

## IMRIE TRIBUTE

Text: A.J. Mergenthaler Photos: A.J. Mergenthaler, Stuart A. Hessney and Courtesy of Helen Imrie

A.J. Mergenthaler pens a fond tribute to his longtime friend William F. Imrie, America's leading maker of military miniatures for more than 50 years

Undoubtedly, William Ferguson Imrie was the best-known and premier manufacturer of military miniatures for more than 50 years in the United States.

Bill is mainly known for crafting metal kits almost without number in partnership with Clyde A. Risley. Together they formed Imrie/Risley Miniatures in 1963.

However, Bill preceded that partnership with his own unique production starting in the late 1940s. He produced many a painted figure of varied scales in his early years before teaming up with Clyde.

### FORMATIVE YEARS

Bill was born on June 27, 1930, in the upstate city of Watertown, N.Y. Because his father was a manager for the J.J. Newberry five-and-dime store chain, the family moved quite frequently.

His father eventually moved up in the organization to the main office in New York City and the family moved to Long Island.

They also maintained a summer home in Lake George, N.Y. It was visited frequently, especially in the summer months after school was let out. Lake George is where Bill's father had grown up and met Bill's mother, who was a schoolteacher in the area.

Bill attended public schools in Rockville Centre in Nassau County, L.I. During his school days, he became an accomplished trumpeter. When he was old enough, he decided to join the National Guard where he mastered all of the military bugle calls.

Bill and his future wife,

Helen, were high-school sweethearts. After he was graduated, he went off to Union College in Schenectady, N.Y., following in the footsteps of his grandfather, father, uncle, brother and cousin, all of whom had attended that institution.

It turned out that he was so busy commuting to the New York City area on weekends that he finally decided to transfer to Long Island's Hofstra College to be closer to home. In 1952, he was graduated from Hofstra with a Bachelor of Arts degree in business and history.

### PASSION FOR HISTORY

Bill's early exposure to upstate New York, especially the Lake George/Ticonderoga area, obviously had a great deal to do with his interest in the historical aspects of the region.

He became engrossed in the history and personalities of the early explorers, the French and Indian War, and the American Revolutionary War. The area is replete with historical sites, battlefields and important incidents that helped shape the future of the United States.

Over the years Bill researched military campaigns that took place in the area during the nation's formative years, including the armies, weapons and uniforms of those involved.

That does not imply, however, that he was uninformed about other periods, wars, countries or military matters. There is no doubt that in his early years as a maker of figures, his emphasis was on portraying in miniature the American soldier of all periods. But his interests covered the whole range of recorded history.



Above: William F. Imrie

Below: Two of Bill's first 54-mm figures portrayed the U.S. Cavalry of 1876.

### KOREAN WAR DRAFTEE

Bill and Helen were married in June 1952. Soon thereafter he was drafted into the U.S. Army during the Korean War.

Although he earned recognition as a sharpshooter during training, Bill was





assigned to the Signal Corps as a radio operator. After training at Fort Gordon in Georgia, he was transferred to Fort Reilly in Kansas.

As the war in Korea wound down, many draftees were granted earlier discharges if they were going to continue their education. Bill took advantage of that opportunity and he was discharged in 1954.

He returned to New York City and attended Columbia University for a short time still unsure of his future.

### STARTING OUT SMALL

Bill's early efforts in military miniatures were spent producing 20-mm soldiers depicting the American soldier ranging from the ARW to modern times. The figures were very nicely sculpted with good detail and neatly painted.

Besides single figures, he crafted a number of multi-figure dioramas of the American Civil War. He also created a group depicting the evolution of American armed forces from their meager beginnings to



Top left: Two striking, 18th-century soldiers in 100-mm scale.

Top right: French explorer Samuel de Champlain circa 1609.

Bottom left: Part of a 54-mm ARW diorama.

Bottom right: Bill had an affinity for Scottish Highlanders. These are in 54-mm scale.

World War II.

Prior to taking the plunge as a full-time maker of soldiers, Bill tried his hand at following in his father's footsteps by working as an assistant manager at a Newberry store in New Jersey. All during this time he was making figures in his spare time for sale at Polk's Hobby Store on 5th Avenue in New York City.

This exposure to other collectors resulted in his receiving commissions for





background, knowledge or financial status. He never affected an air of pompousness or superiority and exuded a quiet graciousness.

“ Bill was a humble, natural and regular fellow with a gentle spirit -- someone you could call a real friend regardless of your background, knowledge or financial status. ”

specific requests. Bill was always happy and pleased to fill them.

By 1956, he left the Newberry chain. While Helen commuted to Cooper Union in New York City to further her studies in architecture, Bill stayed home sculpting and making soldiers, honing his skills to higher and higher levels.

### SATURDAY SESSIONS

I'll never forget the time when on a Saturday night in the very early 1950s, Bill brought his first 54-mm soldier to Polk's for inspection.

Fortunately, I was one of a

small group of young collectors, including Polk's sales clerk Marty Fine, Dick Hart and Hank Becker, who met with Bill on Saturday evenings to eat at neighborhood restaurants and "chew the fat" about every aspect of our shared hobby and interests.

Bill was center stage because he was a real up-and-coming manufacturer of very good figures. He would ask for critiques of his figures and take suggestions for new subjects, positions or periods.

Bill was a humble, natural and regular fellow with a gentle spirit -- someone you could call a real friend regardless of your

Top left: Specially commissioned barracks scene.

Top right: Bill signed the bases of all figures that he personally painted.

Bottom left: Imrie/Risley Miniatures' clean-cut castings have extremely fine detail that underpin painted figures.

Bottom right: Proud Confederate artillery officer in 54-mm scale.

### FIRST 54-MM FIGURE

Bill's first 54-mm effort produced a U.S. Cavalry trooper circa 1876.

The figure is in a relaxed pose garbed in a field uniform, cradling his carbine and wearing a slouched hat. Overall, the cavalryman has a weathered look.

Bill's work was so out of the ordinary in terms of what was produced by other makers at the time, that it ushered in, for me at least, a whole new appreciation of what can be done and how realistic military miniatures can be. It took my hobby and collecting to a new level, encouraging me to look beyond toy soldiers and basic representations toward better detail, accuracy and realism.

In 1958, the Imries moved to New York City's Greenwich Village, where Bill concentrated on making custom figures for





Top left: A relaxing WWI British Expeditionary Force infantryman (left) and a French poilu.

Top right: Figures of a WWI doughboy in France (left) and a WWI Marine in the Pacific.

collectors. He had been making 54-mm and larger figures for some time. Larger scales enabled him to really put his skills to work.

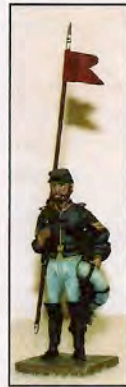
### COMMISSION WORK

Bill took on special commissions in these early days as his reputation began to grow on the U.S. East Coast, then nationally and finally internationally.

One of those special commissions came from a collector who wanted to make a massive diorama of the Napoleonic era that required hundreds of soldiers in 35-mm scale. Bill produced several basic figures with separate weapons that could be interchanged and posed in various attitudes. They were supplied in bulk as metal castings to the customer to assemble and arrange as he saw fit.

Also made about that same time was a 25-mm scale U.S. Cavalry patrol of the 1876 period. It deftly captures a moment of time in the Old West.

The complete patrol consists of 22 cavalymen, two Indian



Above: Unique 54-mm ACW figure depicting a member of Rush's 6th Pennsylvania Lancers.

Bottom left: Part of a 25-mm U.S. Cavalry patrol. The horses have very realistic tails made from individual strands of wire.

Bottom right: WWI German soldiers in dress and combat uniforms.



scouts, two pack mules and one dismounted Indian hostile. Each of these figures and horses are different with poses that fit into the overall diorama.

This project took approximately two years to complete with one new figure made every four to six weeks or so, since Bill was busy filling orders for his other items.

Due to its quality and uniqueness, this frontier patrol remains my most treasured possession. And, it is my understanding that my group is the only one of the four made that is in its complete form.

I never permanently mounted my U.S. Cavalry patrol in a diorama. Instead, the components remain as individual figures that I have set up and photographed a number of times in different settings both outdoors and indoors.

### CONSUMER-FRIENDLY MAKER

In the 1950s, Bill published a "Custom Military Miniatures" catalog that stated the following:

"If you wish a figure made that is not included in this catalog, please send along what information you might have, or list specific reference books so that an estimate can be made. All reference material will be returned to you when the figure is completed. If no reference is available to you, my library will in most cases furnish the information."

Now that is what I call a consumer-friendly catalog!

Bill's library of reference books, plates and uniform guides were complemented by his growing collection of militaria and various accoutrements. All of the aforementioned contributed to the great degree of accuracy and detail that went into his finished pieces.

Daughter Susan joined the Imrie family in 1960. Due to the cramped conditions of their Village apartment, they moved to Queens, N.Y. For the next several years Bill produced soldiers at a prodigious pace.

### FORMING I/R MINIATURES

During this same period of time, Bill and a number of other collectors and history buffs formed the Military Historical Society.

The late Peter J. Blum was the first president of the society.



Soon a quarterly publication titled "The Adjutant's Call" was published with contributions from artists and writers from around the world.

Clyde A. Risley provided the publication's cover art as well as illustrations for many of the articles in those early days. It was during this time that Bill and Clyde joined forces and formed Imrie/Risley Miniatures.

Production skyrocketed during their partnership with hundreds of kits of many types and periods.

At one time they even issued a relatively small selection of boxed sets of traditional-style toy soldiers of the ACW. These Fanfare Toy Soldiers have become rather rare collector items.

### FRANKLIN MINT SERIES

In addition to I/R Miniatures' regular production, it was commissioned by the Franklin Mint in Philadelphia to create 13 figures commemorating the 200th anniversary of the ARW.

Each 90-mm soldier represented one of the original 13 colonies.

That project was started just before the business moved in 1975 to Ballston Spa. The





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periods.

It can be seen in the look and stance of his WWI doughboy. The figure has a cocky, fresh from the States look.

Bill’s WWII Marine jamming a clip into his M1 Garand looks like a typical citizen soldier. His casual dress suggests his “down to business” attitude. The dog tags around the Marine’s neck are really loose on their chain.

Bill captured the “feel” of the American fighting man better than anyone else at the time.

### RESPECTED ARTISAN

Figures in the accompanying photographs include some of Bill’s early custom work. I think they demonstrate the great skill and imagination that he displayed while undertaking the researching, sculpting and painting. Works like these made him the respected artisan he is.

Bill and Helen made a wonderful team. With their business progression from Imrie Custom Miniatures to Helenic Miniatures and then I/R Miniatures, great kits have been produced for countless collectors and hobbyists.

Bill is one of a kind -- a man

Top left: The detail and animation in these frontier figures is extraordinary considering the 25-mm scale.

Second left: French Napoleonic grenadier in 35-mm scale and an ACW Zouave in 20-mm scale. Wonderful sculpting and painting techniques were part of Bill’s unique talents.

of talent, integrity, humor and gentleness. I count it a privilege and an honor to have known him all these years.

His contributions are without a doubt a major reason why many aspiring young makers or sculptors have been encouraged to venture out into this most unique hobby.

Bill was a workaholic and could never consider the possibility of retiring. But due to conditions beyond his control, he has been in a nursing facility for a little over three years.

Helen, who has been involved in the business for years, and very heavily since Clyde retired, is now completely devoted to running I/R Miniatures and the Saratoga Soldier.

As she recently said, “I am keeping up the business. Sometimes I think I may do something new, like my old Alice in Wonderland figures, but I am too busy just filling the orders I have.”

On behalf of collectors, hobbyists and those who have personally known William Ferguson Imrie, I want to conclude by placing the spotlight of recognition on a man who was the major American force in the hobby for more than half a century. ■

Below: Sampling of ACW troops from the Fanfare Toy Soldiers range produced by Imrie/Risley Miniatures.

upstate New York village, which is located between Albany and Saratoga Springs, remains the home of I/R Miniatures and its retail outlet, the Saratoga Soldier (Website: [www.saratogasoldier.com](http://www.saratogasoldier.com)).

Through the years Bill produced figures of several scales, including 20, 25, 35, 54, 90 and 100 mm.

The larger-scale figures were basically commissioned for museum displays for places such as Fort Ticonderoga and Trenton Barracks, amongst others.

### AMERICAN FIGHTING MAN

Although Bill produced excellent figures for foreign armies, his fondness for the American fighting man was especially noticeable in his U.S. soldiers of various historic

