

review: Carriers at War

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Type: Strategic Wargame

Publisher: Strategic Studies Group (904/469-8880)

Retail Price: \$69.95

Mail Order: \$39.00

Requires: Color Mac (with 32 bit Quickdraw), hard drive, System 6.0.7 or later. 2 MB RAM for System 6.x, 4 MB for System 7.

Protection: None

[December 7, 1941](#). Dawn. You sit back in your Admiral's chair contemplating the war machine you've just set into action. As Admiral Chuichi Nagumo, commander of the most powerful carrier task force the world has ever known, you have an amazingly mobile weapon that can send even the mightiest fleets to their death. Mighty fleets like the U.S. Pacific Fleet, with its vaunted battleships and powerful fleet carriers.

Just prior to dawn you launched a massive airstrike from your six carriers, the Kaga, Akagi, Soryu, Hiryu, Shokaku, and Zuikaku. Target: Pearl Harbor. As far as you know, the Americans have been notified of the declaration of war (a delay in the decoding of the declaration in Washington, D.C., was not known to Nagumo), but you are confident you will be able to deliver a crippling blow to the U.S. A set of quick victories is necessary, for a prolonged battle with the American industrial machine is sure to end bitterly for the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN).

Having launched your Vals, Kates, and Zeros, all you can do is sit back and let the human element take over. You can do no more but wait to hear either the cheers of victory or the cries of defeat. As fate decreed in this particular scenario, your planes attack Hawaii almost unopposed, sinking all of the battleships in port along with a couple of cruisers and destroyers to boot, as well as ravaging the military aircraft lined up so neatly on Hickham and Wheeler fields. And your airplanes later found and sunk the U.S.S. Lexington.

[Summer, 1993](#). Wait a minute! Pearl Harbor was over 50 years ago! And there was only one strike? Correct on both counts. Pearl Harbor was over 50 years ago and Admiral Nagumo launched two strikes against Pearl Harbor and did not manage to sink every battleship in port. However, Strategic Studies Group's Carriers at War allows you to control the battles, and I chose to launch a single devastating strike, followed up by subsequent strikes against the elusive U.S.S. Lexington. I did a much better job of pulverizing the U.S. Pacific Fleet than Nagumo did, actually managing to sink a real aircraft carrier, not a battleship covered with planks for use as a target ship.

y playing Carriers at War you can recreate any of a number of battles involving U.S.N. and I.J.N. aircraft carriers in WWII, starting with the opening blows at Pearl Harbor, when I.J.N. carriers were more numerous and had better planes than their U.S. counterparts, and ending with battles where U.S. carriers are extremely common and have airplanes that are far superior to their IJN counterparts (at least as far as fighter aircraft were concerned). Carriers at War allows you to pick sides and control a little, a lot, or all of the forces involved in a particular battle.

It should be pointed out that Carriers at War is not a simulation in the Hellcats sense of the word. It is a strategic simulation, where you deal with the big picture and let the computer take care of the actual combat. In this respect, CAW resembles Three-Sixty Pacific's Harpoon, except that CAW is based on historical actions using the actual weapons available at that time, whereas Harpoon is a modern naval combat simulator.

Opening Moves. Once you start playing the game, your instrument of command is the mouse. There are some actions that have keyboard equivalents, but SSG has done a good job of making everything mouseable. By clicking on buttons and maps you can run the carrier battles of WWII. Unfortunately, you cannot double-click on a map location to get information about that particular task force or air group.

Once the combat has started you'll be treated to some detailed color graphics of the various planes and ships involved as well as a series of "slides" detailing various actions. SSG states that they have animated bomb and torpedo sequences. Those of you that are used to watching torpedos streak after carriers or bombs descending relentlessly on battleships in Hellcats will be disappointed. The animation SSG speaks of involves non-moving pictures that have smaller pictures of fire and/or damage appearing superimposed on them. But hey, if you really were one of the admirals, you'd never even see any of the action unless your carrier was found by a wave of vicious SBD Dauntless dive-bombers. Of course, mine was.

As you select different battles, the available ships and weapons (both sides kept developing new planes and launching new ships) change to reflect the historical orders of battle. Unlike Harpoon, which allows you to modify battles to your heart's desire or even create your own, CAW lacks this option and you are somewhat stuck. But not completely stuck, as SSG does provide multiple variations on each scenario, including ones where carriers that had previously been sunk (historically) are still around, and my favorite, a version of Pearl Harbor where the U.S. was expecting the attack. Still, it would be nice to have a scenario editor.

Aside from the massive amount of bugs in CAW (SSG promises an update soon), another complaint I have about the game involves the map. The Pacific Ocean is the largest body of water under a single name. It is huge — bloody huge! Carrier task forces are very small compared to the Pacific itself, yet CAW does not allow you to zoom in on a specific area. The admirals of the forties definitely had large scale and small scale charts of the area, and SSG would do well to allow players to zoom in on the area of interest, instead of giving them huge chunks of ocean to look at. Greater detail would allow greater precision in planning strikes and maneuvering.

Gripping aside, SSG should be commended for designing the game to be flexible. The game allows you to play on either side and decide which admirals you want to challenge. You can also decide how many of the active forces (usually task groups) you'd like to control (in the latter stages of the war the U.S. task forces were huge, and trying to keep track of all the necessary details could be tough, but succeeding is very satisfying). A neat feature is the ability to re-create historical battles until you are blue in the face, trying again and again to see why a battle turned out as it did. You can play variations of historical battles, with factors such as weather, experience, luck and timing playing major roles.

The Final Judgment. Carriers at War is an entertaining and informative strategic wargame that allows you to re-create some of the major carrier battle of World War II. It delivers impressive color graphics and a well designed interface that shows few of the deficiencies often associated with games ported from the DOS world. The game play is intuitive, but CAW does lack some features (like zoomable maps and active objects on maps) that a similar program (Harpoon) includes. CAW also lacks a scenario editor (but we hear that's coming), but it should take even a dedicated war gamer a long time to try every possible combination of scenarios, commanders, and force allocations. Overall, this a well implemented game.

Pros

- 256-colors
- Highly detailed, using combat determinants such as weather and pilot experience
- Provides a number of scenarios and variations on those scenarios
- Allows you to play the role of either USN or IJN commanders
- Manual makes good reading

Cons

- Interface lacks a couple of features like map zoom and clickable objects on the map
- The manual is DOS oriented
- No scenario editor