

# review: **Flight Commander**

by Karen Kaye

Type: Jet Combat Simulator

Publisher: Big Time Software, Inc.

Retail Price: \$69.95

Street Price: \$49.00

Requires: Mac Plus or newer, System 6.0.5 or better, 1 disk drive and a hard drive, 1 Mb for Monochrome, 2 Mb for Color under System 6 (3 Mb for System 7)

Protection: None

ately, I have become much more skeptical of the promises which appear on gameboxes. There is no scarcity of claims and promised features, but the delivery often leaves me feeling a little shortchanged. I found myself slipping into this regrettable condition when I looked the cover of Flight Commander (FC): it promised to recreate 60 years of jet combat! I suspected that somewhere toward the end of the user's manual there would be a pitch for oceanfront property in Nevada. Well, I was wrong. Not just about the real estate offer, but also about my initial suspicions of the ability of the game to deliver on its promise.

**Joystick Not Required.** FC is something unique. It simulates air combat in the jet age, but the perspective is rarely that of the individual pilot. Even though one-on-one engagements are possible, the main thrust of FC is to allow the player to command large formations of aircraft. The player assumes the role of a flight or squadron commander, either in individual battles or in linked engagements which form a campaign. The emphasis is as much on resource management as it is on splashing bandits. Furthermore, all commands are issued using a set of on-screen graphical controls: all you need is the mouse. Modem or E-mail play is not supported, but there is a two-player option. The game covers six time periods: Korea, Vietnam, Arab-Israeli Wars, Falklands 1982, Contemporary, and Near Future. 37 nations and 110 airframes are represented. It is quite probably the most comprehensive collection of jet aircraft included in any one game.

[ission Briefing](#). FC remains true to its uniqueness even in the intro sequence. The Big Time Software logo certainly makes an impression! The welcome screen allows players to select scenarios or campaigns, create their own air battles, and select advanced options. The game includes an excellent tutorial: a single A-10 Thunderbolt II on a gunnery range. Even those with tons of “stick-time” are encouraged to complete the demo to get used to the game interface. The user’s manual will step the player through the tutorial, and it does a competent job of showcasing the game’s features. The game includes a built-in Data Library, which provides information on aircraft, missiles, ground units, and an assessment of the major Air Forces. The Data Library is text only. Pictures of the aircraft and their armament would have really added to the value of the library, especially for novices.

Players have a choice of three campaigns and a dozen or so individual scenarios. Perhaps the most interesting and challenging campaign is that of Royal Navy No. 801 Squadron aboard HMS Invincible during the Falklands engagement of 1982. Equipped with a subsonic aircraft that was armed only with heat-seeking missiles and guns, it performed brilliantly. Players will also select the capabilities of the Argentine Air Force. Unfortunately, campaigns can not be played two-player, so the only choice is to determine the quality of Argentine pilots.

Once the campaign is selected, a Mission Brief screen welcomes the players. It describes the overall situation, provides intelligence reports, and alerts the player of any aircraft not directly attached to the squadron that will be participating in the next engagement. These aircraft will add to the capabilities of the player’s squadron, but will remain under computer control. The next step is to select the aircrew who will participate in the upcoming mission. All squadrons in the game have 15 pilots and 12 airframes - a somewhat crude abstraction. All pilots are rated on several criteria, such as air-to-air and air-to-ground proficiency.

The first scenario in the Falklands campaign is the intercept of an inbound Argentine strike, so the pilots selected should have high dogfighting skills. The Mission Brief also recommends the number of aircraft to be launched on a particular strike. Players may choose to override this, but since crew fatigue will eventually cripple the squadron, it is best not to launch every pilot on every mission.

Armament selection for the mission is crucial. Especially for the British in this first stage of the campaign. They only have 70 of the all-aspect AIM 9L Sidewinder missile and even fewer Maverick air-to-ground rockets. For certain missions, which take place at night or in adverse weather, it may be necessary to carry precision targeting pods. After all the planes are prepped, the group launches.

**The Right Stuff.** Takeoffs and landings are handled abstractly. Players are typically deposited right in the middle of the action. The main window is divided into two major areas: a situation display to the bottom right, and the control areas to the top and left of the situation display. All the functions of sophisticated combat aircraft are represented, and the controls which initially appear somewhat simplistic, function remarkably well. The situation display presents all aircraft from a top-down view, and a line extending from the aircraft's icon represents its maneuvers from the previous turn. The depiction of altitude can also be easily toggled on or off.

Each aircraft's movement is individually planned. Those aircraft that are tailing an adversary, will plot after the disadvantaged aircraft has planned its move. Better trained pilots will more readily detect the maneuvers of their adversaries, and have the luxury of moving last. Once each aircraft has its movement plotted, the action phase begins. All movement is executed simultaneously. I was skeptical that phased movement would work in an environment as fluid as air combat, but it is a reasonable compromise, when I consider that in a few minutes I can give orders to a dozen aircraft. Workload can be further reduced by assigning one or all of the player's aircraft to computer control. This is a handy feature in some of the larger battles, especially since aircraft can be returned to player control at any time. The flexibility of the game in this aspect is exemplary.

The campaigns demand that players not only be good leaders in air battle, but good resource managers on the ground. Damaged aircraft take time to repair, air crew losses are not replaced, and crew fatigue will eventually begin to rise. Most importantly, if a strike does not accomplish its purpose, the player will have to repeat the mission.

**he Debriefing.** The game's simulation of air combat becomes more enjoyable once the "Advanced Options" are selected. These options cover such areas as Stalls/G-Lock and High-G Turn Limits. I strongly recommend that all 7 seven options be left on continuously, since without these, FC is reduced to a "beer'n'pretzels" game. Oddly, these options are not a preference. This means that they must be selected every time the game is started. A further annoyance in the interface is the requirement to select the "SHOW ALL MOVES" feature in every scenario (this feature is essential in order to see the projected flight paths of all friendly and disadvantaged enemy aircraft). This must be done even when playing multiple scenarios in the same session.

FC has several sound options. The basic sounds which accompany missile launches, explosions and other mayhem are adequate. The novel aspect of the use of sound is the background radio chatter. These sounds appear to have been recorded during actual missions. They are interesting, and really add to the atmosphere of the game. But they become repetitive quickly. While I think that radio chatter is a good idea, it is impossible to implement with sufficient variation in a non-CD ROM environment due to the amount of storage space that would be required. The radio chatter also does not account for nationality, so the English voices don't quite fit with a Saudi Arabian sortie.

The database for the scenarios has some substantial glitches and inaccuracies. This goes beyond the rapidly changing organization and Order of Battle of today's Air Forces. For example, in a hypothetical engagement between Russia and NATO in the year 2000, the E-3 AWACS is armed with AA-8 and AA-7 missiles. Another scenario claims to be an air battle between two Navy F-8E Crusaders armed with Sidewinders, against four North Vietnamese MIG-17s. However, when the scenario starts, it becomes evident that the navy jets don't have missiles, and their adversaries are hopelessly outdated MIG-15s. Something was lost in the testing here. A less important omission is that campaign games only track the pilots of two-seater aircraft. For all intents and purposes, all aircraft in FC have a crew of one.

The aspect of the game that really shines is replay value. With the ability to create battles — although not campaigns — built right in, the possibilities are endless. There are numerous options available for the design of battles, which can include as many as 40 aircraft on each side. Players can either choose a number of jets for both sides (with variation built-in for good measure), or they can specify a number of Combat Points that can be spent. The latter option is useful in two player games. Other parameters which can be defined are weather condition, the presence of radar controllers and the type of mission to be flown. Besides the obvious air-to-air engagements, players can fly against more than a dozen strike targets: enemy fleets, nuclear reactors, airfields, SCUD launchers, etc.

The game is best suited to be played against the computer, since the AI is competent, and the two player mode is awkward. Especially when using some of the Advanced Options — which are necessary for better realism — each player will need to swap out at the machine twice in order to complete a single turn. This can become tiresome. I found that the game generally gave me a good run for the money, although the AI is poor at coordinating several aircraft to bracket a single target.

**The Pipeline.** Big Time is considering other add-on features to the game. More scenarios are likely to surface, as exemplified by the one included with this issue of IMG. Other campaigns are likely to follow as well. Of course the best source of scenarios will be the players themselves, who are encouraged by Big Time to upload created battles to bulletin boards.

**The Verdict.** I have found several things that I did not like about FC. But a game is often more than the sum of its parts. This is a classic case of that. Some may complain that the

flight parameters are somewhat simplistic or that there is no rudder control for the aircraft. But that is not the point here. This game is fun and the campaigns are addictive. The interface is smooth and well organized. I have played this game late into the night, and have noticed that I had stopped taking review notes hours earlier. That is perhaps the real test of any game. Is it a chore to review, or do I become so engrossed that I forget about my deadline? FC is the latter, and I can wholeheartedly recommend this product. Intercept this game at the earliest opportunity!

#### Pros

- Strong graphical interface
- Highly playable as B/W — including PowerBooks
- Very high replay value
- Good documentation and tactics guide
- Easy learning curve

#### Cons

- Some errors in the Battles data base
- Only three campaigns available with the game
- Modem and network support not available
- Two player game can be awkward when using the Movement Phasing Advanced Option