

Panelology

By Sean McQuaid

This week: Comics go to war!

As Remembrance Day draws near, the spectre of war looms ever larger in a variety of media; however, one oft-overlooked medium for war stories is comics. War has been a key comics genre virtually since the beginning of comic books.

When the comics industry began to flower in the late 1930's, America (the primary comic book publisher) was not yet a participant in World War II-- but like many North Americans, comics were itching for a fight. The advent of aggressive dictators in Germany, Japan and Italy gave comics ready-made bad guys to exploit-- similar to television and film's swipes at foreign leaders like Saddam Hussein today. Moreover, many comics readers and writers were genuinely patriotic individuals who felt America would, sooner or later, have to confront the aggressors attacking America's allies in Asia and Europe.

As a result, nazis, fascists, "Japs," and sinister Orientals of all kinds began turning up in comics, either as figures of ridicule (the Chaplin-esque Hitler was often played for laughs) or as fearsome forces of evil, or both. A lurid example of this trend was the wildly successful *Daredevil vs. Hitler*-- comic book one-shot, wherein the red-and-black clad, boo-

merang-tossing Daredevil (not to be confused with the modern-day Marvel hero of the same name) joined forces with a few other heroes to give Hitler and his gang a good thrashing (the strangely comical cover has Daredevil and friends lashing out at a larger-than-life, photographically doctored, fearfully cringing Hitler). And this before the Americans even went to war!

Another by-product of imminent war (later perpetuated still further by the war itself) was the rise in patriotic heroes. Blind (and perhaps excessive) patriotism was nothing new for the U.S.A., but the threat of war served only to fuel nationalist posturing. Captain America was among the first to appear (also predating Pearl Harbor), and the red-white-and-blue clad avenger remains one of the most popular American fictional icons to this day. Joining him throughout the 1940's were scores of other, lesser-known patriotic comics heroes: the Shield, Captain Flag, Yankee Eagle, USA (the Spirit of Old Glory), Miss America, Mister America, Minute Man, Uncle Sam, The Patriot, The Star-Spangled Kid and Stripesy, and near-countless others.

War came to the Americans (literally) with the late 1941 Japanese sneak attack on Pearl Harbor, and comics joined the fight with gusto. Virtually every super-hero enlisted, or fought the Axis powers in their costumed identities, or both (Superman tried to enlist, but was rejected during his physical exam: while reading the eye chart, he accidentally read a different chart in the next room with his x-ray vision).

A prime example of the super-heroic war effort was DC Comics' Justice Society of America, comics' first super-team (and unquestionably the greatest of their era). After Pearl Harbor, the JSA all enlisted (with the exception of the Spectre, who was, after all, a ghost), but were asked to leave the armed forces in the same issue: the army felt superhuman or extraordinary soldiers such as the JSA would be too disruptive within conventional forces, and that the JSA could do more good as a civilian super-team than as seven more soldiers. Regardless, the JSA renamed themselves the Justice Battalion and put themselves at the disposal of the war department for the duration of World War II. They continued to fight crime while smashing spy rings, thwarting subversives, raising money for war orphans, and generally making life miserable for the Axis powers while fighting for America and Democracy."

(If you haven't the resources to dig up the ultra-rare, monstrously expensive back issues of the JSA's 1940's *All-Star Comics*, you can get a more sophisticated and somewhat expanded version of the JSA's wartime exploits in various issues of the 1980's series *All-Star Squadron*. This series also explained lots of nagging continuity points, like why the more powerful DC heroes didn't plough straight into the Axis powers' home countries-- Hitler and Tojo had dug up some mystic artifacts whose combined magical field kept the more powerful, magic-susceptible heroes out of Japan and occupied Europe. For a more condensed but comprehensive account of the JSA's history, see the essential *America vs. The Justice Society* mini-series. Another option would be the *All-Star Comics Archives*, an expensive but gorgeous series of hardcover books reprinting the JSA's original *All-Star Comics* series.)

If anything, the comic book war effort went a bit overboard. Enemy peoples were given disturbingly racist and often ruthless treatment, notably in Marvel Comics (then called Timely Comics). Marvel cover artist Alex Schomburg once said Timely would buy any cover he drew so long as "the japs showed their ugly teeth and glasses and the nazis looked like bums." One especially lurid Marvel cover showed the Human Torch burning off a Japanese soldier's arm while a wholesome, all-american girl looked on in delighted admiration.

When the war ended, comics almost ended with it. The comics lost their best bad guys, patriotic heroes went out of style, super-heroes in general began to lose their following as idealism waned in post-war America, and Americans would soon be seduced away from comics by a more pervasive, influential form of cheap mass entertainment: television. Regardless, there would be war comics-- both then and in the following decades. Many, like EC's war comics and some of DC's (i.e. *Sgt. Rock*), would attempt to convey the horrors of war; others, like Marvel's *Sgt. Fury and his Howling Commandos*, and the more recent *G.I. Joe*, would glamorize and glorify it. But the subject has always been there, though not very popular or widespread in current comics-- perhaps because North America has never

been as involved in war as it was in the 40's, or perhaps because we have lost faith in the wisdom of war-- and rightly so.

Regardless, some fascination persists. Apart from the many comics about civilian soldiers, there have also been many recent super-hero stories set during wartime. Marvel Comics, who never had a major wartime super-hero team, rectified that in the 1970's with the *Invaders*, a series about a wartime super-team dedicated to battling the Axis Powers. Its cast included Captain America, Namor the Sub-Mariner, the original Human Torch, and a handful of lesser lights such as new characters Spitfire and Union Jack. This series lasted several years, and spawned a spin-off group: the Liberty Legion, a hometown super-team of more obscure golden-age Marvel heroes like the Whizzer, Miss America, the Patriot, Jack Frost, the Blue Diamond, Red Raven, and the Thin Man. More recently, the *Invaders* and the Liberty Legion returned (with minimal success) in a new *Invaders* mini-series.

Other wartime Marvel teams introduced through the *Invaders* series included the Kid Kommandos (Cap's sidekick Bucky and the Human Torch's sidekick Toro teamed with kid crimefighters Golden Girl and the Human Top), the Crusaders (a primarily British rival super-group to the *Invaders* who disbanded on learning their organizer was an enemy agent), and Freedom's Five (a World War I super-team whose members included France's Crimson Cavalier, America's Phantom Eagle, and Britain's Union Jack, Sir Steel and the Silver Squire).

Meanwhile, DC has been much busier with modern-day wartime series: the *Wonder Woman* series was set in the 1940's for a time during the 1970's, and DC has devoted several now-cancelled ongoing series to wartime teams. These include the *All-Star Squadron* (an excellent 1980's series about a presidentially created, wartime alliance of all of DC's 1940's wartime super-heroes, including the JSA, the Law's Legionnaires and the Freedom Fighters), *The Young All-Stars* (a sequel to *All-Star Squadron* focusing on some of the team's younger members), and the *Freedom Fighters* (golden-age characters originally published by Quality Comics and later purchased by DC, including Uncle Sam, the Ray, Phantom Lady, the Human Bomb, Black Condor, Firebrand, the Jester, Max Mercury, the Spider, Miss America, Red Bee, Neon, the Invisible Hood, Magno, Red Torpedo, Manhunter, and many others. The *Freedom Fighters* first appeared in 1970's DC Comics as heroes from an alternate Earth where the Nazis won the war, but they were later reintegrated into DC continuity as a splinter group of the All-Stars).

While no major wartime super-hero adventures are in publication at present, war remains a popular genre, and the characters produced in the World War II era persist (in one form or another) as the foundation of the two major comics companies-- and of the industry in general. War, however obsolete or unpopular a subject it may seem, played a major role in the making of the comic book industry.

STUDENTS: GET YOUR MIND IN THE GUTTER!

Go Bowling Tonight at
the YMCA

UPEI/HOLLAND COLLEGE SPECIAL:
BOWL 3 GAMES, PAY FOR 2!
TOTAL COST IS \$3.50
INCLUDING TAX AND SHOES.



Call ahead for information,
ask for "Bowling Lanes"



THE YMCA
OF CHARLOTTETOWN

252 Prince Street
Charlottetown, P.E.I.
C1A 4S1
Phone 566-3966