



Old campaigner

California-based **Bill Hocker** has 36 years' experience in the production and sale of collectable metal toy soldiers. While his **Wm Hocker** range appeals to collectors at the more traditional end of the spectrum, some highly original new releases are causing a buzz within the hobby. TSC's **George Phillips** spoke to Bill to find out more about his craft...

It was the simple ambition to make a home movie with a classmate at college that set the scene for toy soldiers to become a massive part of Bill Hocker's life.

"It was 1966 and I was studying architecture at the time," Bill explained. "I became fascinated with an animated film by Charles Eames in which he used his toy train collection.



Bill Hocker in his studio

"A classmate had some Britains figures from his childhood and we thought it would be great to build up their ranks and make a film in the same style of Eames. So we started buying toy soldiers from F.A.O. Schwartz. We couldn't buy too many at the time because at \$5.00 a box, they were pretty expensive. This was also about the time Britains stopped making metal toy soldiers in favour of plastic, so the stock of metal figures soon evaporated from store shelves. I felt a real sense of loss at this and, of course, the film never got made!"

The bug bites

Bill's soldiers were put on the shelf for 15 years until he met someone with a small collection of their own. "I thought to myself: 'Gee, I have a collection somewhere in my closet.' I went home and pulled them out and the fascination was rekindled. I immediately started seeking out places to buy more soldiers," he said.

Bill's plan was to collect at scale, accumulating large quantities of figures. However, the price of brand new items proved prohibitive.

"So I started to buy lots of damaged and repainted figures. A large part of my early collection includes figures that I bought and restored. Getting into restoration involved the casting of arms, duplicating paint styles and working with solder to repair things," Bill said.

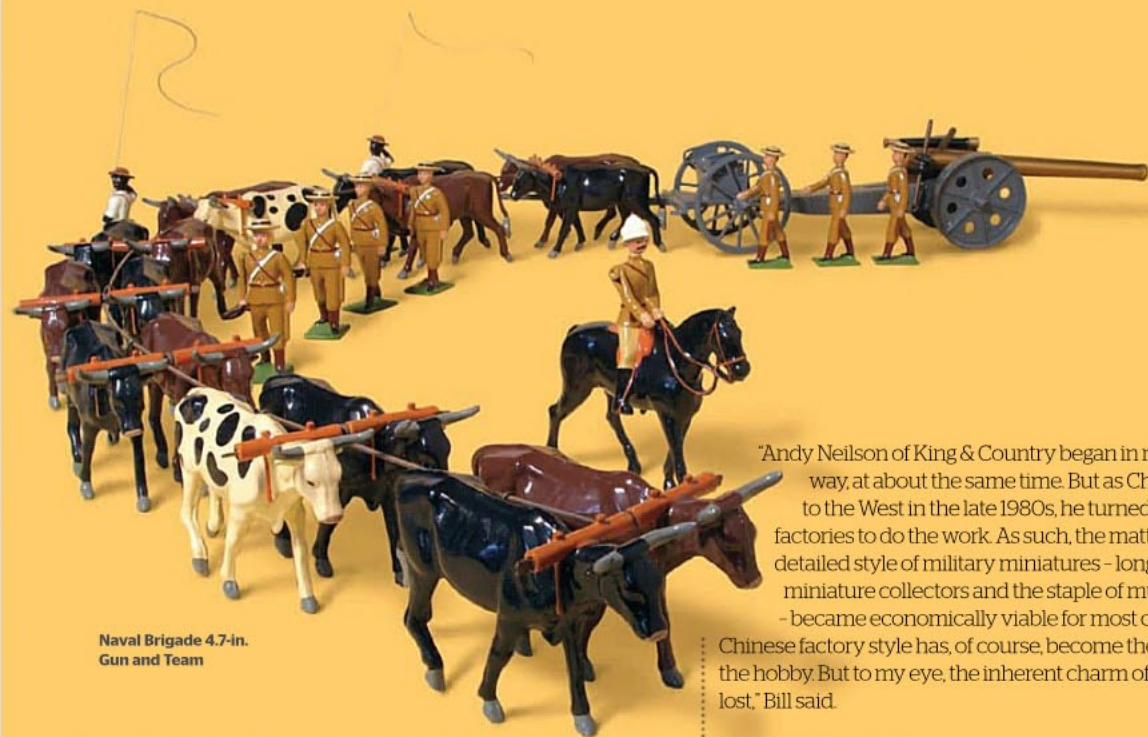
After developing these skills, Bill decided to manufacture and sell toy soldiers of his own to compensate for the money he had spent on Britains. He produced several sets, put an ad in a magazine and went to the annual show organised by Old Toy Soldier News (OTSN).

"I was amazed that people started spending money on my figures," he said. "I was employed as an architect full-time but working in an upstairs room at home, grinding out one new set at a time. I would pin orders onto the window shades around the room. Pretty soon, there were layers of orders and I couldn't keep track of when I was supposed to have orders ready. I bought my first computer to keep a better track of things and my passion for computer programming, as well as toy soldiers, began."

Going full time

After two years of juggling his work as an architect with a burgeoning toy soldier business, Bill realised he could make a modest but more enjoyable living from the latter. In 1987, he converted his garage into a workshop.

"I also realised I couldn't continue and expand the business without help. So I hired my first Mien worker, May Seng Sae-chao, who was doing housecleaning for a neighbour. Another



Naval Brigade 4.7-in. Gun and Team

→ neighbour, an Afghan refugee, also started working for me. They immediately demonstrated they could do the work much better than I could - whatever kind of work it was"

In the years since Bill became a full-time toy soldier maker, he has recruited all but one of his team from the local community of Mien tribespeople, an ethnic group which settled in the US after leaving their native Laos in South East Asia.

"Today, I'm delighted that I still have Liew Orn Saechao, Kae Chiam Saechao and Sou Chio Saelee working for me. They have been with me for 30, 29 and 23 years, respectively and are amazing people. They have an innate understanding of craft work and the patience to execute it at consistently high levels of quality."

Sticking with tradition

Fans of Bill's products will know he manufactures very traditional-looking toy soldiers in a market where the trend is increasingly towards more realistic, matte-painted miniatures.

"My passion has always been for toy soldiers rather than miniature representations of military history," he explained. "Coming from a background of collecting and restoring Britains figures, my natural tendency was to have my new soldiers look like the old-style Britains. For me, the abstract toy-like detail and gloss paint were essential characteristics of the style."

"Andy Neilson of King & Country began in much the same way, at about the same time. But as China opened to the West in the late 1980s, he turned to Chinese factories to do the work. As such, the matte, shaded, hyper-detailed style of military miniatures - long a passion for miniature collectors and the staple of museum dioramas - became economically viable for most collectors. The Chinese factory style has, of course, become the default style of the hobby. But to my eye, the inherent charm of a toy has been lost," Bill said.

Product range

For the first 12 years of production, Wm Hocker, much in the style of Britains, produced Victorian colonial campaigns and related subjects. "Britains toy soldiers were a Victorian toy, so these themes seemed logical," Bill said.

His product range contained many sets of figures - friend and foe - from British colonial conflicts across the globe.

"The Victorian subjects for production were initially chosen quite haphazardly but I soon decided to do a reasonably thorough documentation of the period, choosing a different campaign or subject each year," he said.

As a US citizen with a passionate interest in his nation's military history, it was a natural next step for Bill to turn to American-themed conflicts, beginning with the Revolutionary War.

"Someone encouraged me to produce an American Revolution fife and drum band. It was a transforming experience. The variety and colour of the uniforms, the historical significance, the dearth of figures available and the desire to begin an American slant to the products of an American maker - it all came together," Bill said.

"So began an 18-plus year period of grinding my way chronologically through American military history. For the post-Civil War Indian Wars, I expanded the subject to do a history of the American West. Overall, we've now reached WWI."



The Wm Hocker workshop



Hopi Kachinas



Great America

Customer base

Bill revealed that the majority of his customers are American, along with clusters of collectors based in Britain and Canada. "I also have customers scattered across Singapore, South Africa, Hong Kong, Spain, France, Italy and Germany," he explained.

"I have a nostalgic passion for the figures in my collection and I sincerely hope that my customers, share a similar passion for my products."

Perhaps not surprisingly considering the geographic spread of his customer base, Bill's website is his most powerful sales channel. The business is also represented each year at the annual Chicago Toy Soldier Show.

Trump Regime

The political polarisation that has occurred in the US in recent years provided Bill with the impetus to produce an unusual and eye-catching new series of sets under the theme of The Trump Regime.

It's an understatement - and one of epic proportions - to say that Bill is no fan of the current US president. "My angst about Trump existed well before he was elected and has grown to outrage since," he said.

"You don't have to be a very knowledgeable military historian - my knowledge is no more than is needed to avoid embarrassment in my sets - to draw unsettling parallels. Uncompromising partisanship led to the bloody carnage of the American Civil War. The rise of autocratic nationalism in Europe led to WWI. The rise of elected demagogues that promoted and exploited nationalism



Liew Orn Saechao



Kae Chiam Saechao



Sou Chio Saelee



In praise of the Mien people

"The Mien are an amazing group of people. They were drafted into the American 'secret war' against the Vietnamese in Laos and left with no support when the Americans abruptly pulled out. Fearful of communist retaliation, many fled to Thailand," Bill explained.

"They are now US citizens, with their own homes, SUVs and American lifestyles. Their children are in college or in business. In one generation, they have leap-frogged several stages of industrial evolution. It is a remarkable story of triumph over adversity," he said.

Bill has channelled his discomfort with the American political landscape into the production of a series of figures that offer an incisive satirical take on Donald Trump and his supporters.

"It was my aim to offer our clientele a range of sets that illuminate the hostile and surreal path our nation is on under the most immature and increasingly dangerous leadership in the nation's history," Bill said.

My favourite set in the series, entitled 'Above the Law', depicts the Commander in Chief standing over the fallen figure of 'Justice' as symbolised by the blindfolded figure of a woman carrying a sword and a set of scales. The symbolism is unequivocal and Bill fiercely defends his stance.

"There is not a lot that normal citizens can do in the face of such historic political and social change. But not to express fear and loathing at this point is to be complicit in the outcome," he said.



And there has been an unexpected commercial upside to the stand Bill has taken with his Trump-inspired range.

"I sold and took orders for 18 of each set at the 2019 Chicago Toy Soldier Show - an unheard of quantity for a new release," Bill explained. "And they continue to sell well."

Looking ahead

"Beyond that, the next logical subject would be the rise of fascism in the 1920s and 1930s—something that I should probably be doing now in view of the numerous parallels in contemporary world affairs."

And his longer-term vision for Wm Hocker?

"I'd be happy just to survive and stay in business until my crew can retire," he said. "And then, perhaps, I'll finally make that movie."