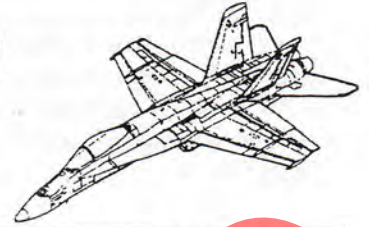


AIR POWER

The Journal of Air Combat Gaming



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The Speed of Heat

Air combat over Korea and Vietnam
designed by J.D. Webster

from CLASH OF ARMS GAMES

Six 9.5" x 10.75" geomorphic maps; 240 counters; 32 8.5" x 11" charts and tables (backprinted); one Rules booklet; one Scenario booklet; boxed. Originally \$36, now \$44.

Reviewed by Robert Kasten

The modern tactical air-combat realm (at the single-aircraft scale) has been, over the years, a difficult subject to simulate (at least with hexes and counters). In 1975, Dunnigan's Foxbat and Phantom proved that the subject was gameable in the traditional manner. And while Foxbat was certainly a popular and pioneering game, it left plenty to be desired in terms of detail and realism. Gamers — as they always do — asked for more.

These detail and realism needs were answered in two ways: overkill and underdevelopment in SPI's Air War (SPI, 1977), and obscurity coupled with very (very!) poor physical treatment in Zocchi's MiG Killers (Russo, 1977). MiG Killers was the clear winner in overall design terms (especially playability), and Air War got a solid physical treatment from Redmond and Co. As such, Air War was more fondled, looked at, and talked about than MiG Killers — which was, more often than not, quietly played. The obscurity of MiG Killers meant that it would never catch on and become the "definitive" treatment on modern air combat that Air War did in the early 80's (somewhat analogous to how CNA was/is the "definitive" treatment on North Africa: talked about but not played). After TSR mercifully let Air War go out of print, this seemingly popular subject went untouched for years.

Finally, the ever humble J.D. Webster appeared on the scene to heroically "save the day." He took his new air combat game to GDW. (Why not...? GDW will publish anything, right?) (Ed. note: actually, I took it to Avalon Hill first, Victory Games second, 3W third, Close Simulations fourth and I talked to Zocchi about it, all before going GDW.) This new system was similar to its three predecessors in many superficial aspects (scale, general mechanics, approach, etc.) but was a completely new game system based on more solid research than the games

it followed. The first game to be published was Air Superiority (1987), followed closely by its sister game Air Strike (1989) covering air-to-ground combat, and a bit later the Arab-Israeli air-to-air module called Desert Falcons was added (hereafter referred to, collectively, as the AS system).

After some 20 years of wargame designs, gamers were finally treated to a complete jet combat game they had been looking for all along (covering air-to-air and air-to-ground actions equally): a fairly accessible and playable system that had enough "dirtiness" to keep all the serious armchair jet-jocks happy, yet keep new gamers coming in to learn the system, thereby providing the veterans with new challenges (and the designer with fresh ideas).

As per usual in the gaming industry, all was not perfect — especially in "jet-land" with the Air Superiority system. Mr. Webster's rules-writing skills, while certainly adequate, needed some editorial help. Unfortunately, GDW's efforts to edit and "develop" the rules met with mixed results. The errata for Air Strike and Air Superiority was four pages out of a total of some 36 pages of combined rules. But like any great game (or game system in this case), it's the design that counts. And here the system shines through any physical inadequacies that the most inept publishing house could dish out (and that's saying a lot). Physical problems aside, Air Superiority and its offspring represented the cutting edge in modern air combat wargame design, albeit in a less than perfect package.

Then, one day, for some unknown reason (although it probably had something to do with RPGs), GDW became uninterested in continuing their support of the system and let the three titles go out of print. It was not due to the lack of sales, either. Air Superiority alone sold over 13,000 copies — very good for any type of wargame. Fortunately, GDW was nice and allowed the rights to the three AS titles revert to the designer. (Actually, the rights to Air Sup. are still pending, ed.)

Updates and modules to the system were once promised by GDW. And since AS fans wanted more, the time had arrived for J.D. to take the still-popular, yet orphaned, system and his new Korean/Vietnam-era module called Gunslingers (which was about ready for publication) to a new home. This new home was found in the most unlikely of places — Clash of Arms Games. Clash of Arms (COA) — known mostly for Ed Wimble's Napoleonics, and Rick Barber's counter work (especially when he uses those metallic colors ...) — bought J.D.'s design, and published the Korean/Vietnam module along with the updated

system rules — now dubbed “Air Power!” (hereafter referred to as the AP system). This new game — now called “The Speed of Heat” (the “Gunslingers” title was scrapped) — covers the Vietnam and Korean period of air combat from the U.S. perspective.

Examining Speed of Heat (SoH) in the store, was an interesting and amusing experience. The game is packed in one of Clash o’f Arm’s (sic) famous Napoleonic “big-boxes” — and painted in the most garish silver (Rick “metallica” Barber at work), light blue, and orange motif that would make the most devout 70’s-throwback blush. (Although, I’d venture to say that a little lime green along the sides would have helped subdue the orange and make it look suitably “period.”) But what did I care? I was getting a freebie review copy in the mail. I didn’t have to worry about being laughed at as I ran back to my car, game in hand. Others may not be so lucky.

Opening the box (and actually “looking” inside) reveals few surprises. The components all bear a striking resemblance to their earlier GDW cousins, with the exception that everything (except the errata) is on somewhat heavier paper — a very nice touch. Even the fonts used in the SoH rulebook are remarkably similar to those used in the original GDW rules booklets and many of the rules diagrams are exact replications. But, the real amusing physical aspect here is how all the game’s parts are normal (letter) sized, and would fit into a bookcase box, _except_ for the geomorphic maps which are a half hex too large. That superfluous “half-hex” means you get a big, flimsy (and ugly) box. Additionally, the impressionistic cover art, while not much worse than what adorned the AS covers, left a bit to be desired. (Although I am told that it is, at least, technically accurate.)

If J.D. Webster isn’t Shakespeare in his (rules) writing ability, then Phil Boinske isn’t Harold Ross in his editing ability — or at least does not appear to be so here. The scenario and rules booklets, while they look reasonably clean and easy to read, are riddled with sophomoric typos and grammatical errors one would expect of a grade school term paper. But sadly (and seriously), it’s not all that bad industry-wise, in this age of Decision Games, 3W, and the (late) FGA. The true mystery is how these supposed publishing companies (a term which has become essentially meaningless, these days) have never heard of spell-checkers. There are no excuses for typos in this age of computer typesetting/printing, and grammar/spelling checkers. Get your collective heads out of the sand, boys. It’s 1992, not 1975.

The six geomorphic maps, while adequate, are disappointing. Rick’s semi-impressionistic map work has always been quite appealing, if not beautiful, in the past. These maps appear out of place and unclean in their appearance.

Punching the 240 counters, while difficult due to poor die-cutting, demonstrate some impressive artwork. Can you think

of a better place for Mr. Barber to apply his silver? (I knew you couldn’t.) Since many Korean, and some Vietnam-era, jets were unpainted and remained the raw aluminum silver (that American Airlines is so famous for) color, the game’s counters are a natural for Rick. The counters’ clear line-drawings of aircraft, and realistic coloration, look great and are the strongest physical aspect to this otherwise physically weak game.

Fortunately, the situation improves even further as one gets into learning the game system (assuming you’ve never played the AS system. Remember now, this is the AP system... which is essentially 2nd edition AS system... is that clear?). Since the rule-book is just a mite intimidating at 72 pages, learning the game appears difficult. One inevitably turns to the nearly-as-voluminous scenario booklet (weighing in at 52 pages) for salvation. Included are six small solitaire training scenarios which allow one to access the system incrementally and eventually absorb all the system’s rules and some of its subtleties. (This same technique is used in the original system.) The training scenarios are essentially puzzles to be solved. They’re excellent learning tools that present a challenge, and make one want to learn the specific rules (with more vigor than usual). This “training” process does require significant time and effort for those unfamiliar with the AS (or is it AP?) system. And, like any complex system, this is not something you want to learn by jumping head first into the most complex scenario.

Clearly, the more tedious aspects of the game system — apart from actually learning it — involve configuring aircraft, keeping track of their weapons load-out, and the pencil and paper record keeping. While the MiG Killers-like record-keeping may not appeal to some, it’s better for playability’s sake than the physical “tracks” used in Air War and Foxbat — especially when one gets several aircraft on the board at once. In general, when you get more than two jets per side, the game system begins to slow down noticeably. Four per side is really the maximum for my tastes — and is the point at which more than one player per side becomes a necessity. Once airplanes are readied with weapons, one records speed, throttle setting, altitude, and other (somewhat less important) values, each and every turn. These values can change throughout the turn depending on what the aircraft does, and are recalculated at the beginning of every new turn. The system is complex and defies simple description. It’s an exercise in simple arithmetic, and a guessing game as to what the opponent will do. With each hex representing one-third of a mile, and turns of 12 seconds, we have a highly tactical game situation. One must focus on tactics. This is not a fight of machines between weapons platforms; it’s a duel. Make the right guesses, get one move ahead of your opponent, and you’ll win. This is especially true to the period. In Air Superiority — where cutting edge technology aircraft are employed — many air battles were over before combatants were ever in visual range of one another. Instead they lobbed long range missiles at one another hoping to achieve a kill. During the period depicted in SoH, guns are the primary weapon one relies upon. Maneuver and tactics were, and are in SoH, the order of the day.

CAPSULE COMMENTS

While it's time consuming to learn, the time spent is well rewarded (for those interested in this subject). And once the game system is learned, the rationale behind particular rules are easy to recall — at least that's the way it seems to me. And lest we forget, there are lots of charts.

One could go on, ad nauseum, listing the game system's features. But it's accurate if not easier to say that nothing has been left out. Seriously. If it plays a role in air combat — either air-to-air or air-to-ground — it's in here. This is one of the most complete game systems out there — on par with ASL in what it tries to cover. Couple this fact with J.D.'s excellent bi-monthly 20-page journal "Air Power," (where have I heard that before?) now in it's 22nd issue, and the coverage of tactical air combat is made even more complete.

It's important to consider how this game system compares with the most popular genre in the computer gaming realm — the air combat simulator. Many consider manual board (or do they say 'board?') games on this subject to be obsolete. Such is not the case! The flight sims in the desktop computers use models which are similarly accurate (and in some areas less accurate), but provide more iterations (of calculations) per turn to provide the illusion of flight, and animation. The model in Air Power is completely adequate and provides the greater learning experience as it requires more analytical thought and interaction. So, for all you zealous computer jet-jocks out there, consider learning the AP (or AS) system as it will provide insight into the world of air combat that the computer simply cannot provide. Or, even better yet is to augment the computer flight sims with this game system.

The Air Power rules included in SoH represent the culmination of many years of testing and development. The popularity of the system is not coincidental; it works and has proven itself over the past 5 years. The SoH package also includes many scenarios which are carefully designed and laid out to provide an interesting and incisive study of the evolution of jet combat during the period depicted. The combination of good research, history and a solid game system make Speed of Heat a game which will not soon be forgotten. All the system needs (and deserves) at this point, is top notch rules development and graphics (a la ASL).

I had a dream... that the perfect wargame was published... (Haven't we all had this dream?) Being a zealous jet-combat fan myself, this "perfect" wargame was called Air Power II... It was designed by J.D Webster, developed by John Butterfield, edited by Phil Boinske (who figured out how to get his spell checker working), graphical design by Rodger MacGowan, maps by Mark Simonitch, counters by Rick Barber, and published by GMT (or was it Avalon Hill — I can't remember)... Then I woke up to find reality — and the Speed of Heat.

Graphics: Adequate overall: great counters; good rules; fair charts; tacky (big) box.

Playability: Dependent upon the number of aircraft involved. More than 4 aircraft per side slows the system down to the painful level for one person per side.

Replayability: System-wise, it's unlimited, to say the least. The scenarios have plenty of variants to keep one busy for a few years.

Historicity: This is where the system — and SoH in particular — shines. This is a complex and incisive overview of Korean and Vietnam-era jet air-combat tactics worthy of academic study.

Comparisons: Nothing (that's in print).

Overall: State-of-the-art and cutting edge (I hate such terms, but they apply here). At 36 bucks it's a steal, simply based on the information included — physical flaws and all. Certainly not viable for the beginner or the casual gamer. A must buy for the jet-combat fan. (Then again, all you jet combat fans out there probably have the game by now. If not, hurry. The price will be going up soon.) {Too late, it already did!}

Editor's Note: This review first appeared in an edited form in Berg's Review Of Games newsletter. Robert contended that the review as edited left out some important commentary and while I did not find the edited version very pleasing, for that matter this version bites just as hard or harder, I told Robert I was willing to publish an "uncut" version. Richard Berg was kind enough to grant me permission to do so. By the way, BROG is a good newsletter, witty and apologetic to no one as you can see by the lumps I take here.

BROG is \$19.00 per year for six issues or \$5.00 per single issue. Write to: BROG, PO Box 567, White Plains, NY, 10602 to subscribe.

By the way, I might add that Rob Kasten was not a subscriber to Air Power, nor a hard core fan of the system when he wrote this review. He has since become both. Although he maintains that this is actually a positive review, I think it is at best neutral with negative slams outweighing the positive comments. It is however, certainly only one man's opinion and it is an opinion that comes from outside the ever supportive "inner sanctum" of zealots with whom I spend most of my time, and thus it may be indicative of the general public's feeling on the game. I'll let it stand without rebuttal. Reader commentary definitely invited.

J.D.W.



Air-to-Air Gunfire Engagements using Proportional Movement

An Unofficial Rules Modification for Air Superiority™

By Peter K. Matthews

Introduction

Air-to-air gunfire combat is the epitome of aerial warfare. Many pilots report that there is nothing to compare to a gunfire kill. Gunfire combat is the most demanding of aircraft and pilot alike with its intense maneuvering, requirement for situational awareness, understanding of yours and your opponent's aircraft, and just plain overwhelming excitement.

I'm probably not alone in having had the following experience. When I first received Air Superiority, I tried to get one of my friends to play it with me. Tom is a remarkably intelligent person, but has never seemed to get the hang of air-to-air combat games. We had played Air Force and Air War (anyone who can learn that system is no slouch), but he found Air Superiority easier to grasp. Then came the infamous moment. He was disadvantaged and in my move I slid in behind him and fired, getting some nasty hit (C, as I recall). Tom's immediate remark, certainly made with some peevishness born of frustration no doubt, was, "But I wasn't there when you fired." And he was right, of course. I was four flight points into my move and he had already completed his (six, as I recall). In "time" as defined by flight points, I should have been in front of him. This led to my search for a better way to accommodate gun combats.

Don't get me wrong. I am a "devoted" fan of the Air Superiority game system. The problem I cite is endemic to air-to-air combat games from Richtofen's War, through Foxbat & Phantom, Air War, Air Force, Flight Leader, right up to Air Superiority. Some have tried to get around the "timing" problem using plotted movement, but given the high-speed nature of air-to-air combat, this was inelegant at best.

After some thought, I realized that a good solution was already built into Air Superiority in the form of the missile engagement rules. Here as an aircraft moves, the missile chasing it moves, too. The elegance of this is two-fold: the missile moves proportionally with the aircraft, so that when interception occurs, both the aircraft and the missile are in proper time synch; and furthermore, the player can simulate realistic counter-missile tactics. I felt these rules could be modified to accommodate air-to-air gunfire combat as well. It is a tribute to the quality of design of the Air Superiority system that the needed modifications are few indeed. What is nicer still is that proportional movement need only be used on those turns where it is needed. The faster sequential movement system can still be used on most turns, keeping the pace of the game brisk, as befits a game about air-to-air combat.

What follows is my unofficial optional rules along with suggestions for implementing them. They affect only two rules sections: Rule 9, Gunfire Combat, and Rule 13, Order of Flight. Keep in mind that nearly everything is unchanged, and where a change occurs, it generally follows the precedent of the Missile Engagement rules (Rule 16). If you keep that in mind, and let common sense and fair play prevail, you can easily integrate this concept into your future games.

Proportional Air-to-Air Gun Engagements

A. General Rule -

1. Aircraft may choose to be actively engaged in prosecuting or defending against a gunfire attack. If they do they move with other engaged aircraft (those engaging missiles) in the Engaged Aircraft Movement Phase of the Flight Sequence.

2. Aircraft in a gunfire engagement move proportionately with other aircraft in the same engagement, each expending one flight point (FP) at a time in the order determined by the Proportional Flight Order of Movement Chart [page 5].

3. Aircraft in gunfire engagements may make up to two gun attacks per turn subject to Rule 9, Air-to-Air Gun Combat. Gunfire may occur at the end of each Proportional Flight Segment after all aircraft moves in that segment are complete.

B. Details -

1. During the Engaged/Free Aircraft Determination Phase, decide which aircraft will be involved in gunfire engagements that turn. They may include:

a) Any aircraft which is disadvantaged and within gun range of another aircraft, which may or may not be advantaged over it.

b) Any aircraft regardless of its advantage or disadvantage status which is within gun range of another and the players consider gunfire combat likely.

c) Any aircraft whose player requests use of proportional movement.

2. Gunfire range is the aircraft's speed plus 2. That is, anywhere the aircraft can reach plus the normal range of guns. Use some discretion, though, and watch out for head-on passes.

3. To conduct Proportional Flight, refer to the Proportional Flight Order of Movement Chart [page 5]

a) The Start speed determines in which segments an aircraft will move. Start speed in this case includes increases for 0.5 FP carry and/or reductions in speed due to idle power.

b) If an aircraft's start speed is greater than 16, treat it as a missile (why not, it's moving like one anyway), and use the rules for proportional missile movement.

c) Order of movement within a proportional movement segment is determined as per Rule 13, Order of Flight. Exception: regardless of start speed, disadvantaged aircraft always expend one FP before any aircraft advantaged against them. This FP is used in the first segment when an advantaged aircraft moves and is in lieu of the disadvantaged aircraft's last movement segment.

Example: Aircraft A, B, 1, and 2 are engaged in gunfire combat. A has advantage over 2; B and 1 are non-advantaged, and after the die roll, B has the initiative. The order of flight is 2-1-B-A in those segments where two or more of the aircraft move. A has a start speed of 7; B and 1 both start at 6 FPs; and 2 has a start speed of 5. Thus A moves in segments 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, and 14. B and 1 move in segments 2, 5, 8, 11, 14, and 16. Normally 2 would move in segments 3, 6, 9, 12, and 15. However, because 2 must move at least one FP before A, its first