

# **THE ACTUAL FACTUAL STORY OF THE EARLY DECADES OF GI JOE PACKAGING DESIGN AND BRAND DEVELOPMENT**

By Ed Morrill

## **PREAMBLE**

GI JOE played an important role in my early career as a package designer and, in turn, I was influential in helping it become the great long - lasting success story it became both financially for Hasbro, and for the millions of kids who were eager to play with Joe and for the enthusiasts and collectors to this day.

Over the years I have been asked to be interviewed for books, publications, blogs and websites. While I have always enjoyed reminiscing about my role and take pride in what was accomplished, life moves on and many other challenges and opportunities took precedence. After retiring, my passion turned to photography and digital imaging.

My son Shawn has recently shared with me the passion that still exists in the GI JOE hobby and has shared with me links to amazing websites several collectors have created. After reading them, I noticed that they could really be enhanced by sharing my influence and perspective on the development of the brand through the formative years. I wanted to tell “my story” about GI JOE, but was not sure how I wanted to go about doing it. I typically am a very private person, but with both my wife and son’s encouragement, I decided now was the time! Joyce, my wife of 45 years has forgiven me for all those weekends when I was working on making the deadlines. An old family joke is that we live in “the house that GI JOE built.” I recently decided to part with a few of the original art paintings of GI JOE and the flood of memories that brought forth inspired me to put down some of those memories.

Some of the details of my involvement with Joe are known, but much is not and there are some misunderstandings as well. I hope to shed some light and share some facts.

## **FIRST, A BIT OF BACKGROUND**

As a kid, growing up in upstate N.Y., with comic books and movies but no digital anything, (not even a TV!), my playground was outside in the streets, backyards, and nearby fields. Our imagination was free to be, and we pictured ourselves as exciting characters in all kinds of adventures. (See photo 1).



1. (That's me, the Indian on the left)

When winter closed in, I began to create my own posable “action figures” out of modeling clay and the worlds they inhabited out of cardboard boxes. Cowboys and Indians in western towns, knights of the round table in medieval castles. In time they got to be pretty realistic and my parents, happy to see me so occupied, let me take over the basement for my ever-expanding imaginary worlds. At about the age of 11 or 12 I surprised everyone by winning first prize (a brand new shiny red Schwinn bicycle) in a major hobby contest in Albany with a diorama of an Indian village complete with flowing stream, teepees, and an Indian tribe all doing their thing, including a warrior coming home from the hunt with a deer over a horse's back. All researched for authenticity and hand painted. No coin or stamp collections for me! (See photo 2).



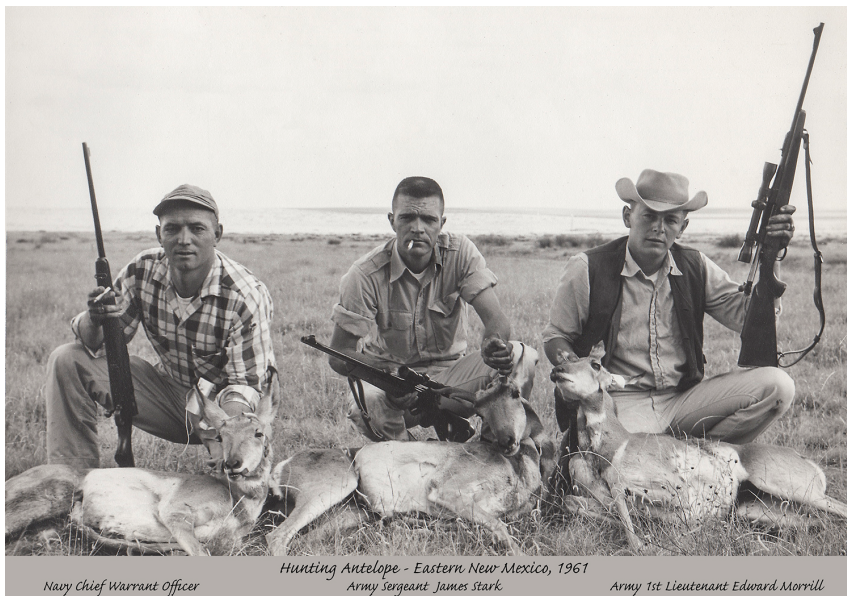
2. (my own posable figures)

As I got a little older our summers included time spent in the country on a working farm, friends of our family, and I was allowed to roam on my own far and wide. Taught to handle a gun and then trusted to use it, I would be off for hours at a time. The farmer was happy to see the varmint woodchuck population reduced! (See photo 3).



3. (guns and hunting at an early age)

Guns and hunting were a natural part of growing up in my family and I learned to appreciate the out of doors and responsibility of handling firearms from an early age. I learned patience and teamwork and formed many close bonds with my fellow hunters. (See photo 4).



4. (that's me on the right)

I graduated from Syracuse University with a BFA in Advertising Design, focusing on package design and photography. I joined R.O.T.C. which gave me the memorable experience of doing my basic training in a very hot summer at Ft. Bragg, North Carolina where the soldiers from the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne could train and instruct us future officers. They certainly delighted in the task!

My active duty was at Sandia Base New Mexico, a joint military facility, where as a First Lt. in the Army Signal Corps. with a top-secret clearance, I was O.I.C. of an extensive photo lab within the Atomic Weapons Training Group where I directed the work of soldiers, sailors and airmen. This took place during the Cuban missile crisis, a time of heightened military preparedness. (See photo 5).



5. (serving my country in the 1960s)

In 1965 I was a struggling young staff designer at Irving Werbin Associates in N.Y.C. I was just starting my career, having just completed three years active military duty. So, I was a rookie designer but not exactly a rookie in other respects.

In the late 1960's a couple of interesting fellows from Hasbro (Don Levine and Jerry Einhorn) came to visit us. They presented us with a toy called GI JOE. They had been instructed by the Hassenfelds to come to NY to find a design firm that could handle the task of redesigning the initial packaging they had, creating more exciting packaging and develop the visual branding for the line.

At the time our clients included companies in the cosmetics, hair products, liquor, food and recording industries.

I was very impressed by this toy called GI JOE. Irving Werbin, my boss and 18 yrs. my senior, was not. As the meeting progressed, I found myself taking the lead and imagining out loud how we could create packages which would communicate

the unique play value of this realistic, fully articulated boy's action figure. By the time they left I had convinced them to let us show them what we could do.

I set about finding the time and resources in our small firm to create mock ups of package concepts. Mostly in my after-hours time I made rough sets in our studio and photographed Joe in a range of environments. Deep sea diver in an aquarium, astronaut in space, jungle trooper. Thanks to the detailed outfits and pose-ability the resulting images were exceedingly life-like and the resulting comprehensives with greatly improved graphics communicated our vision and, coupled with my obvious excitement, convinced Hasbro to give us the go ahead to redesign the line and prepare mock-ups of the entire expanding line for toy fair 1970!

Ahhhhh, toy fair! As anybody in the toy business knows, toy fair was the defining moment in presenting all the new lines for the upcoming year. Make or break, you went all in! For us, it meant incredible pressure. 24/7 (not even an expression in those days), all hands on deck (there we go!)... Imagine a time when essentially the whole presentation was in the form of handmade 3D mock ups. No digital nothing. Photographs with press type copy, even hand lettering! Cut out, paste up logos, whatever. So, no matter how great your design and your creativity were, if you could not deliver on time, forget about it.

So, it required a great amount of organizational skills and use of resources. In those early years all the client input, all the directions, all the materials came by face-to-face meetings at Hasbro in Rhode Island, by overnight messenger, by mail, by telephone. Given the pressure on the folks at Hasbro to come up with all the rough sketches, early prototypes, package sizes, AND COPY! in the first place, it is hard to believe we always made it happen.

Having proved ourselves with Joe, and winning the confidence of Hasbro management, especially Stephen Hassenfeld, for whom the success of GI JOE was critically important, we were awarded many other assignments over the years. From the Your Baby product line to Playschool, from Arts & Crafts Today to Fresh & Fancy girls' cosmetic line, to Visionaries and Transformers. And many, many more. And who can forget "Weebles Wobble But They Can't Fall Down"?

Our approach to package design, branding and unified line development was much appreciated by Hasbro's advertising agency at the time, Benton & Bowles, and later by Griffen & Bacall when Tom Griffen and Joe Bacall left Benton & Bowles to start their own agency.

Of course, trust and secrecy were important ingredients. We were privy to endless trade secrets. A simple handshake with Stephen was all he asked for as our

guarantee that we would not work with any other toy company or divulge any precious information. We never again worked for another toy company.

## GI JOE PACKAGE DESIGN AND GRAPHICS

Our opportunity to develop the graphics for GI Joe in late 1969 came at a pivotable point in Joe's early history. Introduced in 1964 as a military man and enjoying a great deal of success through 1967, GI JOE sales had fallen on hard times primarily due to the anti-war backlash from the Vietnam era and he temporarily ceased to exist.

In 1970, with the new marketing direction to reintroduce Joe as a member of The Adventure Team, we were chosen as the firm that would create the image. At the same time, package design had been accepted as an important piece of Hasbro's overall marketing development plan, a perfect fit for our training and approach to problem solving.

Keeping the GI JOE name was undoubtedly a wise decision and initially we made only slight improvements to the logo in order to keep the equity. We created a strong impactful design format for the line that was more unified and allowed for maximum space to portray Joe in his exciting adventures. Finding the best possible illustrator was key and our search paid off with the selection of Don Stivers. Don was an amazing talent, able to translate my rough sketches and direction into exciting action-oriented images that the kids could relate to. After all, GI JOE was not a toy, he was real!

As always, logistics was a factor. Don was represented by Joe Mendola Artist Representatives, and it seemed like Mendola's staff was always at my door, waiting to hand carry my sketches, the product prototypes, and all other materials off to Don's studio in Connecticut and pick up the work he was doing to bring back to us in Manhattan the next morning. Not the easiest way to do business, but as Don and I soon developed an understanding of what was needed, and with his incredible productivity, the work flowed smoothly. (See photo 7 1970 Land Adventurer original illustration)



7. (original art by Don Stivers)

Important for me to mention that Hasbro had excellent art directors who greatly aided the over-all effort. Chief among these were Tom Lavelly in the 1970's and Matt Lizak in the 1980's. They really helped make it all happen.

Throughout the early and mid 70s Hasbro made many product improvements, life-like hair, Kung Fu Grip, life-like body, eagle eyes, great play set adventures, and we highlighted them all while steadily creating new graphics for the line. We were able to carefully redesign the GI JOE logo, adding dimension and action, and create a strong unified orange background and a graphic system that had shelf impact as well as a quality look befitting our quality product! It is safe to say that this packaging was not the typical "toy packaging" of that era. (See photo 6)



6. (graphics of 1975)

In 1975 a new enemy appeared in the form of OPEC. The large scale of Joe and all his other components required a huge amount of materials and as the manufacturing costs escalated, making a profit was proving ever more difficult. In 1977 that reality, coupled with intense competitive pressures, meant it was time again for GI JOE to take a leave of absence.

An attempt was made in 1978 to bring to market a line called Super Joe with a tag line “from the makers of GI Joe”. The figures were 8 ½ inches tall with a “one two punch” mechanism which allowed him to combat the beast Terron. Our design direction was to create a totally new image with distinctly different illustration style. Hasbro ran into significant production problems and could not ship enough product to cover the costs. Despite our best efforts and a good push of promotion, sales suffered. Sadly, and after almost 15 yrs., this time Joe was really gone.

## **GI JOE: A REAL AMERICAN HERO**

In the early 80’s Hasbro’s ad agency Griffin Bacal, Inc., veterans of the early years of GI Joe, convinced Hasbro that a new line of 3 ¾ inch figures with the theme “A Real American Hero “with GI Joe fighting for freedom everywhere, would be the way to bring Joe back to life. Great advertising and promotion and product with superior features (snap on accessories, great articulation) and a concept of unique characters with special capabilities, would tempt the kids to collect them all, their very own strike force! What was needed now was great packaging.



In 1982, Hasbro once again turned to us, and we were happy to welcome our old friend GI Joe back. With a clean slate it was an opportunity to create break-through graphics.

The new GI JOE logo was both bold and patriotic. The hand lettered logo was italicized to give it a sense of motion and action and the bold red, white, and blue stripes coming off the logo served as speed lines as well as a graphic element that could be extended across the top of the package becoming one of many unifying devices. The space above the cap J was now fitted with a blue star. We now had our star and stripes and were ready for action!

What would be the background color? Our study of the marketplace and our deep experience with GI Joe led us to the choice of a solid color black. It was both masculine, unique on the shelf, and would not compete with the red, white, and blue logo. And of course, it was perfect for giving our explosion maximum impact! (See photo 7)



7. (face panel Infantry Trooper)

## **THE EXPLOSION**

What better device could there be but a burst of color highlighting every figure and vehicle? It was exciting to be sure but so useful in so many other ways. Since each explosion was unique, it was flexible and could be configured to fit the needs and shape of each individual package. And what a boost it gave the illustrations, not just in excitement, but in giving the illustrator the license to add white, yellow, orange, and red highlights to each figure and vehicle in a very believable way.

## **THE ARTWORK**

As in the past, we did our homework and found Hector Garrido. His name is now well known in the world of GI Joe and his talents are rightly considered to be important to the great success of GI Joe from the 1980's.

The process was similar to the past. Hasbro would provide us with as much product information as was available at the time. I would review the whole line of characters, or as many as were available in the heat of the development battle, and I would identify what made each one unique. What was the personality, the weapons, the back packs, etc. and what would be the best pose that would show it all off while differentiating each figure from all the others in the line? For the vehicles, what was the best angle to view the oncoming jeep to show its special details yes, but also to look at it in a way to give it a sense of motion and impact. Often a "worm's eye view" worked well with forced perspective to make you feel part of the action. We exaggerated and took artistic license because the actual products were always shown behind the blister pack or in detailed photography on the back panels.

Working up my rough sketches for Hector was always fun and surely my childhood play and imagination was kicking in. And maybe my memories from basic training of a tank coming at us was part of it also.

Hector would then work his magic and breathe real life into his art. His characters were real, with facial expressions that were intriguing and commanded your attention. You did not visualize the figure as it was in molded plastic with only a bit of detail, but as the real-life character that Hector created. They jumped off the package, propelled by the explosion, and into the imagination of countless kids of the day and for many to this very day as well! (See photo 8 original art).



(Recondo, Jungle Trooper - original art by Hector Garrido)

A Real American Hero was an enormous hit. The combination of exciting TV commercials, fan clubs, marketing direction and compelling packaging graphics sent Joe to the top of the toy sale charts. 1983 brought an expanded line, with the swivel – arm battle grip and sales doubled. In mid 1984 I merged my company, then Werbin & Morrill, with a larger independent design firm and former competitor to become Coleman, LiPuma Segal & Morrill Inc. (CLS&M), thus providing a greater range of resources and capabilities. As 1984, 85, and 86 rolled on, fantastic new characters and vehicles were created, new features added. The graphics were modified to give the logo a three-dimensional look and the explosion became a linear horizontal pattern. GI Joe became the best-selling toy in America!

### **ALL GOOD THINGS...**

By the late 1980's the landscape was changing. Hasbro management was changing. We were all saddened by Stephen Hassenfeld's untimely death at the age of 47 and we all lost a real leader. Not surprisingly, as Hasbro's inside art department grew there were aspirations to do more of the GI Joe work in house and the sheer volume of product presented many opportunities for that to happen. This coincided with discussions at CLS&M about the stresses and strains on our company in terms of manpower devoted to Hasbro, especially the pressure on me to be so involved "hands on". I needed more time to handle new business and grow our existing accounts. And so, after almost 20 years, we all decided to part ways.

CLS&M prospered in the ensuing years, we grew in terms of staff and new clients, and we embraced the new digital technology to become a leader in utilizing computers in all facets of the design and production processes.

In 1996 I took a deep breath and decided to devote my time to my own personal pursuits. I was excited by the world of digital imaging and the only way I could truly learn and explore was to do it full time, so I handed in my keys, sold my share of the business, and retired. Whew! What a great ride it had been!

Looking back on my life with GI Joe, I would never have imagined that those images we were creating would make such an impression on the kids of the time and have such a lasting impact and be so revered and collected with such passion by those same "kids" of today. It gives me great pleasure to have been a part of it and I salute them all!

(See photo 9)



9. (Retired and pretty happy about it)