

The soldiers of Washington DC

Regular US correspondent **Brigadier Raymond E. Bell Jnr** visits The Toy Soldier Shop of Washington D.C. which is owned and operated by Neil Rhodes

When the Queen of England is in residence in London, the royal standard floats in the breeze above Buckingham Palace. When Neil Rhodes is holding court in his snug shop and abode at The Toy Soldier Shop of Washington, DC, his sign hangs above the front door.

The visitor to London dares not miss the changing of the guard at Buckingham Palace and when visiting Washington, DC, one should not miss the opportunity to visit the only remaining shop devoted exclusively to old toy soldiers.

Neil began his journey into the old toy soldier realm in 1987 following a visit to the Forbes Museum of Toy Soldiers in Tangiers, Morocco. The return journey from Morocco home to Los Angeles took him through London, England, where a visit to Portobello Road provided him the opportunity to purchase some of the figures that were on view in the display cases in Tangiers. The spark was ignited.

Back in Los Angeles, the search for more antique toy soldiers led to Bill Connolly's Toy Soldier Exchange (sadly, now long closed) in Pasadena, California. Connolly encouraged Neil in the hobby, and got him started painting castings in the style of old Britain's toy soldiers.

Neil would trade his painted figures for antique ones he



sought for his collection, and Connolly would sell all of Neil's limited production in his shop. Eventually, the buyers of these figures would contact Neil directly with ideas for the specific regiments that they wanted to fill in the gaps in their collections. In this manner, what started as a relaxing way to pass the time, and build up a small collection

of antique toy soldiers, was gradually transformed into a mini vocation.

In 1998, Neil moved from Los Angeles to Washington, DC. Without a job, and needing a small space to put his painting table where the fumes of the solvents would not bother his wife, Neil purchased a derelict row house within walking distance of his residence. →





→ Neil relishes the opportunity and challenge to create special toy soldiers on commission that fancy the interest of any collector. His creativity has been previously displayed in this magazine, most recently the classic Bulgarian and Turkish horse drawn artillery made for a collector of toy troops representing those that fought in the Balkan wars in the early 1900's (Issue 44, February/March 2012).

In setting his offerings apart, he particularly likes to use his imagination in making figures in the classic mode which famous producers such as Britains never made. As he

describes what he is doing, his fingers are making it happen. The results are sure to be extraordinary as, for example, his deft strokes paint a mustache or button on a needy figure.

Although visitors will most often, at first, find Neil behind his work bench, he is quick to get up to greet them, show them around, and talk about the antique figures that fill the many display cases in the shop. Except for his own creations and the figures of his fellow craftsman, Bill Hocker, The Toy Soldier Shop of Washington, DC. sells only antique toy soldiers. You will not find the mass produced Chinese-



made figures nor the very fancy Russian made figures, both of which have become very popular in the hobby over the past decade or so.

Neil is proud of the fact that he has one of the very few, if not the only, shop in the United States where a collector can walk into a store and see, handle, and purchase a pre-1966 toy soldier right off the shelf. In doing so he likes to differentiate between the

traditional toy soldier and the more modern figures which approximate the status of military miniatures.

Neil has only one rule regarding what makes it on to the display shelves of the shop. "It has to be something that I would personally love to have in my own collection." If it is old and unusual, the chances are good that it will find its way into the shop. This philosophy guarantees the toy soldier aficionado an interesting and worthwhile experience.

The range and number of figures that you can see artistically arranged in the antique show cases extends from multiple shelves consisting entirely of an array of Heyde, Noris, Haffner, Mignot, MIM, Vertunni, old Britains, Johillco, Greenwood & Ball and many more obscure and interesting toy soldiers, horse drawn gun teams and color parties, single figures, unboxed as well as figures in their original boxes. The number of antique toy soldiers on display is generally more than one person can see in just one visit, and they are





all for sale.

With the recent closing of Steve Balkin's Burlington Antique Toys, a shop that was located in New York City and Craig McClain's Old Toy Soldier Home in Southern California, it appears that there are few, if any, old toy soldier stores left in the United States, or anywhere else in the world for that matter. If you would still like to see, and support such a shop, when enjoying the sights in the capital of the United States of America, make a point of visiting the Toy Soldier Shop of Washington, DC.

Located not far from the Capitol on 11th Street, SE, within one of the largest his-

toric districts in the country, there is also good eating to be had at restaurants located on nearby tree lined streets. The visit will be a rewarding one as one enters where the sign outside beckons not only the toy soldier collector but anyone interested in seeing creative works of militaria. One will not be disappointed. **END**

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