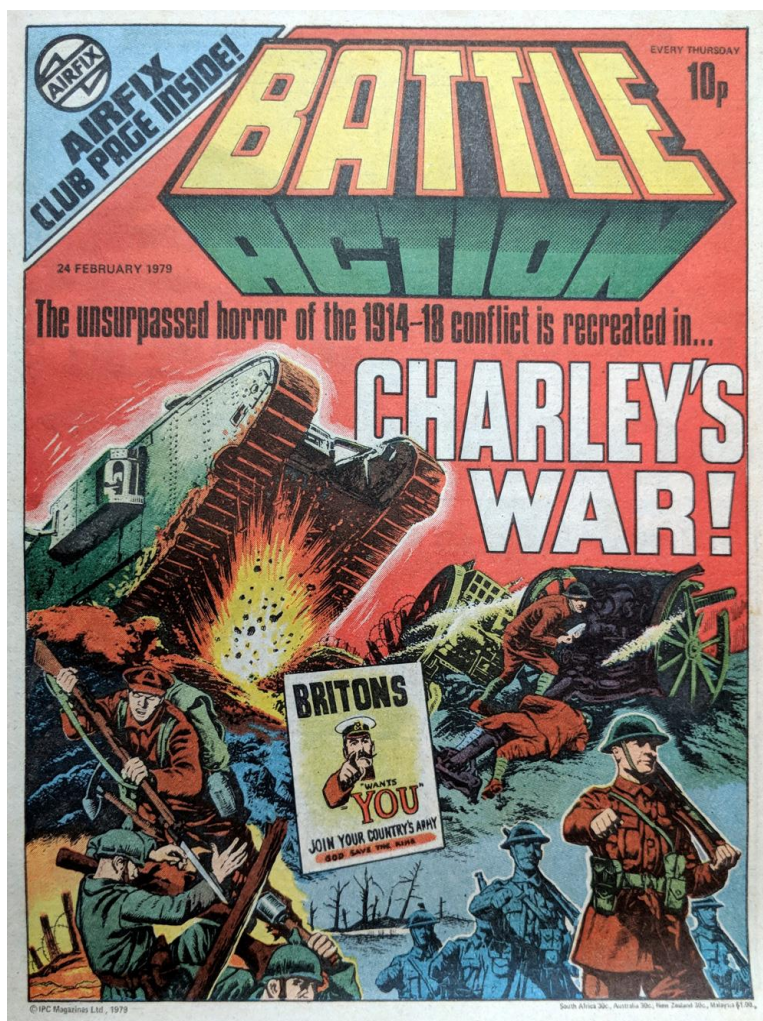
One of the things we mustn't forget is the readers voted *Charley's War* their number one story for pretty much the whole of its run from beginning to end. It was their favorite story of all time. Now that tells you a great deal about you lot. In other words, you've been raised on a diet of fairly jingoistic war films and war comics and so on and yet you're attracted to this story that basically says, "War is shit" and I thought to myself, "This is the most wonderful subversion. How many other people have this opportunity to talk to kids at the most vulnerable time in their life where they're sucking up information like vacuum cleaners?" Because you know, if a twenty-five-year-old reads *Charley's War* they say, "Oh, yes, all right, it's pretty cool." But it's not going to change them in a way it's going to change a twelve-year-old and I knew that at the time, so I was enjoying myself.

JV: Now by late 1983 *Battle* had become *Battle Action Force* and at least twelve to fourteen pages a week were now dedicated to the *Action Force* toy line – which by the way I loved – but at the same time you were doing some of Charley's strongest storylines: Adolf Hitler in the trenches, Charley's court martial and wedding and the little-known sea-battle at the Falkland Islands...

PM: I should mention this, my cunning plan was if that [the *Battle of the Falklands* storyline] worked was then I would have learnt enough about the Navy to do a story about the Battle of Jutland, which was the equivalent of *Star Wars*. To my horror, although you liked it and I know others liked it as well, it was not as popular as the others and the editor, and bear in mind Joe Colquhoun had been in the Merchant Navy, so I thought I was on a slam dunk, I really did, but he said "It's

not as popular as the other *Charley's War* stories so get Charley back in the trenches pronto!" And I was gutted because it's always been a challenge for John Wagner and myself to make a ship story work and neither of us have succeeded. This wonderful lady, Anita at the cartoon museum, said to me once when I was banging on about it, "Well, there is one comic story about ships that worked and that's *Jonah* in the *Beano*." [Laughs] And he used to sink a ship every week! You know what, at my time of life, I'm never going to write another ship story, but there's always that bit of you that wants to wants to try to do the impossible.

JV: Which is a real shame because there are moments and scenes that are unforgettable in that storyline. But as I was saying, *Battle* was moving more towards reprinted stories, but there was still *Johnny Red*, *The Hunters* (a story about two TV actors who were actually spies) and *Charley's War* where you wrote about the end of the war and then you moved on to the Russia Campaign, which



is where I – and I’m sure a lot of readers – first learned about Britain’s part in the Russian Civil War. Did you get ever get the feeling, “This story doesn’t fit the comic anymore”?

PM: I wrote the story in a vacuum so that I would rarely look at the comic. I know I’m not alone in that: Carlos Ezquerro would tell me that he rarely looked at *2000 AD*. It’s because you’re so caught up in your own story but if you start looking at other people’s stories, you’re going to start thinking things like “Well, *The Hunters* is popular. Maybe I should be moving more in that direction.” You’ve got to hang on to your own identity.

JV: The Russian campaign... Because of the storyline -- Charley is “volunteered” to fight in Russia – did you have any problems getting that into the comic?

PM: I was careful. I was *very* careful. You’ve got to bear in mind that these people who were editing the comic at the time, they didn’t give a shit really, you know what I mean? So it was no odds to them what was going on as long as I wasn’t doing anything that would jeopardize their job. They’d just rubber-stamp it, but I would slip in stuff, as you doubtless remember. I can recall a scene where the British army burned down a village in order to save it. Classic Vietnam stuff. The other thing I should add is there’s a little bit of me that would love to write that story today because at that time I didn’t have the major reference sources that I have now. What I know now about that war is far worse! The British Army in Russia in 1919... we are talking endless raping of the population, using poison gas on them – which I did feature a bit of – and spreading sexual diseases among the Russian population. And this was, you know, I mean, I’ve come across all this stuff and I thought, “Jesus Christ so much for these wonderful British soldiers that we’re endlessly told about!”

JV: I love the ending to *Charley’s War*, I think it’s one of the most heartbreaking, poignant endings ever. We see Charley in the London of the Great Depression walking off into the distance telling himself that the sacrifices he and his friends

made weren’t in vain as a newspaper seller shouts, “Hitler elected!”

PM: Yeah.

JV: And I was eleven when I read that and it was gut-wrenching. Brilliant, but gut-wrenching! What made you decide this was the point to end Charley’s story?



PM: I’d always planned to have Charley carry on in World War II, to have his son and all this kind of stuff, but I started researching World War II, in around when Charley was in 1917. I thought, “Well, I’ll get myself a year or so and I should find the right books” and I couldn’t bloody find them! And I’ve talked subsequently to others and they said, “Well, there are all these accounts but they’re all in the vaults of the Imperial War Museum.” In other words, you know, the books that you will generally get with the exception of perhaps of, say, Spike Milligan, you’re not going to get anti-war books on World War II. Yet I knew that there was an anti-war

aspect of World War II and I thought, “How am I going to solve this?” and the only way I could think was I thought, “Okay, what I’m going to have to do, I’m going to have to interview British Legion veterans.” Who at that time would have been in their sixties, something like that? I don’t know. And I thought, I’m going to have to do this. It’s the only way, so I said to this managing editor, “Now,” I said. “Look, if I’m going to carry *Charley’s War* on into World War Two, you’re going to have to give me a research budget. You’re going to have to pay me extra because I’m going to have to take train journeys. I’m going to take bus trips. I’m going to have to travel and I’m going to have to spend time tape-recording veterans’ stories.” And of course if he was on the side of *Charley’s War*, he would have seen that that was a unique opportunity, and can you imagine if I’d taped all those veterans that were around at that time? You can imagine the kind of things I would have been asking them. “What did you really feel about the war?” Etc., etc. And he said, “No, we can’t do that.” And I said, “Well, look, if you can’t do that, I’m not carrying *Charley’s War* on into World War II.” And of course that was the perfect opportunity. It’s what he’d always fucking wanted. Really, he wanted this dangerous story dead!

JV: And had they said “Pat keep going!”, how far would you have gone?

PM: Of course, it’s so hypothetical because IPC was so Luddite, but okay, if they had offered me

a proper deal then there’s no reason whatsoever that Charley’s grandson or great-grandson could not be featured today, and that was always my dream.

JV: Now the final question... What’s the most personal or proudest moment you’ve taken from *Charley’s War*?

PM: Hmm... That is a tough one. I would say probably for me, it would be that final story in Russia because it was seeking a story through because, as you can imagine, particularly in a comic called *Battle Action Force* with things like *The Hunters* in it and so forth... Yeah. So to have a story where Britain is invading a country that they have no reason to – they had no right to be there – and to be able to show that also to say, “Look, you wonder why Russians aren’t always particularly fond of the British, the British Empire and so on?” Because they were bloody *invaded* by them. And so for me that that was that would be the personal story. I think that is what I take the most pride in I think and there’s this other one and this is purely to do with writing techniques.

I felt very proud of that. I was able to write a story where nothing happened, nothing dramatic and yet it was powerful and that was one where they were on a long march marching in the summer heat and I don’t know how I did it. Now. I remember reading it thinking, “Jesus, you know, it’s just having soldiers on the march!” In other words they’re not fighting, they’re not meeting Germans,

they are just marching and the experience of marching in heavy, heavy gear and they’re tired and I don’t know what how many miles they march, but it’s probably a colossal number, and being able to bring that to life. I thought “Well, you know that that’s pretty damn good.” So I was thrilled about that.

Pat Mills’ *Ragtime Soldier*, a successor to *Charley’s War*, was published in *Great War Dundee*, available to download for free from Pat’s website: www.millsverse.com



INTERROGATION: JOHN WAGNER

John Wagner is one undoubtedly of the greats of British comics, the co-creator of dozens of immortal characters, not least of which is the one for which he's probably most well-known: 2000 AD's legendary *Judge Dredd*. But *Battle* fans John's work in that comic is just as important... *Rat Pack*, *The Flight of the Golden Hinde*, *The Bootneck Boy*, *Lofty's One-Man Luftwaffe*, *D-Day Dawson*, *They Can't Stop Bullet*, *Return of the Eagle*, *Darkie's Mob*, *Joe Two Beans*, *Gaunt*, *HMS Nightshade*, *Fight for the Falklands* and *Invasion 1984*... He knows his stuff, this chap!

Recently, John was kind enough to take the time to answer some questions posed by the Journey Planet editorial team...

Journey Planet: Can you share how and why you were brought into *Battle Picture Weekly*?

John Wagner: IPC comics division MD John Sanders asked Pat Mills to devise a war comic. Pat wanted someone to work with and asked for me. I'd left IPC a year before to become the caretaker of a mansion in Scotland, but had discovered it was easier writing scripts than looking after a mansion (mainly because I wasn't getting paid for the mansion). I was ready to come back.

JP: Can you help our readers understand the creative process of creating a comic from scratch? Has the process changed much between the creation of *Battle* and your most recent comic *Rok of the Reds*?

JW: It's pretty much the same although there was a lot more pressure on *Battle*. Sanders wanted a comic quickly, though we never realised he had the figure of six weeks in his head. Maybe that time frame didn't present a problem in the creation of the kind of formulaic stories IPC were putting out in the boys' division at the time but it was tough if you actually wanted to do something different, better, with integrity.

JP: *Victor* and *Warlord* were very different to *Battle*, arguably much tamer and safer: was there an editorial mandate to outshine those comics, or did you just forge your own path?

JW: *Warlord* was the target. It was selling really well and IPC wanted to tap into the war market. We both thought *Warlord* was an excellent comic with some fine stories – having worked there neither of us had any doubt about the ability of DCT staffers to turn out quality product. It seemed fairly hard-edged in comparison to the usual comic fare, but as we were both minded to bring over the real horror of war where we could it was no problem to 'out-tough' *Warlord*.



JP: How difficult is it to write a story set on a closed environment such as a ship?

JW: It was harder than usual but I like ships and the Navy, I've long had an affinity for the sea. The accepted wisdom was that you couldn't make



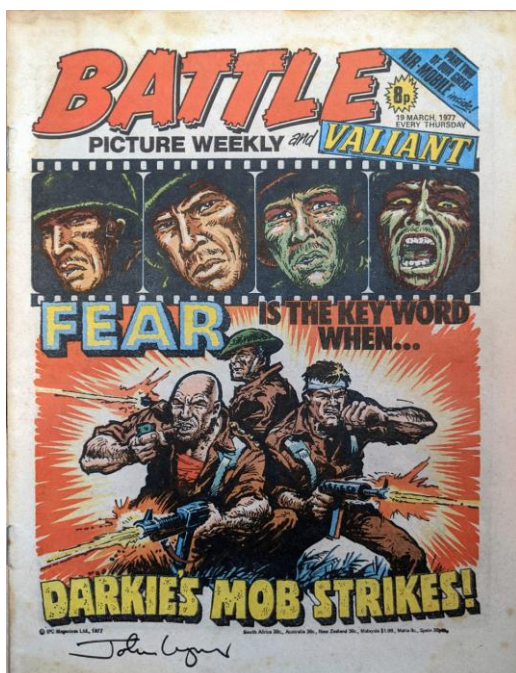
a sea story work, I wanted to challenge that, and I was fascinated by the role of corvettes during the war and the courage and hardships of the men that sailed in them.

JP: Were you yourself a fan of war comics?

JW: Not comics, but I read a lot of factual stuff on war.

JP: What did you enjoy most about working on *Battle*? Looking back, it was clearly breaking a lot of ground – did it feel that way at the time?

JW: I think it was the £100 per week we were getting that pleased me the most. It was quite a lot at the time.



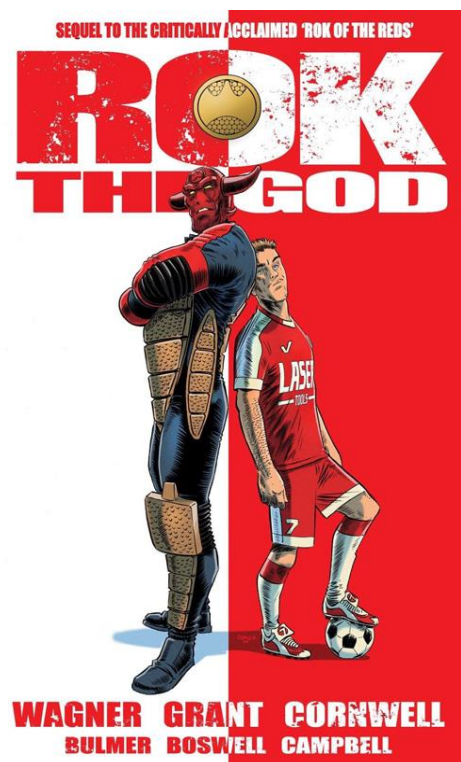
Yes, it did feel like we were doing something different, a little dangerous – breaking new ground, pushing things to the edge and sometimes beyond. These days some of the content might seem a little tame – not back then.

JP: What's next for you, after *Rok the God*? Do you ever see yourself returning to war comics?

JW: No. Won't write war again. *Rok* is probably my last project. It's been a different experience after 45 years working for big companies, to do my own thing and now to self-publish. Hard? You bet. Costly? I never dreamed how costly. Fulfilling? Fun? Yes, yes indeed.

One of the things that I got most right is the choosing of the Rok Crew. Dan Cornwell, Abby Bulmer, Jim Campbell – now Jim Boswell taking over the colouring. What a talented bunch, what a brilliant job they're doing. I've just edited Chapter 2 of *Rok the God* and – largely thanks to them, to the way they brought the story to life – it's just wonderful.

Rok is the story I'm happy to leave readers with. This is the end product of my 50 years experience. Here are all the lessons I've learned in that time, my final offering. Not perfect, nothing's ever perfect. But I love it and I've poured all my heart into it.



JOE COLQUHOUN:

A PERFECT COMIC ARTIST AND GENTLEMAN

James Bacon writes: "Joe Colquhoun is one of my favourite artists, having drawn both my favourite stories, and it was with pleasure that I discovered his oeuvre, and have come to appreciate how hard working he was. I am very grateful for the input we received from Jane Colquhoun!"

Jane Colquhoun writes of her father Joe:

'Hard working, perfectionist. Funny, like Tom from *The Good Life* – he wore jumpers with elbow patches and cords and desert boots, had a beard – grew veg – brewed beer, smoked a pipe, walked the black labrador twice a day, sailed – a free spirit, but also had that thing about duty, manners – conservatism, patriotism which was left over from the wartime – perhaps didn't quite go with the 70s progressiveness.

'He had a resignation about work, didn't enjoy it but couldn't do it half-heartedly. Listened to Terry Wogan and kept 9-5, unless we were due a family holiday and he worked time and a half.

'He was always there for a 'heart to heart' and to help with art homework – but diary accounts state that behind his cheerful demeanour he found life stressful with deadlines/bills and house maintenance, trying to catch good weather for a sail. He mentions his health a lot but think doctors were only beginning to make the connection between being overweight, smoking, and stress in those days.'

Joe Colquhoun was born in Harrow, north west London on 7 November 1926. He said himself that he 'was brought up on the usual diet most kids were then – *Comic Cuts*, *The Truepenny Bloods*, *Magnet*, *Champion*, *Triumph*, *Wizard*, *Hotspur* – which were all written stories, and well-written for what you paid, with one-off illustrations.'

Joe received a placement at the Kingston-upon-Thames Art School but he told David Ashford

that 'attending art school became a farce really, more time spent diving into shelters than studying' and according to Jane was conscripted into the Navy in July 1944, although he told Ashford '...it would be safer than civilian life'.

Serving mainly in the Mediterranean, he had a quiet war, and his wife Mary has said 'He saw little action, if any, and somewhat resented spending his salad days swabbing decks in the sunshine. Oh, he had a lovely war, if a bit boring. He writes about it in the diaries and letters home to his parents. He certainly wasn't drawing on his own experiences in *Charley's War*, but he was able to put himself in the shoes of men at war in extreme situations.'

He seemed to love the sea, as his accuracy with Naval artwork was amazing and he thoroughly enjoyed sailing as a pastime. He returned to art school in 1947 after his service and studied book illustration. He was very interested in comic illustration although he had completed a correspondence course in writing while in the Navy.

He followed up an advert in a trade magazine looking for samples for a new independent comic publisher, and joined the King-Ganteaume Studio. Ken King and Malcolm Ganteaume, two ex-GIs, used their severance to set up a comic production company for British publishers, but with a distinctly American look, and indeed occasionally stating a US cent price and 'UK editions' on the cover of some, including work for Scion and Miller.

One can see how excited Joe was to be published, it had a very strong impact and he related this when he said 'The very first publication I saw my own work in gave me the most euphoric feeling I ever had. It's like riding a bike I guess – never to be repeated.'

Carver of the Islands was Joe's first published strip, he drew and wrote this story, and it appeared in *Jungle Trails*. He drew *Dave Landor (Conqueror Comic, 1951)*, he wrote and drew *Beachcomber Bill*

(*High Seas Comic* 1951-1952) *The Flying Sharks* (*Daring Hero Comic* 3, 1952) and *Kit Carson* in *Cowboy Comics*.

He had an interview with Marcus Morris, the editor of *Eagle*, who then pointed him over to Stan Boddington at *Lion*, from Amalgamated Press, but they did not have any positions for artists and when asked if he could also write, he grabbed the opportunity and said he could. He wrote a story about the Navy in the Pacific War, He came up with *The Naval Stowaways* with a synopsis setting out a story consisting of some 100 instalments although the work was edited and turned into four stories in *Lion*, in August 1952.

He then moved to *Champion* where he wrote another epic, *Legionnaire Terry's Desert Quest*, which was some 44 episodes, which ran as centre spread 2-pagers, and still had work with K&G doing ten issues of *Masterman* running from November 1942 to August 1953 and a number of other *Champion* stories.

Joe then worked on *Roy of the Rovers* on *Tiger*, initially written by Frank S Pepper but subsequently he then wrote and drew the rest of the first year of *Roy of the Rovers*, despite not being

much of an expert on football at all. Joe worked on *Roy of the Rovers* for nearly six years in *Tiger* (11th September 1954 until 7th March 1959) but moved willingly to *Lion* and *Paddy Payne*, *Warrior of the Skies*. His attention to detail was impressive on this strip as can be seen in an example of his page in the Cartoon Museum in London, and he worked on this with breaks until March 1964.

Joe was a freelancer and there were occasionally fraught times, one when he was moved off a regular and good job such as *Football Family Robinson* for a new project that then came a cropper. he didn't really seem to want to be a writer, and his run on *Roy of the Rovers* became a burden. Jane Colquhoun writes, "I think he did fancy being a writer but not about football, which he disliked – he was not sporty at all but liked adventure and war stories." He had issues with the management and they seemed to look after him more carefully and he returned to *Football Family Robinson*. Likewise, he was on *Paddy Payne* for some time when, suddenly, he was off and out of work, this messing around seems more common than we as readers may realise, and Joe did return to *Paddy Payne*. There was little choice for artists, who seemed to have to fight to even change the story.

While on *Paddy Payne* he completed other work, and he drew the *Air Ace Picture Library Flash Point* 35, January 1961. AAPL #35 reprinted in *Aces High: The 10 Best Air Ace Picture Library Comic Books Ever!*, edited by Steve Holland

Of interest to fans will be *Lion Annual* 1965, which has a full colour story, *Swordfish Strike*, set in the Second World War, and *Lion* #713, 4th December 1965, with a World War 1 cover, highlighting a text story, *The Phantom Footballer of Amiens*. A favourite was *Football Family Robinson* which ran in *Jag* in 1968 to 1969.

To *Battle* and Joe drew a number of stories, but his first work was an illustration to a text story. *Boys at War Youngest VC* was written by Eric Hebden and was in *Battle* on the 17th May 1975. It tells the story of Hospital Apprentice Arthur Fitzgibbon who at 15 years and 3 months was the youngest recipient of a Victoria Cross for his bravery under fire on the 21st August 1860 at the capture of the Northern of the Taku Forts in China.



The honour of being the youngest recipient is shared with Thomas Flinn.

Battle Badge of Bravery was a stand alone true story series of two pages and *Night of the Avenger* was in *Battle* on the 19th July 1975. We see Sgt. Freddy McAleer carrying out a unilateral action in revenge for the loss of his comrade Bill Thompson. Of note, Francis McAleer from Dungannon of the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers received a DCM for his unilateral action on the Goubellat plain on the morning of 24th January 1943. He was lost in an accident on the 8th May 1943 aged 31.

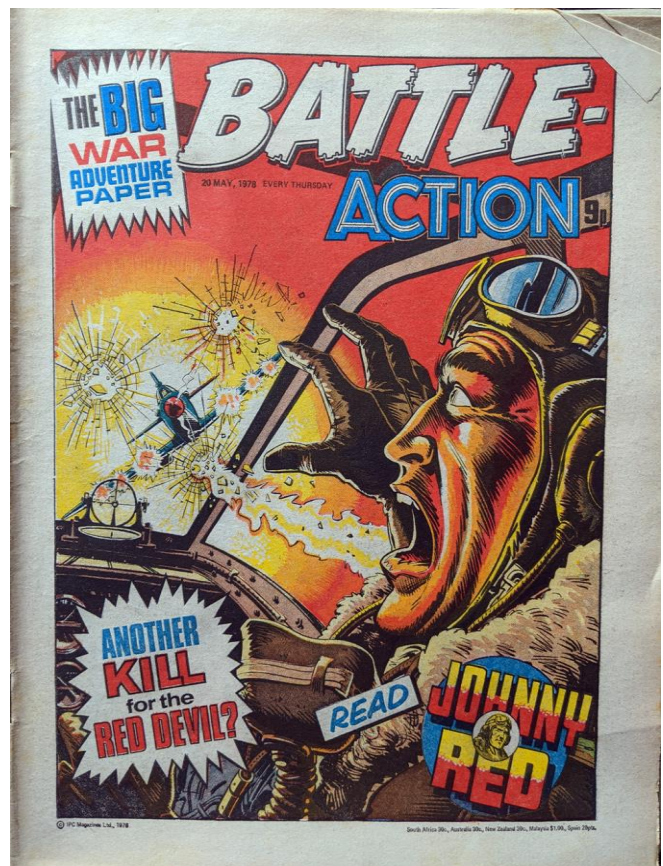
On the 23rd of October 1976 *Battle* became *Battle Valiant* as those comics merged. This issue saw the start of *Panzer G-Man* and we see *One Eyed Jack*, *The Black Crow* and *Soldier Sharp The Rat of the Rifles* in *Battle*. *Soldier Sharp* was written by Scott Goodall and drawn by Joe and like its stable mates is badged as 'A Valiant Story'. Captain Hurricane hosts *Battle Stations* and Dick Emery welcomes *Battle* readers to join the Airfix Modellers Club. *Soldier Sharp The Rat of the Rifles* had begun 28th February 1976 in *Valiant*.

We meet Corporal Arnie Sharp, 1st battalion Wessex Rifles, formally of Stalag 18, identified as having a history of cowardice, cunning, violence and theft. He has escaped with the pilferings from dead comrades and meets Russians who think he is a German, and so begin these tales on the Eastern front. At this stage *Battle* has eight stories and *Sharp* is two and half pages, but by the 13th of November *Valiant* is smaller on the cover, and the story has only two pages, but *Sharp* has run foul of the Russians, who have attached him to a cart wheel and attached a cage of rats to him. I have to admit that as the story progresses, the artwork improves and the story shows quite a distasteful character. The story by December has that style to it, the accuracy of line and incredible blackness of night-time shade is really clean and so brilliant and then with the issue on the 22nd of January 1977 we say farewell to *Soldier Sharp*, who escapes the Russians and hides amongst refugees. This was a very interesting issue as *D-Day Dawson* ends, *The Black Crow* ends, and *The Bootneck Boy* takes a week's break.

During this run, on the 25th of December 1976 there was a very nice two-page stand-alone entitled *The Fire Fighter* which detailed how Pilot Officer Clare Arthur Connor won a DFC and his 18 year old Sgt. John Hannah a VC for fighting flames in a Hampden Bomber during a raid on Antwerp in September 1940. It's a nice upbeat story of heroism during war. Of note, Connor who was 26, and had gotten married in May, received the DFC at Buckingham Palace with his wife and Sgt. Hannah on the 8th of October. He was shot down and lost over the North Sea on the night of November 3rd/4th.

The 100th issue of *Battle*, published on the 29th of January 1977 saw the debut of *Joe Two Beans*, Major Eazy meeting the Rat Pack and the first episode of *Johnny Red*.

Written by Tom Tully and with this issue so wonderfully drawn by Joe, this was a brilliant introduction to a new character, who had been dishonourably discharged from the RAF after unfairly falling foul of an officer whom he struck. During this time Ian Kennedy did some amazing *Johnny Red* covers for *Battle*.



The aerial action is fantastic from Joe, incredible attention to detail, historical accuracy and ability to portray movement and action. Drawing a plane is not at all easy, but the combination of technical ability mixed with the wonderfully expressive facial depictions is a demonstration in storytelling that is rare.

This just makes the horror, the brutality of the harshest front in the Second World War more vivid and tangible to readers. There are moments that haunted me as a child, such as Redburn being slowly strangled to death by the bullet belt of a firing machine gun, and now as an adult I can see many scenes creating a realistic feeling of fear. This is an anti-war story, painting an honest and fair picture of the harshness that is war, with a healthy level of hatred of the Soviet commissar and politically motivated cruel officers while of course, seeing the incredible viciousness of the Germans and the destruction of the humanity in people, and Johnny Redburn got work in the Merchant Navy and during an attack on his convoy, replaced a killed Hurricane Pilot to defend against German attack and ended up inflicting loss and defeat portrayed so deftly. Death was always on hand, and characters could easily fall foul of gun and cannon fire, with very little notice.

Every three pages has a cliffhanger or a story point as was the need with a comic of this era, but Tom Tully is brilliant at it, be it Johnny being floored by a female pilot or an impending doom.

During this time the *Panzer G-Man* cover of 2nd April 1977 seems to have a distinct Joe Colquhoun look to the face and I would love to know if anyone could identify it. There was no *Johnny Red* in the issue 24th September 1977 but 8th October saw a return and a Carlos Ezquerro *Johnny Red* cover. The cover on the 4th Feb 1978 could be Joe while the 4th March 1978 definitely is, while I am not sure about the 1st April cover. The 20th May cover is incredible and sees a German pilot suffer the wrath of Johnny Red, which is replicated in a frame in the 3 page story and on the 26th August the Nagajka gets featured on the cover. Numbering began in the 190s counting up to 200 and issue 198 on the 16th December has a lovely *Johnny Red* cover. Issue 199 was Joe's last

Johnny Red story in *Battle Action*, 23rd December 1977.

Of interest the *Battle Action* cover on the 11th August 1979 has been noted as a Joe Colquhoun cover and is a stunning image of Johnny Red's Hurricane.

Joe went on to draw *Charley's War* for issue 200, with a break on New Year's Eve, issue 200 was dated the 6th January 1979 and John Cooper took over *Johnny Red*.

It was a huge move to take Joe Colquhoun off *Johnny Red*, then one of the most popular strips, but Dave Hunt saw the logic and it was supportive of Pat Mills, who was working on what would become one of the most important comics created.

Joe said 'When I was first asked to take on *Charley's War*, I said to Dave Hunt "God Almighty, how are you going to make any subject matter out of such a static subject as trench warfare?" and Dave said "We've got a damn good author – he'll be able to pull it through." I'd never met Pat or knew of him, I was still a bit sceptical but as it developed I began to realise that we were onto something, it seemed to catch on.



'I was astounded that one learned professor equated it to *All Quiet on the Western Front* as a social document. That seems a bit high-flying for me, though I'm beginning to understand it in a way, thanks to the inspiration and dedication of Pat Mills. I think this has really rubbed off on me. I don't want to let him down, and again I'm very interested in the subject, even though at times I find it very depressing and emotive. Particularly the sequence at the end of the Battle of the Somme. You'll find it hard to believe, but when I re-read that in its printed version I was almost in tears. Just shows how involved you can get, I suppose.

'I've tried very hard to bring out the realism in the trenches and most of the sequences in the story are based on factual incidents. That might lead to a certain amount of authenticity which is possibly lacking in the more blood and thunder, action-packed World War 2 stories. Finally, and this is only my own opinion, it illustrates a period that was already dying then. When words like Honour, Duty, Patriotism meant something, I think most decent kids reading this epoch, will have a sneaking, almost atavistic feeling that in this

present sick and rather selfish world, with violence and amorality seeming to pay dividends, they may think they're missing out on something. That's a bit pretentious, but just think it.'

The story of Joe continuing *Charley's War* came up, with John Vaughan asking Pat Mills, 'By 1985 Pat Mills had left *Charley's War* but publishers IPC had decided to continue the story into World War II with a new writer Scott Goodall and series co-creator and artist Joe Colquhoun. Pat spent a few minutes talking about Joe's final days on the series and his genius!'

Pat Mills replied, 'Joe rang me up and he said "Look I'm not that well, I'm coming up to retirement. Do you mind if I carry *Charley's War* on with another writer?" And of course I said "Yes!" I mean after all Joe's the co-creator and I said "Yeah, of course! What I'd really love you to do Joe is to do a story for *2000 AD*. You could draw *Slaine* or something like that. Whatever you want to do!" and he said "Pat I haven't got the imagination for it." And that almost has me in tears because of course you and I both know Joe had the most wonderful imagination, he's the most talented imaginative guy imaginable and the most modest guy and so of course I said "Yeah, of course, it's all right, Joe."

'Scott Goodall does the story which of course bears no resemblance to the original *Charley's War* for the readers despite loving Joe's artwork, despite loving his beautiful depiction of Dunkirk and all the rest of it. They say "Hang on a minute. this isn't what we signed up for." and the story crashed and it almost crashed overnight. Now you would think that they would be an inquest on something so appalling and the answer is there never was because these people at IPC, they really didn't give a shit! And the saddest part of all is they kept giving Joe work but they just kept giving him shit work and you'll find that. I think the last thing he did was I don't know? *Action Force*?'





John Vaughan suggested, 'I think it was actually M.A.S.K.'

Pat replied, 'M.A.S.K.! Yeah, that's it, and I believe he may have died at his drawing board, which is a fitting end for an artist, but at the same time he fucking deserved better than that. Actually, I'll tell you a footnote on that as a great compliment paid to him. Joe Sacco, the Maltese artist, he did some World War I stuff but he's more well-known for his general political stuff. He told me that he considered drawing this great battlescape like Joe used to and he said he couldn't and he remembered when he got those comics in Malta as a kid, he said he'd just be bowled over by it but he felt he could not match Joe Colquhoun!'

Joe did a number of covers for *Battle* featuring *Charley's War*:

- 23d February 1979 – Night Raiders
- 24th March 1979 – Over the Top
- 19th May 1979 – Lonely and the Trench
- 13th October 1979 – The Tanks are coming
- 10th November 1979 – SECRET
- 22nd December 1979 – Church and Tank
- 2nd May 1980 – Judgement Day

On the 12th July 1980 the cover changed to a yellow surround and a splash image which was the first panel of the story that immediately

continued inside. This alternated but the first one was a cover by Joe. Again the ability to do this and create a cover and story shows his agility to tell stories. The covers were nearly all *Charley's War* or *Johnny Red* with one *Fighting Mann*.

This gave us more great Joe Colquhoun and John Cooper work, and some astonishing covers such as the 17th October 1981. The last cover in the yellow surround style was dated 20th February 1982 with a *Charley's War* in a waterlogged shell hole. From three quarters of a page, the first panel now filled the full page and it was laid out so that BATTLE across the top and a wider variety of stories on the cover. 15th May saw a general in the drink and the story continued on the next page, whereas two weeks later we have the iconic Sit-Down Strike cover. The frequency of *Charley's War* lessened and indeed the style was not consistent, some covers were distinctly the first page of the story, others led directly to it, but the occasional Joe Colquhoun covers were stunning such as the FAIRY? featuring Wilf on the 25th June 1983. The 30th July 1983 – last *Charley's War* cover, as 8th October 1983 *Battle* became *Battle Action Force* and the next *Charley's War* cover was the 11th August 1984 as *Action Force* dominated the covers, but when Joe did do a cover, such as this, it was stunning. The next cover was of the Scott Goodall era, and the Big Bombardment and we see Charley in the second World War.

Pat Mills's run on *Charley's War* with Joe Colquhoun ended with *Battle Action Force* on the 26th January 1985 and is a real 'what-if' for fans. Scott Goodall took up the writing from the 2nd of February 1985 and Joe continued and the art remains wonderful. On the 4th of October the story saw Charley in France and started to recount his First World War experience and so the story was reprinted, until the merger of *Battle* with *Eagle*, the last issue being the 23rd January 1988 and the story continued, with *Johnny Red* in *Eagle*. Joe's artwork was incredible and it was a brilliantly laid out and drawn comic, of epic proportions.

There were a number of World War 2 covers – 31st August 1985 The Big Bombardment; 14th of June 1986 we see Charley escaping the SS; 19th

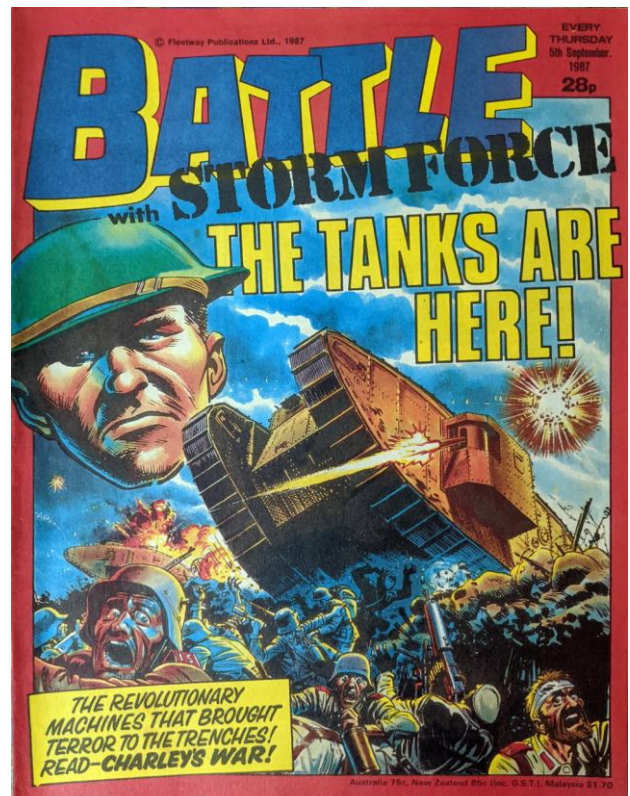
July 1986 Dunkirk. A wonderful cover on the 9th September 1986, we see a destroyer hit by torpedoes off Dunkirk.

The cover of the 26th November, during the reprint time is wonderfully bright and eye-catching, but I do wonder if this was a group of Stats.

Of interest, though, may be *Battle* dated 17th January 1987, featuring *The Ringer*. This is a lovely standalone naval story, written by A. Bond and is a fine read in four pages. The cover features Joe's work, but it is a cut and paste of two panels from the inside, something that became more common with *Battle*.

The cover of 21st February is a reproduction of a *Lonely* from years earlier, while the cover on the 12th December is an adjusted panel from the interior.

Joe went on to work for *M.A.S.K.* with issue #6 and had work featured in ten subsequent issues, six of which were published posthumously.



On the 23rd of October 1976 *Soldier Sharp* began and the last Second World War episode of *Charley's War* was on the 4th of October 1986. There were times where the comic took a break, and there were times where there was no story. It is fair to say that Joe worked on *Battle* continually for ten years non-stop and it took its toll – he suffered a heart attack in 1982.

Joe had two stories in the *Valiant Book of Mystery and Magic* annual 1975: *The Man on the Road* and *The Final Victim*. *The Final Victim* saw a comic artist under considerable pressure from his editors and with an artistic block, while not well remunerated. He kills a person by accident, and uses their expression of impending doom which breaks his mental block and subsequently receives high praise momentarily from his editor, but he soon realises to get more brilliant imagery he must see more horrified faces confronted with their mortality. Jane Colquhoun said to Nick Churchill of *Dorset Life* 'I've only just seen this one, but it's definitely dad. It's his desk in the attic, his anglepoise lamp, the

same dirty cups, the flares! We didn't even know he'd done that one.'

It makes one think.

Joe's ability and incredible skill is borne out by his vast body of work, three or four incredibly brilliant pages a week, telling such wonderfully poignant stories, and the ability to have such accuracy and attention to detail, consistently and also tell stories to children that are recognised as being the finest the medium of comics has to offer.

When one looks at his covers, and the colour story in the *Battle Annual* in 1982 and the *Battle Action Force* 1985 annual, which is so stunning, has a full colour cover, it helps one realise just how brilliantly agile he was. One of the finest comic artists ever.

Joe passed away on the 6th of May 1987.

Without doubt one of Britain's greatest comic artists, and now internationally recognised as such.

Notes:

Steve Oldham interviewed Joe Colquhoun for *Fantasy Express*, and although we tried hard to get permission to republish this, we failed to make contact with Steve. We have used quotes from this interview, we hope that we might make contact or someone might connect us, so we can ask, and perhaps publish in any follow up the full fascinating interview... journeyplanet@gmail.com

Charley's War Volume V – Colquhoun writes the introduction. (Titan Books, 2008)

An article on Joe by his local paper *Dorset Life* where Mary and Jane Colquhoun speak to Nick Churchill with some lovely photos...

www.dorsetlife.co.uk/2014/09/from-roy-of-the-rovers-to-world-war-1-joe-colquhoun/

Steve Holland's Bear Alley – Comic First's – Joe Colquhoun

bearalley.blogspot.com/2007/10/comic-firsts-joe-colquhoun.html

A full stripography is available on John Freeman's *Down the Tubes* website and Steve Holland contributed to this. downthetubes.net/?page_id=20972 As well as a massive *Charley's War* site keeping the incredible work of Neil Emery alive with many additions.

Dictionary of British Comic Artists, Writers and Editors, Alan Clark. (British Library 1998)

Book and Magazine Collector #288 – David Ashford and Norman Wright's *Great British Comic Artists* on Joe Colquhoun. David had some quotes and the 12 page article is a fuller representation of all of his work.

Images of Joe were from a *Battle Summer Special* feature.

The Fleetway Companion by Steve Holland is an incredible book.

Arthur Fitzgibbon – www.thegazette.co.uk/London/issue/22538/page/3363

SGT Freddy McAleer: www.dungannonwardead.com/persondepth.asp?cas_id=821

INTERROGATION: DAVE HUNT

Dave Hunt, the youngest IPC staff member to be promoted to editor, was given the task of working with two guys brought down from Scotland to launch a top-secret new comic. Dave went on to edit the first five years of *Battle*, its real "Golden Age." Guest Editor Paul Trimble listens to what he has to say.

Nearing the 30 years of age mark and also bemoaning the fact that my beloved *Scorcher* football title had recently been gobbled up by the in-house *Tiger* publication, I suppose my editorial career was very much at a cliched crossroads. Suddenly, my desk phone rings and Editorial Director John Sanders' secretary informs me he wants to see me in his office immediately.

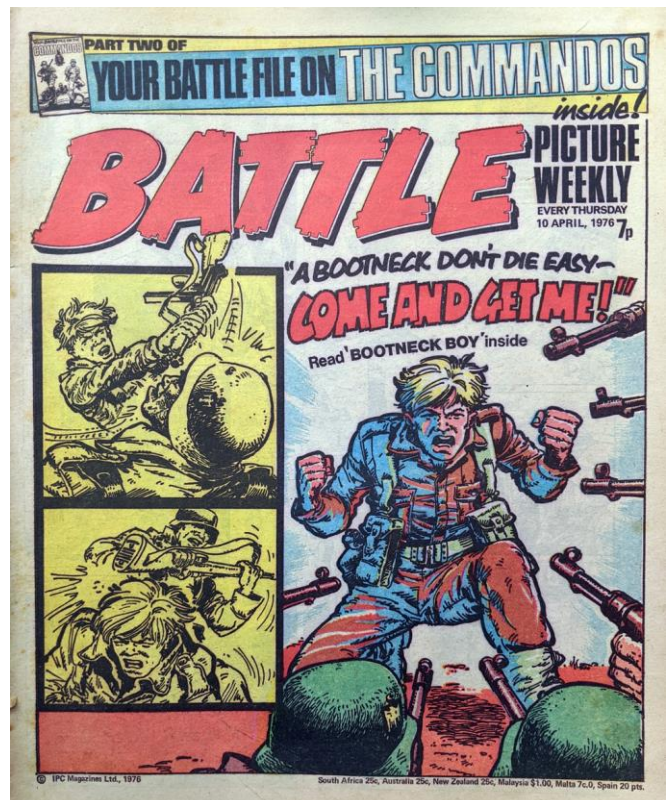
Being the non-political animal I am and always have been, I listened to John intently because, honestly, I had no knowledge as he explained that he had recently brought two young guys down from Scotland to create a new war themed publication as a rival to DC Thomson's successful *Warlord* publication.

The duo were currently located in an office in the Girls Department, at that time run by managing editor John Purdie, and JS was fully aware his strategy was currently causing much consternation in the Boys area run by Jack Le Grand. However, he reasoned it was fully justifiable on his part if the Juvenile Group was to strengthen, move with the times and progress as a viable contributor within the IPC Magazines empire. He also thought it was a win-win situation for me personally because I could learn more about the creative process from these mystery guys and they, in turn, could learn something from me regarding the editorial process. OK, let's give it a go I thought.

And so I met Pat Mills and John Wagner for the first time. If my memory serves me well, this

was circa January 1975 and the first issue was, when I made my entrance, roughly 60% complete. The lads gave me the completed stories to read and I was immediately hooked. For a start the stories – *D-Day Dawson*, *The Bootneck Boy*, *Lofty's One-Man Luftwaffe*, *Flight of the Golden Hinde*, *Day of the Eagle* – were self-contained 4-page complete adventures, rather than the 2-page episodic, cliff-hanger endings the way we had always done things in the past. They were tough adventures, yet had compelling, moralistic storylines.

As I got to know Pat and John the more I marvelled at their talent and conscientiousness. They would deliberate over every frame, every word. They re-wrote scripts sent in by various contributors until the finished article bore little resemblance to the original submitted script. I



recall the first episode of *Rat Pack* arriving in the BPW office and all of us enthusing over artist Carlos Ezquerro's wonderful gritty interpretation of its scumbag characters. I recall the story *Terror Behind the Bamboo Curtain* and the uncertainty of how Pat and John intended to develop this particular war adventure. Indeed, it was this Japanese prisoner of war story that would eventually lead me to taking full control of the title.

But first I just want to add that a few weeks after the launch issue I had an incredible stroke of good fortune. One morning Jack's right-hand man, Sid Bicknell (incidentally, a guy who I had a lot of respect for during my time on *Scorcher*), came into my office accompanied by a young lad by the name of Steve MacManus and informed me he was to be my new editorial assistant on *Battle*. We hit it off right away and I quickly realised that, although Steve had a lot to learn, he undoubtedly had flair and talent in spades. On reflection, we were still quite young (especially Steve) and so therefore weren't entrenched in the political side of comic book matters. We faced the pressures of a new launch head-on and did it in an honest, almost innocent-like way which I think allowed our creative talents to be dominant. Steve was a good guy to have alongside me in the trenches.

The initial circulation figures for the new title were proving to be really good, but with P & J still tinkering with every syllable, in every balloon, in every frame, in every page, we had somehow managed to fall way behind on our printing schedule. I think we had just sent a very late issue #9 to Press when in strode a clearly angry John Purdie to the *Battle* office. I was his target as he informed me we were about to lose a complete issue due to editorial lateness and this especially applied to the *Bamboo Curtain* story. I like to think that I always got on OK with John, but I wasn't best pleased with this situation and his accusation and told him I wouldn't be held responsible because I didn't have total charge of the publication. Steve Mac backed me all the way and, incredibly, Pat and John both agreed that maybe it was time for them to leave

the publication. Had they also reached this decision because they had now gained some respect for me and felt the title was in good hands?

On reflection I feel there were plenty of in-house guys who would have liked the new publication to have failed. Who were these upstarts? How dare they be given the royal approval by John Sanders? There was a tried and tested way of launching new publications and JS had totally and deliberately gone over their heads! I will have none of that. Pat and John were the proverbial breath of fresh air so needed at that time within the Juvenile market.



I learnt so much from these guys. Long lunches discussing plot lines; late evenings trying to make up the time spent during those lunches; a wife and young kids at home wondering what had happened to their dad. But my career had gained so much just by being involved with them. The six months or so spent in their company had given me the confidence to take the comic forward after their departure. Thankfully, we'd parted amicably on *Battle*, plus I now also had the use of their

creative talents to hopefully write popular stories for me in the future... *Charley's War* and *Darkie's Mob* immediately spring to mind. As John Sanders would have said- definitely a win-win situation for me.

Another main influence on *Battle* has to be Gerry Finley-Day, who at that time had been the editorial force behind the success of the girl's title *Tammy*. The more complex, romantic and sensitive plotting for the female audience was exactly the required briefing P and J would give to scriptwriters working on the all-action war stories. Also a first class ideas man, Gerry lived the stories he created for *Battle*. *The Bootneck Boy* was a typical example of this ... the working class orphan lad brought up by his brutal Uncle Fred and, despite his small stature, his overriding ambition was simply to make it through as a tough Royal Marine. Gerry developed *Bootneck Boy* into a very popular story for *Battle* readers. He also went on to create the enormously popular *Hellman of Hammer Force* which first appeared in the ill-fated *Action* title and also the story *Fighter from the Skies* for *Battle* which viewed the war through the perspective of German eyes. Gerry was very generous with his time and his talent. You could always talk through ideas with him and he was also a genuinely nice guy to work with.

With Pat and John departed, but remaining in-house with Pat working on a new boys' comic and John attempting to revamp the *Valiant* title, Steve and myself now had the immense but enjoyable task of carrying on with the successful start to the *Battle* publication. I had a very competent art team on site and these were certainly backed up by the creative talents of Art Editor Doug Church. Doug was never assigned to any one title, but had a roaming, almost freelance like brief to help out as and when necessary on any of the many boys' comic titles. You can be sure that I enlisted his help whenever I could, because give him the skimpiest of ideas and he would develop it and come up with a great end result especially when it came to the *Battle* covers. When Pat was developing *2000 AD* he himself said that Doug was the creative

inspiration behind a lot of the title's exciting innovation.

The next four years were I honestly felt the most enjoyable period of my whole editorial career. Whilst giving the low-down on the in-house situation, I have so far given scant respect to the many freelance contributors who ensured *Battle* remained a successful title with its loyal readership. Alan Hebden, Tom Tully, Alan Grant, Pat Mills, John Wagner, Gerry Finley-Day, Joe Colquhoun, Mike Western, Carlos Ezquerra, John Cooper to name just a few.. I suppose we were fortunate in that we inherited other great titles along the way, the *Valiant* and *Action* publications. Whenever the *Battle* circulation started dipping, it was these excellent titles that kept us strong and ready for the next important stage in the title's history.

Of all the many terrific stories we developed during my tenure, I have to single out *Charley's War* as my stand-out achievement. Of course, the little matter of having Pat Mills and Joe Colquhoun create it might have played a slightly significant part as well. With these incredible guys on my side I honestly feel that this ground-breaking and



thought-provoking war story was as good as anything I was ever involved with.

I was fortunate to work on many titles during my long editorial career but *Battle* was, I think, my stand-out achievement. But you're only ever as good as the superb contributors you surround yourself with. It's an honour that *Battle* still has a following and is recognised as the damned good publication it undoubtedly was.

The trouble when making contributor lists who one considers to be the mainstay of any publication, is that you very often exclude guys who were also very important in the development of a good title. Major Eric Hebden, Ian Gibson, Jim Watson, Ian Kennedy and Cam Kennedy certainly fit into this category. It's all a long, long time ago and so please excuse me for any memory lapses on my part.

As you say, Ian Gibson was the artist on the *Amazing War* series which, as the name suggests, was a collection of weird and fascinating facts pertaining to the war theatre. I'm pretty certain that Alan Hebden's late father was the scriptwriter on part of this series at least. Eric was very influential to both Pat and John during the early days of *Battle Picture Weekly*. They respected him and leant on him heavily because of his first-hand knowledge of the war scenario. Again, he was a guy who gave his knowledge willingly and also I recall with good humour.

Ian Gibson would, I'm sure, be the first to admit his main interest was sci-fi and so when Pat spawned *2000 AD* he did some excellent, creative work on this title. I don't recall him ever doing an adventure series for *Battle*, but I like to think of him as one of the unsung heroes of the publication.

Jim Watson did a lot of first-class work for *Battle* and notably the story *Hold Hill 109* written by my editorial colleague Steve MacManus. A great professional who could always be relied on and also a guy I had many interesting phone conversations with.

Another Ian, the marvellously talented Mr Kennedy from Dundee, was certainly another of my heroes. Again, he was never a prolific contributor on *Battle*, but whenever I could make use of his talent you can be sure I'd grab at the opportunity.

During my time on *Battle* I think Ian was still completing a lot of work for other publications, notably in the DC Thomson stable. But when I went on to become editor on *New Eagle* he completed some incredible artwork for me and especially on Pat Mills' *Dan Dare* series. I like to think that our working relationship was also based on friendship and, again, whenever Ian and Gladys Kennedy made a visit to see us in London, it was always a delight to be in their company.

Unfortunately, Cam Kennedy came very late in my time on *Battle*. I remember him submitting samples of his classy artwork to the office and I was immediately smitten and desperate to make use of his talent. So much so that I'm fairly certain I quickly wrote the *Private Loner* one-off adventure just to give him some work and to enlist him, so to speak. But then I was gone from *Battle* and thankfully Cam went on to create much more memorable work for the title.



From *Battle Picture Weekly*, 3 May 1975: Art by Ian Gibson

EXPLORING: NON-FICTION IN BATTLE

How does reality play alongside fiction? Let's find out!

By Chris Garcia

It's pretty obvious that my comic reading in recent years has been mostly of non-fiction comics. Rick Geary, mostly, but also other stuff. I love those non-fiction comics, have ever since I discovered the *Big Book* series in the 1990s.

One thing that I love about *Battle* would be the use of non-fiction in the comic. The first one I came across was a lovely piece that took a look at the American Civil War. In a very British way, it basically covered the entirety of the Civil War in a couple of quick paragraphs, and didn't really touch on the matters that led to the war. In a way, it's the best shorthand you could give, and it really mentioned how much the Civil War defined the US for decades to follow. It even ends by claiming that some believe the Civil War hadn't ended until Carter was elected!

That's the sort of thing that Non-Fiction Comics can actually do. They can take a short look at a huge topic like The Civil War and make it digestible. No, you won't be able to give a forty-five minute lecture on it after reading it, but even knowing broad-strokes helps. It's these kinds of things in comics in the 1970s and 80s that helped push me further into History.

The non-fiction pieces in *Battle* don't feel forced. That's important. I grew up with cartoons that had to carve time out to make a message, which usually turned out to be about not littering

or to not bully the fat kid. Too often, when you shoe-horn in a message, you're just making it stand out and it loses the impact. The best thing about the *Battle* pieces is they can be enjoyed as their own thing. I guess that's the good thing about an anthology title.



Names of Glory: Royal Tank Regiment by Jim Watson and Ken Roscoe, *Battle* 30th July 1977



Names of Glory: Grenadier Guards by Jim Watson and Ken Roscoe, Battle 2nd July 1977

The series of pieces called *Names of Glory* turned out to be my favourite non-El Mestizo pieces of the entire run that James Bacon (all praise be unto he!) gave me! They're one page looks at various units that went on to acclaim. They're short, but they give a fine outlet for some exceptionally good art. The *Names of Glory* that covered Royal Tank Regiment of World War I and World War II (Motto: Fear Naught) and it's a great encapsulation. Specifically, it talks about the legendary tank *Creme de Menthe* that destroyed a German outpost in the War to End All Wars. The instalment about the Grenadier Guards (Motto: *Honi Soit Qui Mal Y Pense*) is gorgeous, a beautiful contrast between a nattily dressed 18th Century Guardsman and below is an amazing illustration that appears to be from one of the World Wars, chaotic, making a brilliant use of colour, and especially variance in texture and tone. That plays so well on newsprint, much better than that sort of thing works on higher-gloss.

Probably my favourite is the 617 Squadron (Motto: *Après Moi, Le Deluge* [which is also an awesome Regina Spektor song]) which is a single image, and one that is actual far-more painterly than most of the art in *Battle*. In fact, it's got this sorta Turner-esque thing going on that makes it incredibly effective.



Names of Glory: 617 Squadron by Jim Watson and Ken Roscoe, Battle 30th July 1977

Another series of one-pagers, *The Gladiators...*, *The Arena...* basically looks at a single fight, though often an extended one, such as the battles between the Hurricanes and Kondor fighter planes. The art is straight-up perfect, showing how the Hurricanes would be launched off the deck of Merchant ships when confronted with Luftwaffe attack in the Atlantic. The hundred and fifty or so words, almost microscopic in my vision, tell the story of the battle, of the planes, and of how it was a one-way trip the Hurricane pilots were making, unless they got incredibly lucky and were picked up by a passing boat.

INTERROGATION: STEVE MACMANUS

Our fearless leader James Bacon writes: "Steve MacManus is one of the nicest people in the comics industry. He is such a pleasure to engage with, and when I first met him at a *2000 AD* convention, he was so generous with time and thoughts. He was so heavily involved in so many seminal comics, *2000 AD* and *Battle*, and of course he was Tharg. I cannot recommend his book *The Mighty One: My Life inside the Nerve Centre* highly enough!"

James Bacon: Can you tell us how and why David Hunt brought you into *Battle*, what stage the comic was at, and what your expectations were?

Steve MacManus: To be fair, I think I was foisted on David by the managing editor of the department responsible for creating *Battle*. That man was John Purdie. As I recall, I had previously attended a scripting workshop run by Purdie and he must have remembered me when the time came for *Battle* to be staffed. So I became involved right from the beginning. As for my expectations, I was looking forward to working on a title that I imagined would carry more realistic comic strips.

JB: Did you get to interact with John Sanders or John Purdie? If so, what were they like?

SM: John Purdie was Scottish and young enough not to have fought in WW2. He was a diminutive figure, but intensely focused on creating great content for kids and teens alike. I found his enthusiasm refreshing. As regards Sanders (or 'God' as Kelvin Gosnell called him), I never got to interact with him until I joined *2000 AD*.

JB: How was it to take the genius that was Mills and Wagner and then turn it into a regular on-time weekly comic?

SM: You must remember, at the time I was only a lowly sub-editor, and a relatively inexperienced one at that. As I recall, this being back in the winter of 1974, Mills and Wagner were

appointed as the creative team on *Battle* and David was there to ensure each issue was drawn, lettered and proofed according to the production schedule. A demanding task, I might add, that required its own, specialised set of editorial skills.

JB: How did your background help to bring the comic together at this point?

SM: The only background I had was learning the editorial ropes on *Valiant* comic. Having said that, I had a keen interest in the events of WW2, which must have helped in some way!

JB: When did you realise that the comic was a success and how did that feel?

SM: The success of any new launch is measured by the sales figures from the first few issues. We would have been working on issue six or seven before we were told the sales figures for issue one. As it happened, these appeared promising enough to allow us to continue commissioning art from the scripts Mills and Wagner, and Gerry Finley-Day, were writing. The news of the good early sales was a valediction of everyone's hard work and our maxim going forward was, "This is great. How can we make it better?"



Steve was Action comic's "Action Man"... Readers could (and did) request him to do just about anything.

JB: How was it working for David Hunt?

SM: Well, David could have been awkward to work for, bearing in mind he had not had any say in my being appointed as his sub-editor! But the reverse proved to be the case – and I think pretty soon we became recognised as a crack editorial team.

JB: Can you help us understand some of the mechanics? What was your day and week like?

SM: The mechanics of producing a weekly comic are quite simple – it's a process; step one, receive script from writer. Step two, read and approve it and post to the designated artist with a deadline for the artwork to be supplied. Step three, pass script and artwork to a letterer to add the dialogue, again with a deadline. Step four, receive lettered artwork, proof read it for any literals. Step five, pass lettered artwork to art department for them to check and add logo. Step six, send entire issue to repro house and then to printers, having received and approved proofs of the issue. Step seven, receive printed issue. Step eight: go to pub. (The trick in all this is to ensure what is published proves popular enough with the readership to make them want to buy the next issue!)

JB: What were your tasks and who did you most enjoy working with?

SM: The duties of a sub-editor then were to support the editor and to liaise with the two members of the art staff. Thus, each title had a team of four. My specific duties were to open the readers' mail and choose letters to be printed in the letters page. I also had to write the topline for each front cover. I also had to write the topline that appeared above each page of a strip, summarizing what was happening in that page. It was also my task to check that the artist had drawn each picture in accordance with the relevant scene description. On one occasion, I failed to notice that the artist of *Yellowknife of the Yard* had forgotten to draw the ropes around a villain supposed to be tied to a tree! On another occasion, I got ticked off for failing to notice that a football centre forward had the wrong number on his shirt.

JB: How did new stories come about? Do you have any favourite examples?



SM: Mills and Wagner created the initial batch of strips. Gerry contributed the long-lasting *Bootneck Boy* stories. After *Battle's* launch was pronounced a success, Mills and Wagner handed over the creative reins to David while they took on other projects. From then on the process would be either a writer proposing a new character to David, or he commissioning a writer to create a new character. My favourite example of a new character was the arrival of *Panzer G-Man* written by Gerry.

JB: How was the first year? And how did it feel when *Major Eazy* was published?

SM: The first year saw us consolidate the success of the launch and slowly but surely bring in new characters to accompany the big hit regulars *D-Day Dawson*, *Rat Pack*, *Day of the Eagle* and *The Bootneck Boy*. As regards *Major Eazy*, the teaming of Alan Hebden with Carlos Ezquerro proved a masterstroke on David's part.

JB: You wrote *Dredger*, *Sport's Not for Losers*, and *The Running Man* for *Action*. How did that work with your job on *Battle*?

SM: All the work I did for *Action* was as a freelance contributor. So, as well as my staff salary, I was receiving cheques for being *Action Man* and for scripting. David kindly allowed me time off to perform my stunts as *Action Man* in the working

week. Meanwhile, at weekends I would write an episode each of the two strips you mention. I never wrote a *Dredger* story.

JB: Am I right in thinking that after the banned issue, you did not write any more?

SM: Correct. I did not submit any ideas for new strips, probably because the new editor did not encourage me to.

JB: When *Action* merged with *Battle*, *Spinball*, *Dredger* and *Hellman* were kept. What did you think of *Hellman*?

SM: Of the three strips, *Hellman* was by far the best fit for *Battle*. I loved it.

JB: *Hold Hill 109* was a story you wrote. How did that come about and did you pen anything else?

SM: I think I had the notion of trying to pull-off a short strip that operated in real time. I guess I was influenced by what I imagine were previous examples of this story-telling style in film and television. As it happens, I re-read *Hold Hill 109* the other day and was quietly impressed by its quasi-documentary style. My next foray into script writing would have been for *2000 AD*.

JB: What were your favourite stories? And who did you enjoy working with, and why?

SM: Aside from *Panzer G-Man*, I liked *Day of the Eagle*, *The Bootneck Boy*, *Major Eazy*, *Johnny Red* and *Darkie's Mob*. I am looking forward to

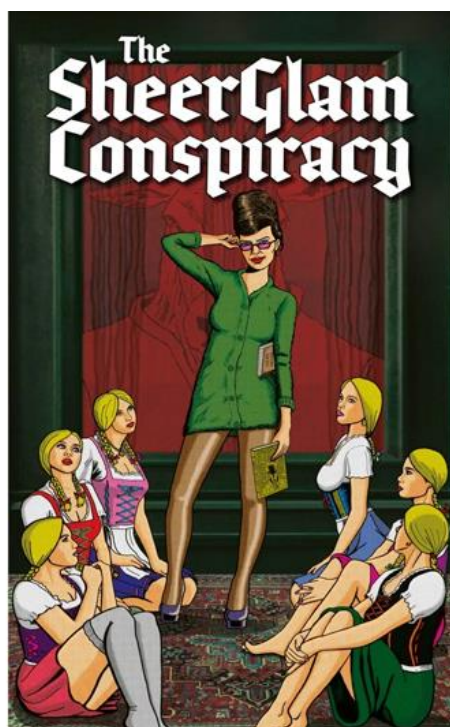
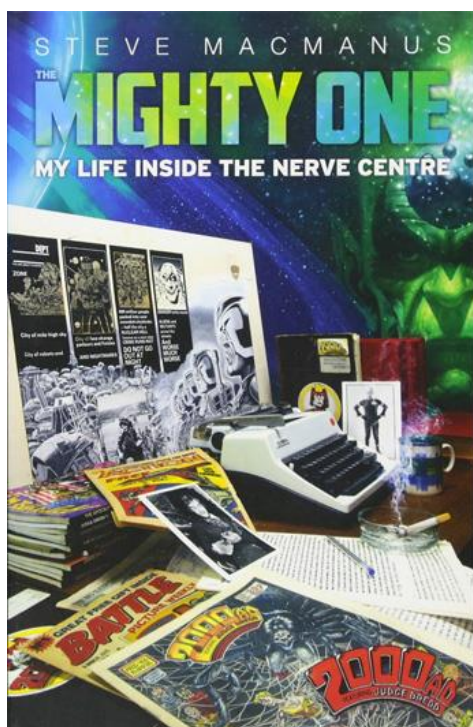
reading some seminal strips that were published after I left *Battle*. As for the writers and artists, it goes without saying what an honour it was to work with Mills, Wagner and Finley-Day. Alas, the artists all worked from home and so it was harder to get to know them personally. But I particularly liked the artwork of Carlos Ezquerra, Mike Western and Eric Bradbury.

JB: You moved to edit *2000 AD* in 1978, initially as interim editor, and there was a shuffle as Kelvin Gosnell moved and later Nick Landau went to *Battle*, replacing Jim Storrie who had replaced you – was this common in the industry?

SM: Not entirely accurate. In advance of the merger between *2000 AD* and *Starlord*, I was moved from *Starlord* to *2000 AD*. I replaced Nick Landau, who was moved to *Battle*, replacing Jim Storrie who was moved to *Starlord* to see out its remaining issues. A full account of these events can be found in my memoir: *The Mighty One: My Life Inside the Nerve Centre*.

JB: Can you share with our readers your most recent work?

SM: My most recent work is a comic novel entitled *The SheerGlam Conspiracy*. Oddly enough, its subject matter concerns strange goings on at a Publishing house specialising in comics for children of the 1970s :)



INTERROGATION: CAM KENNEDY

Cam Kennedy might be better known from his work on *Judge Dredd*, *Rogue Trooper* and *Star Wars* but before all that his dynamic art appeared in three serials for *Battle*: *Wardog*, *Fighting Mann* and *Clash of the Guards*, as well as a number of covers and one-off stories. Guest Editor Paul Trimble asks the renowned artist about his time on the comic.

Paul Trimble: After spending some years in France in the mid 70s working as a painter in the commercial art field you returned to the UK around 1978 and, hearing about a comic called *Battle*, sent in some samples. Did you consider trying *Commando* again since you had worked for them previously?

Cam Kennedy: No. For eight years in the 70s I was living in France living off fine art. By then I had two small sons to look after and *Battle* paid more.

PT: A script from *Battle* was sent to you – late 1978? Apparently this script, *Private Loser*, was quickly written by editor Dave Hunt who was so impressed by the samples you sent that he wanted to get you work as quickly as possible. Any memories of it? Was it easy to get back to drawing WW2 stories?

CK: I wasn't aware of that, so many thanks to Dave Hunt. I found it very easy to slip back into WW2 stuff.

PT: *Private Loser* was published in *Battle Picture Weekly* cover-dated 17th February 1979 and a number of short stories followed through the year as well as the *Charley's War* story in the 1979 *Battle Holiday Special*. *Charley's War* would go on to be recognised as

the pinnacle of British comics. Did you follow the comic at all?

CK: I am a big, big fan of Joe's *Charley's War*.

PT: During 1979 *Battle* Editor Dave Hunt helped supervise a new comic, *Tornado*, which only lasted 22 issues. You took over a strip called *Storm* from artist Musqera written by Scot Goodall. Any memories of this story?

CK: Not a big lot, I'm afraid. I had a lot on at the time and apart from comics I was fulfilling painting orders from France.



PT: December 1979 saw your first regular strip for *Battle* – *Wardog*, written by Alan Hebden – taking over after five episodes by Mike Western. December 1979 also saw your first work for *2000 AD* with *The V.C.s*. A story not unlike what you were doing for *Battle* but with a sci-fi setting. Did you prefer this new sci-fi material?

CK: I have no preference, Paul. There has been little I haven't enjoyed doing.

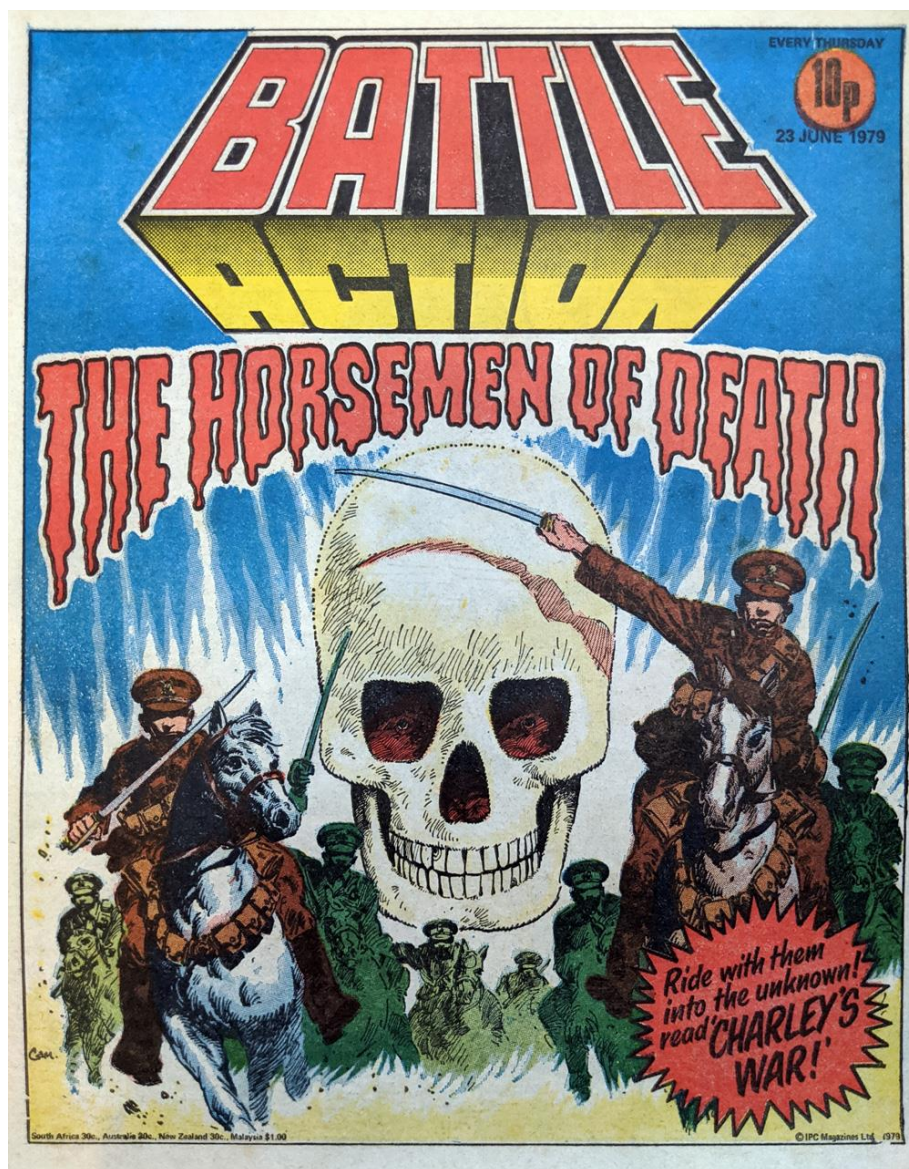
PT: Another strip written by Alan Hebden, *Fighting Man* – which was set during the Vietnam War – followed in 1980. A change to anything you'd drawn previously. Was much research required?

CK: It came as no problem. Also I was ably aided by my oldest son who took great delight in building all the reference model kits I had bought. A happy wee lad.

PT: You drew one final series for *Battle* – *Clash of the Guards*, also written by Alan Hebden – from September 1981 through to January 1982. The story ended on a cliffhanger as apparently the art for the final episode was held up in a postal delay. Any memories of this?

CK: I am quite unaware. So what became of the final episode? I would like to see *Clash* again and more good stuff from Alan.

PT: By May 1982 you were working on *Rogue Trooper* for *2000 AD* and your time on *Battle* was at an end except for *Charley's War* stories in the 1983 *Battle Holiday Special* and the 1984 *Battle Annual*. Editor Dave Hunt had moved on to



Top Soccer in 1980, though you would later reunite on the *Eagle* in the 80s. Any other memories of your time on *Battle*?

CK: I had lots of fun working on *Battle* but never got to know Dave or other contributors as much as I would have liked. To be fair living on an island off the north coast of Scotland doesn't really help.

If any of you read this, 'Good day to y'all!'

EXPLORING: INVASION 1984

Film-maker and screenwriter John Vaughan takes a personal look back at the only science fiction story *Battle* ever published, and why a minor tale considered even by its creators to be 'terrible' has stood the test of time and is one of the true hidden gems of British comics in the Eighties.

**Before V, Before Independence Day, there was...
INVASION 1984!**

On Thursday, March the 24th, 1983 (before you ask, *Battle* was always in my local newsagents on a Thursday morning) I opened the latest issue to find something I had never seen before in *Battle* – a science fiction story. Now in the eighties as today if I wanted science fiction, I'd just buy *2000 AD* instead. Each genre had its own comic, *Roy of the Rovers* was football, *Tiger* was sport, *Whoopee!* and *Buster* were humour and *Battle*? *Battle* didn't do science fiction, it did war! As one of its co-authors John Wagner would say later about *Invasion 1984* in an interview 'It's a terrible story, we managed to get a futuristic strip to look like an old war story.' Well, looking back on it today, perhaps that's why it succeeds. An old fashioned throw-away three-pager with a cliffhanger every week but within those pages its writers, John Wagner and Alan

Grant (working under the pseudonym R. Clark), and artist Eric Bradbury, giving us some of their strongest work, managed to portray the true horrors of war on a scale rarely touched in *Battle*.

The story opens one year from the date of publication, March 1984, as a gigantic fleet of over a thousand alien ships arrive above the world's capitals (this, may I remind you, is a full thirteen years before *Independence Day*) and the ridiculously square-jawed-in-his-Britishness



professor of languages Ed Lomax and his family

watch on TV as the Space Shuttle Columbia approaches the alien fleet. Of course the Shuttle is destroyed (word of advice, perhaps never welcome an overwhelming alien fleet with the words 'Hi there, good buddies!') and Lomax being Lomax immediately realises what's going on and decides that he and his family have got to get out of London immediately

'We can't stay here! If this is an invasion, capital cities like London will be prime targets!'

So far, so very average-British-comic-story-of-the-early-Eighties, but once Lomax and his family leave the safety of their home, Wagner, Grant and Bradbury show us sights through this story readers of *Battle* would never have seen before.

Streets crammed with refugees desperate to get out of London before the aliens (nicknamed "Spooks" for their skeletal appearance) landed. RAF planes falling out of the sky before the might of their fleet's weaponry. London in flames! One of the best moments from the earliest episodes is a few simple panels as Lomax tries to talk to a police officer who has lost his mind from shock (something you never saw in a British comic).

With every episode there is a growing sense of hopelessness and terror that felt more like the nuclear war dramas *The Day After* and *Threads*, which would appear later that same year to terrorise television audiences, epitomised by the moment as what remains of the government decide to test the aliens defences by nuking an overrun Glasgow. Artist Eric Bradbury captures the horror of the event in a single frame, the readers unable to tell who was an alien and human from the silhouettes cast against the fireball, only to reveal a few panels later the alien ship survived, impervious to humanity's nuclear arsenal.

'STORM SQUAD MAKE THE DIRTY DOZEN SEEM LIKE A BUNCH OF KINDERGARTEN KIDS!'

Even the 'heroes' had a darker edge to them than usual. Outside of the cardboard cut-out character of Lomax, who felt like any British comic hero from the previous thirty years, there was Storm Squad led by Major 'Mad' McVicker (no first name needed, it wasn't that kind of a story)

operating from a secret nuclear bunker. A strike force composed of the roughest elements in the army, they were obviously a copy of *Battle's* hugely popular *Rat Pack*, except *Rat Pack* never looted the dead or collected the teeth of their enemies for trophies.

And so it went on over the Summer and early Autumn of 1983 as readers witnessed through the skill of Wagner and Grant and this 'terrible script, this old war story' the full horror of the invasion and the inhumanity of war! The execution of looters, the horrific effects of disease brought by the aliens on the surviving humans in a reversal of HG Wells' *The War of the Worlds*. Slavery, the burning of the dead and the dying on funeral pyres and even gave us a glimpse of concentration camps. Even at nine I understood enough about history to know the added weight of the words 'They're splitting them up into lines!'

'THEY CAME TO CONQUER...AND THEY FOUND DEATH!'

But the story had to end before the year ended, after all it would hardly be futuristic if it continued into 1984, so the writers had to wrap the story up. And in doing so came up with what must be considered to be one of the gutsiest endings to ever grace the pages of *Battle*.

Lomax, McVicker and the few surviving members of Storm Squad raid the chemical warfare research centre at Geddon Down (I know, I know, say it fast enough, you get the joke!) in order to get their hands on the deadly ZX-Seventeen bacteria. Their plan? To inoculate the few hundred survivors in the bunker and then release the bacteria. It is so fast-acting that, in the words of the resistance's chief scientist, 'Before the Spooks have time to concoct an antidote, they'll all be dead!'

In a stark and dramatic moment that shows the survivors still retain their basic humanity, before the plan is carried out it is put to a vote. When the question is asked about other survivors and resistance groups across the world, how will they survive, McVicker responds 'the best we can do is put out a radio warning to stay in their bunkers until the bacteria itself dies out!'

So in the last Issue of *Battle* of 1983, dated December 31st the survivors carry out their plan and everyone and I mean EVERYONE outside the Bunker dies! The Second wave of Alien ships are forced to turn away as the planet has become a death-trap to them. The few hundred survivors come out of the bunker and Ed Lomax's son asks the question "Gosh dad, are we the only people left alive in the whole world?" looking back on this now, one could almost hear the writers sardonically thinking "Yep, everybody's dead. HAPPY NEW YEAR!"

And yet this is why *Invasion 1984* truly stands the test of time nearly forty years later.

Because its creators had to work with the limitations they were given and an ending forced onto them by a supposed sell-by date. Which resulted in them producing a conclusion which looking at it now is even far more harrowing today than it was thirty-seven years ago and far braver and more original in its storytelling than any one of the numerous big-budget productions that have appeared on screens in the decades since. And reading it today, one has to admit although I really shouldn't, the end of the world has never been quite so enjoyable.



INTERROGATION

ALAN HEBDEN

Alan Hebden wrote a considerable amount of *Battle* stories and conceived some of the favourites, including *Major Eazy*, *El Mestizo* and *Fighting Mann*. A very relaxed and incredibly intelligent man, I have met him a number of times at conventions and am astounded at how easy he seems to find brilliant writing. He has a sparkle to his eye, and also is good to fans – many of whom found him welcoming and engaging and willing to share a pint.

Interview by James Bacon

James Bacon: How did you get into comic writing and what path did you follow before getting to *Battle*?

Alan Hebden: I'd been selling some *War Picture Library/Commando* plots to the old man and he said I should try writing them myself. Started with a few one-offs for DC Thomson and Fleetway, then moved on to *War/Battle Picture Library* and a couple of *Commandos*. Also full length series *Day of the Giant* for Victor.

JB: What stories did you start with for *Battle* and how did that come about?

AH: A few *D-Day Dawsons* and *Rat Packs*. The old man said Fleetway/IPC were starting up a war comic so I cadged a lunch off Pat Mills.

JB: Did you write on *Terror Behind the Bamboo Curtain* as a starting point – under your own name? Did you start with *Rat Pack* on the 16th August 1975?

AH: I wrote a couple of episodes, but didn't like it. Not my idea and rather too contrived. I've no idea which *RP* you're referring to.

JB: Your father Eric was a writer and technical adviser to *Battle* as well, and had a

military background, could you tell us a bit about him please?

Above: Rat Pack by Eric Hebden and E Feito, Battle 10th April 1976

AH: My father was born and raised in Keighley in the West Riding of Yorkshire, oldest of three children. His father was technical manager at one of the big mills in town. During WW1 he joined up before conscription, which meant he could state a preference for which branch of the army to be in. He chose the Artillery because a) he had a technical background and b) because the war had been going on long enough to have bogged down in the trenches. His assumption, quite correctly, was that the big guns were kept out of range of the enemy and all he had to do was lob shells into the German front line.

My father followed him into the mill, but lost his job during the Great Depression. He applied to join the army, as did many others, and was accepted. Naturally enough he chose the Royal Artillery as his father had before him.

After a year his unit was sent overseas, to Hong Kong in 1934, by which time he was a corporal. It was going to be a four-year posting, but the growing Japanese threat over the border in China extended their stay by a year, then the growing German threat in Europe took precedence and the unit was sent home. However, WW2 began as their troopship sailed up the Red Sea.

When it called at Gibraltar the unit was taken off. It was possible that fascist Spain, with German backing, might try and grab it, and they wanted the defences reinforced. His unit was deployed right at

AH: It's like driving a new car instead of a second-hand one.

JB: How did *Major Easy* come about?

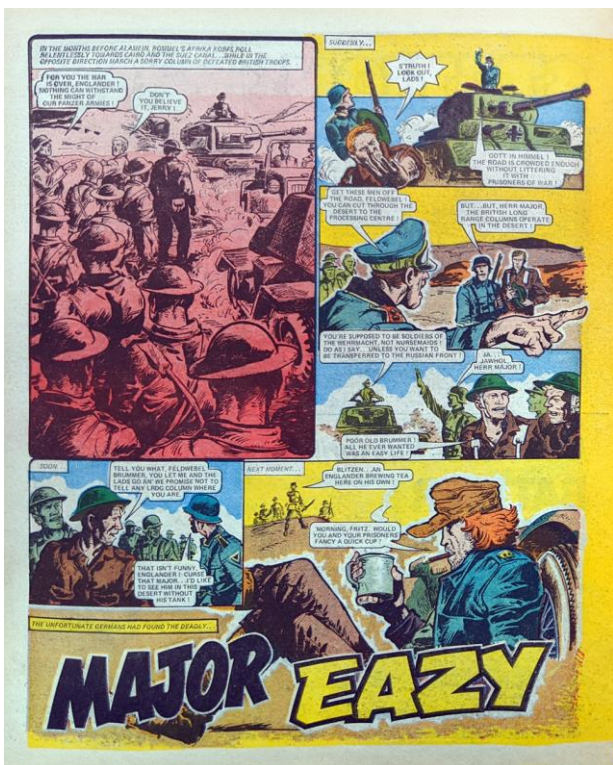
AH: Off-beat seventies creation, the sort of thing you had in war movies at the time.

JB: At this stage did you collaborate much with Carlos Ezquerro?

AH: Not at all. That wasn't how it worked.

JB: *El Mestizo* takes us to the USA and to an fascinating character, quite unconventional for 1977, with an Afro-American Slave and Mexican parentage, he was a scourge in Mexico and returns to fight on his own terms in the American Civil War. Quite a fascinating character. How did he come about?

AH: He [Carlos Ezquerro] wanted to do something with horses.



JB: Did you draw upon Spaghetti Westerns for both *El Mestizo* and *Major Easy*?

AH: Only *Mestizo*. *Easy* was more like *Dirty Harry* in drag.

JB: Was ambiguity about morals something you wanted the reader to explore?

AH: Only insofar as it let me get away with as much violence as possible.

JB: *Fighting Mann* saw a change to Vietnam, and given it was 1980, this was a relatively fresh war to fictionalise and write about. This was drawn consistently brilliantly by Cam Kennedy. How did this come about?

AH: The movie *Apocalypse Now* came out 1979 and I liked the idea of a guy hunting for his son against the background of the war, rather than a participant. Same as *Mestizo* in that way.

JB: *Death Squad* told the story of a German penal squad, on the Eastern Front, with art by Eric Bradbury (did Carlos Ezquerro have any involvement?) the brutality here is apparent but in a clearly anti-war and anti-Nazi way. How did you go about pitching this to *Battle*?

AH: By saying, "If you haven't read Sven Hassel, there's a series waiting to break out in there." Carlos had nothing to do with the series, though I believe he drew a later annual story, not written by me.

JB: You wrote *Truck Turpin*, *Krazy Keller*, *The General Dies at Dawn*, *Jetblade*, (*Dredger?*), *Clash of the Guards*, *D-Day Dawson*, a vast amount of stories for one of the best remembered war comics. What did you yourself enjoy about working on *Battle*, and were there any favourite memories of colleagues there?

AH: Hey, don't forget *War Dog* and lots of *Rat Packs*, including the only seven-page *RP* story they ever published. What can I say about the other part? I was lucky to be doing something I quite enjoyed and getting paid for it. I didn't have to get up in the morning to go to work and I could take holidays where and when I wanted. Then there was Dave Hunt as editor and Steve MacManus as his deputy . . . what more could you want?

JB: You will be writing for the *Battle 2020 Special* from Rebellion due out in September. Can you tell us anything about that and who you worked with?

AH: *El Mestizo* makes a comeback, this time with the sister of his lost love Shelly. Didn't work with anyone and I don't know the artist, Brett McKee, and I haven't seen anything of the story yet.

EXPLORING: EL MESTIZO

What happens when an American unfamiliar with *Battle* encounters a character as American as he is, but created for a British comics series? Chris Garcia is that American, and El Mestizo is that character...

If there was one movie I want to see Quentin Tarantino make, I'd want him to tackle *A Cast of Killers* about the William Desmond Taylor murder. If I got a second film out of him, it would be tackling the legendary series *El Mestizo*. How much? Well, I'd trade pretty much every film Quint has made since *Django Unchained*. Which is appropriate, since *Django* is a very similar sensation to *El Mestizo*, and the violence would fit right in!

Let us go then, you and I, to the American Civil War, and back into the US (well, Confederate territory, I guess) walks El Mestizo. Mestizo is a term used in Mexico and Central America to indicate people of mixed race, like myself for example, and in some parts of Mexico, particularly parts near the border, it's something of a status thing. El Mestizo was born a slave in Alabama, and he's referred to as a 'half-breed', which would seem to indicate that he was half-black and half-Mexican. Eventually, he ran off to Mexico, and now that the Civil War has been raging, he's back as the third-front of the war.

He's a bad, bad man.

The opening story features El Mestizo hunting down a bounty. There were thousands of bounty hunters during the Civil War, and yes, many of them in Texas and Louisiana were Mexicans. In fact, there were a lot of Mexicans who would pass into Texas to

act as mercenaries, or bounty hunters. The fighting in Texas, in particular, had Mexicans fighting for both sides.

There have always been military contractors.

El Mestizo is known. He's a brutal independent, and one that is feared by those who have heard the myth that he exudes. This is an idea that has been a part of the western since just about the beginning. Clint Eastwood basically made a career of playing exactly that kind of



character. If you're a fan of 1990s Indy cinema, especially the work of Robert Rodriguez, you'll recognize this as the basis for the story told by Cheech Marin at the beginning of *Desperado*. The story is as effective an entry as you'll find for a character like El Mestizo. It's violent, it tells the story at the core, and it makes El Mestizo seem like a bad ass.

And it goes on from there.

My favourite story is from the September 3rd, 1977 issue of *Battle*. It's a classic story, the kind most of those who romanticize the War of Southern Hubris think was really frequent: brothers fighting on different sides of the war. Yes, it did happen, but it was really pretty rare. Geography played a HUGE part in that, but mostly, if a family was living in the same area, they fought on the same side. So, one brother was captured as a Union saboteur, and the other stopped his execution, stole some horses, kidnapped a Major, and rode off. El Mestizo followed, and quietly assisted the less-than-smart brothers in escaping.

Now, why was this story so great? Well, there's the obvious. It's a feel-good story, as the brothers escape, hopefully to freedom, though we'll never be sure. It's well-written, and the art is of that style of 1970s that would evolve into the 1980s as a signpost for edgy comics of the like that populated *Vertigo*. There's a line-iness to them, and a looseness to the figuration, that I absolutely appreciate. The real reason I love it so much is that it allows El Mestizo to feel like a hero, but at the same time, he's playing against his own side when he helps them escape. It shows that not only is El Mestizo his own man, but he's his own worst enemy, and that's something that only works if you're also bad enough to make up for it. If you're gonna be dumb, you gotta be tough.

The big thing about El Mestizo is that he's got it over on everyone, especially over the General he works with, and nearly everyone else. That's a big concept. He's the world's most dangerous man, and it shows in just about every panel. The character design, so important in establishing what kind of story they are telling, is perfect for Mestizo. It's rough, somewhat grizzled, tight, yet at the same time, there's almost an airiness to it that makes it feel very much like we envision the old west.

And let's be clear; this is not a war comic. No, it's an Old West comic. The idea of a war comic hero is a person who is extraordinary, and puts his safety behind those of the other men so that bravery is the key element. There's the Western lawman trope, a figure in repose, or so the director Howard Hawks once claimed. It's not a great fit for Mestizo either. What is a near perfect fit is the Tom Mix character from the amazing film *Hell's Hinges*, where he becomes the law, though he is a bad, bad man. El Mestizo is not trying to become the law; El Mestizo is forcing an order on the world he interacts with, much like Tom Mix. It's a beautiful idea, and the execution of the individual stories is really impressive.

I love the *El Mestizo* comics, and James gave me the entire run. If ever they were to re-launch the character, well, I could totally see Quint wanting to get in on that action... or maybe suing for ripping him off thirty years before *Django Unchained* was released.



INTERROGATION: IAN KENNEDY

With a career spanning 60 years and still going strong, Ian Kennedy's distinctive artwork has graced every genre of story by every major British comics publisher, and a multitude of amazing covers. Ian's body of work for *Battle* may be quite small but his instantly recognisable art always stands out. Guest Editor Paul Trimble quizzes the comics legend.

Paul Trimble: *Warlord* was the first comic specifically themed to war stories in September 1974 with *Battle Picture Weekly* in March 1974. Did you notice any of this focus on World War 2 at the time?

As a freelancer your work was being published at the time by both DC Thomson and IPC in the digests, weekly comics, annuals and summer specials. Did you follow the ins and outs of the publishing schedule at all?

Ian Kennedy: In attempting to recall events which took place some forty years ago you are, without doubt, testing my notorious memory to the limit. However, here goes!

On looking through my financial records kept, of course, for HMRC, I am made aware of just how full my schedule was. This meant I had very little time to follow up on work once it left the drawing board, except to check up on the finished article when it appeared for publication in order that any errors were not repeated. Above all, the editor had to be satisfied.

PT: Did you visit the IPC offices at all? Did you get to meet *Battle* editor Dave Hunt, sub-editor Steve MacManus or Pat Mills and John Wagner who developed the comic?

IK: I did visit the IPC (previously known as Amalgamated Press and Fleetway) office, but not all that frequently, as it involved a wee bit of a journey from home in Dundee. As a result, it became part of my annual pilgrimage to the Farnborough Air

Show. On these occasions, I had the great pleasure of meeting Dave, Steve and, of course Barrie Tomlinson amongst many others including Kelvin Gosnell, Dez Skinn and Dave Gregory. A wonderful bunch who always made one feel welcome! I did not meet Pat or John at that time. However, I have been fortunate in getting together with both in more recent times.



PT: Your interior work for *Battle* showed up early on but tended to be one page information pieces or self contained two page stories. Was this all your busy schedule allowed?

IK: At that time my schedule was always pretty tight, preventing any large commitments but it was usually possible, with a bit of tweaking here and there, to fit in a cover or single page feature.

PT: Besides covers for *Battle* based on Arnhem and Dunkirk you illustrated three which tied in with ongoing series *Johnny Red*, *Hellman of Hammer Force* and *Skreamer of the Stukas*. Do you recall any particular brief for these?

IK: Sadly, I have to disappoint you here as it is so long ago it is impossible to recall any details apart from the fact that they were done around 1976-8

PT: Would you have liked to drawn a serial for *Battle*?

IK: I am fairly sure I would have taken on a serial. The subject matter would have been just what I enjoy illustrating, but I'm afraid, at the time, there were just not enough hours in the day!

PT: Is there a particular character you would have liked to draw for *Battle*? Any favourites?

IK: Once again, my memory is letting me down, which means that no particular character springs to mind. However, if the story involves flying and things aeronautical, I am, without hesitation, your man!!

PT: Any other memories of *Battle Picture Weekly*?

IK: Sorry to say that my memories of *Battle* are rather thin on the ground as it coincided with what was probably one of the busiest spells in a long career in comics, but what does stand out is the pleasure I derived then from working with Dave Hunt and Co.



INTERROGATION: MIKE DOREY

Mike Dorey was at the Lakes Festival in 2018 by chance and thanks to Colin Noble, Paul soon invited him as a guest at Enniskillen Comic Con, where Mike delighted and was delightful with fans.

With a vast amount of work completed in comics, his distinctive gritty yet incredibly accurate work on *Hellman of Hammer Force* for *Action* and *Battle* is iconic work. Working on *Iron Annie*, *Kampfgruppe Falken* and *Big Willi* for *Warlord*, his work forms a vital part of the British war comic story from the German perspective. James Bacon interviews the great man...

James Bacon: Mike, can you tell us how you became a professional comic artist?

Mike Dorey: I always intended to be a comic artist having copied the comics I used to read, they were *Sun* and *Comet*, both published by Fleetway. So after being kicked out of art college I wasted no time in trying to get into the business. Having been a reader of the Fleetway comics (and they being closer to home) I took some samples of my work to them. Luckily they recommended an agent who also had a studio of artists, so I was able to learn a lot about page layout and speech balloons from them.

JB: But even though Fleetway liked your work, your first comic was with DC Thomson... Can you recall the move to boys' Comics, and what stories you were working on at this stage?

MD: The first comic I worked for was *Diana* for DCT; after a short while I was asked to do a story for *Victor*. It was, I think, either *The Pillow Champ*, *Is it Cricket* or *Cadman*. The first two were slightly comic stories (I realize now that I actually enjoyed doing humorous stories best, *Ro-Jaws Memoirs* and some of the *Invasion* stories for instance). My

first war story was *Cadman*, of which I now reckon I must have drawn in excess of 1200 pages.

JB: You went to work for Pat Mills when *Action* was coming together. How was that? Were you working together with others in an office?

MD: I must have got the job on *Hellman* for *Action* because of the work I did on *Cadman* (maybe it was at that time I drew *Cadman* in *The Tanks*). Working in the office with my old friend Barrie Mitchell – a football artist – Pat Mills and various sub editors was very lively. Pat Mills was very animated and involved in all aspects of the stories and I seem to recall that Gerry Finley-Day



Mike Dorey's stunning cover for *Battle*, 24 June 1978

was much in evidence, writing not only *Hellman* but some other story as well.

JB: How did *Hellman* come together? What were Pat's and Gerry's input? How did you help shape the character, and how did you bring the comic to fruition?

MD: When the idea of a story featuring a German tank commander was mooted I immediately thought of the film *Battle of the Bulge* which starred Robert Shaw, who seemed the perfect *Hellman* character; so that was the way I drew him. We all agreed that we couldn't have him killing any Brits so poor Gerry had some difficult plots to conjure up for a tank commander not to kill anyone!

JB: The sentiment that has been shared was that it was a big deal to get you yourself over to *Action*, and *Hellman* is recognised as the first British comic to tell the story from a German perspective. How do you feel the comic was received?

MD: We knew the comic would be well received as it was such an exciting product. But it was with some relief that *Hellman* proved so popular.

JB: *Warlord* decided to capitalise and compete against *Action* with stories from a German perspective. How did you get involved with that?

MD: Well, as I was still drawing for *Victor* and *Warlord* for DCT it was not difficult for them to choose me to do their first story featuring an enemy hero. There was, however, some reluctance from the senior people there to this as many of them had actually been in the war. But the popularity of *Hellman* proved difficult to resist. The only proviso was that their hero, Kurt Stahlmann, shouldn't kill anyone. So they decided to make him the most acceptable 'enemy' by being a Luftwaffe pilot flying an unarmed transport aircraft. That story was *Iron Annie* featuring a Junkers 52.

JB: Sgt Rayker was unusual at the time.

MD: I really enjoyed drawing *Sgt Rayker*. DCT wanted something different so having a black American GI seemed to fit the bill.

JB: *Action* was merged into *Battle* and you came back to *The Early Adventure of Hellman*, and then onto the Russian Front – who was writing at this stage?

MD: Can't remember who wrote the *Early Adventures of Hellman* and on the Russian Front, it might have been Gerry.

JB: Can you share the mechanics of a *Hellman* story? At what stage would you input, or would you just get the script from the artist?



Would you set out the frames, was there a formula, Etc.?

MD: It was good working in the same room as Pat Mills and Gerry because we could discuss the stories and change things for more effect. I always wanted a large opening pic to catch the readers eye and then less frames per page so to have more space for dynamic pics.

JB: There was a grittiness to your art. Can you tell us about J. Clough? also what materials and tools you used?

MD: Because DCT didn't like 'their' artists working for a rival when IPC started putting the names of the contributors on the stories I thought it prudent to call myself 'J. Clough' (it didn't work!). The J. Clough was a play on the word J. Cloth, which were items that I used to provide texture to some of my work. The tools I used were Indian ink, a dip pen, sable brush, zippertone and, of course, the aforementioned J. Cloths.

JB: *Hellman*, *Iron Annie*, *Kampfgruppe Falken* are all renowned for their excellent and accurate renditions of armour, uniforms, equipment. How did you tackle this? What research did you carry out?

MD: I had always had an interest in the second world war so a lot of the uniforms, equipment and vehicles were already familiar to me. Also I had to be very careful to get things right as you could guarantee that some clever-clog would write in and complain if things weren't correct. Nowadays the Internet gives unlimited info on everything including weapons of war, but 'back in the day' I had recourse to my (luckily) extensive library of war books – and of course to Airfix models.



JB: You left comics to pursue a career in advertising. Tell us how you reconnected with fandom and how you found yourself as a guest at your first comic event, the Enniskillen Comic Fest?

MD: I reconnected – or should I say connected – with Fandom at the Lakes International Comic Fest. My wife and I happened to be on a trip to the Lake District when purely by chance we came to Kendal where the con was going on. Attending one of the events someone on the stage – I think it might have been John Freeman – picked out Colin Noble in the audience. Colin had previously emailed me about something so I knew his name and introduced myself. John Freeman came over and said I ought to attend future comic cons. Subsequent to this Colin mentioned me to Paul Trimble (he organizes the Enniskillen Comic Fest) and he very kindly invited me over. It was such good fun that I decided to do some more.

JB: In the new *Action 2020* special you have a *Hellman* story written by Garth Ennis. The story is a fabulous... the young lad being educated by his sister, while Hellman and his crew defend them, brutally, the realities and horror of war exposed. How did this come about?

MD: Garth Ennis mentioned in an email that Rebellion had asked him to write a new *Hellman* story and would I be interested in illustrating it. What do you think I said? YES.

JB: How was this different to *Hellman* previously? Did you do anything different or use any different media?

MD: This time Garth stipulated which frames went on which page. Something I had never encountered before; I did, However, change some of those. As regards media, because I knew it would be printed on good quality paper I was able to use half tones (greys) which made the task easier and more enjoyable. But I still used the traditional old dip pen and brush.

JB: Any reason it was a Panther? What level of detail was required?

MD: P.J. Holden, who has illustrated several stories by Garth, told me that Garth was a stickler for accuracy so I made damn sure every nut and bolt was in place. As *Hellman* used a Panther at the end of the war Garth probably thought that more suitable (I do recall him also having a King Tiger in some of the stories. Nowadays when people commission me to draw a *Hellman* I usually do him in a King Tiger which I think is a great tank).

JB: How was it to be back drawing comics?

MD: It was great to be back in comics. I'd forgotten how much I enjoyed working in them. Also knowing now how much people liked the *Hellman* stories it was a treat to draw him again.



EXPLORING: HELLMAN

Writer Maura McHugh takes a look at *Hellman: At the Twilight of the Reich* which appeared in the recent *Action 2020 Special* from Rebellion.

Prior to reading this strip, written by Garth Ennis, with art by Mike Dorey and letters by Rob Steen, I was unfamiliar with the comic book adventures of Major Kurt Hellman, a German Panzer commander during World War II. He first appeared on the pages of *Action* in 1976, originally written by Gerry Finley-Day and drawn by Mike Dorey.

Luckily, I was able to read through a cache of back-issues of *Action* to catch up with the ethos behind the comic and compare how Ennis has positioned this problematic character for today's audience.

Hellman represents difficult moral questions in a world where not everyone has access to black and white solutions. How should a soldier act when he is part of an unjust war? His line in one of the comics summarises his attitude when he refuses to gun down English forces when he could encourage them to surrender instead: 'I am a soldier, not a butcher.' Hellman loathes the Nazi party and the Gestapo, especially Gestapo officer Gauleiter Kastner, with whom Hellman clashes frequently. Hellman's crew are composed of working-class men and ex-convicts like Big Max and Dekker. They're conscripts in a brutal war machine that considers them all disposable. These unscrupulous men come to trust Hellman because he fights alongside them and always leads by example.

In the original comics the mechanics of war – the uniforms, the tanks, and the guns – are all faithfully rendered in a way that appeals to those who love the details of real life conflicts. Dorey's artwork and the action sequences are often outstanding. There are explosions, bodies flying,

people being gunned down, soldiers dashing through barrages of gunfire, and tanks trundling through numerous battles. The dialogue is sometimes clunky and expository, but typical for a serial story told over a number of years.

In the *2020 Special* Dorey returns to this world with supple black lines and washes that give it the feel of a vintage film. Ennis sets the story in 1945 with the end of the Reich in sight. Hellman and his crew are in their lone Panzer on their way to the final battle in Berlin – those familiar with the *Action* comics will know that Hellman's mission is to kill Kastner, so this is an interlude during his hunt.

Since this is a comic that was always aimed at a young audience Ennis cleverly puts the plight



of three German children – Leni, Erich, and Greta Vollbracht – at the centre of the story: they are attempting to escape from the invading Russians in their car which has broken down. Hellman insists that his tank protects the car, despite making the tank a clear target for the advancing army, and orders Max to fix the car. Hellman knows the children will be in danger if they are on foot, especially the girls. Gendered violence was never really acknowledged in the Hellman comics prior to this, but it is a grim reality of all war zones.

Erich is in awe of the Major and has read all about his exploits. In many ways Erich represents the child reader of the comic who can get carried away with hero worship of fighters and enjoy fetishising uniforms and equipment. His older sister, teenaged Leni, is the head of their family and is the hard-headed pragmatist who understands the misery that the war has brought upon her country. She also appreciates that while Hellman may be a noble combatant, he is also part of a vicious movement.

After Hellman and his squad dispatch a convoy of Russian tanks and gun down infantry, Leni has a straightforward conversation with her brother. With the lines ‘Do you really understand what’s happened here? Do you think it’s something to admire?’ Ennis makes his position clear. There is no glamour in warfare. Armies are composed of individuals, and each person’s death is a tragedy.

Erich has bought into his country’s propaganda, but Leni sees the lies that are sold to men about the valour of war – partly because she understands that she and Greta have little protection in the aftermath. She informs Erich that their widowed father departed for war, leaving only a gun and a letter that informed Erich to kill his sisters and himself if the Russians came. Leni refuses to view herself, her sister, and her brother as goods to be destroyed before an advancing army and opts for life and escape.

Hellman sends the trio off in their repaired car and advises them to surrender to British or American troops. Due to Erich’s age he’s likely be conscripted by the German army on the spot, so Hellman suggests Erich is dressed as a girl to prevent this from happening. The war is nearing its end and Hellman does not want another child killed



in the conflict. Dressing a boy as a girl is a subversive strategy that raises many issues of how gender is perceived during warfare, and is a trailing thought that remains in the mind as the story finishes and Hellman sets out for Berlin, determined to catch up with Kastner.

In ten pages Ennis cuts through to the heart of the difficult issue of war comics: the romanticising of battle and the instruments of destruction. For refugees of war there is nothing valiant about being caught between two advancing forces. They are powerless and dependent upon those in position of authority to be honourable. Unfortunately, many armed forces do not traditionally encourage mercy or compassion toward the vulnerable. Conflict can become an excuse to revel in the sadistic thrill of domination over helpless victims. Ennis’s story destabilises the traditional war comic by underscoring the stark differences between the seasoned warriors and their capacity for easy violence and the utter vulnerability of dispossessed children whose plight has been caused by their own government’s death drive.

This story reminds us of the necessity to wield whatever power we have been given to aid those who have none. It is a remarkably important message right now.

INTERROGATION:

JIM TOMLINSON

James Nicholas was the pen name of James Tomlinson, who grew up eating and living comics: his father Barrie Tomlinson was editor of *Speed* and *Tiger*, head of the Boys' Sport and Adventure Department at IPC Magazines, and launched *Roy of the Rovers*, the new *Eagle* and *Scream*. Shortly after leaving school, Jim was encouraged by his father to enter the business. Jim worked a wide variety of titles, from new *Eagle* to *M.A.S.K.*, and from 1983 until its merger with the new *Eagle* Jim was a writer for *Battle*. James willingly agreed to assist James Bacon with his inquiries...

James Bacon: You were a *Battle* reader and a fan before ever writing for the comic. What stories were your favourites, and what drew you to them?

James Tomlinson: Yes, I was a *Battle* reader (lots of free comics brought home by Dad!) and a big fan since the early issues in the mid-seventies. I guess I preferred the war, action or science fiction type genres to sport in those early days. As to what stories I really liked apart from the fantastic *Johnny Red* (I was and still am a big aviation nut so there was added interest with this one) and the superb *Charley's War*. Well, I really liked *Darkie's Mob*, *Major Eazy*, *D-Day Dawson*, *Rat Pack*, *Panzer G-Man*, *Fighter from the Sky*, *HMS Nightshade* and *Lofty's One-Man Luftwaffe* to name but a few. Again, anything to do with aviation appealed as well as naval history which is another of my interests. As you can see I was also keen on stories told from the German point of view such as *Panzer G-Man* and *Fighter from the Sky*. *Darkie's Mob* was one of my all time favourites, a classic tale of a small heroic band battling against impossible odds. Brilliant artwork and gritty, violent action in the jungle. Great stuff!

JB: Which comics and stories you started with, and what age were you then?

JT: I did some football stories for *Roy of the Rovers* first, exactly what the story was I can't recall. But it wasn't for Roy himself, although I did some complete Roy stories for Specials/Annuals! Then there were a number of *Amstor Computer* complete stories for the new *Eagle*. *Action Force* stories in *Battle* also began around that time and these would continue for a good while before our in-house replacement, *Storm Force*, took over. I would have started writing around the age of 19, very soon after leaving school.

JB: How did offers of work occur, how would an editor offer you work?

JT: Some of the script work came via Barrie, other times from the individual editors. I would sometimes step in for other writers, such as when I wound up the very long running and popular *Johnny Red* saga. These episodes were set right at the end of the war in Europe, with Johnny leading his Falcons against deadly Luftwaffe Me262 jets. It didn't end well for most of those involved, but Johnny survived to be reunited with some of his former comrades in London on VE Day. At the time there was a lot of work around for writers so there were always scripts that needed doing, if not for the comics then for Annuals and Specials.

JB: At what stage did you start writing for *Battle*? Was your first story *Action Force Tank Hunt* with art by Jim Watson 17 December '83 to 16 January '84? How did it come up?

JT: Certainly that was about the time I started scripting for *Battle*. I was available as a writer from the very beginning of *Action Force* so it was good timing on my part. With other writers perhaps already committed to established stories, a 'new gig' writing for a whole new series was just what I was looking for. *Action Force* was my first taste of a 'product placement' story. Many more would follow over the next few years, some a lot easier to do than others!

JB: Can you describe the process with *Action Force*? What corporate or Palitoy instructions or guidelines did you have?

JT: With *Action Force* I believe we dealt with the licence holder in the UK, rather than having to deal direct with the USA. So it wasn't quite as challenging as some later stories, such as *M.A.S.K.* Each writer was given a 'bible' which contained details of all the *Action Force* characters as well the general storyline we had to follow. There was also information on weapons, vehicles, etc., basically everything a budding *Action Force* writer would need to get scripting.

Usually I would start with a synopsis which would go off to the licence holders for approval. It would sometimes come back with some required changes, which I would incorporate into the actual script. Once complete, this too would head off for approval. With luck, not many changes would be needed before the script was sent to the artist. Changes to the final artwork were usually too late or expensive to incorporate!

JB: For your standalone war stories, was the concept or historical element given to you or did you come up with the idea?

JT: The standalone war stories I undertook were mainly well established characters such as Johnny Red and Charley Bourne. As a fan of these two tales from the very early days, I knew enough about them to help flesh the stories out. I did, however, do some extra research when required to make sure I had the historical accuracy just right. The actual individual concepts of the stories were normally up to me. With both *Johnny Red* and *Charley's War* there were a huge range of possible storylines so that wasn't a problem for me.

JB: What contact did you have with the artist through the process? And were there any artists



you worked well or engaged with? And what were they like?

JT: The only real contact I had with the artists were my scripts that were sent to them! The scripts would go to the artist via Barrie or the various editors. Very occasionally I did meet artists such as Sandy James or (much more recently) Mike Dorey. Others such as David Sque, David Pugh or Joe Colquhoun I would speak to on the 'phone from time to time. Writers and artists didn't meet up very often. Often they lived in different countries! I hope I worked well with all artists and, of course, I have to say when I did have contact with them they were all very friendly and helpful! As someone who can't draw for toffee, I have always hugely admired artists. They have tremendous skill, enthusiasm and imagination... and they put up with a lot from scriptwriters like me!

JB: You were working nearly constantly on *Battle* stories for four years, on a day-to-day-basis. Can you outline what your day was like?

JT: Yes, it was a busy few years for sure! I usually made some rough notes to begin with, either for the synopsis or the actual script. I liked to get scripting ASAP either using a manual typewriter (in the early years... the dark ages!) or on a computer in later years. I thought Tippex was a

marvellous invention back in the mid-eighties! With luck, by the end of the day I would have a finished script or perhaps a synopsis or two! Of course sometimes writers' block made an unwanted appearance, which was tough. Luckily it didn't happen that often!

JB: Did you get to meet other writers, and who did you engage with?

JT: Apart from Barrie, who wrote scripts for various comics over the years, I had no contact with other writers at all I'm afraid. A lot of writers tend to be solitary creatures I think!

JB: You worked on Summer Special and Annuals as well. Was there a different process for these? Did you approach a prose story differently than comic script?

JT: The Summer Specials and Annuals were a bit easier in some ways, as they were complete stories rather than serials. I did the usual synopsis which was usually accepted as long as I wasn't repeating previous storylines. That very rarely happened, if ever, because I had been reading *Johnny* and *Charley* so closely for so many years! As to prose stories, I found those a bit simpler to do, with no instructions for an artist needed for example. I could usually churn out prose stories pretty quickly, my only real problem was the

punctuation which is not my strongest skill! Prose stories also made a nice change to comic strips, something different and a new challenge!

Jim Tomlinson Bibliography:

Battle Stories by James Nicholas

Action Force – 21 distinct stories between 17 December 1983 and 23 August 1986 (includes *The Operation Deep Cover* – 4-month interlinked story)

Johnny Red – 23rd August 1986, 6 September 1986, 13 December 1986 to 17 January 1987

Ryan's Revenge – art by Vanyo, 6 December 1986 to 27 December 1987

Death's Head – art by Jesus Redondo, 3 January 1987 to 17 January 1987

Storm Force – 24 January 1987 to 23 January 1988, continued in *Eagle*

Stand-alone strips:

The Bull – art by Ron Tuner, 28 January 1984

Killer Fish – art by Jim Watson, 17 March 1984

The Last Tiger – art by Jim Watson, 28 April 1984

Images of Death – art by Carmona, 21 June 1986

Captain Trouble – art by Lopez, 18 October 1986

Little Tough Guy – art by Casanovas, 25 October 1986

The Fighting Magees – art by Solano Lopez, 1 November 1986

A Honourable Death – art by James Bleach, 6 December 1986

Keep it Tidy – art by N. Eaton, 10 January 1987

Jim Tomlinson says: 'All the *Battle* stories you list are certainly ones I remember doing, but none of the standalone stories ring any bells at all. Sorry! *Operation Deep Cover* was a long runner for sure, I enjoyed doing that one and *Ryan's Revenge* too... aircraft and naval action so I couldn't go wrong!

'As to what I wrote for, these included: *Roy of the Rovers*, *Battle/Action Force*, *Storm Force*, the new *Eagle*, *Teenage Mutant Hero Turtles Comic*, *Toxic Crusaders*, *M.A.S.K.*, *Superhuman Samurai Syber Squad*, *Skydancers*, *Scream* and *Sonic the Hedgehog*.'



INTERROGATION: MIKE WESTERN

Fan-favourite *Battle* artist Mike Western sadly passed away in 2008, but his legacy is a wonderful body of work, and a treasure-trove in the form of his diaries, scrapbooks, hand-drawn cards and of course the memories of his loving family, friends, colleagues and fans. His son Peter, also an artist, has kindly shared with James Bacon some of his memories. James writes, "I engaged with Peter and he was delightful, insightful and very open and it was a superb chance to hear about one of the stalwarts of *Battle*."

James Bacon: Your dad always had an interest in comics, as a youngster. Can you tell us anything about where he grew up and what he liked reading?

Peter Western: Mike Western was born out of wedlock in Southampton on 4th February 1925. It is only recently, I have been able to fix how he ended up with the surname, WESTERN.

His true father's surname was McMahon (predating the other comics artist by half a century at least!). The family have letters to show how the poor man desperately wrote to Mike's mother's parents, asking to marry her. They weren't WESTERN either but in any case, would not answer his letters. They took him to court instead and he ended up paying ten shillings per week for Mike's upkeep.

The family have no record of this but we think Mike's grandmother married a piano tuner named WESTERN. She gave birth to Mike's mother, my grandmother.

So her maiden name was WESTERN, which she and her illegitimate son Mike retained. Her piano-tuning father died (maybe: family rumour has it he perhaps committed suicide). Whatever, Mike's grandmother remarried a Mr. Brockman. For a time Mike and his mother must have lived with the Brockmans until she finally married a Mr.

E. Haig. My dad was always very fond of him and I think he, in turn, readily accepted Mike as an equal of the children he bore of his own with his newly adopted wife.

Hence the mysterious origins of that almost COMIC/SHOWBIZ SURNAME!

It should be remembered there was great stigma in being a single mother until late into the 20th century.

For Mike, it was a terrible secret to bear as, in his first job, he had to produce his birth certificate, and it became an office joke. He didn't ever admit to his own wife – my mother, Enid – that he was illegitimate. She and my sister only found out when they discovered his birth certificate in a desk drawer after he had passed away. There was no name in the father column.

But he obviously liked the surname, because, according to his half-brother, my Uncle Don Haig, he started calling himself Mike Western from the age of nine.

A school report as he was leaving school for good has him named Michael Haig, however. He was top of his class and received a headmaster's comment, 'A well-recommended boy.'

As we see from this report dated 31st January 1939, at 14 years of age, Mike was living in the Greater London Borough of Heston and Isleworth in Hounslow. But soon after that, the family moved to Reading and Mike was forced to leave school and take his first job as a clerk for, of all places, Amalgamated Press process works in Southwark. He was seeing artwork coming in even then,

I think Mike's mother had a nervous disposition, or she was rent-dodging, but for whatever reason, the family was constantly moving from one London address to another, even

going far into the North London suburb of Kingsbury. He always retained a broad London accent [not Cockney] which I think I have now too.

When the bombs started falling, the family moved to Reading. At this point, he was called up for service in 1943.

Just to answer the rest of this particular question, I think Mike was probably an auto-didact and read voraciously. Anything from *Comic Cuts*, *Funny Wonder* to *Gem* and *Magnet* to Charles Dickens, Robert Louis Stevenson and A. A. Milne. It is clear to me from personal letters that he retained a highly-intelligent interest in literature and poetry, coupled with a highly-charged visual interest in the illustrators who accompanied these classic texts. Mike was also particularly influenced by the great American comics artists, Alex Raymond, Milt Caniff and the *Tarzan* artwork coupled with a huge interest in cinema: in particular, the so-called 'film noir' directors and cinematographers for their lighting and composition of framing and staging.

Mike also had a good knowledge of basic arithmetic and drummed into me my 12 times tables when I was lagging at the age of 10.

Where the innate drawing talent came from is hard to define but it is clear, he was drawing all the time as a young boy, as a young man in the midst of war and beyond into his illustrious career. He always used the highest quality materials he could afford and get hold of. I was the recipient of his superb 2B Royal Sovereign pencil stubs which fit my little hand as a kid. I've never liked harder leads!

Poverty and the Second World War intervened to cut off any hopes of further education of any kind for Michael.

JB: He was drafted into the Army during World War II. Can you share with us his service, and also how his artistic side developed during this time?

PW: He was taught how to drive army lorries but had no aptitude. He never owned a car or drove in his life either! After a bit of work doing map lithography with the Royal Engineers, Mike was seconded onto the unit's magazine. It proved very popular and SHAEF Headquarters took it over. It became a bigger and slicker publication called *Soldier*. After Belgium, Mike was posted to Egypt

where he quickly became a member of the Art Club and painted a number of portraits of his fellows. No work from this era survives, save an odd dingy photograph. The Art Room in Alexandria was blown up by Arab terrorists but luckily no-one was in it at the time!

15 Apr 1943	Colchester - PTW - 6 weeks
30 June "	Rhyl - RA Signals - 7 weeks
6 July "	7 days leave - Reading
14 " "	Rhyl - RA Signals - 2 months
14 Sept -	Newtown - RA Depot - 2 months
8 Nov "	10 days leave - Reading
19 " "	Newtown - RA Depot - 1 month
19 Dec "	Ruabon - STC - 2 months
14 Feb 1944	9 days leave - Reading
24 " "	Ruabon - STC - 4 months ?
24 June "	Bordon - Transit Camp - 1 month
24 July "	Dunsfold - 515 Field - ?
25 July "	Aramanches - Transit Camp
26 " "	Normandy - 515 Field - 1 week
2 Aug "	Sommeville - M4 Depot - 2 weeks
16 " "	Sommeville - 14 PWS -
19 " "	Caen - 14 PWS - 3 months
19 Nov "	Antwerp - " - 3 months
21 Feb 1945	9 days leave - Reading
3 Mar "	Antwerp - 14 MRS - 5 months
3 Aug "	Rahden - 519 Fld - 3 weeks
24 " "	Ruabon - STC -
26 " "	10 days leave - Reading -
9 " "	Ruabon - STC - 1 month
9 Sept "	Warminster - " - 2 months
13 Nov "	11 days leave - Bristol -
25 " "	Warminster - STC - 1 month
18 Dec "	14 days leave - Bristol -
1 Jan 1946	Warminster - STC - 1 month
21 Feb "	El Ballah - RETD - 2 weeks
10 Mar "	Jura - 512 - 1 month
10 Apr "	Abbaasia - - 5 months

Mike Western's service record.

JB: After being demobilised, he worked as an animator, and worked on such films as *Animal Farm* – can you tell us a little about this time, and how he met your mom, also an artist.

PW: By chance, as Mike was being demobilised, circa 1947 he saw a press advertisement from the J. Arthur Rank Organisation calling for all kinds of artists to submit their portfolios. It turned out to be for a new animation studio set up in a leafy, idyllic village bordering the Thames; Cookham, Berkshire. Rank, a committed methodist, wanted to help ex-forces artists to survive in a blighted post war Britain. He also briefly thought he could

rival Walt Disney with a British animation production facility – a misguided notion. No-one could rival the Disney story department/character development at that time and Disney has continued to dominate the market in animated films.

Much to his surprise, Mike was taken on as a trainee under the artistic supervision of an ex-pat American, David Hand, a former Disney director [*Snow White, Bambi*]. Mike's already superior draughtsmanship was quickly adapted to 'cleaning-up' the rough but lively animation key drawings from more-advanced animators in readiness for being traced and painted onto transparent celluloid



A year or two later, my mother-to-be applied for a job on the advice of a former boyfriend from the heavily-industrialised town of Bolton, Lancashire. She didn't immediately get taken on but subsequently received a telegram asking her to get down south, pronto!

She had an almost Stanley Spencer [local artist] 'heavenly' vision as she stepped off the train into the luxuriously-leafy green, idyllic world of Cookham, having arrived from the predominantly black 'n' grey war-torn North. Almost from day one

of her arrival, she noticed my dad winking at her, across the canteen. The guy from Bolton didn't stand a chance after that.

The failure of the charming little animated films produced by GB Animation to grab the UK public's attention led to J. Arthur Rank shutting down his studio in 1950. The artists all went their separate ways but, thank goodness my dad had the sense to marry my mother, Enid, at around this time in what looked like a bleak new year in Blackpool. Later in 1950 they both picked up jobs in different studios in the small town of Stroud, Gloucestershire. My mother continued tracing and painting animation drawings onto celluloid on a production called *The King and The Bird*. My father, as you know, began to animate on the Halas & Batchelor production of George Orwell's *Animal Farm*. The first fully-animated British feature film, it has been revealed to have been secretly funded by the CIA as an American propaganda piece in the Cold War.

No-one on the production knew about this but certain things were demanded such as changing Orwell's bleak ending to a happy one. John Halas, a Hungarian emigre, who had probably suffered under a Communist Soviet-dominated regime, was happy to comply.

However, after some time on the film, my dad once told me that he started to 'chafe at the bit'. His immediate boss, the very talented lead animator, Harold Whitaker had a tendency to keep all the better scenes for himself and doled out the minor secondary scenes to his junior animators. He refused to give Mike better scenes to get his teeth into. Mike felt kept down and, frustrated at the lack of progress in getting to be a better animator. [it's something I also felt I suffered from in my 20s].

This is where Nobby Clark reappears....

JB: He was brought onto *Knockout* by Nobby Clark, and so his career began in comics (was this 1954?) and was soon on *Johnny Wingco*, and onto *Valiant* in the 60s. Can you recall the stories he enjoyed working on?

Ron 'Nobby' Clark admired my dad's draughtsmanship when they had worked together at GB [Gaumont British] Animation. Eric Bradbury, Ron Smith, Harry Hargreaves, Eddie Radage and Frank Langford [formerly aka Frankie Eidelstein]

had also worked at GB and all were to head into either editorial cartooning, animation for the new commercials on ITV or comics work. For a time everyone was going to the same London agents with exactly the same portfolios. So Mike was relieved that Nobby pulled a few tricks to get him into Amalgamated Press, the same company he had worked for as a 14-year-old wages clerk before the war. He started drawing comics, a few months before I was born in October 1952.

But this time, the work on offer was as a freelance artist with no guarantees that he would be kept on. Nobby, as scriptwriter said that, as he [ex RAF] could draw aeroplanes of all types, technically very well, he would lay out the pages, pencil in the planes, very cleanly, leaving space for Mike's superior ability at figures and scenery and wrote in the word balloons. Mike was also to ink everything. He also suggested that the young Western family move to Horsham, West Sussex where Nobby had established himself so that the collaboration would work more easily.

Making phone calls in those days was very expensive.

In the meantime I had been born in Stroud and my sister, Mandy, arrived three years later in September 1955. At first my parents could only afford to rent a dingy flat in Bartelott Terrace, Horsham. But even so, recently I found a short article from the local newspaper reporting that the town had an interesting new artist in residence at this address. Mike had already been noticed. But by his own admission he struggled at first with the new kind of work that comics art demanded. He had got so used to working in a clean line with a pencil in the animation biz that he found it difficult to master inking a page of hand-drawn artwork and balancing his black and white areas to make an attractive and graphically-interesting page. So his first couple of stories look rather thin and lacking in a confident style. His first strip was called *Captain Phantom* – the man of a thousand disguises – for *Knockout*. *Lucky Logan*, a cowboy

character based on James Stewart came next and was shared with Eric Bradbury. Eric had mastered inking rather more quickly but I think my dad took note and his confident line and style started to appear.

I feel he really got into his stride on *Johnny Wingco* starting in 1954. It had great characters and Mike worked hard at designing them, culled from all sorts of movie actors and researching all the props, location details etc.



Then, unfortunately, there was a shake-up and Amalgamated became Fleetway; several artists were let go, including Mike. Even as a little boy, I remember him anxiously getting on a train to London to visit an Italian Art agent who took him on. The man quickly found him some lovely well-paid work on *TV Express*, run by TV Publications Ltd.

Not only did he paint full-colour covers printed on superior glossy paper but he had a page of *Biggles* stories, taking over from Ron Embleton. It was also in glossy full-colour inside and Mike also drew a one page halftone of the new TV series, *No Hiding Place*, for which he finally invested in a television to study the actors' likenesses. Much to my delight. I could now see my favourite *Popeye* cartoons!

Meanwhile by 1962, Fleetway managing editor, Sid Bicknell had been looking down from his lofty perch in Farringdon Street EC4 and invited Mike back to work on the newly-created *Buster*. I

was allowed a 'pictorial joke' on the jokes page, made up by my dad and Sid, in actual fact. I received a Mars chocolate selection bag as a prize. CORRUPTION IN THE COMICS INDUSTRY! The standout strip for me in this period was *The Shrinker* and I became aware of my dad's 'film noir' inking style which came back to the fore on *Battle Picture Weekly* a decade later. Mike was an avid cinematography fan.

After a successful stint on *Buster*, Sid Bicknell paired Mike with writer Tom Tully to create *The Wild Wonders* for the new Fleetway publication, *Valiant*, edited by Stewart Wales. Stewart hired a very youthful Steve MacManus to help sub-edit the new comic, although Sid seemed to be in overall charge. Mike worked well with Tom's sparkling scripts and the rather sombre tone of the opening stories developed into a more light-hearted zany cartoon-ish strip – a clear, clean, highly animated style of drawing which I, and many fans of Mike's work, love to this day.

There were other strips of course and many, many front covers and summer specials. Sid kept Mike very busy as he did not countenance losing him to a rival again. Tom Tully's creation for *Buster*, *The Leopard from Lime Street* is arguably the most popular British strip for a generation of schoolboys, but I was hardly aware of it as I'd left home to become an animator myself – a job so absorbing that I virtually stopped reading comics until quite recently. *Billy's Boots* came later, another incredibly popular Tully-written script for

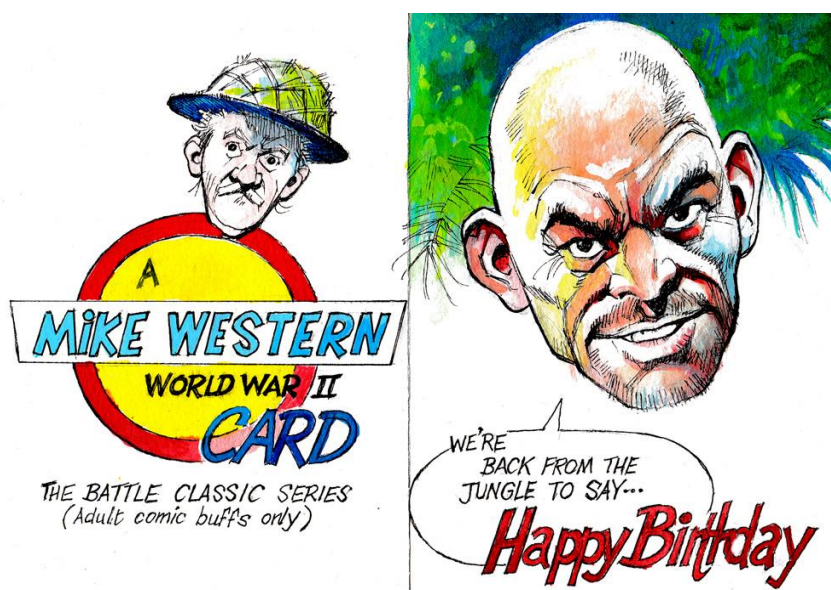
Scorcher, edited by Dave Hunt, who went on to become editor of *Battle*.

JB: *Battle* began in 1975, and Mike is in the first issue – March 8th 1974 – with a stand alone *Boys at War* story. Can you tell us how he got involved with *Battle*?

PW: I've only read about all this recently in Steve Mac's book *The Mighty One: My Life Inside the Nerve Centre* – required reading! Pat Mills and John Wagner, two brash young, ambitious writers, lured away from DC Thomson, were secretly developing *Battle* in their own room 401 on Farringdon Street. They demanded and initially got complete control over style, editorial and development of the artwork. But, such was their zeal in writing and rewriting stories that things were looking decidedly dodgy about the launch date of the new comic. Management put their collective foot down and Dave Hunt, who meanwhile had been editing *Valiant*, was brought in to regain control and he was the kind of no-nonsense man to stick to a rigid schedule and get the comic out every week. Steve M. joined him and together with John and Pat put out the beloved comic, *Battle Picture Weekly*. Dave Hunt was a big fan of Mike's work and obviously gave him the initial stories you mention. I guess during this time, Mike was drawn to the attention of John Wagner who wanted him to draw *Darkie's Mob*. The rest of this period, you will know about better than me.

JB: Was his military background and service in World War 2 useful?

PW: I'm absolutely sure it was. It was the first time he had travelled abroad to Europe, first of all, stationed in Antwerp and Brussels, then posted to Egypt. Still, a very young man, I can easily imagine the sights and smells must have made a vivid impression on his imagination. Reportedly, he managed to draw much of the time and would paint his fellow recruits. Later, of course, he would have had to do hefty research into details about weaponry, uniforms etc. and I'm sure John W. provided a lot of back-up with this. *Darkie's Mob*



One of Mike's many hand-drawn birthday cards!

remained Mike's favourite strip for the rest of his career and he was proud to send me and my brother the *Judge Dredd Magazine* reprints, years later. It was at that point I recognised him as the master of comics he was. I'm glad I wrote him a long fan letter telling him how much his work impressed me.

JB: Mike drew quite a few stories for *Battle*: *D-Day Dawson* (3 Jan 1976), *Iron Cross of Courage* (10 Jan 1976), *Merrill's Marauders* (Feb and Mar 1976), *The Team That Went To War* (31 Jul 1976), *Operation Shark* (14th Aug 1976), and *The Sarge* (Jun 1977 to Sep 1978) – what was this time like for him? Did he enjoy these war comics? Any particular memories?

PW: As I say, I wasn't witness to these years. But a recent conversation with my younger brother confirms that he was being worked dreadfully hard. I'm sure you have read the diary entries that Paul presented on the Battle Fans Facebook group which tells you what he was going through. At one point he was drawing and inking *The Sarge* and pencilling *Leopard Boy* which Eric Bradbury agreed to ink. That amounted to seven pages of artwork per week. Sid was also asking him to do the odd Summer Special and annual covers as well. I think he really loved his work. What he sometimes balked at was John's extremely violent scenes. He often toned down the visuals, probably in consultation with Dave Hunt. But I am aware that perhaps like Joe Colquhoun, he was working *too* hard, to the detriment of his health, not to mention some short-lived strained relations with his long-suffering wife. It became a seven day working week at one point and his eyesight started to suffer.

Strangely, in one of his diary entries of the time on *The Sarge*, he makes a comment about Jim Masters being a 'stonewaller' – a leader who isn't too decisive [must look up the American general Stonewall from Civil War days!]. Artists are not always the best judges of their own work. I feel *The Sarge* will be properly assessed by Mike's peers when the Rebellion book finally comes out, scanned with the only original artwork Mike ever got back from IPC.

JB: John Wagner saw Mike as the right artist for *Darkie's Mob* (14 Aug 1976) and Dave Hunt had made it known the comic was gritty, your dad

really went with this steer – this is an incredible story: what insights can you share of his time drawing this story?

PW: None really. As I mistakenly thought, John had asked him to raise his game another notch. John has told me firmly that just wasn't true! He added that he would never have had the temerity to tell an artist of Mike's stature in which way to draw. I can only guess but I would say Mike found John's terse unwordy style of scriptwriting highly refreshing after years of working with the talented, but sometimes arrogant and wordy, Tom Tully. The story of Joe Darkie is so powerful, the characters almost draw themselves and Mike responded with the new style of gritty artwork demanded by John and Dave. He was incredibly versatile and could change his style to suit the tone of a story from light to dark, from straight figurative drawing to a fresh cartoon style, all solidly drawn. Both Dave and Steve have attested that Mike, almost more than anyone, knew how to break down the panels on a given page to visually make a flowing, clear sequence that the reader doesn't even question.

Interestingly, Dave Gibbons came up with this as a tribute to Mike in *Eagle Flies Again* on his 80th birthday – it's worth quoting in full:

Mike Western is one of those artists that, as a kid, I took for granted. Everything would look so authentic and exciting that I just fell into the drama.

It's only later that, with a professional eye, I realised the effort this apparent effortless took the craft that is needed to fit ten or more pictures onto a page, with variety and clarity. The skill that it takes to organise the elements in each picture, often with a large cast of individual characters and an exotic or atmospheric setting, not to mention often wordy speech balloons, without crowding the composition. The fluency that ensures the story is always clear, the action always coherent. The vision that can render in ink, in pure black and white, people and places with such presence and vivacity. The discipline that it takes to perform this feat week in and week out, without missing a beat.

It's a tribute to Mike that, despite all that. I STILL just fall into the drama of his work!

A brilliant homage from one brilliant artist to another! I'll just add that my brother watched him inking this and other *Battle* stories at the time. He says it was a slow, painstaking process to carefully ink with such precision without losing the 'life' in the rough pencil drawing. This is why he spent hour upon hour on his work. I think Mike knew this one would be his crowning glory.

JB: *HMS Nightshade* started with the important issue #200 (6 Jan 1979, inked by Ron Tiner) and is recognised as one of the finest naval comics ever – can you tell us about his time drawing this story?

PW: Sorry, not much at all as I wasn't around. But Mike hated letting the inking go to someone else. Look at the difference in the standard of Mike's two opening pages of inked art and Ron Tiner's looser feel. No disrespect to Ron but he wasn't the best choice of back-up. Eric Bradbury would have done a wonderful job but was in demand as the great artist he was, himself. But at least Mike had the pleasure of drawing his self-portrait every week as the old narrator looking back on those days on board *Nightshade*. I haven't read much of it yet but what little I have read appeals to me more than *Darkie's Mob* because it is *so real!*

JB: Can you tell us about the process that Mike went through, getting a job, then whether there was input or if it were just following the script, and then how and where he would draw out the story, etc.?

PW: I can tell you a bit from my observation of his routine in earlier days. Jobs came to Mike once he was back in with Sid and the IPC boys, He never had to look or beg for work, he was in such demand. The editors and writers in the 60s/70s/80s often wanted him to lead off a new story, set the standard and move on to the next story. That must have been hard!

He was the first in the house to rise in the morning, around 6:00am, spend quite a bit of time and care on his ablutions, trim his moustache etc., always humming music hall melodies like "Come into the garden, Maud." He got into a routine of regularly cooking himself a fried breakfast until my mother finally persuaded him it was not healthy. So he switched to yoghurts. But before that he cleaned up dog mess in the kitchen, roused me

out of bed to do my paper round with a mug of hot, homemade lemonade. Having got all that out of the way, he pulled on wellingtons, hat, mac and scarf, put a lead on Bennie the beagle and headed off on an unvarying walk over the surrounding hills of Horsham. I would sometimes tag along when I was able to, just to be able to chat with him – I think he liked me a lot but in that slightly, reserved English way of fathers of that generation. I feel he knew I respected him for what he was doing, including keeping the family fed and watered. We had a few arguments when I was a moody teen because I think he sometimes felt I wasted too much time not working hard enough at my schoolwork, something he never got the chance to do himself. I am convinced he would have been a brilliant scholar.

Anyhoo, he would get back to his studio round about 9:30am where the first thing he would do was to pack his pipe with tobacco and spend seemingly endless minutes lighting, inhaling and puffing out his first pipe smoke of the day. Slowly he would gather himself to read the script, sharpen a pencil by hand and start laying out the page very loosely, lightly and organically. No panel borders just yet.... This bit was lightning fast work



Mike Western's cover for *Battle-Action*, 1 Sep 1979

– again, I think he had a genius brain for analysing a script, mentally breaking it down into the panels. I never read any of those scripts, to be honest, but I suspect a John Wagner script was already terse, utterly honed and was brilliantly-inspiring to boot. Then the Indian ink came out and he started ruling out panel borders, whiting out bits if need be. Then the magic really happened as he applied thick and thin lines in a flowing way with a small (no. 1 or 2) sable brush to delineate characters and backgrounds – he always used good quality materials, never compromised except on the board when he found a thinner, cheaper one than the expensive Bristol fashion board he started his comics career on. Bigger brushes and various pens were used for larger areas of shadow or for tiny, precise thin lines, details and highlights around eyes, mouths, bad teeth and bulging eyes being particularly important. White-out paint would be judiciously employed to sharpen/clarify tiny details.

JB: Mike went on to work on *Speed*, *Tiger* and *Eagle*. He drew *Hard Men* by Peter Milligan. Can you share with us how the later years were and at what stage he retired (if he did)?

PW: I'm not much of a fan of these years – I felt Mike had lost his touch to an extent. A HARSH JUDGEMENT? YES! But remember, I AM AN UBER FAN of his work and I was a professional artist too by then. I was judging him by his own highest standards. As I mentioned before, his eyesight was giving him problems. But he wouldn't go to an optician to get a pair of prescription glasses – something I was forced to wear from the age of eleven. He borrowed my mum's reading glasses! He had a mortal fear of doctors, dentists and hospitals too, something I fear he really suffered through in his last years. His powerful imagination, his marvellous wit and drawing talent was slowly being dissipated by a debilitating series of strokes

and a touch of cancer in his oesophagus. But he could still raise a weak smile when I went to visit him in a series of hospital beds and care home. My mum once found him sitting stooped right over in an armchair in his room and promptly made the decision to care for him, herself at their home. She managed to get a special hospital bed installed in the former dining room and desperately tried to keep him alive, with the occasional help from professional carers who would visit, twice a day.

But whenever I came home to visit, he always told me he just wanted to be left alone to die, much to the upset of my mum. But I secretly agreed with him. It was a sad sight to behold such a great and proudly independent man reduced to almost a skeleton.

I miss my dad to this day. My parents made me what I am and anything I have achieved in life is very much of their making.

Mike Western Battle Stripography

Here are some of the stories we know Mike worked on for *Battle*. In some cases he was one of many artists who worked on longer-running stories.

Boys at War: The Head-First Hero – 8th March 1975

Iron Cross of Courage – three stand-alone stories in this series.

D-Day Dawson

Merrill's Marauders

The Team That Went to War

Darkie's Mob – 14th August 1976 to 18th June 1977 (complete run)

Operation Shark

The Sarge

HMS Nightshade – 6th January 1979 to 15th December 1979 (complete run)

Charley's War – Cover 12th February 1983, Holiday Special 1984

EXPLORING: SCOTT GOODALL'S CHARLIE'S WAR

Writer Scott Goodall – who would later be awarded an MBE for services to Second World War History – continued the *Charley's War* series after Pat Mills departed. We decided we wanted to take a closer look at both the post-Mills series and Scott himself, and set James Bacon to the task.

Be warned, though: James's in-depth analysis of Scott's contributions to *Charley's War* contain some major spoilers!

Marcus Scott Goodall, MBE, was a veteran of comics. He served in the army in the 1950s and had worked with Joe Colquhoun in the 1960s. On the arrival of John Wagner and Pat Mills into comics Scott Goodall told *Comics UK* that, "To say that they were the two new brooms destined to sweep out the old IPC cupboard is putting it mildly. Imported in secret by managing director John Sanders, my 'Don't use gorblimey or the word flick' days were gone forever! Immense talent the pair of them, young, strident, forceful... From then on the blood flowed! *Battle Picture Weekly* was launched, brilliantly done, drawn and written, plus the unforgettable *Charley's War* by Pat Mills and Joe Colquhoun."

I know that as fans we critique and consider stories, and naturally have favourites. I appreciate that Scott's *Charley's War* was not as good as Pat's run, but is it fair to compare, when we know Pat wanted a research budget, which he didn't receive?

Pat's run was, and is, brilliant. If we want to compare, where does one rank Scott's *Charley's War* against the other seventy

ongoing serials in *Battle*? The artwork is amazing and it deserves to be reprinted. I lament that creators do not own more of their work, that industry is not more fair, that we did not see World War Two and even the Falklands by Pat Mills, of course I do. Yet, Goodall was a comic writer who did his job.

Born 7th November 1935 in Aberdeen, he loved *Wizard* and *Hotspur*, left school and went into insurance and then was called up for National Service and served in the army in Japan and Korea between 1954 and 1956, achieving the rank of Corporal. After the Army worked first for a newspaper, then DC Thomson, before going freelance. He was a sub-editor on girls' comic *Mirabelle*, and worked on comic stories such as *Captain Hurricane* for *Valiant* and created *Fish Boy* and *Splash Gordon*, which appeared in *Tiger*. In Scott's own words, again from *Comics UK*, "Splash Gorton, the hippy swimmer drawn by the sublime



Joe Colquhoun, which was meant to be a modern 60s version of the 40s sci-fi character *Flash Gordon*, but for some inexplicable reason Barrie changed his name to *Splash Gorton*."

Scott wrote a vast amount of stories, but one of his favourites was *Zarga – Man of Mystery* for *Buster*, and again here we see Scott and Joe working together. Scott described it thus: "...from an original idea by Sid Bicknell. Zarga, a failed stage performer (hypnotist), mocked by his audience one night but who could hypnotise *himself* into any type of character he needed to be... like a pole-vaulter, champion swimmer, Formula One driver, zap... he'd be just what he wanted to be! Drawn by the wonderful Joe Colquhoun, I loved the finished result! Joe had a knack of knowing just how a writer's mind was working. For instance, I had a policeman chasing the wicked Zarga, whose name, I think, was Inspector Claudius Gumble. Now all Gumble wanted to do was retire and grow green beans in perfect rows, but no –Scotland Yard said that Gumble had to catch Zarga... so Joe portrayed this poor Gumble as the most superbly frustrated gardener you'd ever see in a BBC gardening programme. The artwork and characterisation were sublime..."

Scott also worked with Joe Colquhoun on *Kid Chameleon* (for *Cor!!*) and *Sammy Brewster's Ski-Board Squad* (for *Buster*).

For *Battle* Scott took over writing duties on *Flight of the Golden Hinde* from Pat Mills and John Wagner from 22nd of March 1975 until its demise a few weeks later on 24th May. He wrote *One Eyed Jack* alternating with Chris Lowder from the 23rd October 1976 until the 28th May 1978, doing the first and last issues. *Soldier Sharp – the Rat of the Rifles* with Joe Colquhoun ran from 23rd October 1976 until 22nd January 1977. He took over from John Wagner on *Joe Two Beans* from 24th September until its end on 1st April 1978. He wrote some of the final issues of *The Sarge* (or maybe just *the final one*). *The Wilde Bunch*, *The Douglas Bader Story*, a number of *Action Force* and *Storm Force* stories as well standalone stories – such as *Odds Against* on 8th November 1986 – were all penned by him.

January 1985, I was ten years old and loving *Charley's War*. The armoured Trains appealed to me no end and indeed I have an interest today that



saw me writing about an apocryphal armoured train which was a military train entering Enniscorthy at the end of the 1916 Easter Rising in Ireland.

It was so exciting at the time and then, the conclusion occurred in one page and it was thirteen years later, 1933, and life is grim for Charley. He's on the Dole, and even Old Bill only on a short term job.

A less naive and more attention-focussed child would have known something was up, but I was not that child, I just adored Joe Colquhoun's art so much, and loved Charley. Seeing him in his lovely house was so nice even if momentarily, although his anger and trauma were unfortunate consequences of the character's history – which I felt sad about – this was idyllic compared to the Great War and the depression dole.

I'd expected that Len, who was the spit of Charley, would be the one the story would now follow, that *Charley's War* might become *Len's War*, or *Bourne's War*. So I was not at all surprised by Len's decision to throw in being a doctor and join the regular Army, while the general emphasis on the evil of Nazis strengthened the overall scene for the reader. Yet Scott Goodall had taken over the reins.

Now for us readers these issues were quick. A lot happened and, indeed, the next issue really jumped as Len did go off to the army but then Charley is in France and it is May 1940!

Colour me confused at the time, somehow fifteen months had disappeared. This was too

sudden a jump and indicative of some untidy initial problems.

We are quickly introduced to some new pals, and as well as the Germans, we have Sergeant Nickles, a grotesque poisonous bloodthirsty bully, a solid trope-ish character that readers could hate.

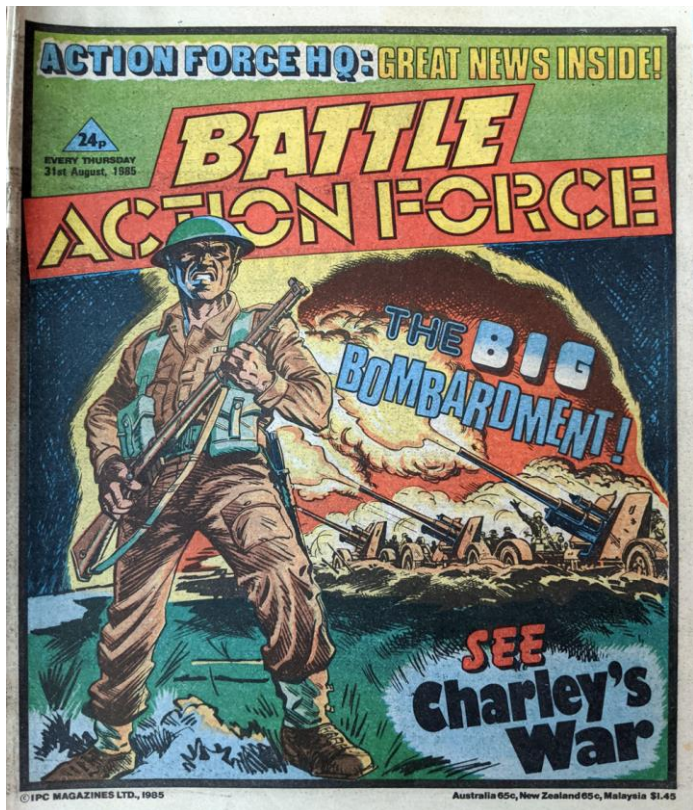
Charley's battles with the Germans – be it in woods or in town – see him always looking after his comrades, fighting hard and at odds with Nickles. As the story continues we get to meet Panzer Major Klaus Rimmer. It is fair to say that Nickles and Rimmer are tropes of previous characters, but in the truest tradition of *Battle*. By April, Rimmer orders his men to fire on civilians, even his own men consider him a barbarian and the time is set.

Charley motivates the comrades with whom he's isolated to fight and prevent the Germans walking up the Old Kent Road, a bit of a turn around to the Charley who had wanted to sit out the war, but in the overall context, it sits OK. Again, some settling-in issues, perhaps, and one has to be careful not to dismiss too soon, as the development of depth is a slow burn.

The May 4th 1985 issue (the date of my eleventh birthday!) has Charley and his mates escaping Rimmer in a Bren Gun Carrier, and he sees Len – his son, a Lieutenant – in charge of a bridge demolition team, but then, next issue as we see Charley rush towards the bridge, Len is hit by artillery and then the bridge is blown. We were given a glimpse of happiness for Charley, but a mere three pages later, it is sorrow and anger as he finds his son's epaulette.

No time for any grieving for Charley: the action is quick-paced and soon he is using horses to plough a large arrow into a field to trick a German bombing-run. I felt Charley's reaction to the loss of his son could have been expanded upon, but these were nice enough stories. To Arras next, where we encounter Gefrieter Kleist – a 19 year old kid who tries to surrender. He's chinned by Charley, who in doing so has disobeyed an order to kill from Nickles. Charley's mildly fatherly approach to younger soldiers was nice, while the festering hatred between him and Nickles continues, but it is soon passed off. We meet some

characters, such as Captain Dixon who is very Tally Ho... but lasts just two issues.



And it is interesting how Charley's ribbons earn respect from a Colonel who was at the Somme.

Nickles proves just how horrific a sergeant he is, and we see the return of German Major Rimmer. Charley gets caught between the two in a very personal battle and it's quite good to be honest. Nickles is very much a bloodthirsty murderer, and so despite Charley striking him (and nearly getting trapped) we see Nickles and Rimmer fight and in the end they both die. There is a humorous aside about a glass eye, and it was funny. Interestingly at this point it feels that actually Goodall had a number of bigger ideas, interwoven characters and plot-seeds, but was just not as skilled as sowing and developing them as Pat Mills had been, and maybe was more rushed.

The story regroups somewhat, still in France and we meet Nobby Clark from Liverpool, who I assume is a reference to Ron 'Nobby' Clark, a well known comic artist (see *Interrogation: Mike Western* in this very issue!), and we find out there is something wrong with Kate...

There was no *Charley's War* on 2nd November 1985 but the following week we have our first epistolary episode, with a letter about

Kate having been arrested for black marketeering because of the author of the letter – Charley’s brother-in-law Oily – has returned. Now this was a good episode, as the truth of what was going on was juxtaposed with the lies in the letter beautifully in the art. The style continues and we see a telegram about Len arriving with Kate, and the lies continue from Oily but before he can get home Charley is thrown into battle and his French to get some exhausted Moroccan troops to help him oust some Germans. Then we meet a sniper, Holtz, who as a child disappointed his father by failing to shoot a boar (a common story I think) but he frustrates Charley by shooting his officers as he asks for leave. We meet Capt. Winslow Carlton-Hyde, a very posh, foppish cricket eccentric, who immediately one thinks is the antithesis of Charley who shows detest, but unexpectedly is brave and, in a change, we see an experienced Sergeant show the damage the Captain did in action, and Charley goes back as a sniper to hunt down Holtz. This allows for moments of the First World War to be in the frame.

After this, Charley gets isolated and he meets Madame Hortense Flaubert, a fabulously robust woman who is hunting the Germans. This offers some fun moments, amidst nastiness as we see local betrayal. A Panzerfaust is used in *Battle* on 26th April 1986 and this was few inaccuracies I found, as the weapon only came into being in 1942, not summer 1940. Yet, this is unfair: how many comics just have tanks? Here in these World War II stories, Matildas look right, Panzer IIIs have the correct amount of return and road wheels, while the sprocket wheel is accurate and when a Panzer IV is shown, it has eight-and-four and is just right. The ancillary vehicles, from half-tracks to motorcycle sidecars, all look so good and accurate.

The military aspect of Colquhoun’s work is phenomenal. He captures action exquisitely and of course one can tell his characters apart and know how they feel: the hint of smile in Charley’s face as he rushed to Len in the Universal Carrier... it’s brilliant.

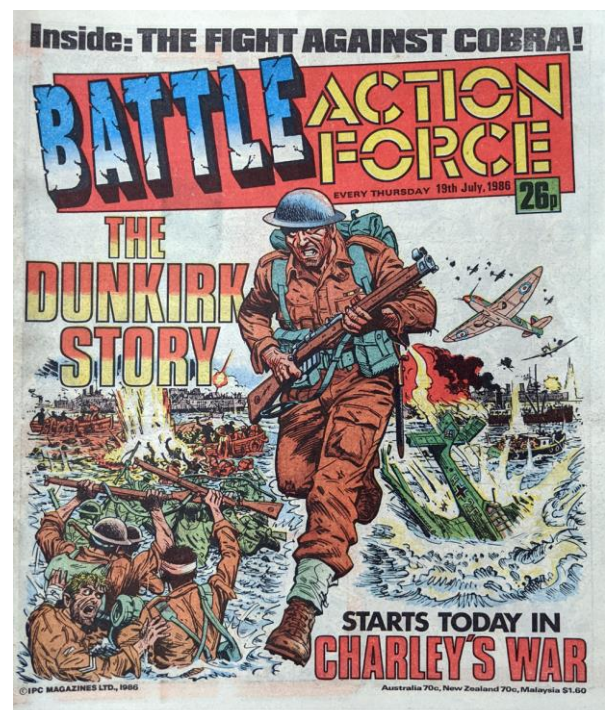
There is some nice weaving of the story, as Charley seeks to get a letter to Bill Tozer back in Blighty, who is now in the LDV – a bit of Dad’s Army – but we see Bill trying to figure out things for Kate concurrently with this letter being sent. The story

jumps back to Charley, who has recovered and now is isolated, solid fare, and witnesses an SS Colonel Braun slaughtering civilians. I like how the SS wore camouflage to distinguish them and then



an amateur cartoonist draws his likeness for Charley and shows him it – a bit of brilliance.

Between France and Britain, we see Old Bill fight Oily and arrange for Kate’s release. So that was nice, but the spectre of the SS was with us and then on the 14th of June 1986 we have the first *Charley* cover of the year, with Charley and Wally running from the SS, but it’s presented in that



classic style from *Battle's* earlier days where the cover is the first page of the strip.

The story is dark in places here, as we see potential rat torture and the utter repulsiveness of the Braun, and fortunately Charley kills him.

19th July 1986: we have a *Charley's War* cover announcing *The Dunkirk Story* and we meet footplate, the black cat who survives an ambulance train disaster, another pal of Charley's dies... Wally at Dunkirk, but we meet Archie Bentall, Nobby Clark and Capt. Winslow Carlton Hyde again.

The art is as ever amazing, and there are some panels over two issues with a stricken Spitfire which lands on the beach near Dunkirk. Charley sticks up for the young downed pilot, gets into a fight with soldiers who want to be evacuated first and Capt. Winslow C.H. sticks up for Charley, who is begrudging regardless.



A wonderful cover on the 9th September 1986: we see a destroyer hit by torpedoes off Dunkirk. Charley is off on a mission with Capt. Winslow C.H. and sees Len who is in a dreadful state, but Charley goes on and we see Len make it to a boat but then has an episode and throws himself off a boat.

Len is rescued, the closeness of the action means that Charley is told but Archie dies, well, he doesn't... but for a while we think he has. Charley and Len end up on the same tug boat, and the

action intensifies as the tug hits a mine and then a demented Len punches Charley, knocking him into the sea between the sinking tug and paddle steamer they're trying to reach, but we see Charley with crushed ribs come through, and with Len now knowing who his dad is, they spot the cliffs of Dover and we see an exhausted Charley think about how he was at sixteen years old... and as he thinks back to World War I.

I admit I was gutted the following week, dated the 11th of October 1986, as I knew then that was it: the story was going to replay from the start.

I had come to love Charley, who always had it so bad, who lost so many friends, who was so wronged, and so badly treated, beaten, bullied and put into horrendously traumatic situations. I had grown up with him, and in many ways, now I see that I had come to like him so much that while a hard critique would undoubtedly see Mill's stories feted for the amazing work they were, I did enjoy Goodall's run. The artwork had a lot to do with it, but when we love something warts and all, we do.

The respect that Goodall held for Mills was apparent. When asked about remuneration, he said, "It wasn't until the arrival of the very talented and militant Pay Mills that things began to change and that now (I think) writers and artists are receiving royalties for their scripts and artwork."

Scott moved to the French Pyrenees and worked on the reopening of walking escape routes used by POWs, evasive servicemen and refuges to escape from France to neutral Spain. He set up the Chemin de la Liberté, a four-day hike, and worked with the Museum and wrote a guide book. In 2005 in the Queens honours list he received an MBE For the Services to the History of the Second World War.

Scott Goodall passed away in France on the 7th March 2016.

Further reading on Scott Goodall:

www.comicsuk.co.uk/scottgoodall.html – the source of the quotes here: has a much longer and insightful interview.

www.chemindelaliberte.fr

www.telegraph.co.uk/obituaries/2016/04/25/scott-goodall-comic-book-writer--obituary/

INTERROGATION: GARTH ENNIS

The name Garth Ennis really needs no introduction. From his Belfast roots Garth has become a massively popular writer with *Judge Dredd*, *Preacher*, *The Punisher* and *The Boys* on his C.V. Guest Editor Paul Trimble talks to the *Battle* fan supreme.

Paul Trimble: You've said you first picked up *Battle* around mid 1978 (the real golden period). What was it about the comic that hooked you compared to all the other comics on the shelves at the time?

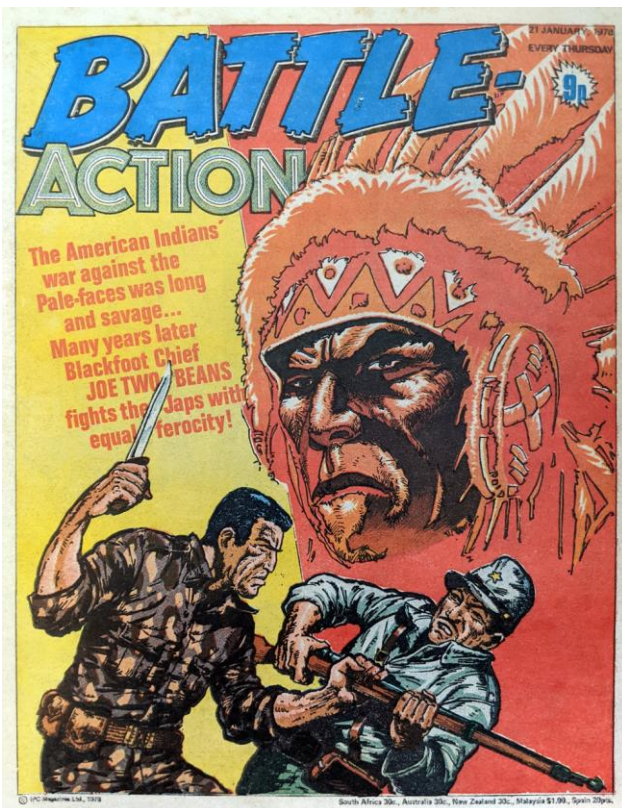
Garth Ennis: For me, the standout story in my first *Battle* issue was *Johnny Red*, in which the Stalingrad storyline was just kicking off. Joe Colquhoun's wonderfully detailed artwork was a big draw, particularly with his depiction of the Falcons – as Johnny's Hurricane led various Yaks and Lavochkins into a massed battle with several squadrons of Messerschmitts. By this point I'd read a few issues of *Commando* and the *Picture Libraries*, so I was familiar with the notion of war comics – I think I'd probably seen a few war movies as well, such as *Kelly's Heroes*, *The Battle of Britain* and *A Bridge Too Far* (my folks took me to see the latter on my 8th birthday). But there was something special about Joe's depiction of combat, aerial and otherwise – I recall being intrigued by the contrast of the Hurricane's roundels with the big red stars on the Soviet aircraft, all of them united by the Falcon symbol underneath their cockpits. The following episode had Johnny being decked by Nina Petrova, by which point I was hooked.

There were of course other great strips in those issues, such as *Dredger* and *The Sarge*, with fantastic art by John Cooper and Mike Western respectively. It's worth noting that I'd already been reading *2000 AD* for over a year, and I continued with it alongside *Battle* – there was no way

anything was going to tear me away from the Satanus episodes of *The Cursed Earth*, or the beginning of *Robo-Hunter*. So the two comics made a nice pairing. But *Battle* stood out from all the rest through its sheer quality; you were somehow compelled to come back for more. Later I read and enjoyed *Warlord*, but good as some of its strips were the comic lacked that Pat Mills/John Wagner editorial ethos that continued under Dave Hunt, which encouraged the writers to take things to the next level. Not that I'd have been able to articulate this at the time, when all I'd have said was "I want more," but I think that where *Battle* had gotten to by mid-'78 was a point when stories grew beyond repetitive single-episode instalments. You had multi-part storylines that allowed the narrative to develop, rather than good characters rendered boring by identikit episodes (e.g., *D-Day Dawson*).

PT: At what point did you have the opportunity to go back and read the earlier issues prior to 1978? *Major Eazy*, *Darkie's Mob*, *Joe Two Beans*, *The Sarge* and *Panzer G-Man* among the earlier classics.

GE: A couple of those were reprinted in *Battle* itself later on; I think *Darkie's Mob* started around '81. That one grabbed me straight away – wonderful artwork, compelling scripts, occasionally quite startling brutality. I still maintain that the first page of episode one is a stunning lesson in how to grab the reader from the word go ("This is the story of a madman..."). Much later, it was interesting to go back and see what had been censored and which episodes had been left out of the reprint run entirely, such as the one where we learn that Darkie is actually a Buddhist. I was with the Mob all the way, and one blood-soaked year later I was very taken with the ending, in which we



learn the peculiar and completely unexpected nature of Darkie's hatred for the Japanese.

The Sarge was already running when I began reading *Battle* in 1978, so I read a good chunk of the Gerry Finley-Day/Mike Western run and all of the later Scott Goodall/Phil Gascoigne material. Some of Finley-Day's ideas could be quite bizarre, but he had a superb sense of character, and you really felt a sense of loss for each member of the Sarge's section as they got knocked off on the long trail up Italy (I should say that this was a lesson I learned well – creating likeable characters who you then kill one at a time for maximum emotional pay-off). The Goodall material was okay, but a bit more pedestrian in terms of its ideas. He had the same problem following Pat on *Charley's War*.

As for the rest, it wasn't until I put an appeal for *Battle* issues in the *Preacher* letter column and managed to buy an entire run, that I got to see how it had all started. It was great to read the first year or so of *Johnny Red* and see the strip hit the ground running (and then some), but for the reasons I mentioned above I think there was also a fair bit of dead space. *Panzer G-Man* was nothing special – not a patch on the best German strips like *The General Dies At Dawn* and *Hellman*, the last episodes of which were fantastic (all that lovely art

by Mike Dorey and Pat Wright). *Joe Two-Beans* wasn't bad. I recall John Wagner talking about how he instantly wrote himself into a corner on that one by having the lead character refusing to speak – that didn't last too long.

Dirty little secret here: I never really took to *Major Eazy*. He's a fantastic looking character, of course, but he seems to me much more American than British, in terms of his outlook and appearance. There were certainly some strange characters in the LRDG and early SAS, but Eazy has too much James Coburn/Donald Sutherland in him for me to buy him as English. I think that's why I always liked *Crazy Keller* so much more – that particular brand of maverick seems to me to work better as a Yank than a Brit. I'm well aware I'm in the minority here, very likely of one. Interesting that both characters were created by Alan Hebden.

PT: *Charley's War* debuted in issue #200, cover-dated 6th January 1979, and on sale a few days beforehand. Unlike anything ever published before to that point what did you think of the strip at the time?

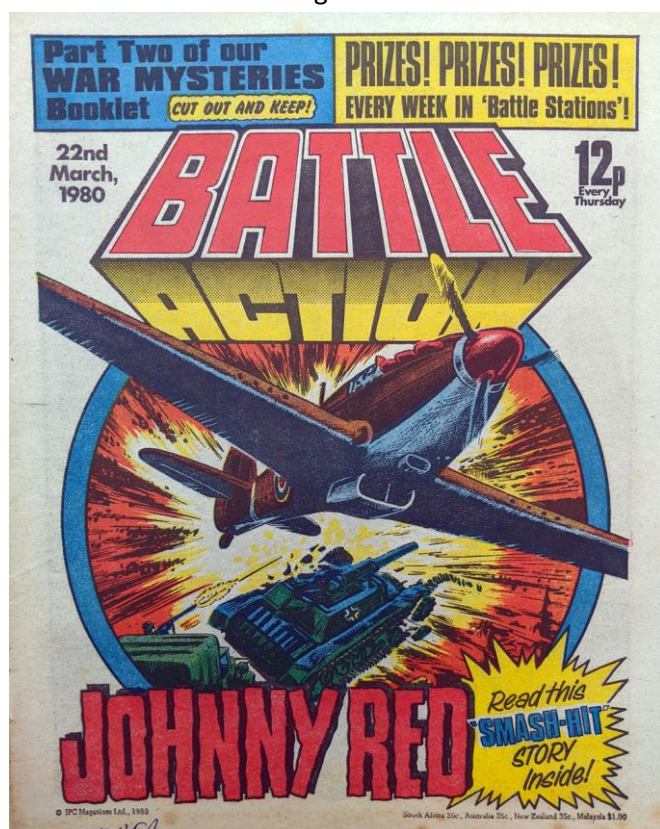
GE: My first thought was something along the lines of – what's this, and why is the *Johnny Red* guy drawing it, and why is the *Dredger/General Dies at Dawn* guy drawing *Johnny Red* (no credits in those dark days)? That didn't last long, of course, testament to the great writing and art of Pat Mills and Joe Colquhoun (and also, I should say, of Tom Tully and John Cooper). *Charley's War* was really unlike anything else that had been in the comic or that I'd read at all up to that time. It's probably the most character-driven strip ever to appear in *Battle*, and there are some comparatively quiet instalments in those first few months.

Then the Battle of the Somme begins in all its horror, and you have those ghastly couple of episodes where the Tommies advance directly into German machine-gun fire and die by the thousand. Even to my normally bloodthirsty nine year-old self there was something different going on here, and as the weeks went by and you saw the cost of the battle mount up – so many thousand dead for a gain of half a mile, or something equally appalling – you began to understand that this was a new approach. That's not to say that I didn't still enjoy the other stories on the level they were written on;

I can't claim that the strip changed my entire attitude to military fiction, or anything like that. *Charley's War* was simply unique, and there was nothing else like it throughout the comic's history. It made you think about conflict in a different way. Two examples from the first few Somme episodes to illustrate the point: Ginger stumbling across the carnage under heavy fire with dying men grabbing at his feet, thinking, "If hell is worse than this, I'd better start mending my ways"; and the melancholy roll call at the end of the first day, when a sniper's bullet changes the answer of "Present, Sarge" to "Dead, Sarge".

PT: With the addition of *Action Force* in 1983 how did *Battle* keep your interest during 2000 AD's golden period?

GE: Very nearly with *Charley's War* alone. I didn't care for the Action Force stuff at all – some nice art, but even at thirteen a bunch of stories based on toys weren't really likely to grab me. You still had the occasional gem like *Invasion 1984*, and *Johnny Red* could impress now and again – though that one was on its way downhill, and never recovered after the long interlude set in the UK. But



as you say, 2000 AD was really shining around this point – Dredd in *The Starborn Thing* and *Cry of the*

Werewolf, the return of *Strontium Dog* with *The Moses Incident* (possibly my all-time favourite), *Skizz*, book three of *Nemesis*, that last crazy *Robo Hunter* story where he goes to heaven... really, if it hadn't been for *Charley's War* it would have been no contest

PT: If Titan had gone ahead with *Garth Ennis Presents Battle Classics vol 3* what stories would you have liked to include?

GE: Editor Steve White and I had several more volumes planned – in no particular order there was the aforementioned *Crazy Keller* (brilliant script and art by Alan Hebden and the great Eric Bradbury), the Finley-Day/Western run on *The Sarge*, the last year's worth of *Rat Pack*, the same of *Hellman*, and a brutal little Finley-Day story called *Cooley's Gun*, featuring a particularly ruthless lead character.

I'm pleased to say that Rebellion seem to have excellent taste in terms of *Battle* material – two of their first releases are stories Steve and I had also planned to get around to, *Invasion 1984* and *Death Squad*. Clearly someone's an Eric Bradbury fan. Quite right too.

We'd also hoped to continue the *Johnny Red* volumes well into John Cooper's run, at least as far as the end of 1980, with the conclusion of the insane but inspired Ghost Fighter storyline. You have some excellent stuff in there, like the attack on the Lutzmarck and the end at Stalingrad. After 1980 there's still some good material, but Tully begins stretching things out and repeating himself, and great ideas like the Gang of Seven and the attack on the Porcupine Bridge are sadly few and far between.

PT: You've written *Johnny Red*, *Hellman of Hammer Force* and *Rat Pack* (for the upcoming *Battle Special*). What other *Battle* characters would you like to have a crack at?

GE: I have more ideas for *Rat Pack* and *Johnny Red*, and if Mike Dorey was up for it you know I'd come up with another *Hellman* too. Beyond that I'm not sure – I think so many *Battle* stories ended so perfectly (*HMS Nightshade*,

Darkie's Mob) or were rendered meaningless without their original creative teams (*Charley's War*) that there's really no point in continuing with them.

With *Johnny Red* in particular, I have a nice idea about how to finish Johnny's story off properly – the last episodes that saw print in *Battle* were so obviously banged out in a hurry, and weren't even written by Tom Tully. Maybe one day Keith Burns and I will get a chance to do the job right.

I suppose if I have one regret about this stuff, it's that guys like Tom Tully, Joe Colquhoun, John Cooper, Mike Western and Eric Bradbury never lived to see the current revival of interest in their work (Coop at least knew a reprint of his *Johnny Red* was on the way). I'd like them to have known that people cared enough about the stories they told to reprint and even continue them – that the wonderful work they did still mattered to a great many readers, and that their legacies would be preserved.

PT: Around 1982 the emphasis in *Battle* seemed to change a bit with "adventure" stories beginning to appear and stories set in the present day for example *Truck Turpin* and *The Fists of Jimmy Chang*. This continue in 1983 with *Jetblade* and *Invasion 1984* which, cracking yarn as it is – and the Eric Bradbury art is amazing – is really more sci-fi than war and unlike anything previous. Do you think this change was necessary?

GE: Obviously war comics were in decline – certainly those set in the Second World War, which faded in the collective memory with each successive generation – so some kind of change was certainly necessary. It's possible that these strips might have fit into *Action* had it survived, given that all were set in the present day and none relied on war as a theme. But apart from *Invasion 1984* the quality really was lacking-*Jimmy Chang* wasn't bad and *Truck Turpin* scraped by so long as Cam was drawing it, but things like *The Hunters* and *Jetblade* were pretty feeble fare (that's where the *Action* comparison fades, actually, because none of this stuff had any kind of bite).

PT: *Invasion 1984* was John Wagner's last work for *Battle*. Carlos hadn't drawn anything for the comic in years, except covers, and Cam



Art by PJ Holden

Kennedy drew his last strip for *Battle* in 1982. Despite the benchmark set by *Charley's War* Pat shifted his attention to *2000 AD* as well. Was the success of *2000 AD* to the detriment of *Battle*? Was there enough creative talent to keep both comics to a high standard?

GE: You may want to check this because I don't know for sure, but it's very likely that *2000 AD* simply paid better than *Battle* – I'd be surprised if John and Alan got the same rate for *Invasion 1984* as they did on *Dredd*, for example. So it would make more sense for people to work for *2000 AD* as and when they could. Because at that point there hadn't been the big talent drain to the States that would come later, IPC could afford to pick and choose who worked for what, and with *Battle* sales in decline it made sense to keep their A-listers at work on the progs. Pat stuck with *Charley's War* out of sheer dedication, no doubt, but otherwise he,

John and Alan would have had no need to work for *Battle*.

(On the other hand, if I'm wrong and each writer actually had a set rate that applied across the board, it's possible that *Battle* simply couldn't have afforded to use some of these guys on a regular basis. Sales wouldn't have justified it.)

Perhaps a more thoughtful use of talent would have preserved *Battle* for a while longer, but instead you had an increasingly marked division of writers on the two titles – Tom Tully writes his last *2000* strip in '82 with *Mean Arena*, Gerry Finley-Day gets to keep *Rogue Trooper* going until '85 (but they haven't taken anything new off him since *Harry 20* back in '82), and Alan Hebden manages to get the *Mean Team* sequel in '87 and that's essentially his lot. The decision is made to put all the big eggs in the *2000 AD* basket and use the *Action Force* stuff to prop up *Battle* instead – this works for a couple more years, but really the writing's on the wall.

Invasion 1984 is indeed a cracker – I wonder if it had been turned down for *2000 AD*? I often think of it in the same terms as I do *Fiends of the*

Eastern Front, in that each would more or less have fit quite comfortably in the other comic.

PT: *Action Force* joined *Battle* in June 1983. No doubt this brought an influx of new, young readers but likely also turned a lot of old fans off the comic. Do you think this was a good move or should *Action Force* have launched their own comic?

GE: See above. It's really hard to say; I think John Sanders made the point in the big *2000 AD* history that there'd never really been a proper program in place to hunt for new talent, particularly on the writing side of things, and so editorial had to grab who they could. Eventually they got Grant Morrison and Pete Milligan, but *Battle* seemed to rely on its regular stable of older writers, and a lot of them got stuck on *Action Force*.

So do they really have a choice when the question of using the *Action Force* stuff comes along? To keep *Battle* stable you'd have had to keep the rates of pay roughly equal throughout the different comics, and make sure that your best writers work for as many titles as possible, and hope that was enough in the face of declining sales.



John Cooper on Johnny Red – *Battle-Action*, 22nd March 1980

And separately from all of this, the talent drain to the US is going to happen at some point, because ultimately you're not giving your writers and artists equity in what they create – so there's another onrushing iceberg to deal with.

Ultimately most publishers are going to take the easier, short-term option to prop up sales, and IPC in the '80s was no exception. Remember that management really had no interest in the actual quality of the material if there wasn't some immediately obvious commercial reflection – waiting and seeing meant nothing with the old "hatch, match and despatch" policy still in full effect at this point.

PT: Pat Mills has said (and I'm afraid I can't find the source material offhand) that *Battle* could have continued with strong new stories and run parallel to *2000 AD*. Do you think this was possible, or were war stories just too out of fashion by the mid 80's?

GE: I'm not sure, but it's interesting to speculate. Pat may have been thinking of his *Third World War* strip from *Crisis*, which appeared just a couple of years after he finished *Charley's War* (even though we think of them as belonging to different eras). An ongoing war comic that survived along *2000 AD* lines would have had to have grown up with its readers, which I think would have meant abandoning or at least augmenting World War Two material and looking at more modern conflicts – *Battle* did actually cover Vietnam and the Falklands, and you could have had the Middle East, Central America, even Northern Ireland. Perhaps, in some (extremely demented) parallel universe, there exists a strip about a section of British squaddies under a veteran NCO on their first tour of duty in South Armagh, 1981 – written by Gerry Finley-Day in full *Sarge* mode. That would be a thing to behold.

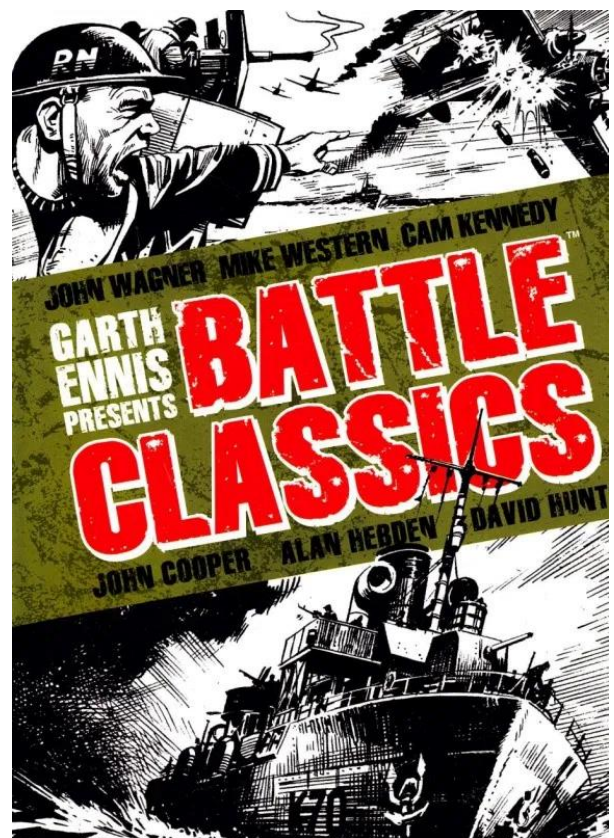
The other thing about a more modern war comic is that it would almost certainly have had to

become increasingly political, given that it would be dealing with more morally ambiguous conflicts than the Second World War, and I can tell you from experience on *Crisis* that politics can quickly drive sales into the toilet. So that would have taken some very careful handling.

PT: And a hypothetical question to finish. If you had been made editor of *Battle* in the mid 80's what direction would you have taken it in?

GE: Oh, boy, that's the kind of question I tend to avoid. Speculation can be fun, as I say, but given the stumbling blocks I've laid out above I'd never have taken the job.

Really, saving *Battle* would have required a completely different publishing philosophy to the one under which it saw print. Which takes us back to parallel universes.



EXPLORING: JOHNNY RED

VOLUME 1

Ann Gry reviews *Johnny Red* volume 1

The Great Patriotic War is ingrained in the history of every family in Russia. My Great Grandfathers from my mother's line both served and died, early in war, around 1942 – in the bloodiest Battles of Rzev. While my paternal grandfather was too young to serve, he made shoes for soldiers. His brothers and sisters died from hunger, leaving him alone. I was close to my grandpa Igor Pavlovich and used to listen to his army stories. He joined in the last drafts in 1944 and was 16, just a boy of 150cm height – he grew 20cm in the first year of training and serving as army rations were much better than what civilians had during the war-time. I never knew where he served and he would never say much but only that it had to do with a state secret. But he would tell a story about how he learned the war was over, when he was in Romania. I understood that he was at times guarding conferences of the senior soviet leaders but never had any firm details. He continued in the army and had a full military career after the war, bringing my grandmother with him while serving on the border and achieved the rank of Подполковник Podpolkóvnik (Lieutenant Colonel). He served at the Black Sea in Abkhazia, and Azerbaijan and subsequently retired to Moscow and obtained a degree in history.

When I started reading *Johnny Red*, I was surprised that I liked the art so much. I often find art in the older comics challenging, especially from the likes of Marvel, and it can be a bit rough around the edges. In *Johnny Red* the images are so authentic and well researched and the artist must

have given it some serious investigation time. As I read it I felt the look really matched how I imagined the Great Patriotic War.

I would not have thought that a British pilot dropping out of the sky in Murmansk would get such reaction from the soviet flyers: that he was now one of theirs. I looked at the Russian BBC service article on the Murmansk during the War and learned that the Allies were welcome in the Soviet Union, although it changed in 1942 when Stalin saw that he could win the war on his own and no longer needed Allied soldiers as much. There was a law issued in the Soviet Union regarding



Original *Johnny Red* artwork by John Cooper

interaction with foreigners. Further research, as James Bacon kindly shares during our conversation about the comic, shows that the RAF had a wing, the 151st, formed of the 81st Squadron and 134th Squadron, equipped with Hawker Hurricanes to demonstrate the plane's ability as well as showing support. They were based at Vaenga and although they returned to Britain, other RAF contingents flew out of that aerodrome until 1944.

Some things in *Johnny Red* gave me mixed feelings. For instance, I don't think that Soviets would have ever attacked a convoy of their fellow soldiers, even in desperation – but the story and art, the quickness of the action-packed chapters are very appealing. I was surprised that soviet soldiers supported Johnny's idea for an attack, they would be dead for such treason and their families would also have faced consequences.

I liked how everyone is so human and how friendly and supportive and respecting they are of each other as they fight a common enemy. The feeling of admiration was apparent in the comic and depicted so well as it was in the interviews of RAF pilots who served in Murmansk. I also think this is such a serious comic: there is a lot of death, so I was surprised to learn this was intended for children in the UK. And James telling me he used to read these when he was 9-10 years old... For me, when I was reading about the WWII at the age of 11-13, it scared me what humans were capable of doing to each other and how they had to survive.

When Johnny goes to protect Leningrad, the art fantastically depicts common people on the streets, and the destruction of the city seems so real and dark, although the story is about pilots, so it is different than the story of those on the ground, yet I can see that Johnny is baffled by how grim it all is, and I think it is a good introduction to readers about how bad it was in Leningrad. It is more patriotic than reality, so when Johnny asks why they do not escape over the Lake Ladoga, they say they want to defend the city, but the reality was that this route was too dangerous for escape. Overall though as a story by a British writer, I enjoyed it and felt that it was good.

I liked how as the story progressed, the faces which are so real and different and hold so much

character and have properly Russian features. Yakob is like the Russian fairy tale character Bogatyr, and it leads me to think that the writer and especially the artist researched the subject really well. They drink tea from samovars, and the clothing and hats feel so authentic. It successfully avoids the 'klukva' (cranberry) category, which is what we call stereotypical depiction of Russia in the foreign art. Although I would not recognise machinery or plane types, I liked the uniforms, especially the iconic Soviet belts which I remember my granddad used to wear too, and it looks right. And the ushanka hats! I was wearing hats like those, especially in the Russian winters – which you can also feel at times on the comic pages when the wind swirls and large snowflakes cover the ground half a meter thick.

James mentioned that Joe Colquhoun is considered one the greatest war comic artists ever. I don't doubt it at all! Although I was only able to read the first volume, I enjoyed it tremendously in large part because of the art and I think comic art connoisseurs would agree that it's a gem. I'm already looking into *Charley's War* and expect to love it.



BATTLE MEMORIES

In the grand Journey Planet tradition, we reached out to a number of people to reveal their thoughts on *Battle Picture Weekly*... Compiled by Paul Trimble

CALUM LAIRD

DC Thomson Editorial 1979-2015

I used to read *Battle* in the *Commando* office (1981-on). Loved the two main stories, *Charley* and *Johnny*, and also Hebden/Kennedy's *Fighting Mann*. I also liked *Darkie's Mob*, I thought it was as hard-hitting as *Charley*, though in a different way and the narrative was gripping. The great thing about going on holiday in those days was that you came back to a double or triple helping!

I think I speak for all the *Commando* sub-editors at the time in saying that it was the one comic above the others that we wanted to read. I don't ever recall anyone saying that we wanted to do the same, we just liked what they were doing. At the same time, we were reading *Victor*, *Warlord* and *2000 AD*. I also bought the new *Eagle* for myself. *Battle* was a class act, it ran out of steam (like all the others) towards the end of the run.

PATRICK GODDARD

2000 AD and storyboard artist

Battle was one of the first comics I ordered as a child, I started getting it when it became *Battle Action Force* (toy related!) and loved Vanyo's work on *Z Force* etc. I remember a TV advert with SAS force on the cover and got my mum to buy it for me. I previously got the UK *Star Wars* comics (my brother used to get the more superhero stuff like *Hulk Weekly* and *Spider-Man*). I had *Battle* on order

for years, up until around the time *Storm Force* appeared (1987), by then I was into US comics and gave up on it.

KEITH BURNS.

Artist on *Johnny Red: The Hurricane*

I missed out on *Battle* when it first came out, it was read by the older boys. Skip forward 26 odd years to Nostalgia & Comics in Birmingham where I discovered *Garth Ennis War Stories* published by Vertigo. I devoured them all. I grew up on *2000 AD* but then drifted away for a decade or so, I had plenty to catch up on but was always drawn back to war stories. I wasn't drawing comics at this stage, skip forward again to find myself working on a war story with Garth called *Castle in the Sky*, then *Johnny Red* which involved getting hold of all the great reprints. I've always had an interest in WW2 aviation, and I prefer black and white artwork, so was in absolute heaven reading through these. Joe Colquhoun's art was gorgeous – accurate aircraft, beautiful characterisations and skilfully captured action and story-telling. All the characters felt so believable. John Cooper took the characters to another level, though the aircraft weren't as skilfully nailed the story-telling was top-notch, which I'd always argue is more important in a medium that personifies story-telling.

Next up were the reprints: *Garth Ennis presents Battle Classics*. *HMS Nightshade* really shocked me at the end... I was so engrossed with what was going on in the story that I forgot the ending which is shown on the first couple of pages. This was followed by *Fighting Mann* filled with stunning art by one of my favourites, Cam Kennedy.

The attention to detail, research and historical accuracy mixed with great characters, beautiful story telling and plenty of hardware is the perfect mix for me in *Battle* stories and I wish I'd got to read them all first time round. The reprints are great but I want them all reprinted.

NEIL ROBERTS

Commando and *Judge Dredd* cover artist

My memory of reading *Battle* is distant and hazy at best (I would've been very young when it first came out) whereas my memory of seeing the artwork is far more solid, even if it was mostly in annuals (1983, to be specific) or later reprints. Whether it be Carlos Ezquerra's cool draughtsmanship and effortless storytelling on *Major Eazy* or Jim Watson's scratchy, atmospheric and vibrant panels literally vibrating with life. And *Darkie's Mob*, despite any modern-day problematic stereotypes, appealed because of Mike Western's rock-solid art – which I would also enjoy in *Eagle's Computer Warrior* – his line work, rendering and layouts were always a pleasure to look at – in my opinion he really was one of the best.

However, I must admit a slight soft spot for when the comic tied into the *Action Force* toy line – I was, after all, their target market (although I never bought the action figures!). Ultimately though, I was drawn to the art – I loved the Vanyo brothers' work in *Battle* (and on *Death Wish*) and reading anything drawn by Ron Turner was always good value for money.

My experience of *Battle* was typical of reading UK comics in the 80s, with titles launching and folding into other titles, characters moving with them, with different artists fitting certain strips and others not so much. But what stayed with me was always the emotion of seeing those stories brought to life with such incendiary, explosive and masterful art.

ROB WILLIAMS

Writer for *2000 AD*, DC and Vertigo

Battle was always an occasional treat when I was a boy rather than a regular buy. My mum would bring home *Roy of the Rovers* and sometimes I'd get

Battle too. I'd very occasionally get *Commando* books at the same time. It was all about the plane stories for me, and I'm still a WW2 aircraft nerd to this day, so *Johnny Red's* the one that really stood out. Joe Colquhoun's art remains extraordinary to this day. I recently re-read *HMS Nightshade* and Mike Western's art was the same- every page had something like 9-10 panels. Within that you'd have amazing reference, wide establishing shots, dynamic action and character work. The level of craft in many of those *Battle* stories would cripple modern artists. And we were getting it weekly. And the stories pulled no punches-hey were grim, gritty realism, not idealised versions of war. It's pretty amazing what we were reading as 9, 10 year olds in what were, I suppose, meant to be children's comics

PHILLIP VAUGHN

Course Director at Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art. Co-Editor *Great War Dundee*

I first became aware of *Battle* after getting a free mini-comic with the new *Eagle*. This free comic was based on the *Action Force* toy line, and was beautifully illustrated in full colour by Geoff Champion. This led me to pick up my first copy of *Battle* proper, the issue dated 4th of June 1983. Quite how I managed to avoid this comic before then is beyond me, however it may be that a weekly dose of *Warlord* was enough! The cover, rendered superbly by *Battle* stalwart Jim Watson, depicts the villainous Baron Ironblood (sans mask) who it states is 'The Evil Genius who plans to Conquer the World!' No small ambition there!

Interestingly, the comics first story is *Charley's War*, now focusing on Charley's brother Wilf. This would start a lifelong love of this strip, which culminated in working with Pat Mills on a sequel of sorts just last year, *Ragtime Soldier*, available here: www.millsverse.com/download-great-war-dundee-comic/

The mix of traditional *Battle* war stories and the 'new' contemporary adventures of *Action Force* was a nice mix for me. I soon got up to speed with the likes of *Johnny Red* and *D-Day Dawson*. *Action Force* hadn't quite got its foot under the table as of yet, the main strip did occupy the colour spread

and back page, but the strip was still treading water. Gerry Finley-Day does a great job of keeping the licensed strip engaging, and Watson's art is solid and dynamic. The full invasion of *Action Force* started in issue 440, where the *AF* strips would really leave their mark, eventually taking over half the comics as a pull-out section! I would continue with *Battle Action Force* up until (and beyond) the license lapsing to Marvel UK. I was also impressed with *Storm Force*, which was hastily created to fill the gap once *Action Force* has deserted.

However, the writing was on the wall, and it was with a great deal of sadness when I saw the 'Exciting News in this Issue!' banner on issue 664. Yes, a merger with the new *Eagle* was imminent, and for me the comic came full circle. It did mean I was able to read the initial run of *Charley's War* that was now being reprinted, however it was always a sad day when two comics merge, especially when you know which one is ultimately for the chop!



Baron Ironblood, specially drawn for Journey Planet by Philip Vaughan!

EXPLORING: CHARLIE'S WAR SPECIALS, ANNUALS AND COVERS

A variety of writers and artists worked on the *Charley's War* stories that appeared in *Battle* specials and annuals, while a number of artists other than Joe Colquhoun provided *Charley* covers for the weekly. James Bacon bravely leads us through the minefield...

I only learned recently that *Battle* annuals and summer specials did not pay as well as the regular comic. This info was shared by Alan Hebden, who said he avoided working on them for that reason. Likewise, Pat Mills didn't work on any of the specials or annuals.

The 1979 *Battle Holiday Special* featured Cam Kennedy art telling a nice story with much mention of carrier pigeons. The epistolary style is used and we meet Charley's mate Alf who looks after the pigeons that are lofted in the top deck of a London bus. Charley Bourne and Alf Scroggins are sent out with an officer, who is pretty dreadful, on a night patrol, and Alf cops a bad blast to the chest. Despite success there is no duty of care to Alf, who passes. This is a cold and thoughtful *Charley's War* story, of loss and grimness on the part of the officer class. This was reprinted in the 1989 annual.

The 1980 *Battle Holiday Special* had Cam Kennedy doing a fabulous job on this nice story featuring Charley's motorcycle sidecar rider pal Ernie Gilbert, whom Charley joins on a mission to collect a defecting German Major who's being sought badly by the Germans. A smart conceit exists, meanwhile a Fokker Eindecker (Eii) also features. The artwork is lovely.

The 1981 *Annual* is drawn by Cam Kennedy. Cricket kicks off this episode and we see Charley learning how to play, which seems odd, but photos

exist of cricket in the rear areas of the western front and photographs of Women's Auxiliary Army Corps exist showing them with bats, ostensibly to play with the convalescing wounded. This story features a letter home about a new chap who is very straight and regimented and also keen, and so we see what occurs... which is actually not so good, to be honest: once he sees some action, he suffers a bad bout of shell shock.

The 1981 *Holiday Special* features Ron Turner art, I think.



Battle Picture Weekly Annual 1982, art by Joe Colquhoun



Battle Annual 1983, art by Joe Colquhoun

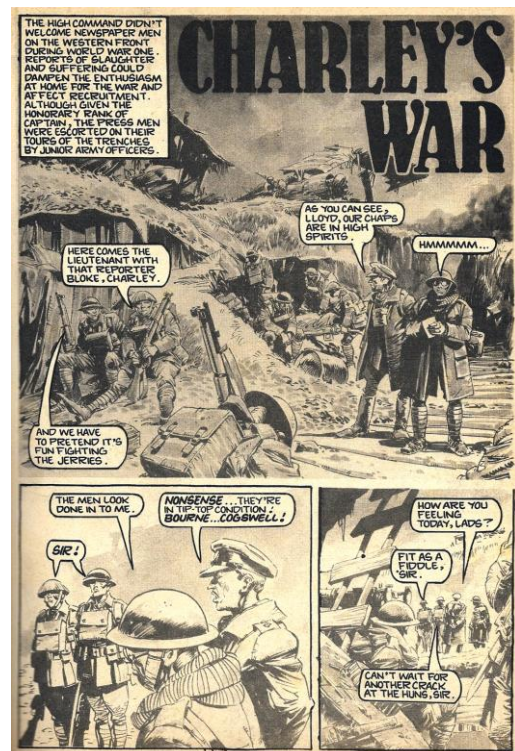
The 1982 *Annual* is in full colour and wonderfully drawn by Joe Colquhoun, six and half lovely pages. We see a Bristol F2 fighter come to the assistance of Charley and co. in the trenches. As they are pulled back, the pilot needs help getting his plane towed out of some mud and Charley is requested to help with the horse doing so. While Charley is checking the tail plane, an airborne attack occurs, and a quick take off results in Charley getting taken aloft, climbing up the fuselage to the gunner position where he dispatches the Fokker Dr.I. The pilot offers him a position, but he stays with the Sarge. It's a nice, feel-good story, wonderful art, but the officer is portrayed positively which, as we know, is unusual and the plot requires a little disbelief. Also of interest in this annual is an episode of *Death Squad* by Carlos Ezquerra.

The 1982 *Holiday Special* sees Charley rescue a wounded German messenger dog, whose messages lead to information on a German Stronghold, Kings Cross, in the Battle of Ypres. The dog then helps Old Bill and Charley figure out there is a trap. This may be Geoff Campion Art.

The 1983 *Annual* kicks off with another Joe Colquhoun-drawn *Charley's War* in full colour, in which we see Charley and co. pull back and requisition what they think is an empty hotel, but they find Germans! After a fight Charley encounters two stray soldiers, and despite some

far-fetched physicality, Charley finds out that they are hiding some refugees, so allows them to hide. A simple enough tale but the art is wonderful to see.

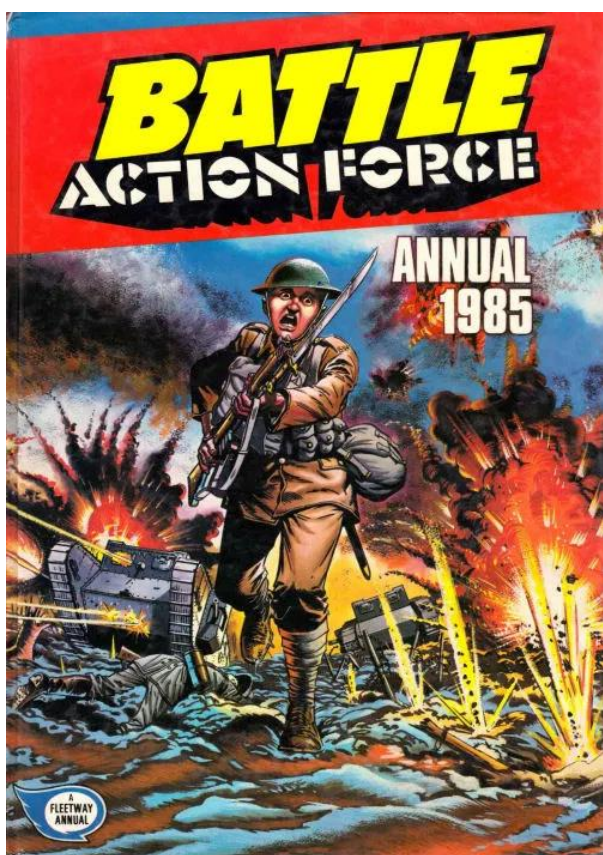
In the 1983 *Holiday Special* Cam Kennedy is back on art with the story of a General's son joining the army to do his bit. A devious German sniper finds out there's a General's son somewhere, in Passchendaele. Beautifully drawn.



Battle Annual 1984, art by Cam Kennedy

1984 annual, and Cam Kennedy is on art duty again in this story about visiting media to the front line. The story explores censorship, with the "Fleet Street Chaps" not permitted to feature a soldier whose nerves have gone, or take pictures of scruffy soldiers, let alone the dead or dying. A photographer follows Charley and sees the real war. A little more thought-provoking for an annual story and reflecting the positive portrayal of War Journalists at the time: after Vietnam where they were seen as guardians of truth, rather than propagandists, but not so here in WW I.

1984 *Battle Action Force Holiday Special*. Mike Western drew this story which features a German Team who have moved forward with a 2" toffee-apple-firing mortar. Out in the open is a shell-shocked corporal doing parade exercises: Charley and his pal Owen Wilson head out to recover the corporal as first a dud and then a live toffee-apple bomb land. They then go with Old Bill in search of the Germans. The shell-shocked corporal causes a distraction mid-fight and Charley and Bill overcome the Germans.



Battle Action Force Annual 1985, cover art by Joe Colquhoun

The 1985 annual features a Joe Colquhoun colour cover and it is incredible. It would make a reader want more. I am unsure what medium was used but the sky and Charley are impressive. The story inside is drawn by Mike Western and features a captured British tank being used, but not as 'Beute Panzer' but to deceive and attack a quiet part of the Western Front. Charley gets isolated, but then finds some tanks and leads them to take on the deceitful German Tank and using a German Anti-Tank rifle scores a lucky shot. Of interest is the name of the tank, Hilda, which was the name on the tank that led the Cambrai Tank offensive. The scene on the cover replicates that in the story. Also of interest in this annual may be the *Johnny Red* drawn by Jim Watson, a reprint of Ian Kennedy's *Panic Under Fire* and *Hellman* drawn by Pat Wright.

The 1985, 1986, and 1987 *Holiday Specials* and 1986 and 1987 annuals had Phil Gascoigne on art duties (I reckon), and of interest in the 1987 annual is the Cam Kennedy eight-page Christmas *Rat Pack* story.

The 1988 annual has a sad text story about pianist Roger Copeland who holds his sheet music close to his heart, but has his fingers blown off by a grenade and ends up saving Charley. One of the accompanying three pieces of artwork is more specific to the story, which could be specifically for this story, a full year after Joe himself passed away.

1988 *Holiday Special* reprinted the Cam Kennedy motorcycle sidecar story and the 1989 *Holiday Special* reprinted the Cam Kennedy "Fleet Street Chaps" at the front tale, and also features a Sandy James-illustrated text story of some six pages set in World War II.

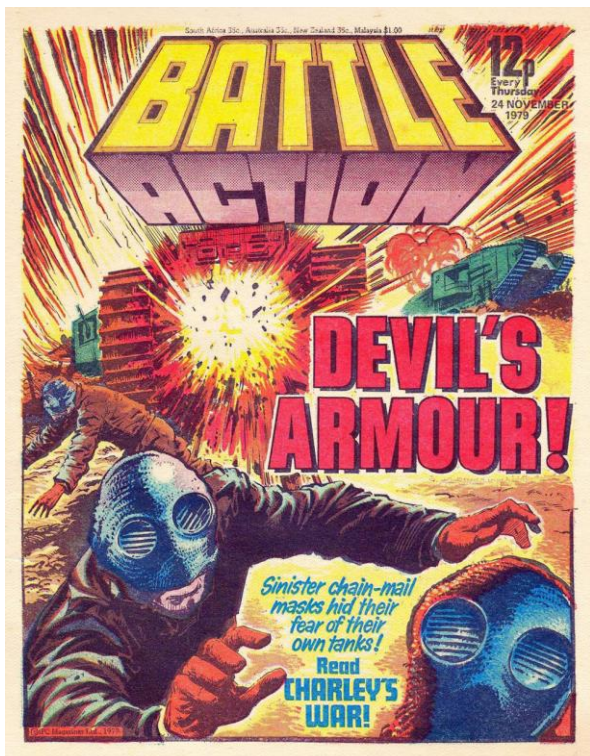
The 1990 and 1991 *Holiday Specials* both had stories but we've so far failed to identify the artist.

An undated Fleetway Editions £1.10 (maybe 1992) *Best of Battle Holiday Special* features a reprint of the 1982 messenger dog story. *The Best of Battle 2009* has no *Charley's War* story, but does include two episodes of *Johnny Red* by Joe Colquhoun.

Charley's War covers for *Battle* were sometimes drawn by artists other than Joe Colquhoun, and I will always remember asking Carlos Ezquerro to sign my GAS cover

(Interrogation: Pat Mills elsewhere in this issue of *Journey Planet*), while the *Horsemen of Death* by Cam Kennedy is stunning (see *Interrogation: Cam Kennedy*).

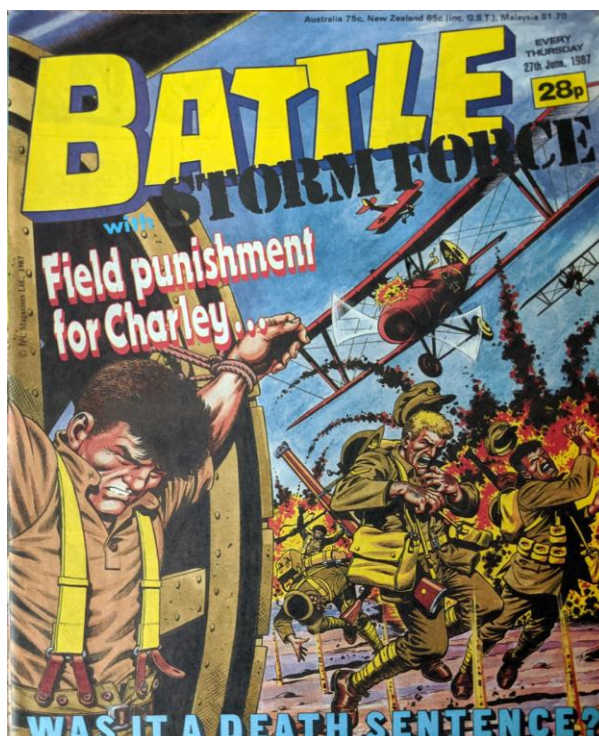
Other notable *Charley's War* covers...



24th November 1979, by Eric Bradbury



12th February 1983, by Mike Western



27th June 1987, by Sandy James

BRANDING BATTLE

Note: A version of this article was originally publishing on the Rusty Staples comics blog – michaelowencarroll.wordpress.com – on 2 June, 2019.

Prepare yourself for a shock, comic fans: We are now further away from the last issue of *Battle Picture Weekly* than its first issue was from the end of World War II.

Battle, to use its street name, is arguably one of the most important and influential British comics of all time. Of course, that's true for every British comic, because *any* opinion is arguable, particularly if you discard annoying conversational speedbumps and potholes like facts and logic. But in this case I *do* have facts and logic to shore up the already-sturdy foundations of my opinion, and I intend to present them within this feature.

Battle Picture Weekly was IPC's response to their rival DC Thomson's *Warlord*, which had been an instant hit on its launch on 28 September 1974.

Compared to most of its predecessors – including stablemates such as *The Victor* and *The Hotspur* – *Warlord's* war stories felt more action-packed, gritty, and modern. Indestructible, unchanging characters like Captain Hurricane and Cadman from *The Coward of the Fighting 43rd* were looking a bit old-hat: kids wanted a greater semblance of realism, or at least they wanted their comics to more closely match the then-current war movies. To a degree, they got that with *Warlord*, particularly *Union Jack Jackson* and the title strip, *Codename: Warlord*.

The powers that be in IPC looked upon *Warlord's* success and thought, "Gosh darn it, we can do better." They hired upcoming young hot-shot freelance writers Pat Mills and John Wagner

and tasked them with creating a comic capable of beating *Warlord* at its own game. Wagner and Mills subsequently brought in fellow writer Gerry Finley-Day, and together with editor Dave Hunt and art editor Doug Church they threw away the rule-book and created the sort of comic they knew the kids wanted to read.

'Y'see, before *Warlord*, war stories in British comics were all, "Keep a stiff upper lip, there's a good chap," and "Do it for ol' Blighty, men! Charge!" *Warlord* introduced a much-needed element of, "Crikey! *That* was a bit close, eh, Alfie? Best get clear before... Alfie? Alfie! Oh crumbs."

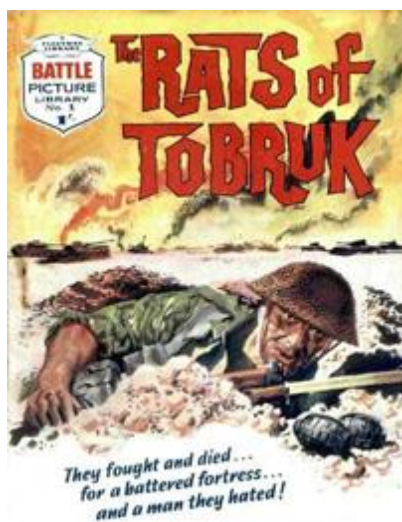
But Wagner, Mills and co. knew that the readers wanted stories closer to, "We're gonna



make him pay even if it means we have to butcher every Nazi from here to Berlin!" and "The captain's on a bleedin' *death-mission* an' he don't care that he's takin' us all wiv 'im!"

Somewhere along the way, the title *Battle Picture Weekly* was chosen. Now, "Battle" is a great title for a war comic, but why add "Picture Weekly"? It made no sense to us kids back in 1975. We knew it was weekly, because all proper comics were weekly, and we knew it had pictures because we could see them.

It was many years before I realised that it had been so named in order to imply a connection with IPC's digest-sized *Battle Picture Library*, which had been running since January 1961 (*BPL* eventually bought the farm after an impressive 1706 issues over twenty-four years).



I still reckon that the weekly should have just been called *Battle*, but then I guess we ought to consider ourselves lucky that they didn't decide to call it *Battle Picture Weekly Story-Paper Library of War for Boys (But Not Girls)*.

The creators pulled out the stops and refused to let anything hold them back. From the very start, *Battle Picture Weekly* didn't just match *Warlord*: in terms of gripping stories, cracking art and general attitude, it absolutely trounced it.

The first issue hit the streets early in March 1975, and many of the stories that appeared within are still fondly remembered even now in the future Space Year of 2019...

D-Day Dawson:

Sergeant Steve Dawson is wounded on D-Day: a bullet is lodged close to his heart and can't be removed. He knows it's going to kill him

eventually – within a year – but he's not ready to quit fighting yet. One of my favourite things ever when I was nine!

Lofty's One-Man Luftwaffe: British pilot "Lofty" Banks escapes from a Stalag Luft in 1943 and in the process kills an ace German pilot, Major Ranke. Desperate to get out of Germany, Lofty passes himself off as Ranke at a nearby airfield, and his ruse is so successful that he realises he can do more damage to the enemy by posing as one of them than he'd be able to do otherwise. Why has no one ever made a movie of this?

Boys at War: An occasional one-page text article recounting true stories of youthful heroism.

The Flight of the Golden Hinde: A fully-working replica of Captain Francis Drake's ship *The Golden Hind* – constructed by the British navy some years before WWII broke out – becomes an unlikely asset in the naval battle in the Indian ocean. (There have been several replicas of Drake's ship in real life: like the fictional one in this tale, the one that was built in 1973 also spelled its name "Hinde" instead of "Hind.") I liked the idea of this story, but it strayed a little too close to fantasy compared with the rest of the strips and it didn't stick around very long.

Battle Honours: A series of standalone true stories. This sort of strip was pretty much a staple feature of British war comics of the era. I don't recall any of the individual stories.

Day of the Eagle: 1943: British secret agent Mike Nelson is tasked with the most dangerous mission of his career – the assassination of Adolf Hitler! The movie version of Frederick Forsyth's best-selling novel *The Day of the Jackal* was a huge hit in 1973, and was undoubtedly an inspiration for this strip. Cracking good stuff, from what I remember.

The Bootneck Boy: Danny Budd is the young orphaned son of a Royal Marine and wants to sign up, but he's rejected as too young and too puny. However, the recruiting sergeant later sees Danny defending himself against three much older and larger bullies and changes his mind: Danny might just have what it takes after all. I *loved* this strip! Sure, at its core it was standard orphaned-kid-does-well-against-great-odds fare, but it really worked for me.

Rat Pack:

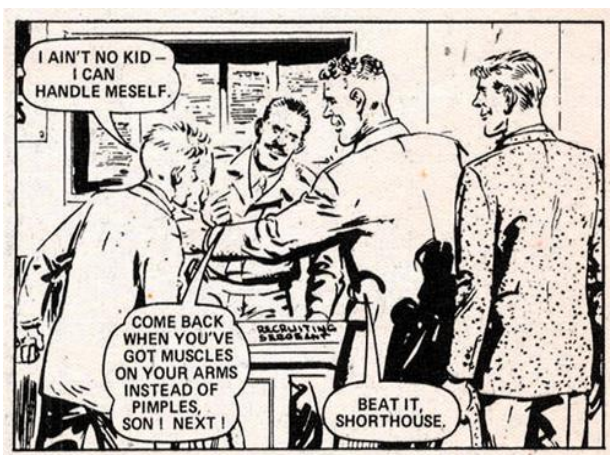
A bunch of hardened convicts are offered clemency if they agree to work for tough-as-old-nails Major Taggart. This is clearly *The Dirty Dozen*, only dirtier and in comic form. The first episode was allocated six pages in issue #1, a sure sign that the editors knew they had a hit on their hands. The earliest strips were drawn by Carlos Ezquerra and thus are pure gold as far as I'm concerned.

The Terror Behind the Bamboo Curtain: Inmates of a Japanese Prison camp in Burma are subject to increasing horrors from the camp's merciless and sadistic Commander Sado... as well as the horrors of the mysterious Bamboo Curtain, a dense bamboo forest liberally sprinkled with booby traps. Of all the stories that appeared in the launch issue, this one has aged the worst. Its portrayal of the Japanese soldiers is... not commensurate with current attitudes. Or shockingly racist, to put it more honestly. Different times, folks.

This Amazing War: A one-page occasional feature: facts and figures about World War II.

Looking back at the first issue now, seeing it not as an eager child but with my experienced, jaded, myopic (yet still adorable) fifty-three-year-old eyes ... it's aged well. Far better than most comics of its era.

The only thing that really dates the comic is that in the early days the lettering was typeset – which was standard practice at the time – rather than hand-drawn. (Of course, these days *all* comics have typeset lettering thanks to “computers” but it still *looks* hand-drawn.) Take this example from the first episode of *The Bootneck Boy*:



Even ignoring the spaces preceding the exclamation marks (a crime so heinous I can't conjure up a punishment nasty enough), the

lettering looks impersonal and ugly, and very much feels as though it's an afterthought. Hand-drawn lettering, properly added by a skilled letterer, becomes part of the artwork and helps guide the reader's eyes through the tale.

The curse of the comic-book letterer is that if the job is done well, the reader won't notice it. If they *do* notice the lettering, that might destroy the suspension of disbelief and take them out of the story.

Years later, for a collected edition of *Charley's War* (the classic strip by Pat Mills and Joe Colquhoun, probably *Battle's* finest hour), the lettering was completely revised by top letterer Jim Campbell and it makes a *huge* difference, as you can see from the examples here:



Anyway... Let's take a closer look at the comic and how it presented itself to the public over its thirteen-year lifespan. Long-term *Battle* fans should start angrily sharpening their complaining-pencils now because this will *not* be a comprehensive study, and that means I might brush past – or completely ignore – elements of the comic that they hold to be sacred.

BATTLE

PICTURE WEEKLY

#1 (8 Mar 1975) to #85 (16 Oct 1976)

I've already listed the line-up of the first issue, and what a line-up it was! Some cracking good stuff in there. Some of the strips certainly made an impact: *Day of the Eagle* commanded the centre-pages colour-spread, and opens with the hero shooting a German soldier in the back. You didn't get *that* in *The Victor*.

The logo is simple but very eye-catching. From issue #8 the red part of "Battle" gained an occasional black outline. The "Picture Weekly" part was moved to the side from issue #58, and thereafter tended to jump around a bit depending on the needs of the cover illustration.

As with all anthology comics, old stories were occasionally dropped (sometimes permanently) to make room for as new strips. Among those introduced in this era were *Major Eazy*, *Darkie's Mob*, *Fighter from the Sky* and *Operation Shark*.

The initial cover price of 6p is increased by a penny with issue #44 (3 Jan 1976), no doubt to take advantage of the readers' Christmas money.

BATTLE PICTURE WEEKLY

and VALIANT

#86 (23 Oct 1976) to #135 (1 Oct 1977)

Valiant was a long-running action-strip comic that had occasional one-page cartoons. It was launched in October 1962 and clocked up 714 issues before *Battle* came along and decided to gormandise it. *Valiant's* war stories tended to be more light-hearted than *Battle's*, such as the aforementioned *Captain Hurricane*, and *The Steel Commando* (which it had inherited from *Thunder*, via *Lion*).

But *Valiant* had also been the home of *One-Eyed Jack*, a tough New York Cop strip by John

Wagner and John Cooper: that one fit a lot better into *Battle*, but only after Jack was given a new job as a secret agent. Jack sticks around for thirty-two issues, which is twice as long as the other strips inherited from *Valiant: The Black Crow* and *Soldier Sharp*.

For the first two issues of the merger, "Valiant" is just about the same size as "Battle" on the logo, but it very soon goes the way of the logos of all absorbed comics and starts to shrink. By issue #100 (29 Jan 1977) it's just kind of tucked away in the corner like an aged relative whose connection to the family is not quite understood so everyone just kind of works around them.

New stories introduced include *Panzer G-man*, *Joe Two Beans*, *Johnny Red*, *The Sarge* and *El Mestizo*. The price jumps to 8p with issue #97, cover-dated Jan 8 1977. Hmm. I was kidding with that "Christmas money" comment the last time, but now I'm starting to wonder.

BATTLE

PICTURE WEEKLY

#136 (8 Oct 1977) to #141 (12 Nov 1977)

A short era this one, only a few weeks. The old logo is reinstated in preparation for the coming merger with *Action*. The "Picture Weekly" part of the logo still isn't consistent and changes font and size as well as position.

Still 8p per issue, but not for long!

BATTLE-

ACTION

#142 (19 Nov 1977) to #175 (8 Jul 1978)

Battle Picture Weekly absorbs *Action*, the comic that was effectively its younger sibling. *Battle's* success was so great that Pat Mills was given the task of doing it again, this time with an all-genre comic, and he created the most shockingly violent, over-the-top and – let's be honest – awesome British comic seen to that point.

However, *Action* went a little *too* far at times, and drew the ire of the press. This was in the days before they had video nasties and violent computer games to blame for the perceived corruption of the country's youth. Launched in February 1976, *Action* was pulled off the shelves after a mere 36 weeks (Mills by this stage had already moved on, and was developing *2000 AD*), and given an overhaul: some stories were dropped, others were toned way down to make it more palatable to discerning older folks who didn't read it anyway. When *Action* returned at the end of November 1976, it was but a ghost of a shadow of its former self. Still head-and-shoulders above a lot of other comics, though. It carried on for a further year before *Battle* came a-knocking.

The cover price starts at 8p for the first merged issue of *Battle-Action*, but then jumps to 9p the very next week. *Action* brought with it *Spinball Wars* (a revised version of *Spinball*, itself a toned-down version of the ultra-violent *Death Game 2000*), *Hellman of Hammer Force* and *Dredger*, all of which had a decent run in their new home.

One nice thing about the merger is that combining the comics' titles inadvertently created the sort of title *Battle* should have had from the start! Don't believe me? well, take a gander below.

From left to right: the American *Battle Action* (Atlas, 30 issues from 1952 to 1957), Australian *Battle Action* (Horwitz, 78 issues, 1954 to 1965), another Australian *Battle Action* (K. G. Murray, 9 issues, 1975 to 1976).



#176 (15 Jul 1978) to #270 (5 Jul 1980)

Ah, now I liked this incarnation of the comic because the new logo meant that they couldn't easily just shrink the "Action" part and start to bury it like they did with *Valiant*. It's not as "gritty" a logo as the predecessor, but it's nice and solid. And dangerous, too: look at those sharp corners – they could have your eye out.

New strips include *Crazy Keller*, *HMS Nightshade*, *Charley's War* and *Glory Rider*.

The price climbs to 10p from issue #195 (25 November 1978), then leaps to 12p from #239 (6 October 1979). This era also plays host to the mysterious "outages" of the sort that trip up comic collectors: gaps in the publishing schedule that were usually down to industrial action. A missing week after issue #199 (23 December 1978), four weeks after #253 (12 Jan 1980) and another four after #266 (10 May 1980).



BATTLE

ACTION

#271 (12 Jul 1980) to #325 (25 Jul 1981)

Back to the original logo, and with "Action" immediately shrunk down to almost nothing. Shame! But I do still like the original *Battle* logo so, at the same time, yay! This era's biggest change, though, was that stories began on the front cover, alternating between the most popular strips, *Johnny Red* and *Charley's War* (with one episode of *Fighting Mann* at the very beginning). This freed up a page inside and gave us some cracking colour splash-images for those episodes. This feature continued beyond the complete dropping of "Action" in #326, right up to #355 (27 February 1982).

Among the new stories of this era are *Death Squad*, *Fighting Mann*, *The Wilde Bunch* and *The Commando They Didn't Want*.

The price increases to 14p with #276 (16 August 1980), then 15p with #296 (3 January 1981 – plundering the Christmas money again!).

BATTLE

#326 (1 Aug 1981) to #439 (1 Oct 1983)



Ah, now the title is just what it should have been from the start! Simple and clear. As mentioned above, we're still alternating between *Johnny Red* and *Charley's War* on the cover until issue #355 (27 February 1982).

This era plants the seeds of what was to be a very big change down the line: tie-in strips with Palitoy's *Action Force* line of toys. The four-week strip began in issue #422 (4 June 1983) and proved to be very popular, leading to a series of mini *Action Force* comics given free with a number of IPC titles over the following months. This culminated in the ominous "Explosive News Inside for Every Reader!" in issue #439.

Other new strips include *Sailor Small*, *Clash of the Guards*, *The Hunters*, *The Fists of Jimmy Chang*, *Truck Turpin*, *Fight for the Falklands*, *Jetblade* and *Invasion 1984*.

The price starts at 15p for this run but jumps up a further penny the very next issue, #327 (8 August 1981). It increases again to 18p from #374 (3 July 1982), and to 20p from #414 (9 April 1983).

Below: issue #431 (6 August 1983) reused Carlos Ezquerro's classic image of *Major Eazy* from the cover of #85 (16 October 1976), but with added colour. You'll note that Eazy's cigar has been excised: by this stage IPC's Powers That Be had decreed that their comics' heroes shouldn't smoke, because smoking is bad for you (guns are actually even more dangerous than cigars, but they tend to be bad for the *other* guy, so they're allowed).





#440 (8 Oct 1983) to #492 (6 Oct 1984)

And so it begins, the fabled *Action Force* era. Got to be honest: I have no memories of these toys at all. But then by 1983 I was seventeen, and that was back in the days when it was widely believed that seventeen was too old for toys. These days we know better: they're not toys, they're collectibles.

By now, *Battle* has been going for eight and a half years and the shine has worn off. It's been tamed quite a bit, and definitely left behind by its science fiction stablemate *2000 AD*. Don't get me wrong: it's still a pretty good comic, but it no longer has the weight it once carried.

Cover prices start at 20p and jump to 22p with issue #464 (24 March 1984).



#493 (13 Oct 1984) to #562 (8 Feb 1986)

Uh-oh... The "Battle" part of the logo has been reduced! That's rarely a good sign. For the past few months there's been a much greater emphasis on the *Action Force* content than the home-grown material... there's no doubt now that *Battle* has been domesticated. The artwork on the cover is generally cleaner, prettier... and less realistic. This is now mostly a comic about toys.

Lots of new strips in this era, but most of them are only a few episodes long. The only substantial new strip is *The Nightmare*. Prices increase to 24p from #509 (2 February 1985).



#563 (15 Feb 1986) to #604 (29 Nov 1986)

Ah, but what's this? Hope on the horizon! "Battle" gets all nice and dominant again! Could this mean a return to form? Sadly, no. The product-placement is still strong with the comic. But then readers are still buying it, so between the toy ads masquerading as comic strips at least they're exposed to reprints of *Charley's War* and *Johnny Red*.

Again, I should stress that the *Action Force* material wasn't bad at all, but this just wasn't the *Battle* I grew up with.

The price increases to 26p from #570 (5 April 1986).



#605 (6 Dec 1986) to #611 (17 Jan 1987)

Palitoy lost the *Action Force* licence (Marvel UK nabbed it), which meant that they could no longer sub-licence the adaptation rights to IPC, and the comic was forced to revert to the title *Battle*. Hooray! But boo also because they didn't use the cool original logo and chose this rather pedestrian one instead. Luckily, it only lasts for seven issues. Unluckily, its replacement is a lot worse.



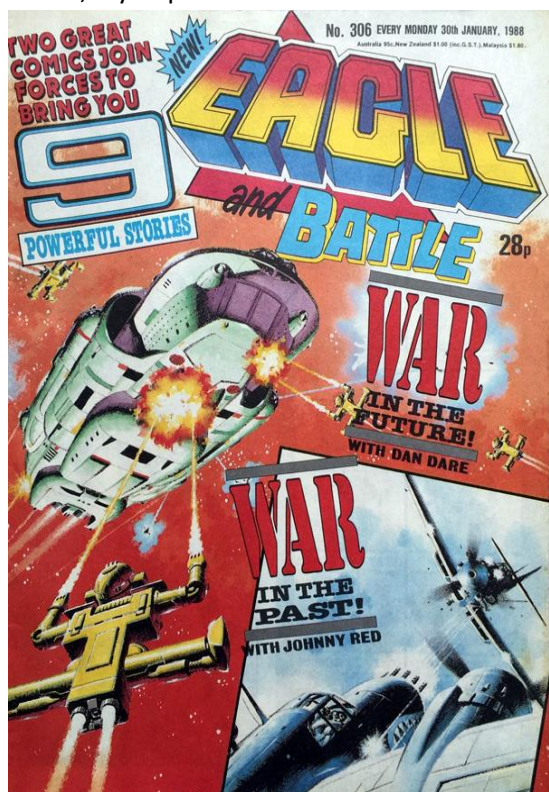
#612 (24 Jan 1987) to #664 (23 Jan 1988)

Told you the logo was rubbish. *Storm Force* was... I have no idea, other than that it was a toyless replacement for *Action Force*. By now a good deal

of the comic's content was reprint material, plundered from its own archives. I own zero copies of *Battle* from this era, and I'm in no rush to rectify that.

The price was raised to 28p on 4 April 1987, the final increase.

After 4704 days (or 12 years, 10 months and 15 days) an armistice was called in January 1988, and *Battle* was demobbed. Or discharged with honours, if you prefer.



Well, not really. The truth is that it was chopped up and its juiciest morsels were fed to *Eagle*. The strips chosen to survive the transition were *Johnny Red*, *Charley's War* and *Storm Force*, although the latter had already been running in *Eagle* for a few weeks prior to the merger (which is the comics equivalent of finding a cheaper supermarket down the road but you still also go to the old one for a while out of a sense of guilt – or in case they're spying on you, which you secretly know they are).

More info on the *Battle* and *Eagle* merger can be found in the *Eagle* Timeline on the Rusty Staples comics blog which can be found at michaelowencarroll.wordpress.com.

In the meantime, on the next page you'll find a handy timeline of *Battle's* logos for you to print out and put on your wall:

So, what interesting stats can we glean from this sadly-but-necessarily scant trapeze through the barbed-wire-draped, shell-hole-pocked fields of *Battle's* past?

- The longest-lasting logo is the unadorned "Battle," 114 issues from #326 to #439 – this makes me happy because that's what the comic should have been called in the first place.
- Even better, that part of the logo appears in various forms on 345 covers out of 664, or 51.96%.
- If you bought every issue as it was published for the cover price, you would have spent £105.72, which is a lot less than a complete collection would cost you these days. That total divided by the number of issues tells us that the average cover price is a tad under 16p.

Despite its comparatively lacklustre latter years, *Battle's* legacy is very strong. Aside from paving the way for *Action* and then *2000 AD*, and nursing the careers of some of Britain's brightest and best comic-book creators, many of its strips stand the test of time.

Charley's War has often been cited as one of the most important war stories ever written regardless of the medium in which it was presented. *Major Eazy* was effectively and very successfully reincarnated as *Cursed Earth Koburn* in *Judge Dredd Magazine*, with original artist Carlos Ezquerro on art duties, and in 2015 Garth Ennis – a huge *Battle* fan in his youth – revived *Johnny Red* for an acclaimed eight-episode series published by Titan.

Back at the start, *Battle* was a bold experiment, and quite a risk to take, but it paid off. It was the spark that lit the candle that burned through the string that was holding aloft the hammer that hit the lever that started the engine that launched *2000 AD*, one of the few British comics to survive the 80s and 90s intact.

So... Good job, soldier. You've done fine work here, son. *Fine* work. But now your war is over. Now you can rest.

**SERGEANT RUSTY'S NON-BEDACTED
BATTLE PICTURE WEEKLY
LOGO IDENTIFICATION GUIDE**

BROUGHT TO YOU BY
RUSTY STAPLES
michaellowencarrroll.wordpress.com



RECOMMENDED READING

Without doubt, there is so much value to collecting the full run of *Battle* comic, but as it's not easy to read down a complete set, a number of collections are available from Rebellion's Treasury of British Comics imprint.

Charley's War has had a number of collections, most recently with the colour covers in colour. *Garth Ennis Presents Battle Classics Vol 1* collected *HMS Nightshade* and *The General Dies at Dawn* and three stand-alone stories. Vol 2 collected *Fighting Mann* and *War Dog*. *Darkie's Mob*, *Rat Pack*, *Major Eazy* have had a volume each. *Johnny Red* has had four volumes collected. *El Meztiso* and *Invasion 1984* have recently been published and *Death Squad* is due soon.

War Comics of Interest:

Goddamn This War!, *It was the War of the Trenches*, and *I, Rene Tardi, Prisoner of War in Stalag IIB*, Vol I and Vol II – all by Jacques Tardi
Kathleen Lynn – Rebel, Activist, Doctor – Maeve Clancy
Corto Maltese: The Ballad of the Salt Sea and subsequent volumes – Hugo Pratt
Battle Stations and the upcoming *Battler Britain* – Hugo Pratt
The Great War – Joe Sacco
Battle of Britain – Ian Kennedy
Last Day in Vietnam – Will Eisner
Raid on the Forth and *Flight of the Eagle* by Colin Maxwell
Blazing Combat – four issues collected by Fantagraphics, by Archie Goodwin and others
Best War Comics edited by David Kendall
Dogs of War by Sheila Keenn and Nathan Fox
Arrowsmith by Kurt Buseik and Carlos Pachero
The Final Flight – Romain Hugault

For Valor – Stephen Mooney, Eoin Coveney, Triona Farrell and Hassan Otsmane-Elhaou
Enemy Ace – War Idyll – George Pratt
International Aces – Chris Geary
Alan's War – Emmanuel Guibert
The White Donkey: Terminal Lance – Maximilian Uriarte
The Grand Duke – Romain Hugault and Yahn
To End All Wars: The Graphic Anthology of the First World War – edited by Jonathan Clode and Stuart Clark
Above the Dreamless Dead: World War I in Poetry and Comics – edited by Chris Duffy
Harlem Hellfighters by Max Brooks
White Death – Robbie Morrison and Charlie Adlard
American Splendor Unsung Hero: The Story of Robert McNeill by Harvey Pekar and David Collier
Walking Wounded: Uncut Stories from Iraq – Mael and Oliver Morel
Cinder and Ashe – Gerry Conway and José L. Garcia Lopez
Dong Xaoi Vietnam 1965 – Joe Kubert
The Nieuport Gathering – by Ivan Petrus
The Case of Alan Turing – Eric Liberge and Arnaud Delalande
Black Dog – The Dreams of Paul Nash – Dave McKean
A Family Secret – Eric Heuval
A Sailor's Story – Sam Glanzman
Eagles over the Western Front – Mike Butterworth and Bill Lacey
Great War Dundee – Pat Mills & others
Baker's Half Dozen – by Mike Western from *Speed* comic from Hibernia comics
Operation Overlord – Davide Fabbri, Michael Le Galli, Bruno Falba
Maus – Art Spiegelman

Garth Ennis has kept the beacon of war comics bright: I cannot recommend his work sufficiently. In the last number of years the following have been brilliant.

Johnny Red is a continuation and ending of the *Battle* story – with Keith Burns
Stringbags – with P.J. Holden
Out of the Blue – with Keith Burns
Sara – with Steve Epting and Elizabeth Breitweiser
Dreaming Eagles – with Simon Coleby
World of Tanks – with Carlos Ezquerra and P.J. Holden

Garth has had two series of comics: *War Stories* and *Battlefields*. *War Stories* initially came out as larger stand-alone comics from DC with incredible artists, including two from *Battle*:

Johann's Tiger – Chris Weston and Gary Erskine
D-Day Dodgers – John Higgins
Screaming Eagles – Dave Gibbons
Nightingale – David Lloyd
The Reivers – Cam Kennedy
J for Jenny – David Lloyd

And then as multiple issues:

Condors – Carlos Ezquerra
Archangel – Gary Erskine
Castles in the Sky with art by Matt Martin and Keith Burns, which saw the series move to Avatar Press and become multiple issues. *Children of Israel*. *The Last German Winter*. *Our Wild Geese Go*. *Tokyo Club*. *Send a Gunboat*. *Vampire Squadron*. *Flower of My Heart*. All have art by Tomas Aira.

There are eight *Battlefield Stories* currently collected in 3 volumes:

Night Witches – Russ Braun
Dear Billy – Peter Snebjerg
Tankies – Carlos Ezquerra and John Cassaday
Happy Valley – P.J. Holden
The Firefly and His Majesty – Carlos Ezquerra and Hector Ezquerra
Motherland – Russ Braun
The Green Fields Beyond – Carlos Ezquerra
The Fall & Rise of Anna Kharkova – Russ Braun

Non-Fiction – some proved essential

The Fleetway Companion by Steve Holland
Fantasy Express fanzine in 1982 published by Lew Stringer with the Steve Oldman interview.
Charley's War Microsite on Down the Tubes: downthetubes.net/?page_id=21061
When Comics Went to War – Adam Riches
Action: The Story of a Violent Comic – Martin Baker.
Blazing Battle Action: The True Story of Britain's Most Acclaimed War Comic by David Bishop
Un treno fra le nuvole in viaggio con gli eroi dell'avventura – Franco Rebagliata
Crikey #8 & #12
Comic Scene December 2018 – The War Issue
Mighty One: My Life Inside the Nerve Centre – Steve MacManus
The Art of Ian Kennedy – Ian Kennedy and DC Thomson
Masters of British Comic Art – David Roach

THANK YOU

This fanzine would not have been possible without the work of our contributors: Jane Colquhoun, Dave Hunt, Steve MacManus, Pat Mills, John Wagner, Alan Hebden, Mike Dorey, Peter Western, Ian Kennedy, Cam Kennedy, Ian Gibson, Jim Tomlinson and Garth Ennis – we are so grateful for their time and sharing so much with us. Maura McHugh and Ann Gry for their insightful reviews, and Calum Laird, Patrick Goddard, Neil Roberts, Keith Burns, Phillip Vaughan and Rob Williams we appreciate for contributing their *Battle* Memories. Steven Dean and Matt Cole for asking & interviewing for us.

I also want to thank people who may not even realise just how helpful they were, but I made great use of Bear Alley Books Blog and also *The Fleetway Companion*, both by the incredible Steve Holland. Comics legend Lew Stringer and his Blimey Blog has also been invaluable.

The late Neil Emery had done so much insightful work on *Charley's War*: John Freeman has this work and much more of his own on his *Down the Tubes* blog, including a *Charley's War* microsite.

Appreciation too to David Bishop for his excellent articles about *Battle* in the *Judge Dredd Magazine* (which David has now compiled into a book: *Blazing Battle Action*.)

Most of all, I am just grateful for such a great comic. Although I do not feel we have been able to do them justice in this issue, I would love to hear about Tom Tully, Gerry Finley-Day, Eric Bradbury,

John Cooper, Geoff Campion, Jim Watson, Eduard Vano, Ron Carpenter, Carlos Pino, Pat Wright, Colin Page, Phil Gascoine, Ron Carpenter and Terry Magee. And you may think – hey, that is my favourite creator, and we'd love to hear more about them.

Finally... We really welcome letters of comment, thoughts, opinions and especially corrections or relevant informative notes. Please, if we have made an error, or a serious omission, please let us know because we're hoping to do another issue on *Battle Picture Weekly* (maybe in a year or two, because this one has taken *months* to put

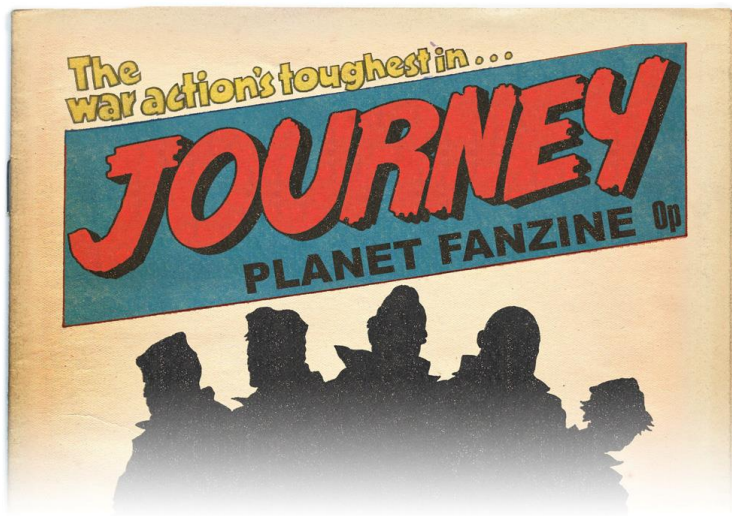
together!). We welcome hearing from those with articles, interviews and insight that we can include. Letters of comment, corrections and suggestions to journeyplanet@gmail.com and jamesbacon74@email.com, please.

See all issues of *Journey Planet* on Ezazines.com and journeyplanet.weebly.com

Finally to my fellow co-editors, Mike Carroll, Christopher J. Garcia and Paul Trimble, contributing editor John Vaughan and copy editor Pádraig Ó Méalóid, thanks: you all pulled out the stops, and Mike this was an incredible job.

My best to you.

James



We are beyond grateful to Rebellion, the Ezquerra Family and The Cartoon Museum for permission to use the Carlos Ezquerra cover. *Battle Picture Weekly* and all related assets are copyright © Rebellion.

EDITORIAL

The irrepressible James Bacon looks back...

The anticipation and excitement that I felt every week with my dad fetching the order of *Battle* comics was unreal. Compared to the digest war comics *Commando* and *Battle Picture Library* and then *Victor* and *Warlord*, which we did get occasionally, *Battle* was just my favourite. Now I can describe how edgy and gritty it was, excelling at telling war stories and art so accurate and detailed, with the correct kit and machinery and brilliant mechanics of storytelling. It was just great.

It is odd to think, I was about four in the late '70s when Dad would read comics to us, and he himself was 29. Then, I could never imagine he was reading them for himself, but I think he may have been. He started with *Commando* when we were very, very small, and then Easter 1978 I got a packet of Matchbox 1/32nd soldiers, as did my brother, and so wars began. We'd already had Jeep by this stage. As I grew up with *Battle* and Dad and war films, he had us digging trenches in the back garden (turning the weeds), and at one stage we set up man traps, camouflaged, and he fell into one, his pride at the ingenuity dispelling any anger or upset, later he would admit he had no idea how he hadn't broken a leg.

I bemoaned at the age of seven that the books in our house were all words, and no pictures and soon, *Purnell's History of the Second World War* in navy binders was produced from the attic. Dad loved history so much, and his sharp memory and mind meant he knew a *Sonderkraftfahrzeug 251* from a *Famo*, and it wasn't built by *Hanomag* but was a *Sdkfz 9*. I struggled with keeping such details in my head. I need notes for everything.

As I moved onto his PR Reid and Paul Brickhills we had gone from *Action Men* to *Action Force*, and he had built me a Z-Force base out of orange crates and we had gone to picking up *Elite*. I stuck through to the bitter end with *Battle* and then onto *Eagle*. Eventually I moved to *2000 AD*.

Thankfully I never went to war, instead as a young man myself and Dad went to various places, usually to have a beer.

Battle meant so much. I loved Charley, Johnny and Joe. The loyalty to one's comrades, be it Feldwebel Harbitter or Walter Mann, who was amazing for standing by his son so much, and so was Charley when he went back, throughout the comradeship was strong. I was scared stiff and had nightmares about the invasion in 1984, in 1983 and loved the story – drill bit spinning toward the temple. Most of all, I wanted the characters to find peacefulness and be happy.

Battle embodied a clear anti-war message and whether it be Nazi or Commisar steered the reader towards dislike of the oppressive villains. Within the complexity which is a British war comic for children, the writers did a good job, never over-glorifying stories, or propagandising or ignoring the difficulties. A comic with a mutiny on the cover, is not afraid of some harsh realities, and seeing Pig Iron from the Hell-Fighters get shot by Snell and then allude repercussion, was Pat Mills leading the way.

Although nothing is perfect, and The Falklands War story was quick off the mark. There is more to the stories than often meets the eye, and now as you read, especially the True War stories, I would encourage research for yourself, for often those who were heroes, were very soon sadly lost.

I hope we get feedback, letters or emails of comment – CORRECTIONS – especially, and perhaps content for a follow up. No idea when we will do that. So much came together so well for this issue, from seeing the cover in the Cartoon Museum at the launch of Mary and Bryan Talbot's *Rain* last year, to Paul having time to then research it, to Rebellion being so kind and allowing us to use it.

Many of the stories are collected, and elsewhere in this issue we mention them and recommend others.

I would also note the kindness during these challenging times. Comics, books on comics and ephemera have been travelling through the post, pictures, files through the ether. There has been considerable kindness, mostly borne from comic fans on various Facebook groups, or from direct contact and it has been amazing. A pal who hasn't read war comics in years asked about *Will o' the Whistle* in *Victor* and within a couple of weeks, he had issues 627 (24th Feb 1973) to 642 (9th June 1974) in the post from various sources. Likewise,

my own spare *Battles* have depleted during this time, and gratefully received were some elusive specials and some still elude me. Especially though, so much time has been spent on answering questions by comics professionals and that has been amazing. Thank you.

Please enjoy this fanzine and do read the comics, and we hope to hear from you.

James



Ken and James Bacon, Christmas 1978, with 'jeep'.

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