

Anoraks, advance! Although their ranks may be thinning, Hong Kong's band of war gamers are showing no signs of battle fatigue, writes David Momphard

TOY BOYS



MOST OF THE battles fought in Hong Kong these days tend to be in the boardroom. But recently, Mongol and Song armies clashed in Kowloon Bay, while Celtic tribes rose up against their Roman occupiers in Britain.

Although the warriors in both battles are just a few centimetres high, their commanders, members of the Hong Kong Society of Wargamers, take their military responsibilities seriously.

"It's the historical aspect of the hobby that draws me," says Peter Hunt, a founding member of the society – and in his other life a chief superintendent of police.

It may be hard for many people to imagine what drives grown men to pit armies of miniature alloy figures against one another, but Hunt has no doubts. War gamers are generally attracted to the hobby for any of three main reasons, he says: they like games; they're history buffs; or they love miniatures.

The figurines range from a few millimetres to more than 5cm in height. They're painted in scrupulous detail and used to stage conflicts from medieval ambushes to second world war battles and clashes from the realms of science fiction and fantasy. The attention to detail is all-important.

"If it's supposed to be the Starship Enterprise, it had better look like the Starship Enterprise or I'm not going to play with it," says Hunt.

Enthusiasts can be obsessive about their collections and sometimes amass enormous armies. Hunt, who is no mean collector, knows of a war gamer in Singapore who owns a set representing the French side in the Battle of Waterloo on a 1:50 scale. "That's 5,000 pieces. Where's he ever going to play with it?"

The figures can command surprisingly high prices. Basic miniatures can be had for about HK\$20, but detailed, hand-

painted figurines may cost up to several thousand dollars each and are regarded in the war-gaming fraternity as collectors' items. The society holds an annual auction of such pieces.

Painting the miniatures is often a pastime in itself. A former member of the society who frequently had to travel across Asia on business used to bring along a case of miniatures that he would paint in his room at night. "That's better than sitting down at the hotel bar," Hunt says.

He confesses to having whiled away many hours with a paintbrush in his hand. "I'll not have drunk beer, haven't been rude to anyone and I've stayed out of my wife's way."

Several members have turned painting miniatures into a business. At his Dragon Painting factory in Shenzhen, Herbert Wong and his staff have been making miniature armies for more than two decades. "It takes months or longer to research and paint an army to a decent standard with sufficient detail," Wong says.

The war gamers' society meets twice a month to battle it out in games of strategy. Hunt says that although war games may employ complex rules that make them seem arcane to the uninitiated, members generally prefer simpler set-ups.

"It can be as easy or as difficult as you like," he says. "We'll do anything. But most games are about jumping in and having fun. You can't do that if you're constantly carrying around a thick rulebook."

Occasionally, members restage historical battles. Their biggest so far was the Battle of Leipzig, fought over two days.

To mark the 200th anniversary of the Battle of Trafalgar in 2005, they re-enacted the naval clash using 1:1,200 scale models

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of the 64 warships involved, with bits of cotton wool for smoke.

But historical accuracy is often sacrificed to the desire for a good game and the element of uncertainty introduced by a roll of the dice.

Hunt says the club played the Battle of Sedgemoor in this way. In 1685, when the rebel Duke of Monmouth planned to seize the English throne by staging a surprise attack on James II, the ambush was foiled when one of the duke's soldiers accidentally set off a musket.

"What if the Duke of Monmouth hadn't been discovered?" Hunt asks. "Well, [according to the dice] he might have won."

And in the re-enactment of the Battle of Trafalgar, society chairman Andrzej Cierpicki says the dice handed victory to the British, "but by much narrower a margin than historically".

The club's golden years were before the 1997 handover, when the membership included a number of British soldiers. Although numbers are now down to about 40 people, Hunt says the members are no less dedicated to their hobby.

He scoffs at any suggestion that there may be a parallel between playing with toy soldiers and fighting in real life. Only a few of the society's members have a military background, Hunt says, although he played a part in ending riots on the Soko Islands during the Vietnamese refugee crisis of 1989. "Helicopters, landing craft – you can have great fun," he says.

With only a couple of years remaining before retirement, Hunt is thrilled at the thought of being able to spend more time directing miniature armies. "In a couple of years I can do this all the time."



Most war-game figurines cost just HK\$20 or so, but prices can run to several thousand dollars each for more detailed examples, which are prized by Hong Kong Society of Wargamers members such as Peter Hunt (above, far right). PHOTOS: DICK FUNG

PHOTOS: AP/AFP

PEOPLE

Star atones over gay slur



Dempsey when he allegedly used the term "faggot" about fellow cast member T.R. Knight. He then angered TV bosses by repeating the word at an awards show.

Soon after the incident, Knight revealed that he was gay and said he was upset at what Washington had said.

Kevin Jennings, executive director of the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network, said: "He seemed very sincere in his interest in working with us on an ongoing basis."

He added that Washington said he wanted to explore ways to work with the network to address issues of "name-calling and how he might use his various platforms to educate people about how painful and wrong it is".

Isaiah Washington, a star in hit US medical drama *Grey's Anatomy*, has met gay rights groups in the wake of his use of a homophobic insult. He has agreed to help educate people about the use of such language, BBC reported. Last October, Washington (above) was involved in an on-set scuffle with co-star Patrick

Polish journalist Kapuscinski dead

Poland's most celebrated journalist and non-fiction writer, Ryszard Kapuscinski, has died in Warsaw, aged 74, after a heart operation.

Kapuscinski (left) made his name in Africa during the 1960s, where he was the Polish Press Agency's only correspondent, BBCI reported.

He wrote widely on wars and dictators, chronicling the last days of Ethiopia's Haile Selassie and the shah of Iran. He also wrote books on the fall of the Soviet Union, Angola's civil war and politics in Central America.

Born in Pinsk, now in Belarus, in 1932, Kapuscinski studied history and worked as a reporter in Poland during the 50s, giving him material for his first book, *The Polish Bush*.

Sent abroad in the early 60s, he covered Africa single-handedly for the Polish press, travelling widely across the continent and reporting on a number of wars. He witnessed 27 coups or revolutions and was sentenced to death four times.



JB awaits final resting place

The remains of soul music performer James Brown (right) were moved to a crypt last week until a final resting place is decided, amid a dispute between relatives for his estate, according to a funeral home owner.

After his death on December 25, Brown's body was kept for 20 days at his Beech Island, South Carolina home in a temperature-controlled room in the gold-and-bronze casket used during his funeral services.

The remains "were moved last Thursday" to a temporary crypt in an undisclosed location, until Brown's relatives decide on a final resting place, said Charlie Reid, owner of CA Reid funeral home in Augusta, Georgia, which has been in charge of the remains since late December.

Reid said he didn't know how long it would take for the family to reach an agreement on Brown's



final destination. "They're trying to finish this other stuff left ... so it shouldn't be that long".

He said the above-ground crypt was a more appropriate place to keep the remains until the dispute was settled.

Asked where the remains were taken, Reid refused to comment. "That's private information," he said. *AFP*

Domingo to hit new notes

Placido Domingo is making the jump from tenor to baritone. Domingo will sing the title role in Verdi's *Simon Boccanegra* for the first time at Berlin's Staatsoper Unter den Linden in 2009.

Domingo, who turned 66 on Monday, also has agreed to sing the role at Milan's Teatro alla Scala and at the Royal Opera in London.

The Spaniard sang the tenor role of the opera, Gabriele Adorno, for the first time in 1995 at New York's Metropolitan Opera. He said in April 2005 that a final ambition was to sing the baritone role in *Boccanegra*, but he didn't say where or when. *AFP*