Wild Bill Stealey
Cofounder, MicroProse Software

Wild Bill Stealey and Sid Meier cofounded MicroProse Software in 1982. Their flagship title, Hellcat Ace, was the product of a bet. Although the industry struggled during this time, MicroProse successfully developed and published simulation games, producing a number of hits for Atari, Commodore 64, and other early platforms. The studio initially created well-received, military-themed simulation games, such as Silent Service and F-15 Strike Eagle, but by 1991, the company had released three of the best-selling franchises in video-game history: Sid Meier’s Pirates!, Railroad Tycoon, and Sid Meier’s Civilization.

In 1989, Sid Meier and MicroProse changed their relationship. Sid began developing games under contract to MicroProse for advances and royalties, instead of being a partner in the company. Wild Bill continued as chief executive officer until the company was acquired by Spectrum Holobyte in 1993. Stealey exited MicroProse after the Spectrum acquisition, and the next year, he started a new simulation game company, Interactive Magic. Meier and two others cofounded Firaxis Games in 1996. Stealey sold Interactive Magic in 1999 and purchased back the company three years later, bestowing the studio with a new name: iEntertainment Network.

Ramsay: Can you tell me about the events in your life that led to the starting up of MicroProse?

Stealey: We better start at the beginning. I went to the Air Force Academy, where I wanted to be a great fighter pilot. I got to be a pilot even with
glasses, and flew airplanes for six years on active military duty and then for ten more years in the Air National Guard. Initially, I was an instructor pilot in T-37 aircraft. After that, I was a C-5A pilot and decided C-5A Galaxy aircraft were not the way to make general, so I decided to leave active duty, fly in the Guard, and go to graduate school.

I was on my way to law school when another Air Force Academy graduate asked me, “What kind of lawyer do you want to be?” I did not know what kind of lawyers there were! He suggested that to be a business leader, I needed to go to business school to get an MBA instead. I went to the Wharton School of Business in Philadelphia. I was already a little older than most of the kids coming out of college or in graduate school because I was 30 years old, already a captain in the Air Force, and already had some significant leadership responsibilities. I then went to two consulting firms. I went to Cresap McCormick & Paget in New York City. Later, I joined McKinsey & Company, the world-renowned consulting firm.

I found out that I was a smart guy, but I wasn’t a very good consultant. I’m not patient. You have to be patient to be a consultant because you have to listen to people talk for years, and not do anything. You can bill them by the minute. I’m not very good at waiting to get the answer done. Whenever there’s a problem, I want to solve it now and go on to the next one. I know there are going to be more problems tomorrow. I spent three years at McKinsey, and then worked for a client in Hunt Valley, Maryland, called General Instrument.

General Instrument was a technology company that built terminals for race-tracks and state lotteries. They had a lot of software people, a lot of hardware people, and I was the director of strategic planning for a $250 million division. My job was to make sure we did strategic plans that we could take up to New York and give to corporate. They basically were doing everything by hand.

I’m a smart, lazy person, so at Cresap McCormick, I invented a software planning system that all of our clients could use on dial-up—believe it or not—dial-up time-sharing. I don’t know if your readers will know what that means, but you would dial into a remote computer using an acoustical modem. I had programmed financial models on this remote computer, and we could run financial scenarios with income statements and balance sheets even before there were any personal computer spreadsheets. We had made a sophisticated financial-planning model on the time-sharing system.

I decided to bring a similar system over to General Instrument, but they wouldn’t buy any computing time. They didn’t want to spend the money on