


review: Hellcats Over the Pacific

Reviewed by Steven J. Freitas

Type: World War II fighter simulation .
Publisher: Graphic Simulations Corporation/Parsoft, Inc.
Mail Order:
\$39
Requires: 68020 and up, 32 bit QuickDraw, 2 MB RAM, System 6.0 and up.

Protection: Manual (register for unlock code).

IMG Rating: 

Overview. The phrase probably most descriptive of Hellcats Over the Pacific is one seen on many license plate brackets: "Sit down, shut up, hold on, and try not to scream." Published by Graphic Simulations, a relative newcomer to the simulation market, Hellcats Over the Pacific (hereafter referred to as Hellcats) places you in the simulated cockpit of an F6F Hellcat aircraft during the height of World War II. Your missions will take you across the Solomon Islands chain in the South Pacific, a land rich with Japanese targets that shoot back with little compunction.

Documentation. The first thing you'll notice upon receiving the boxed software is the beautiful illustration gracing its front; a Hellcat soaring victoriously above a smoking Zero. Pay close attention: that's where you want to be! Upon opening the box, you'll find one 800K 3.5" disk, a large glossy map of the Solomons reproduced from a military chart of WWII vintage, and the Hellcats User's Manual. Beyond that, however, is a touch that is a confirmation of Graphic Simulations' sharp attention to detail: a reproduction of the U.S. Navy's "Pilot's Handbook for Navy Model F6F Airplane," which comprises the Grumman's flight operations core material and flight training material from the FAA. Graphic Simulations presciently recognizes the need for information by simulation aficionados, and this fills the bill about as well as could ever be asked.

Installation. Installing the software on your hard disk is a painless affair, simply involving the copying of two files from the backup of the original (which you should have made) to the hard disk. A Gravis MouseStick Set file is included for those blessed with that heavenly control device.

First Look. When you first run the game, you may be taken aback by the lack of pomp and circumstance. Don't fret, all the icing is in the air, not in the menus. The first dialog box you'll see is one acting as a function of the copy protection scheme. Graphic Simulations has elected to use a scheme in which each time the game is run, the user must look in the manual for a certain word and enter it. Fortunately, this annoyance can be eliminated by returning your warranty card to Graphic Simulations; they will send back a code to unlock the game and render its copy protection unobtrusive.

The next dialog box displays a pilot's roster. This has many positions in which different pilots may reside during your conquest of occupied soil. After typing a name for your first pilot, hitting the OK button will lead you to the next dialog box, one which will allow you to select your armament and mission. You can set your fuel level and number of 500 lb. bombs carried (from zero to two). The less fuel you carry, the better, as a lighter aircraft with less drag will fly faster and be more maneuverable.

The Environment. The manual gives a complete overview of all the available missions. However, it should be noted that Flight School, a mission for new players, is designed for you to learn to shoot down moving aircraft (by leading them, or aiming ahead of them due to their forward velocity) and to land on an aircraft carrier, using a practice strip with arresting wires. In addition, practice ground targets are set up for practicing strafing and bombing.

The real treat, however, as it should be, is the flying. Hellcats manages to provide an excellent level of fluidity and realism on platforms from the Macintosh LC on up. Although the ground terrain is fairly simple, the trees and whitecaps sliding by tend to offer a convincing view of flying, with the detail level very controllable and the frame rate always respectably high.

The Controls. The aircraft is perfectly controllable from the keyboard, mouse or Gravis, and the instruments provide a fully adequate display of your position in the flight regime. The superb engine noise gives you a real feel for the aircraft's energy state. Most simulations tend to sacrifice the fluidity of the simulation for the complexity of the systems. Graphic Simulations was aware enough to avoid this pitfall, giving you an aircraft that is responsive to your control inputs, and gives you much of the perceived joy of flight.

View control is excellent, using arrow keys to pan around and pitch your view of the world, providing a perfect way to keep sight of Japanese Zeros as you chase them around.

The software itself is incredibly stable. No extension/control panel conflict I'm aware of will cause it to crash. It will resize automatically to fill any size screen you have attached to your Mac. Although it won't run on a Mac without a 68020 or later processor, or one without 32-bit Quickdraw, it will run flawlessly on any other machine with any system version after 6.0. 800k minimum RAM should be free for it, although it ideally will use 1.5 megs.

Pros. It offers probably the most realistic feeling simulation of flight available, and offers many Zeros and anti-aircraft guns to tussle with. It is flawlessly stable and will fill up any screen you ask it to. Due to its geometric rendering of objects, no pixilation occurs. It offers a good choice of missions, and a good method of training for upcoming challenges. Most importantly, with its good views controls, good flight controls and attention to detail, it probably provides the best platform available right now on which to practice the true art of dogfighting. Its conveyance of situational awareness to the user is absolutely unparalleled on the Mac. (And when you outgrow the missions, you can purchase the Leyte Gulf scenario disk.) "The Duel," a mission in which you are tasked with the protection of a U.S. carrier group, pairs you with a Hellcat wingman. If he doesn't shoot the Zeros, he'll ram them, so his antics will continue to make the play interesting.

Cons. While few, the cons are significant. First, after landing, if you don't stop right on your runway, there's a random chance you'll be lost (a known bug). While this is reasonable when you land 100 miles from the base, it's not reasonable if your plane stops 20 feet from concrete. In addition, the game occasionally will cause your plane or bombs to instantly reverse direction during free-fall from high altitudes. It happens often enough to be disconcerting, but infrequently enough to remain amusing. Also, while flying at low level (under 25 feet), the way in which the game keeps track of trees can occasionally get you impaled on one if you keep switching views. And while others might eventually find the Zeros too easy, but the Leyte Gulf scenario disk remedies that.

Summary. All in all, Hellcats is unhesitatingly recommended to anyone interested in flying and air combat. It's a creation of rare talent coupled with the desire to remain true to the concept of a simulation. Hellcats truly broke ground in the air combat simulator arena due to its stability and fluidity, and deserves a 5 check rating. And although one-upmanship isn't always the best game to score, Mac users finally have a simulator to hang over the heads of their DOS-using friends! Hellcats is a mandatory purchase. :->

Pros:

- Extremely realistic "feeling" of flight.
- Very stable under all but the most extreme system configurations.
- Supports all screen sizes.
- Offers fluid, 1, 4 and 8 bit graphics at 15 frames per second.
- Complete suite of responsive controls.
- Good view controls.
- Simple navigation of pre-flight settings.
- Accurate flight model lends itself well to true aerial combat tactics.
- Copy protection can be disabled.

Cons:

- Lost pilot recovery not handled well. (This is slated for a future fix).
- Enemy aircraft can become too easily plastered.
- Copy protection.