# eview: F117A Stealth Fighter 2.0

by Douglas Kiang

Type: Strategy
Publisher: MicroProse Software, Inc. (410/771-1151)
Retail Price: $69.95
Street Price: $43.00
Requires: 68030 Macintosh or better, 4 megs RAM, system 6.0.7 or later. (68040 recommended)
Protection: Manual based

ne of the perks of this job is the opportunity to try out beta versions of new games, often months ahead of their release date. This probably somewhat excuses my roommate's reaction upon seeing F-117A Stealth Fighter 2.0: "Gee, that'll be a really cool game when it's finished."

"This IS finished," I declared, indignantly. "This is the Macintosh version of one of the most popular MS-DOS flight simulators ever. I used to play F-19 Stealth Fighter all night long on my old IBM 286 in college. It's probably the single greatest reason I failed Chem 101." However, after eagerly loading up F-117A Stealth Fighter for the Macintosh, and experiencing that first rush of nostalgia, in the end I was left wondering why this program felt so much like a huge step backward rather than the great leap forward that it was at one time.

Pushing the Envelope. PC-based flight simulators have come a long way since the earliest days of Falcon for the Macintosh Plus and Microsoft's original Flight Simulator for MS-DOS machines. Each successive release, it seems, pushes the envelope just a bit further; this is the way that progress is made. The original F-19 Stealth Fighter flight sim garnered much praise when it was released six years ago for the IBM PC; aside from the typical air-ground and air-air missions, it provided the additional challenge of maintaining a low radar profile to "sneak in" below enemy radar to strike at SAM sites and other targets to render the enemy deaf, blind, and defenseless.

F-117A Stealth Fighter for the Macintosh has much to live up to. Not only is it a port of a

fairly old game, but it also comes on the heels of some very good modern fighter simulations for the Macintosh. How does it fare? The frame rate and animation are slow, the program is plagued by numerous sound and graphics glitches, and the interface is unwieldy even for those who are familiar with the original version of the game. Still, the game concept is a good one, emphasizing careful mission planning and mastery of stealthy techniques to accomplish your objectives. The bottom line is that F-117 is certainly a playable game, but this version has left itself a lot of room for improvement.

Read Me First! One of F-117's greatest strengths is the accompanying manual. This is a professional, well-written book that explains the game in detail, and offers some basic information about stealth technology in general and how best to use it in the game to avoid detection. It includes a section on tips and strategies, as well—in short, everything you might find in a successful "third party" strategy guide—and a copy of it is included with every game. This is a step in the right direction; I wish more companies put as much thought and care into designing a helpful, well-designed manual to accompany a flight sim. Some of the details in the F-117 manual are not accurate (a few of the numerous keyboard commands are mislabeled) because this is the same manual that went out with the MS-DOS version, but any Macintosh-specific commands are listed on a separate sheet. F-117 does have a lot of different keyboard commands, by the way—I do wish that MicroProse had included a keyboard overlay, as in the MS-DOS version.

our Mission, Should You Choose to Accept It. Another of F-117's strengths is its great variety of mission variables. It is very rare that you will ever fly exactly the same mission twice. You can adjust the computer opponents, the rules of engagement, the type of mission, and you can fly many different missions in any one of nine regions in the world. These parameters all

keep the game fresh and anything but predictable.

The newest additions to the F-117 "world" are Korea, Cuba, and the Desert Storm area of operations. These are included with the game and complement some of the more dated regions such as the North Cape (against the Soviet Union) and Libya. In each of these regions players can choose to fly air-to-air missions or strike missions. A typical air-to-air mission might involve the destruction of an IL-76 AEW&C plane or a group of fighter/bombers. A strike mission could involve anything from taking out a SAM site to night equipment drops over enemy territory, to clandestine photography of secret headquarters.

In order to photograph a site, you must fly over it, maneuver the plane so the camera sight intersects the building, then click the shutter. (It helps at this point to yell, "Smile!") The photos are important because they will be used later on to guide bombers to the building, but I have never been able to figure out why they don't just have you drop a bomb on it and be done with it. I mean, if you have to fly out there and get close enough to take a photo... In order to deliver equipment you must land at a secret airbase in enemy territory, unload the equipment, and take off again. These types of missions are unique and add a new element of excitement to the game, emphasizing the development of stealth tactics over weapons proficiency.

You can also choose different rules of engagement, ranging from Cold to Limited to Conventional War. Under Cold War conditions secrecy is crucial, so you must avoid a radar ID at all costs and you gain points the longer you remain undetected in enemy airspace. During a Conventional War, all bets are off and it's open season. Enemy intelligence is adjustable and at the highest levels expect to face a swarm of enemy fighters whenever you launch a missile and announce your presence.

When starting a mission you see a detailed, animated display of the mission briefing, a written "memo" detailing enemy activities in the area, and an interactive map displaying your primary and secondary targets and the status of individual radar sites along your flight path. Using this map you can plot a course that will minimize your radar profile by flying directly toward pulse radar sites and perpendicular to Doppler radar sites. This strategy takes advantage of the weak points in each radar system to allow you to sneak right by.

"Hey, buddy! Only what you see on the shelf!" The weapons selection screen allows you to choose from a variety of air-air and air-ground weapons, ranging from the AMRAAM to the Penguin anti-ship missile to the HARM anti-radar missile. All of these various missiles are represented graphically along with a short description of the targets against which the weapon is most effective. Just as in the MS-DOS version, this simulation is very heavily weighted toward the Maverick AGM-65 as the all-around weapon. As a result the Maverick is usually all you will need for 90% of the ground targets, which does seem a little unrealistic.

In addition, no matter how high the enemy skill level, it is still far too easy to gun down enemy aircraft. Generally, shots fired anywhere around an enemy plane will kill it immediately. In addition, one missile hit will automatically down most every target in the game. Often it pays off to simply load up all four bays with Mavericks and go hunting for ground targets, gunning down enemy fighters as they approach.

All of the preliminary animations and briefing orders are very impressive, up to and including your trip out to the hangar in which you see a great animation of your F-117's cockpit canopy descending over your head. The graphics are quite detailed, and the F-117 cockpit is detailed yet easy to read in the heat of battle due to the large numbers, colorful buttons and two graphic displays that provide a tactical map and a targeting display. Most of the artwork has been redone in 640 x 480 x 256 color, and looks quite sharp. All of this impressive

buildup leads to a big letdown, however, once you actually take off.

The most noticeable problem right away is the frame rate. Even on a Quadra 650 the action "jumps" along at the highest detail level. On an LCIII the game is virtually unplayable on anything but the lowest detail level. Decreasing the detail level improves the frame rate at the expense of much of the ground scenery. This has its own problems; with fewer visual cues it is easier to run into the ground. Because a lot of the game deals with level, careful flight with only minor course adjustments, personally I didn't find the slow frame rate to be that much of a nuisance. However, when you do have to take evasive maneuvers, things can get mighty disorienting as the screen struggles to follow your motion. In addition, effects such as damage to the plane's control surfaces are impossible to simulate accurately, since the plane jumps around erratically so much of the time anyway.

The actual flight model of the F-117 is, well, difficult to judge. It doesn't handle like an F/A-18, but then of course one could hardly expect it to, considering air-to-air missions are not the primary role of the F-117. Don't expect to be able to use some of the more advanced techniques such as those forwarded by Robert Shaw, Pete Bonnani, and other scholars of air combat . Trust me, until the enemy's ACM skill increases, you probably won't need to use such techniques to attain gun kills, anyway. Most of your time will be spent flying low and slow to avoid radar detection, popping up to fire a missile or two, then dropping back down again to "disappear" from pursuing fighter patrols. It's a Stealth thing, you know.

I have found that the best way of coping with the poor frame rate is to switch the detail level up or down during the mission: when landing, aiming, or dogfighting, decrease the detail level to improve the frame rate and keep things from appearing "jerky." The rest of the time, it doesn't hurt to keep the detail turned up since the frame rate isn't as crucial in level flight (or on autopilot.) Hey, think of it as an extra challenge to the game.

In general, the background music and most of the sound effects such as explosions and crashes are quite good. A digitized voice even announces quite cheerily, "Target hit!" when a missile finds its target. If one of your objectives has been accomplished, the voice will say "Primary (or Secondary) Target Destroyed!" This is very helpful and eliminates the "guesswork" about whether or not it's Miller Time.

There are, however, a number of bugs in the program that adversely affect gameplay. On some machines the game may freeze up, or unexpectedly quit during play (MicroProse has released a new version that corrects these problems.) In addition, in some of the outside views the plane sometimes disappeared entirely. Although you can access a menu bar during a game, you cannot switch to the Finder; choosing the menu item does nothing. Finally, the most irritating bug occurs every time you fire a missile: the whole game pauses in order to play the sound. Perhaps in future "finished" versions, all of these bugs will be caught and corrected.

To get a better sense of perspective of how slow F-117's frame rate really is, I tried an unofficial experiment: I tried running the MS-DOS version on my Quadra 660AV using SoftPC Pro. Big surprise: the Macintosh version is only marginally faster than the MS-DOS version running in emulation on a Mac! If you have a PowerMac with SoftWindows or one of the elusive Houdini cards, that's something to keep in mind. In any case, something is clearly wrong with the speed of the Macintosh version of F-117.

I Coulda Been a Contendah! What is most disappointing about F-117A Stealth Fighter 2.0 is how unnecessary most of its faults are. With a little polishing up and an improved frame rate, this would be one great game. The implementation of stealth technology adds a unique element to the game, and the manual is first-rate. F-117 also features one of the most

varied mission sets I have ever seen. One way to improve the missions even more would be to incorporate campaigns into the game, in which your success or failure in one mission by eliminating threats will directly influence your chances of succeeding in the next one. And of course, the addition of network play would always be a big plus.

However, despite the great game concept and mission features, many annoying, confusing, and downright sloppy bugs coupled with a terrible graphics engine succeed in shooting F-117 right out of the sky. As of press time, a new version of the F-117 application had just been made available on online services that fixes the problems players were having with the game crashing. Unfortunately, the frame rate is still very slow, and unless this significant problem is fixed, F-117A Stealth Fighter 2.0 just won't be able to compete with the other Macintosh flight simulators that keep pushing the envelope further and further upward.

Pros
• Some amazing animation before takeoffs and after landings
• Huge variety of missions and regions
• Well-written, informative manual

Cons
• Can't switch to Finder
• Frame rate is very slow (even on an 840av)
• Weapons effects unrealistic (too easy to gun down fighters.)
• Game pauses to play some sounds
Some errors in keyboard commands (the Mac is not an IBM!)