

Boog brings it up to the present by talking about the current war and the current iteration of Joe

More textual evidence for the argument that the Joes resolve our conflicted feelings about military history

for U.S. aid to combat the Iraqi invasion. The American attack began in January 1991—a ground battle punctuated by high-tech airstrikes. A cease-fire was declared by the end of February.

The *G.I. Joe* comic book appropriated these events as fast as a monthly news magazine. The February 1991 issue recounts how Cobra teamed up with a fictional Middle Eastern leader to invade a nearby country called Benzheen. “What a coup! Benzheen sits on top of 10 percent of the world’s oil. And now Cobra owns it,” one bad guy cheers after the invasion.

In the next issue, the Emir of Benzheen begs America for ground support in his besieged country, and G.I. Joe comes to the rescue.

Numerous gun battles were carried out through pinkish night-vision goggles, mimicking the footage of tracers, Scud missiles, and smart bombs that had filled the real-life newscasts. The first video-game war fit perfectly into the pages of a comic book.

Nevertheless, this fictionalized Gulf War includes a disproportionate amount of G.I. Joe casualties. In all, eight soldiers die during that conflict—a massive toll for a toy line with a cartoonish relationship to death.

Hama invests Dusty with the darkest role in this Gulf War-inspired saga. After a Cobra sniper kills his war buddy, Dusty recalls the Christmas dinner that he shared with his dead friend’s family. “My brother was in Vietnam,” his partner’s mother had told Dusty. “His unit was over-

run. He was listed as missing in action... we never got the body back or anything.” Dusty carries her son’s corpse out of the desert, redeeming the failures of Vietnam in a grim, patriotic moment.

Compared to the real Gulf War, the comics series ends on a mournful note. The battle concludes when another soldier orders Dusty to stop fighting. “Cease-fire—nobody won. The Emir made a deal with Cobra Commander,” he explains. “Cobra is pulling out and the Emir is pulling out the welcome mat from under the Joes.” The *G.I. Joe* comic book never shows the ticker-tape parades that followed the end of hostilities in the desert.

But Larry Hama got it right. He knew that Dusty the desert trooper wasn’t finished fighting. In another ten years, some of the kids who read that series would end up fighting a new and bloodier war in the Middle East. Impressed by his work, Idea and Design Works (IDW) Publishing hired Hama to relaunch the *G.I. Joe* comics series this fall. Hama hinted that his new series will reflect the darker realities of contemporary warfare. “Cobra will be a lot less benign in the IDW iteration,” he explained. “The gloves are off.”

“The way things look I’ll be driving a vehicle in Iraq that any boy who ever watched *G.I. Joe* could only dream of,” muses Jason Christopher Hartley in his memoir, *Just Another Soldier: A Year on the Ground in Iraq*. Hartley’s 2006 book recounts his National Guard service

during the Iraq War.

Hartley is tall, skinny, and tough: a foulmouthed sarcastic streak runs through his memoir. The America’s Army recruiting website seems earnest and quaint compared to his manic prose. In addition to his memoir, Hartley cowrote *Surrender*, a performance-art piece about the Iraq War. Both these works dig into the gleeful, bloody, and decidedly unheroic side of G.I. Joe—a brand that celebrates the seemingly paradoxical impulses of heroism and bloodlust.

Earlier this year, Hartley workshopped *Surrender* in a small Manhattan theater, dressing the whole audience in desert fatigues and guiding them through a weapon-training simulation. He armed patrons with replica rifles and taught them how to steady the buttstock on their shoulders. Taking turns, each audience member crept across the stage like a kid playing backyard G.I. Joe games—learning the simple, anxious mechanics of what patrol troopers do in Iraq every day.

Hartley had the most candid view of the relationship between war play and recruitment. “Movies and video games are the lexicon of soldiers,” he explained. “It is literally why most of us joined—we just wanted to extend the excitement into real life. Even after all the violence we saw—something that has affected me profoundly—these games and movies and my job in the army are still just as exciting as they ever were, except now there is this weird psychological addendum to it all where my brain says, ‘But this is all actually quite disturbing.’”

In this section, Boog brings in the perspective of an actual soldier and Joe fan, describing his book and his play as a means of talking about his approach to publicizing the Iraq War, then interviewing him about movies and video games in the lives of soldiers.

Building on established history, Boog lines up the GI Joe evolution during these years with the Gulf War itself

Comparing the "look" of the mediated Gulf War to the "look" of the GI Joe comic books

Textual Evidence

One final return to Larry Hama, who says something contradictory and kind of weird and complex about Joe. This piece is building toward its conclusion

Boog brings the phenomenon up to the present day, while at the same time establishing Joe's continuing

In these last few paragraphs, Boog finally tells us what he thinks. I'm not 100% convinced that his evidence supports this conclusion, but this is the structure of the piece; he's entitled to a bit of argument at the end.

After each simulation, Hartley explained how many of participants would have died during the actual maneuver. During the *Surrender* workshop, participants could actually feel the real, twitchy madness of Iraq—quickly learning that most civilians make lousy soldiers.

Larry Hama elaborated on recruitment in an email exchange about the *G.I. Joe* comic books. "War is bad," he wrote. "To some it will be the most exciting thing they will experience in their entire life. To others it will haunt their nightmares forever. Don't make a choice based on reading fiction (especially anything I have written!)." *G.I. Joe* helped children rehearse the motions of war in the 1980s, but it could never make them good at it.

**E**arlier this year, Paramount Pictures released a publicity photo of Snake Eyes from the live-action *G.I. Joe: Rise of Cobra* movie, slated for a 2009 release. Encased in black leather and hidden behind a skintight mask, this mute ninja was one of *G.I. Joe*'s most iconic good guys. In the upcoming film, he will be played by Ray Park—the swashbuckling actor who starred in *Star Wars: Episode I—The Phantom Menace* as the evil Jedi Darth Maul.

That image generated hundreds of nostalgic web posts. On the most basic level, Snake Eyes fulfilled the karate fetish that gripped many boys in the '80s. Still, his character maintained a sophisticated, ambiguous relationship with the military in the *G.I. Joe* comics.

In the last issue of the *G.I. Joe: A Real American Hero* series, a teenager writes to Snake Eyes seeking enlistment advice. It is the perfect opportunity for the hawkish tendencies of the toy line to soar, but Hama takes a somber approach.

Snake Eyes responds with a letter about his experience in Vietnam. At the climax of the comic, the ninja crouches in a field of trampled flowers and dead soldiers, clinging to his enormous rifle like a life raft. "There is no honor or glory in the primary occupation of the soldier," Snake Eyes reflects. "There are only 'long stretches of interminable boredom punctuated by brief flurries of pure terror.' There is no winning. Ask anyone who has sat benumbed in the aftermath of battle... surrounded by stinking, ragged wet bodies of comrades hastily covered with ponchos... assailed by the unearthly screaming of the maimed."

That eerie passage had a lifelong influence on Major Philip Kost, a *G.I. Joe* aficionado and career soldier. On the Internet, Kost curates the five-hundred-plus membership on the *G.I. Joe Reloaded* discussion board. Most recently, he worked as military consultant for Devil's Due comics—the company that revived the *G.I. Joe* franchise in 2001.

Kost told me that he returned to Snake Eyes's letter over and over during his service. "I can understand it better now. [Larry Hama] laid it out there on the line. The intent of the letter was not to glorify anything or detract from anything. It was to tell the truth. This is how things will be if you take this route. Don't think it's

all going to be glory and honor, but on the other side, it's not the worst thing in the world either. Here it is, make your decision."

Kost and Rieman and Hartley all played war, but they were never brainwashed. They knew exactly what they were getting into before they enlisted, because *G.I. Joe* taught them. Even as this brand revived the military's image, American failures and the grim realities of war haunted the issues. Like a secret code embedded inside the heads of '80s kids—Dr. Mindbender's revenge, if you will—the inscrutable ninja named Snake Eyes ended nearly a decade of military worship with a sermon about the nightmares of combat.

It's easy to rebuke Hasbro for kindling warlike impulses in innocent minds. But that critique treats childhood like some Garden of Eden, miraculously isolated from adult hostilities. Children have never been peaceful. From the very first moment they shape a thumb and pointer-finger into a pistol or turn a stick into a sword, they are playing war. *G.I. Joe* taught children what that violence meant, helping them process the confusing legacy of Vietnam, the frightening conflicts of the Reagan era, and the unsettled conclusion of the first Gulf War.

Snake Eyes is the serpent in that peaceful garden, peddling apples from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil—a symbol that embodies both a curse and an enlightened intelligence. Next summer, a generation bewildered by the Iraq War will sample his forbidden fruit for the first time. ★

Snake Eyes' letter. Great textual evidence, which Boog partially quotes and partially

A real soldier's perspective on the Snake Eyes letter. Boog found this guy on the Internet and then interviewed him,