

The Ironbottom Sound Story

I left the Avalon Hill Game Company without completing *Bismarck* because of a labor dispute but shortly after, when they realized no one there had the ability and experience at miniature naval wargaming to complete the game, I was given a contract to complete it and did so in 1977. Under developer Mick Uhl's fine touch guiding it along it would be published in 1979 and was reasonably successful, going into a second printing. Back then a printing was 25,000 units with 5,000 being assembled at a time (10,000 for the initial release).

Returning to Isla Vista – a college town with a bunch of hippies there, like me I might add, - for a second time I continued doing game stuff, mostly reviews and columns, and writing the well received “the View from Isla Vista” in the Walter Luc Haas's now defunct EUROPA magazine out of Switzerland. The beauty of that magazine is that it's 100+ copies went to all the movers and shakers in the hobby, including the likes of Tom Shaw, Rich Berg, Tom Oleson, Gary Gygax, GDW, Jim Dunnigan, etc.

Next I spent the next summer with Battleline in Georgia with Steve Peek and Craig Taylor and gang. What a wonderful and humorous group to spend time with! Have a great chigger and tick story (as well as a GIANT story too) to go along with this too – for another time. To have Steve Peek and Richard Berg in the same room at the same time is one of the most funny and marvelous experiences ever – they occasionally have been together at wargame conventions over the years.

A third time back in Isla Vista, the closing of the doors of a solar company I was working for, a tragic death of a close friend and I found myself in 1979 in San Luis Obispo County working at a second solar firm that would go under in 1981. It was in 1980 that Beth Queman and I met and, as they say, the rest is history!

It was there that I started working seriously on *Ironbottom Sound*. Now there are two things about the game. One is that the battles off Guadalcanal in 1942 were fast moving heavy-duty night actions. This made for fun and quick play.

The second item is that land games are the most popular, followed by air games, with naval games a distant 3rd. I asked around if anyone was interested in a naval game on the night battles off of “The Island of Death” and no company was. So I guess I would have to do it myself. Voila – a vanity press.

Thus was born Quarterdeck Games. By the way, I must give a high-five to my dear friend the fine artist Rodger MacGowan – he and I go back to the old Avalon Hill days. He designed the Quarterdeck logo for very little money, mostly as a favor, and the company would be built on very very little.

The starting capital included a very tiny bit of my own money, some silver dollars and graphic time owed to me by Dana Lombardy from 1972-73 times in San Diego with Conflict magazine, my grandmother Nan’s meager coin collection, a small loan from my parents and a quite reasonable loan from two men that I did not know well but I will never forget. Peter and Darwin Bromley. These two Chicago boys had some family money and would go on to establish

Mayfair Games and for all of us who love the classic 1829/1830 railroad games – they would take them to the next level.

But now Bingo! A game company is launched.

I would print 500 complete copies of the game with components for a total of 2000 and it was published in 1981. Eventually all would be produced and the first game out of the box was to be a hit. It would earn the equivalent of “rookie of the year” when it won a Charles Roberts Award in 1982. Ironically the other four games I was up against were the first four releases from Mayfair Games! Additionally, the category was discontinued the following year!

So what makes IBS so hot?

I never considered myself an original designer. I played many games and borrowed the best design elements from other games and synthesized them into, usually, but not always, a fun and historically accurate game. And I certainly had played a lot of naval games, as they were my first love going back to Avalon Hill's *Midway*. No, the original truly *creative* designers were Charles Roberts, John Prados, Randy Reed, Mark Herman and those types of guys. I freely plundered many ideas from many game designers. But I was no “three-book Willy” and then go ahead and design the game.

What I did do well was read and read and capture the naval combat detail that made my game designs have an authentic feel to them. Ships steaming in the dark of night, a sudden encounter, quick knives of death delivered by torpedo and shell - that was a night action. Quick playing games, lots of random events with a combat results table with well over 36 possible results, special damage, it was all there. I would extensively research and chase down obscure

details – probably why my books are not best sellers either (except in Italy)!

In IBS my most original idea was splitting the ship's speed into three beats. A 6-6-5 = a 34 knot ship. A 5-5-5 = a 30 knot ship. One could capture the subtle differences in speed, and keep the game manageable. Four movement factors is almost a minimum for any game unless you are moving siege artillery. Over 7 are too much for a naval game. My system works and I would use it in *The Royal Navy* and in *Destroyer Captain*. A modified system with two beats would be in *Fleet Admiral* and in *Tsushima*.

The biggest failure in IBS is the pattern for torpedoes once they are launched and in the water. It is unrealistic, but if you play the game a lot and master it, you get the number of torpedo hits on average that were achieved historically. It is the basic problem of a hex-board format and torpedoes not staying within the hex-lines! In IBS II from Moments in History I tried to solve that problem but it really did not work.

IBS II did have the nice feature of some of the small light cruisers (like the Dutch *Tromp*) designed to accompany destroyers in combat are sized to operate more efficiently with destroyers. Combining those two features would be a nice touch. Maybe in an IBSIII?

Once IBS appeared I sent a copy off to the wonderful late Giovanni Ingellis and this would lead to Alessandro Massignani and I hooking up. Giovanni was a game distributor in Milano who always had a beautiful staff of young Italian women. I always enjoyed visiting him!

I also sent a copy off to Japan, to Hobby Japan, usually shown as Post Hobby in the old AH GENERAL magazine. It was there I first corresponded with and later met Mr. Sato. Sato was the owner of Hobby Japan and he was tired of importing finished Avalon Hill Games to Japan and putting English rules in them. Back in the day, the exchange rate was upwards of 260 yen to the dollar and that meant he could only sell a few AH games in Japan as they were incredibly expensive. I offered him the right to license my IBSII and *Norway-1940* that had just appeared in 1982. We came to terms and Quarterdeck broke the Avalon Hill hold on the market with those two games. Eventually Avalon Hill would also license product in Japan, following my lead. Frankly, it was something Avalon Hill did not want to see, as it cut into their ability to sell their own print runs, especially as the owner of Avalon Hill was a printing press firm – Monarch Press (actually Monarch Services)!

My relationship with Hobby Japan would go through several ups and downs but that too is another story for another time.

FIRE & MOVEMENT magazine ran reader polls of games and one of my most cherished memories is the issue where *The Royal Navy* was #1 in the poll as a player favorite, with both *Destroyer Captain* and *Ironbottom Sound* in the top 10 of 50 games! Voted on by the readers.

Any questions class?