eview: Flight Commander 2

by Karen Kaye

Type: Jet Combat Simulator (boardgame perspective)
Publisher: Avalon Hill/Big Time Software, Inc. (800/999-3222)
Retail Price: $69.95
Street Price: $44.00
Requires: olor or B/W Mac, System 7 or higher, 4 MB of RAM, High Density Drive (or CD-ROM), Approximately 10 MB free space on Hard Disk
Protection: None

he original Flight Commander (FC) was somewhat of an anomaly. In a gaming market pervaded by fighter aircraft simulators. It sidestepped the first person perspective for an "eagle-eye" boardgame view that allowed players to recreate large air battles from any era of jet combat. Instead of focusing on a single aircraft type in excruciating detail, it covered dozens of weapons platforms with sufficient specific characteristics to capture the essence of these metal birds of prey. The campaign feature allowed the players to "lead" a squadron of airmen through a series of engagements, which not only tested their ability to orchestrate the air forces for the kill, but also burdened them with the need to manage crew rest and the availability of munitions. The game had reasonably good graphics, was speedy even on an older machine, and provided terrific replay value. Best of all, FC was really fun.

Charles Moylan, with the help of Avalon Hill, has just released Flight Commander 2 (FC2). As enjoyable as FC was, there were a number of annoyances that needed fixing, as well as some additional features that players began asking for shortly after the game was released. The stage is set, the players are waiting. Time to take off the shrinkwrap!

Something Old is New Again. FC2 maintains many of the features of its predecessor, and should be readily recognizable by those who played the original. Once again, 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 linked engagements which form a campaign. Furthermore, all commands are issued using a set of on-screen graphical controls: please note that you will not need a complete Thrustmaster set to play this one! Direct modem play is still not available, but the game finally offers a PBE-mail option. The game covers five time periods: Korea, Vietnam, Arab-Israeli Wars, Falklands 1982, and Modern. Thirty-seven nations

and 117 airframes (a slight increase from the original game) are represented. It is a comprehensive collection of aircraft, although it does still omit many interesting designs such as several of the American "Century Series" interceptors, as well as those Soviet medium bombers (i.e. Badger, Blinder, Backfire) which are most at home in the tactical environment the game attempts to replicate.

Preflight. I have already mentioned that the game will seem familiar to those who own FC. What I should have said, is that this game will seem exceptionally familiar to those who own the previous game. The more time I spent with it, the more I was reminded of the cynical (and "unofficial") Air Force recruiting slogan from the mid-80s, poking fun at the venerable B-52: "Join the Air Force, and fly the plane your father flew." Players can choose from among five campaigns (three of which are from the original game) or eleven scenarios (all of which are either from the original game or have appeared on on-line services as "freeware").

C2 includes two tutorials: a single A-10 Thunderbolt II on a gunnery range introduces the very basic aspects of the game, while the exploits of an F4C squadron present the concepts of the campaign game in "The Dragon's Jaw." 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 includes pictures as well as text, which novices will appreciate. Trouble is, quite a few PICTs are of poor image quality, or are simply replaced with an "Image Not Available" disclaimer. What was most curious about the absent pictures was that they typically would have shown obsolete weapon systems, images of which are readily available (i.e. Soviet AA-2 missile from the late 60s).

The user's manual is a reasonably polished product. It does a very thorough job of stepping players through the tutorial, as well as showcasing the game's features. It is easy to read,

and contains both a Table of Contents and a Glossary. There is a useful seven page section on tactics, which remains mostly unchanged from the original game and thus it contains some inaccuracies. For example, this section advocates that is best to defend against incoming missiles by offering an intercept angle 45° off your front (145° aspect angle). The FC2 engine corrects a previous flaw, and now makes it most difficult to score a hit with a radar guided missile when you offer an intercept angle 90° off your front. The person responsible for the manual at Avalon Hill apparently failed to update this section.

The box also contains a fold-out color poster, which depicts about half of the aircraft from the game. It may be useful to provide a quick overview to those novices interested in the fighter inventory of a particular nation. I found very little use for it, and I doubt that many others players will.

Taxi. On start-up, players can select one of the existing scenarios or campaigns, or create their own air battles. Unfortunately, players can still not create campaigns of their own, nor can the existing campaigns be played in two player mode. The two new campaigns which are included in FC2 take place in 1997, under the highly implausible pretext of a revitalized Soviet Union launching a major attack into Central Europe. Of the two, I found Red Storm to be more challenging. It features an obsolescent MiG-23 squadron in a contemporary high threat environment.

The flow of the game is reminiscent of FC. 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 computer controlled aircraft will add to the capabilities of the player's squadron, and can be brought under player control. The next step is to select the air crew who will participate in the upcoming mission. All pilots are rated on several criteria, such as air-to-air and air-to-ground proficiency.

As before, this section is followed by an armament selection screen. This is where players get to select the missiles which are the primary armament of modern fighters. For certain missions which take place at night or in adverse weather, it may be necessary to carry precision targeting pods as well. The selection of armament continues to have some limitations. A particular aircraft can only load one type of heat seeking and radar guided missile. This precludes the accurate configuration of the SU-27, which carries two standard and two "long-burn" AA-10s. Most players may not be too terribly concerned with this minor inconvenience.

The Mission. Takeoffs and landings continue to be handled abstractly by the AI. Players are deposited right in the middle of the action. The main window is essentially unchanged from the original, and is divided into two main areas: a situation display to the bottom right, and the control areas to the top and left of the situation display: the simplistic controls do 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 and it's intended flight path. The depiction of altitude can easily be 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. Phased movement works well, and the execution maintains the fluidity of air combat. Player workload can be   reduced by assigning any or all 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 Debriefing. As in the original, the game's simulation of air combat becomes more enjoyable once the "Advanced Options" are selected. These options cover such areas a Stalls/G-Lock and High-G Turn Limits. I strongly recommend that all seven options be left on continuously, since without these, FC is just too simplistic.

FC2 has the same sound options as the original. The basic sounds accompany missile launches, cannon fire and explosions. The game retains the use of optional background "radio chatter." These sounds appear to have been recorded during actual missions. They really add to the atmosphere of the game, especially when playing the US player. But they do become repetitive quickly, especially since they are identical to the sounds released in FC. Even the CD-ROM version of the game, which could have included hundreds of Megs of sound, contains only those samples found on the disk version.

The game sports numerous updates and improvements. The aircraft counters are not only prettier, they also make it much easier to identify the type of aircraft they represent. The terrain which serves as the backdrop for ground attack missions is also much more pleasing to the eye. It is not completely intuitive however, and this backdrop can potentially display during Fleet Strike and Naval Strike missions. Players can override this, and they should, even though hiding a carrier in a forest may be a good idea when Exocets are around! The scenario updates now actually make it possible to play all the "advertised" air battles, including the one between two Navy F-8E Crusaders armed with Sidewinders, against four North Vietnamese MiG-17s (In the original game, due to a bug, the F-8Es had no missiles, and the Vietnamese had MiG-15s). The "Head for Home" disengagement feature also adds a dose of realism. The battle no longer ends as soon as this command is selected. There was the potential for abuse in FC, since players could select to "Head for Home" even with a missile on their tail, and their aircraft would magically be whisked to a safe landing. Now the game attempts to resolve such conflicts and disengage remaining assets in a "reasonable " matter. While I like this new feature, players should be warned that this process may take up to 15 minutes (in some larger engagements), and it may result in several aircraft being lost. I recommend that when in a tough spot, players attempt to separate from the action themselves, and not trust in the AI.

One weak feature of FC remain unresolved in FC2: the numbering of adversary aircraft. Players gain an inordinate amount of information from the particular number assigned to a contacted adversary. If, for example, the first contact carries the number 7, then players know for sure that there are at least 6 more adversaries out there. One of the greatest unknowns in air combat is the precise number of enemy fighters that are inbound into an engagement. The search and sort patterns used by US fighter aircraft are designed to eliminate the potential for an enemy aircraft slipping through untargeted. The numbering scheme used in FC2 can serve as a source of intelligence that would not available in the real world.

C2 adds a PBE-mail option, but the game is still best suited to be played against the computer. The AI is competent, and the PBE-mail version does not allow the use of the "Movement Phasing" combat option. The AI remains poor at using its own aircraft in a coordinated bracket against a single target aircraft, but in all other respects makes for a challenging opponent.

The biggest selling point of the game continues to be its exceptional replay value. Since FC2 offers the ability to create battles (although not campaigns), 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 choose either the number of jets available for both sides (with variation built-in for good measure), or they can specify a number Aircraft Combat Points that can be spent during the selection process. 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.

Unquestionably, the most obnoxious and infuriating feature of FC2 is the repetitive "manual look-up" copy protection. Players will be asked time and again to identify fighter aircraft nationality markers dispersed throughout the manual. What makes this copy protection such a pain, is that it does not allow players to make any   errors. It is mightily frustrating to have spent two hours on a large battle in an air campaign, and due to a page error, have the game quit on you without the option of saving. The game is supposed to stop using the copy protection scheme after a few times, but it never states how many times a "few" actually is. After having passed the copy protection test three times, I felt no need to take the manual along with my PowerBook on a business trip. Well, yea verily, FC2 asked for a fourth time, and kept quitting on me. I really don't think that there is any   reason why Avalon Hill needs to come up with such preposterous protection scheme.

The Pipeline. Charles Moylan is very excited about the future. The relationship with Avalon Hill seems to have had positive results. FC2 has been also released in a DOS compatible format, and it has been received   well in that community. The prospect of additional products in the FC2 vein appear to be very good.

Big Time's current project is the Flight Commander 2 "Mission Builder." It will allow players to create their own set-piece battles and full campaigns. The battle module will let players create battles with precision, facilitating the recreation of historical engagements or combats gleaned from the pages of popular fiction (lots of people have requested the

opportunity to recreate Tom Clancy dogfights). The campaign module will allow players to create campaigns from the story line, to mission descriptions, to participants' identity, training, and tech levels, to munitions availability, aircraft group profiles (both enemy and friendly), chronological mission links, and more. Charles is hoping for a response something like there was for the original Harpoon game: once a scenario editor was released, players created all sorts of scenarios and then uploaded them to BBSs and online services for other players to download. If that happens, FC2 players everywhere will have a nearly unlimited source of new campaigns and battles to play. This Mission Builder program is currently in development.

Next in the pipeline is "Over the Reich," a World War II-based tactical air combat game taking place in the skies over Germany, 1943-45. It is based on the boardgame of the same name created by renowned game designer J.D. Webster. It will actually be an extension of the boardgame, in the sense that Big Time plans to add to it many of the things that were successful in FC2: a fully graphical interface (flight stick, etc.), an expanded campaign game, a system of combat options allowing players to tailor complexity to their own taste, an on-line photographic database, and more. The computer version of Over the Reich will have an underlying engine that is every bit as realistic as the boardgame, but an interface that completely hides all of the bookkeeping-style annoyances that are inherent to boardgames. Over the Reich will "fly" a lot like FC2 does - set your throttle, set your flight stick, and go — the computer will invisibly handle the details and realism. Charles is hoping for a very rough target date of Christmas 1995 for release of this program.

The Debrief. The new Flight Commander "engine" is certainly more accurate than its predecessor, and the graphics have been made more appealing. These improvements make for a much better gaming experience, but there's the question that begs asking: "Is this enough to call the game version 2.0?" I was very disappointed that FC2 ships with the very same scenarios that appeared in the original release. The fact that there is no upgrade policy for owners of 1.0 is a crying shame. PBE-mail seems an afterthought, and modem play, for which this game is crying out, is still not supported. The CD-ROM version wastes the opportunity to add quality images in the Data Library, or to expand the sound files available for radio chatter. Then there is the miserable copy protection.

Yet, despite all these gripes, this is a very likable game. It is a singular product, offering a unique perspective on large scale air combat. It remains fun and the campaigns are still addictive. There is great hope in the upcoming "Mission Builder's" ability to rapidly expand the available library of scenarios. I remain hooked on this game, and now that it has replaced the original on my PowerBook hard drive, it will likely remain there for some time to come. I will just have to remember to carry along a copy of the manual. . . just in case!

Pros
• Easy to use graphical interface
• Quick, even on an old IIsi
• Easy to learn — difficult to master
• Good looking documentation and tactics guide — does contain on significant error
• Exceptional replay value

Cons
• no upgrade policy for owners of Flight Commander
• game ships with scenarios and campaigns games available in Flight Commander
• modem support not available — PBE-mail option too limited
• one of the absolute worse implementations of "look-up" copy protection ever released