

TURMOIL IN THE TOYBOX: The Astounding True Story of Playtime's Greatest Heroes! Part I: Old Soldiers Never Die...

By Hooper_X

In late 1963, shortly before his fateful trip to Dallas, President Kennedy authorized the creation of a clandestine special-missions strikeforce. Headed by Lt. Joseph Colton, the team would be America's secret first line of offense AND defense for the rest of the Cold War. Code named "G.I. Joe," the unit trained rebels in Soviet-allied countries, did a variety of still-classified black-bag operations, and generally served as a thorn in the side of international Communism.

The military's counter-intelligence program decided to test a new theory with the G.I. Joe team. Aware that the Hassenfeld brothers' toy company was already planning to release a "male action" doll to serve as a boy-centered analogue to Mattel's wildly successful girls' fashion line, itself based on the life and loves of famed Manhattan socialite Barbara Millicent Rogers (later Rogers-Dahl), federal agents contacted the company and delivered a proposal. The Hassenfeld brothers were authorized to use the name G.I. Joe, as well as heavily altered and modified versions of declassified mission plans to use in storylines. By making the public widely aware of G.I. Joe, but presenting him as a fictional character, the secrecy of the program could be insured, as those who claimed to have knowledge of "the REAL G.I. Joe" would be viewed as lunatics. The program had already worked quite well in Britain, disseminating top secret spy activity both via the "James Bond" novels and the (later) "Action Man" toyline*.

Colton resigned from the Joe team (and the military) in 1970, citing displeasure with Nixon's mis-management of the Vietnam conflict and the horrors that resulted. Colton was, however, a man of action, and formed a sort of loose-knit freelance consultant agency. For a price (whether actual financial reward, scientific knowledge, or simply the thrill of the mission), Colton or one of his elite experts, would climb the highest mountain, dive the deepest sea, explore the darkest cave or most remote hidden city. The group was known by the nickname "The Adventure Team." Confirmed Adventure Team agents include Dr. Angus MacGyver, John "Hannibal" Smith and his four-man team (both before and after their stockade escape), Mike Power; the so-called "Atomic Man", ace pilot (and later, astronaut) Major Matthew Mason**, model/dancer/mistress-of-disguise Tiffany Taylor, the elite commando known only as "Solid Snake", whose rescue of Colton from a terrorist group was loosely chronicled in the game "Bionic Commando", and for a brief while, the Hong Kong Cavalier known only as "Rawhide". The Adventure Team encountered everything from international espionage to lost Egyptian treasure to the Mangani, and came out on top. As the team progressed, so did the toyline. Hasbro introduced figures of "Super Joe" and the "Adventure Team," again basing Joe's exploits on the real-life agents, this time working from Colton's personal files. The success of the Adventure Team inspired imitators, both real and play, including a former Adventure Team member known only as Big Jim who, following a disagreement with Colton, formed his own agency, the P.A.C.K. (Professional Agents and Crime Killers), former secret agent Mike Hazard, brother to soldier-of-fortune Marc Hazzard (with the alternate spellings used primarily for dramatic (and ethnocentric) effect, as the family's proper name is in fact the Arabic-derived "Hasard"), and the actor/adventurer/master of disguise known only as Captain Action.

Things came full-circle in the late seventies, when the NSA approached Colton, and asked the Adventure Team to send a freelancer in to a mysterious uncharted island known in black-ops circles as "Spy Island." The Spy Island mission uncovered some disturbing information. There was a new and quickly growing player in the terror business. An American-based organization, with branches in Europe, South America, and Asia, known only as "Cobra." Cobra had access to bleeding-edge military technology, well-trained operatives, sizable financial accounts, and a mysterious leader, known only as the Cobra Commander.

Following this discovery, the US intelligence community went into overdrive, looking for any info as to exactly who was running Cobra and where they got their funding. This much we know is true: The man known as Cobra Commander once owned his own business, possibly a car dealership, in a small American town. Already a bit of a sad sack despite an immense amount of personal charisma, the death of his brother in a drunken-driving accident drove him further and further into depression and isolation. He lost his dealership. His wife left him and took his young

son with her.

His brother was not the only victim of the fatal crash. The entire family of a young Vietnam soldier, headed to the airport to greet him on his return home, also died in the crash. Because of this, the future Commander turned his blame to the military, then to the government on a wider scale. After all, if that soldier's family hadn't been in his brother's way, he might have lived. If the soldier hadn't gone to war, his family wouldn't have been going to the airport. If there was no war... or better, no government, then his brother would still be alive. One night, he snapped. The only way to fix his life would be to overthrow the American government and to set himself up as ruler. Then he'd show everyone who was the boss.

Taking the last of his money, the Commander invested in shady stock dealings, pyramid schemes, and other illegal scams, amassing large amounts of money within a short time. He eventually hired twin brothers, Wall Street stockbrokers with a taste for sexual sadism and violence, to be his financial advisors. Their true names are unknown, but it is believed they may be connected to Patrick Bateman, whose descent into madness was chronicled in Bret Easton Ellis' "American Psycho." With the Twins' aid, the Commander soon parlayed his small investments into a sizeable fortune.

He recruited his agents everywhere; from street gangs to military washouts to militia groups. By telling every potential Cobra troop exactly what they wanted to hear, and then enforcing strict regimentation, the Commander pulled disparate factions together into a cohesive army. (For instance, one unit could be comprised of white supremacists who were told they were fighting for racial purity, while the next unit were radical Zionists, anarchists, or any other manner of violent idealists, hence the organization's insistence that all troopers wear long sleeves, gloves, and facemasks even in recreational situations, despite the obvious security risks.)

Weapons were primarily obtained from a Scottish group, headed by the man referred to as "Destro." This is obviously a pseudonym, and I hold that his surname is most likely Undershaft, and his business is the modern-day version of his ancestors' Undershaft Cannon Works, as seen in George Bernard Shaw's "Major Barbara." It *is* true, however, that "Destro" did wear a mask in all business dealings, both to protect his identity, as well as due to the fact that the mask had a host of technological advances contained within, similar to that of Victor Von Doom, an occasional client. I also hold that the 19th century criminal known as "The Fantom" was in fact a member of Clan Destro, as evidenced by his family's trademark masks, as well as his attempt at developing an early form of biological superweapons via an attack on a motley crew of British paranormals, exactly the kind of profit-driven weaponeering the family was famous for. Indeed, as the story goes, the first members of "Clan Destro" to don the trademark masks were being punished for selling weapons to both sides during the War of the Roses.

As Cobra grew, it developed more and more branches. An espionage division was formed, headed up by a minor European noble who had a savvy for disguise and infiltration. Codenamed "The Baroness," she was often Cobra's means of stealing vital information. Her true nationality and identity are still a mystery. As a teenager, she often accompanied her older brother on his own adventures around the world, learning much about languages and cultures. Her brother was killed in a Vietnam arms deal gone wrong, which fueled her hatred of the American government. According to US military incident reports, GIs happened upon an arms deal between her brother (secretly an agent of Destro) and the Vietcong, and the brother was killed in the ensuing firefight.

Cobra's head of Research and Design was the self-titled "Doctor Mindbender." Records indicate that he was a kindly if not successful orthodontist, who spent his spare time experimenting with pain-alleviating technology. One of these devices backfired, and radically altered his personality. He turned his attention towards mind-control and torture devices, and became something of a freelance interrogator-for-hire before winding up with Cobra. I have reason to believe that his birth name was Joseph Frankenstein, and that he is the younger brother of Dr. Frederick Frankenstein. Frankenstein/Mindbender followed in his ancestors' footsteps by creating a genetic superman, codenamed "Serpent or", as the prototype for an army of biologically superior warriors. This story was blown somewhat out of proportion when fictionalized, with Mindbender creating Serpentor as Cobra's supreme leader and utilizing the DNA of dead military geniuses to do so. While "Serpentor" was indeed taught a great deal of military strategy and theory, the idea that the long-expired DNA of dead generals could be used to create a new life form with the combined knowledge of said generals is utterly ludicrous.***

Cobra Command also enlisted the aid of several notable international mercenaries in its quest for world domination. The Australian, Major Sebastian Bludd, is almost assuredly a descendant of Captain Peter Blood, while the saboteur known as "Firefly" is a virtual enigma. It is known that Firefly is Southeast Asian, most likely Vietnamese, and that he knows several martial arts, including styles practiced only by the Koga ninja clan.

The man called Zartan is likewise a mystery. It is known that he uses advanced holographic technology, in combination with almost uncanny acting ability and extreme skill with the crafting of latex masks, to disguise himself as virtually anyone. It is also known that he is indeed the leader of a gang of motorcycle ruffians known as the Dreadnoks. (Allegedly, one of the founding members WANTED to call the group the Dreadnaughts, but couldn't quite spell it right.) Most of the band are common grade Australian criminals, possibly distant relations to some British thug of days past, but none of real note. The one exception, Richard "Buzzer" Blinken-Smythe, is worth discussing. Blinken-Smythe was a British sociology student who traveled to Australia to research biker gangs for his thesis. Once there, he abandoned the rules of academe for chaos and the open road. His already radically leftist mindset went overboard, spurring him to take up a chainsaw against the impotent machines of modern society. I have reason to believe that Blinken-Smythe is the same young sociology major and student radical who shared a flat with a punk, a hippie, and a sex-starved yuppie, and whose misadventures were related (albeit in an extremely exaggerated fashion) in the comedy series "The Young Ones." Blinken-Smythe's egomania, and both the bullying manner with which he treats subordinates and the cowardly way he treats superiors are in line with the aforementioned sociology student.

Due to the threat presented by COBRA, and specifically the group's attempts to gain control of nuclear weapons, the military organized Special Counter-Terrorist Group Delta. The "G.I. Joe" code name was dusted off and given to the new unit. Once again, Hasbro started pressing toys based loosely on the real-life military personnel, continuing in the same path of disinformation as they did decades before. Of course, SCTG Delta was considerably smaller than the G.I. Joe topline suggested, nor did they have a space shuttle, or a Mobile Command Center, or what have you. In fact, the Joe team had very few actual vehicles to its name, as, due to its special nature, it had access to virtually any existing military equipment, and the team was often used to "break in" experimental technology.

Precious little is known about the actual members of SCTG Delta, as the vast majority of the mission files are still heavily classified, including virtually all of the personnel data. For the sake of the media and topline, multiple individuals were conflated into single figures and vice versa, and single individuals were often represented in various forms. Indeed, it is a commonly known fact that a vast majority of the file names and facial features of the toys based on SCTG Delta are in fact those of Hasbro employees, and others are clearly jokes (for example, a Coast Guard sailor named "Skip A. Stone"), so it is safe to assume that little, if anything of the information presented regarding the members of the 1980's G.I. Joe team is verifiable or accurate. Some clues are present. For example, the agent who is chronicled as "Scarlett" is in fact, as her faux bio presents, a descendant of Scarlett O'Hara. Her actual birth name is unknown to me, but it is unlikely that her surname is in fact O'Hara, and is more likely "Butler." Similarly, it is known that the Joe agent chronicled as "Quick Kick" was in fact a contemporary of Shang-Chi, Master of Kung Fu, possibly even a pupil of the martial-arts legend, and had at least passing knowledge of the adventurers Iron Fist and Elektra.

At some point, probably around 1982 or 3, SCTG Delta ran afoul of the Cybertronian factions then engaged in a secret war on Earth. Exactly what transpired is unknown, but possibly involved the destruction of several Cybertronians, as well as vast amounts of property damage. (The group referred to as RAAT in the Transformers' comic book series is most likely an analogue for SCTG Delta, given that the U.S. government later enlisted the aid of Hasbro to cover up the Cybertronian wars, with the help of some piloted-robot molds purchased from a Japanese company and given a backstory loosely based on actual events) What definitely happened is, despite the best attempts of the Autobots to prevent it, Cybertronic transformational technology fell into the hands of the U.S. Government and the Undershaft Munitions Company (AKA Destro/MARS). Both factions, following the Autobot style of espionage, implanted the technology into conventional vehicles, mostly automobiles, resulting in seemingly-ordinary cars and trucks that could, at the flip of a switch, convert into heavily armored strike vehicles. The U.S. Military

took several SCTG Delta members, specifically those familiar with covert work and experimental weaponry, and outfitted them as the Mobile Armor Strike Command, or MASC. "Destro" sold several of the resultant vehicles to Cobra, under the codename "Project: Venom", as the vehicles and their operators were meant to be inserted into everyday society to slowly poison it from within. A fair amount of the MASK toylines and media is fiction, the result of Kenner employees actually witnessing combat between MASC and Project: Venom agents, and basing a toylines around the scenario, one which the U.S. government initially had no desire to publicize. (Of course, the government eventually intervened, which may explain the later MASK stories, which focused entirely on MASK and VENOM racing each other for no good reason, as opposed to engaging in any sort of combat) Unfortunately, the Cybertronian parts were impossible to duplicate using then-current technology, and most of the MASC and Project: Venom vehicles were crippled or outright destroyed within the space of about five years. Some of the remaining vehicles, heavily damaged, were later stolen by a group of eco-terrorists and modified with experimental nanotechnology, forcing the government to restore the remaining MASC equipment, resulting in a brief renewal of modular vehicular combat in the early 1990s, as loosely chronicled in the VOR-TECH series. This technology was further cannibalized and revived one more time at the dawn of the 21st century by the genius engineer nicknamed "Tonka Joe" and utilized in a variety of high-tech rescue vehicles, some of which are seeing limited field use today.****

Cobra was essentially destroyed in the late 1980s, following several pitched battles. The majority of the group's command structure was captured or killed, and its forces scattered, demoralized, and/or apprehended. Hasbro attempted to continue the successful toy line past the point that SCTG Delta stopped supplying them with new information, leading to such strange tales as the Joes fighting environmental polluters and drug dealers, stories that have some kernel of truth, but likely involved a government agency other than SCTG Delta.

By the mid-1990's, SCTG Delta, as portrayed in the G.I. Joe media, was disbanded, most of the agents either returning to normal duty or retiring to civilian life. However, the upsurge in Islamic fundamentalism in the recent past may well have prompted a revival of the organization. It is also possible that some or most of the former Cobra command structure could have survived or escaped incarceration and reformed the group. It *is* known that the mercenary group SKAR (Soldiers of Kaos Anarchy and Ruin) received a fair bit of funding from surviving Cobra command, enough to fuel a brief outbreak of violence in the mid 1990's before the unit's leader, the self-proclaimed "General Blitz" was captured and executed.

Regardless, G.I. Joe is back in action on toy and comic book shelves across the United States, and it is the belief of the author that Joe Colton or perhaps a former member of SCTG Delta is serving as Hasbro's primary source for current storyline concepts, producing new characters and adventures again based on true events, but with a definite veneer of fiction.

As an end note, international retellings of SCTG Delta's stories take on varying degrees of accuracy, with the British "Action Force" stories featuring gritty military realism, while the line's Indian counterpart is as fantastic as possible, often bordering on the ridiculous. Much of what was shown in the international stories must be taken with a grain of salt, especially the "revelation" in the U.K. that long-time terrorist Baron Ironblood eventually "became" Cobra Commander, when in fact the truth is that Cobra eventually engulfed Ironblood's organization, relegating him to an administrative position over the European forces. Similarly, the South American terrorist armies best translated to English as "The Enemy" and "The Invaders" were also subsumed into the larger Cobra organization.

There IS some truth, however, to the inclusion of the so-called "Superhero" figure in the Indian GIJoe line. On a mission to the subcontinent, SCTG Delta agents worked briefly alongside the Daxamite mutant, raised by Indian parents and given the name Shekhar, whose adventures were (ineptly) chronicled in the Bollywood production of "Suparman". ****

Whatever his current whereabouts, G.I. Joe is one old soldier who shows no signs of dying OR fading away.

*At least some of the original British "Action Man" toys and adventures are in fact based on the individual(s) known as "James Bond" or "Agent 007." However, in the 1980s, the U.K. established their own version of SCTG Delta, dubbed "Action Force" in the fictionalized version. Action Man/Force and the G.I. Joe team crossed paths a handful of times in the fiction, but real-

life teamups between the two agencies were far more commonplace.

**Mason, being a shrewd businessman in addition to a talented pilot, licensed his name and likeness, and struck a lucrative deal with a rival toy company, much to Colton's amusement. Of course, Mason's toy adventures were far more fantastic than his true-life space exploits... or were they?

***Of course, Cobra was known to have at least one mystically-inclined member of its command staff, the shaman and hypnotist known as "Crystal Ball", and members of the "Destro" clan were known to partake in the worship of Lovecraftian horrors, so perhaps "Serpentor" could have possessed the very *souls* of history's greatest leaders, something clearly too horrific for a "children's" product to discuss.

****"Tonka Joe" also has produced groundbreaking results in the world of modular technology, creating a remarkable new breed of vehicles that can travel to a work site, be disassembled completely, and then reassembled in a matter of hours into a completely different craft or even an outpost. It is rumored that some form of Cybertronic technology was used in the process, but if so, Joe refuses to admit it. Several of the designs are seeing currently limited use in military and civilian rescue applications.

*****Shekhar is a mutant in that he is immune to the lead poisoning that would otherwise be fatal for him. He, like his more famous American counterpart, was abandoned on Earth as a child. His parents were explorers whose ship crashed in India, his mutation allowing him to survive the atmosphere that killed his parents. Raised by a middle-class couple as their own son, he saved the Indian subcontinent on several occasions, at least once in the company of an invisible adventurer who calls himself "Mr. India" and the alien known as Shaaktiman. He did occasionally dress in a costume patterned after his more-famous American counterpart, and it is reported that Shekhar's example may have led to an Indian Spider-Man as well. (In addition, of course, to the Turkish terrorist and Japanese hero who both patterned themselves after the Web-Slinger, in a classic example of the so-called "Great Detective Syndrome.")