



Near Barracks Row, this shop is soldiering on

BY NATHANIEL KOCH

Three blocks from Barracks Row and the oldest active Marine Corps post is a store that sells toy troops, the Toy Soldier Shop of Washington, D.C. (503 11th St. SE, open Saturdays and by appointment).

It's one of a few shops that still deal exclusively in old toy soldiers — the kind generally made of lead, in Europe and before the 1960s. Proprietor Neil Rhodes opened it in 2002 and specializes in “conversions”: re-creating or remanufacturing figures for a particular war or era.

To enter the shop is to step into another world — a tidy realm of colorful armies of thousands of tiny hand-painted troops. Some are astonishingly detailed. They hail from around the globe and represent eras from ancient Egypt to the 20th century.

The average price? “Of an old lead soldier that’s not rare? Twenty-five dollars,” Rhodes says. A box set? \$120.

His rarest figure, a 130-year-old mounted knight, sells for \$900. And just who might drop that kind of money on a toy, however old? Most of his customers are collectors, generally from out of town and tend to be male professionals. They do it, Rhodes says, often for the toys’ aesthetic merit. Someone, he adds, can “fill



Clockwise from top: The Toy Soldier Shop of Washington, D.C., which opened in 2002, caters to collectors; owner Neil Rhodes.



a [display] case” for the price of an art print.

The shop’s ever-changing stock includes figures by a century-old manufacturer called Britains, a French maker named CBG Mignot and a number of the once-dominant German firms. It also sells Wm. Hocker, a California-based manufacturer of new figures in the Britains style (highly stylized, with minimal detail).

Rhodes’s favorites include a phalanx of baby-blue Bavarians and some Boxer Rebellion Chinese figures, all made in Germany.

Customer Peter Clark, a lawyer who lives on Capitol Hill, stops in every week. He owns about 10,000 figures. “I’ve been collecting since I was a kid,” says Clark, who focuses on two manufacturers, Britains and Wm. Hocker.

Collectors, Rhodes says, tend to focus on a particular manufacturer rather than an era or a war. “It’s a passionate business,” he says. “Every day I’m working on something. ... I like painting ... [it’s] like a meditation.”