

Wing Leader

Victories 1940-1942

Maybe, when you were still a young boy (or girl), your parents gave you a scale model kit by Airfix, enabling you to build a Spitfire, Hurricane, or Me-109. You put this kit together while using lots of glue, and next went around the house yelling 'Ratata' and Kaboom'. "Yeah, nice", I hear you say, "but what has this to do with a boardwargame?"

Well, once in a while somebody comes up with some sort of crazy idea, making you wonder 'How on earth do you come up with an idea like this?'. Like Mike Spick, a well known miniature wargamer that in 1977 wrote a couple of articles for Airfix Magazine, showing you how to play an air combat game using scale model aircraft kits. He used both sides of the model aircraft. Using one side to fly to the left and using the other to fly to the right. If the aircraft was climbing or diving you placed it under an angle in relation to the ground. Simple, right! Well, not exactly since flying is a rather dynamic thing. And air combat takes places in three dimensions, something that is hard to simulate on a flat surface. But despite these obstacles, Mike Spick decided to develop a workable game system, and next published a book called "Air Battles in Miniature". The book is filled with all kinds of charts and tables, diagrams, and values to represent the capabilities of a large number of aircraft. Luckily the way Mike is representing all this is light and entertaining, and so surprisingly readable. Movement is conducted by using the well known ruler. But one can imagine that this process is rather involving and can be quite an undertaking when you are using a large number of aircraft.

Lee Brimmicombe-Wood

As we know, GMT Games has been publishing several air wargames before. A respectable percentage of them were designed by Lee Brimmicombe-Wood (LBW). He designed recent games like Nightfighter, and Bomber Command, but also Downtown. And now we have Wing Leader, Victories 1940-1942.

LBW has been heavily inspired by Mike Spick's work for the design of Wing Leader. In Wing Leader we also get to see the aircraft from the side, and placed at an angle when climbing or diving. Wing Leader makes use of two double sided player aid cards, and so called 'Aircraft Data Cards' (ADC). These are far easier to use than the information as presented in the book.

Using the map, counters, player aid cards, and ADC's, you can start playing the game quite quickly after reading the first 31 pages of the rulebook. Now this might sound as being a lot of pages, but the layout is using one column for the rules and a second column for examples, design notes, and more. By way of Training Scenario #1 *Tyger*, *Tyger!* you will be flying in about half an hour.

Wing Leader

Wing Leader comes with a 22" x 34" map, divided in rectangular boxes (no hexes). The map can be called boring, but hey, sky is sky, and only on the bottom edge of the map you will find a small sliver of 'earth'. There is a 48 page rulebook. Like mentioned before, the first 31 pages of the rulebook contain the basic rules, the other pages add advanced rules to the game. These rules add bombarding (ground) targets using bombs, rockets and torpedoes, the use of jet and rocket fighters by the Germans (Me-262 and Me-163), anti-aircraft artillery, barrage balloons, clouds, and more.

There are two player aid cards, one of which is provided twice. This is the Combat Card, so each player will have a copy of it. The other card, the Bombing Card, contains the Sequence of Play and has some additional condensed reference information on all of the actions therein. On the backside of the card are the charts and tables needed when bombarding, and firing with anti-aircraft artillery. And that's it! No long list of numbers to crunch, diagrams to study, and rulers. And this is the strength of the game. A lot of the information is easy to remember, and when in doubt, easy to find on the charts provided with the game.

The scenario book contains 23 scenarios, covering actions in the Pacific, the battle of Britain, and the skies of North Africa, Malta, and Stalingrad. Main idea of each scenario is that one side will be the attacker while the other side will try and intercept the attacking force as effectively as possible. Most of the time you will see that one side will be equipped with (fighter) bombers, with or without escorts, while the other will be equipped with fighters to intercept the enemy.

The 40 Aircraft Data Cards are made of thick cardboard. Next to a beautiful profile of the aircraft in question, the ADC also contains all the information you will need regarding this aircraft type during the game. At the bottom of the card, the in service date of this particular aircraft is given. On the back of the card you will find a short description of the aircraft and a list of variant aircraft types. Some with the variations on the 'standard' model needed during the game.

In the box you will also find two 'Wing Displays' which are used to track identity, status, and the task assigned to the aircraft counters on the map. Because the aircraft move over the map in various angles, using the Wing Display to track the information is the best way to do this. This works just fine and shows the information instantly.

Counters

Next to a plethora of markers, all of the standard counter size, to track game related information and the status of the aircraft counters, the three countersheets provide you with some long and nice looking counters with the flying stuff. And this includes some clouds. If one aircraft is depicted on the counter, it means that it represents a 'flight' (2-6 aircraft), if there are two aircraft on the counter it represents a 'squadron' (7-12 aircraft). This is however an abstraction because the air forces differed in how they organized their units. The art used on the counters is really beautiful. Each side of the counter shows you the same number of aircraft, so there is no 'full strength' and 'reduced strength' side. Just like the aircraft of the scale model kit, one side of the counter is used to fly to the left, and we are going the other way with the other side of the counter showing face up. The aircraft are depicted with historically correct squadron codes and markings. A letter is used to show the identity of the counter, and is used in combination with the Wing Display and information markers.

All the components of the game are of the usual GMT Games quality. A feast for the eyes.

The game

But how does it all play?

Like mentioned before, we have a sky blue map, that is divided in rectangular boxes. From left to right they are identified from A-Z, from bottom to top from 0-19. The latter shows you the altitude at which a unit is flying. Top left the position of the sun will be shown. Since the First World War, each fighter pilot will follow some rules to gain the advantage on his enemy. Attacking from the sun, which will be of a disadvantage to your foe in spotting your approach, is one of them. During combat you will need to check if the defender, or attacker, will be able to see you or not. This will be converted into a die roll modifier.

Following the scenario instructions you will place the aircraft counters on the map. Some of the scenarios will give you a specific box in which to place the counters, while others will give you more freedom to position them. The corresponding identity markers (ID) are placed on the Wing Display, together with the markers that denote the tasking. A tasking can be an interception, but also bombardment, escort, or sweep. On a sweep, fighters and/or fighter bombers flew along a certain track hunting specific targets, or targets of opportunity. A unit can consist of veteran pilots, but also green pilots, or maybe an ace has joined the ranks. Before combat can ensue, the units need to spot each other first. To determine this you will have to follow a 'Tally' procedure, something similar to a line of sight in the air. Clouds, but also the sun, play a role here. Units can give a warning to another friendly unit when they are using the same radio network. A flight consists of a smaller number of aircraft than a squadron, so it will be harder to spot. All these factors are used during the game and procedures used.

It will be obvious that one type of aircraft will be faster than another, but in Wing Leader each type will be using the same number of movement points. A bomber formation will be able to move two boxes forwards, but the same goes for fighters that are escorting the bombers. Intercepting fighter aircraft will be able to move 3 boxes. Movement on the map uses movement points, but during air combat the actual capabilities of the aircraft types are used.

Once units enter air combat, the ADC's are used. Based on the historical information of the aircraft, values are given for speed and maneuverability. This is further divided in altitude bands. So first you determine altitude and speed. So if an aircraft has a high value for maneuverability, you do want to use this to your advantage, while if you are using a fast aircraft, you may want to use speed to your advantage. The choice on what to use is to the players.

Let's take the training scenario *Tyger, Tyger!*. In this scenario American P-40B's are intercepting a Japanese raid performed by Ki-21 Sally bombers on their way to Rangoon. The bombers are flying at altitude 9, and so can use a

speed value of 3 and a maneuverability value of 3. This is 5 and 5 for the P-40B's. Because the Japanese are still carrying their bombs, a modifier of -1 will be applied to their speed value during air combat. This means that they have a speed of 2. So, if using speed the P-40B's would have +3 on them. The higher the + difference, the better it is. If however the P-40B's would run into the famous Japanese Zero fighter, with a value of 4 and 6 respectively, and be intercepted this would be a whole different ball game. The Japanese player would like to use maneuverability as the determining factor since this would mean a +1 in his favor, where speed would mean a -1 difference. Speed and maneuverability, the main factors, will also be influenced by several modifiers. Next a die roll is made and compared to a combat table, the result getting possibly modified again. The number of modifiers however is small, so you will start to memorize most of them quickly. The result of this gives you the number of hits scored, but to see if they were effective, another die roll is made. After this you will check if the formation kept its integrity or lost cohesion during the swirling battle, and next you will track ammo usage on the Wing Display.

And there is so much more...

Conclusion

Wing Leader is a good and attractive game that came out of the blue for many. It is easy to get into, gives the players many options and outcomes, and can easily be played solo. Despite the 'flat world' this all takes place on, you really get the impression that you are maneuvering in a 3D air combat arena.

Keep watching the skies for more!

Text: **Hans Korting**

Rating: ***** (9/10)

Designer: Lee Brimmicombe-Wood

Publisher: GMT Games

Number of players: 1-2

Game time: 45-120 min.

Price: \$ 69,00

BGG-score: 8,4 [73]

Pros: original idea, nice counters

Cons: scenarios in a booklet instead of separate cards