



Gerald Prime takes his father, Harold Prime, and writer Jeni Foster for a ride on his 1943 Zundapp Krad 750 motorbike and sidecar at Duxford.



Back and front views of a limited edition set of World War I figures created to replicate the Frontline logo artwork (left) in honor of the company's 20th anniversary.

# 20 YEARS AT THE FRONT

Text: Jeni Foster Photos: Andy Foster and Frontline Figures

With Frontline Figures celebrating its 20th anniversary, Jeni Foster chronicles the company's climb to a leading place in the toy soldier world and looks ahead to its future

Frontline Figures, a Hong Kong company founded on a friendship and business partnership, has been celebrating its 20th anniversary year in 2004. The two very talented men behind the 54-mm metal toy soldiers and complementary dioramas are Gerard Prime and Howard Swales. To mark the two-decade milestone, Gerard agreed to meet and let me in on how it all began.

## DESTINATION: DUXFORD

Frontline's figures have quality and details that I have often admired, and as an artist envied.

I met Gerard Prime's family, the faces behind Frontline's U.K. and European retail distribution, for the first time at last June's British Toy Soldier & Figure Show in London. His parents, Harold and Bobby, and his brother, Martin, manned the stall.

As my photographer husband Andy and I stood and chatted about the show with them, it felt as if we could have

stayed all day. We exchanged e-mail addresses. I couldn't have been more pleased than when Harold agreed to ask Gerard if he would meet me for this special 20th anniversary article for TS&MF.

Gerard and his wife, Emilie, flew over from Hong Kong to Great Britain in August for, among other things, an Aug. 8 show at Duxford, where he displays some of his own collection of restored military vehicles.

The height of summer, even a British summer, led to a scorching hot day in Cambridgeshire. As the airfield began to fill with people and vehicles, Andy and I began to worry that we wouldn't find Gerard and his father.

Asking around, we eventually found them with a small group of German military motorbikes and sidecars. One of them belonged to Gerard and it is normally on display inside the Land Warfare Museum alongside his World War II German Schwimmwagen. Sitting on the motorbike, a 1943 Zundapp

Krad 750, was simply too good a photo opportunity to miss (Wallace and Gromit here we come).

Frontline has produced a set of figures with a Schwimmwagen based on a classic photograph taken near Malmedy, Belgium, during the Battle of the Bulge. It is one of my favorite toy soldier sets. Gerard kindly took us into the museum to show us his own restored vehicle.

In addition, we just had to stroll on down to the other end of the airfield to have a closer look at the famous Sally B, the only flying B-17 in the United Kingdom. The WWII Flying Fortress was the star of the 1990 movie "Memphis Belle."

The film was shot only a short distance from my home when I was a teenager. I saw the bomber fly quite low over our back garden. It was an amazing sight.

As the sun climbed higher in the sky, it got too hot to be comfortable for long. We all decided to head off to the cafe in the American Air Museum, where we could sit out of the sun and chat.

Its huge dome is skirted by etched glass panels with planes representing each plane lost with its crew, ranging from one to 10 men. Actual aircraft are displayed suspended from the ceiling as if in flight. And here it was that we sat cold lemonade in hand and talked toy soldiers.

## TOY SOLDIER FAMILY HERITAGE

Many people know about the metamorphosis of Gerard Prime and Howard Swales from architectural model makers to toy soldier designers and manufacturers. Some might be aware of their ventures into the field of advertising props perhaps (they have even made a 12-inch Malteser malted milk ball!).

Less well known perhaps is that toy soldiers are in the blood of Gerard Prime, a third generation manufacturer. His mother, Bobby, used to paint soldiers when she was only a young girl -- soldiers made by her father, Granddad Minson as he is affectionately known, as long ago as the 1930s.



Napoleonic figures by Frontline.