Review

So, Exactly How Much Do Anchors Aweigh?

A Review Sortie of SSI's *Carrier Strike*
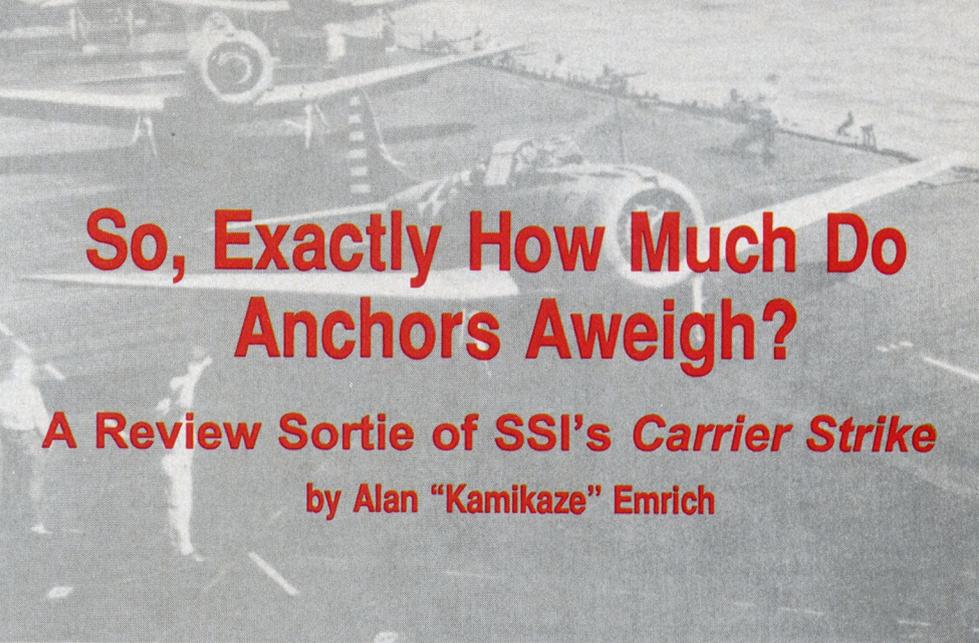
by Alan "Kamikaze" Emrich

Some games lend themselves to instant categorization; i.e., this game is a winner, that game is a loser. Not so in the case of *Carrier Strike*, the welcome new operational level WWII Pacific Theater game from once prolific wargame publisher SSI. Instead, designer Gary Grigsby has created a package with a depth that goes beyond mere first impressions (be they good or ill) and require serious further examination of a subject presented so carefully in this game. While not as wide or deep as the ocean its battles are fought over, *Carrier Strike* requires a sounding of depth and wide search pattern in order to be reviewed properly.

Carrier "Front"

Using the same interface as his previous two games, *Second Front* and *Western Front*, the first impression I had looking at the screen display was "What is this, *Carrier Front?*" The same laborious menu structuring that is so clunky-yet-familiar-to-Grigsby-Gaming-Fans is back again to ease system veterans into play, complete with mouse support. With the exception of adding clouds (which range in intensity from fluffy white to threatening dark gray), a player could swear this was another *Front* game by zooming the map to its two different scales.

Skip Basic Training

The interface déjà vu aside, carrier warfare remains a different animal than land warfare, so many players will seek initial enlightenment from the game's tutorial. Unfortunately, this proves to be a bad move. The tutorial is poorly written, cumbersome and *far* less than complete. It says so much to accomplish so little that its most redeeming feature might be that it is buried on page 48 of the 120+ page manual. Hopefully, players will have tried to learn the game the "hard way" which, in the case of *Carrier Strike* turned out to be the *easy* way.

Fortunately, the interface is reasonably intuitive and it won't be long before planes are flying, bombs are dropping and carriers are burning in silhouette against the beautiful Pacific sunset. Actually, the ease at which play proceeds (once the system is mastered) lends much to recommend this game. Whole battles can be decided in less than an evening and entire campaigns in about 10-15 hours.

Control Freaks Need Not Apply

More akin to an SSG wargame than a traditional SSI wargame, players take on more of a "command perspective" when issuing orders to their units. Each individual piece is not controlled by the player, being moved hex-by-hex as if the player's hand were some god's. Instead, one can order the direction of task force movement, split and combine those task forces (within fairly strict limits), send out the search planes from carriers (including setting the centerline of the search arc from each carrier) and form, as well as launch carrier groups. This latter operation is handled remarkably smoothly on a "flat top" interface screen, allowing players to move individual planes or whole squadrons to fuel, arm (there is a variety of ordnance available), take the elevators up to the flight deck (or down again) and then launch (or land) airplanes. Capacities limiting all of these functions are neatly represented through pie graphs and create an effective combination of realism and ease of play.

Players *cannot* control the operations of land-based air forces nor move individual flying aircraft willy-nilly in expedient flight patterns like some deranged politician gerrymandering a map. Instead, the player is the *fleet* commander, not the supreme commander of all forces in the area. Forming up strikes, launching them, assigning search planes and CAP (Combat Air Patrol) missions is an almost ef-fortless exercise, leaving players to concentrate on difficult decisions rather than difficult procedures. This system will certainly disappoint the control freaks, but I found it quite compatible with what I was looking for in a game on this subject. I heartily approve of the way command decisions are handled in *Carrier Strike*. (It's too bad a "control freak" toggle couldn't be set to appease the alienated wargamers out there by allowing them more deified capabilities during game play).

Something New From Grigsby: Graphics and Sound!

As a welcome addition to the ever growing stable (staple?) of Gary Grigsby designs are more graphic interludes and some real sound support. Now, this isn't *The Perfect General* or *Patton Strikes Back*, brother wargamers, but the nice (albeit 16-color) VGA screens showing fleets and airbases (particularly when they are attacked) add an awful lot for those who are used to Gary's *Front* games. These graphics are likely to pale in comparison to SSG's long awaited IBM release of *Carriers at War* with its heavy emphasis on state-of-the-art graphics support, but so what? The look of *Carrier Strike* is a big step forward and one we want to encourage more of the same from the crew who launched this title.

Adding to the enjoyment was an inspired, militaristic opening theme (another first for an SSI wargame). The music was created by newcomer Donald Griffin of *Computer Music Consulting* (who was inadvertently left off the manual credits). Sound effects, too, have been added, with enough torpedo splashes, bombs dropping and ack-ack sounds to keep one's ears tuned into the game. Unfortunately, the SoundBlaster support was hard-coded into IRQ7, leaving many owners to receive their sound effects from their PC speaker.

The Usual Unusual Features

What new computer game would be complete without the occasional unusual "feature" being found in it? In *Carrier Strike*, it is difficult to get a feel for the various operational

ranges of one's strike forces except through trial and error. Many a strike will be launched against targets that every man-jack in the crew knows didn't have a snowball's chance of reaching the sighted enemy, only to go out, head back and have many of the planes splash down in the drink *en route*. Even more annoying is to have search planes, *who should know better* (particularly since they are controlled by the game's artificial intelligence, once launched), not quite making it back to their carriers and getting a bit wet under the wings as their pilots try to coast their way home on fumes. While it is difficult to say if these features are, in fact, bugs, they certainly *feel* like them and, in my opinion, perceived realism is all that matters to most wargamers.

Harboring the Docs

Save for the tutorial, the documentation does such a thorough job of explaining the game that special kudos are in order. While the game plays easier than the docs actually *read*, any gamer who takes a special interest in this game will find a wealth of information to be garnered from a closer examination of the documentation. The docs come replete with a comprehensive Table of Contents, tons of tables and formulae used in the game's programming, maps and detailed information on all of the ships and planes (complete with their armor and armament). A fine historical article by Martin Campion fleshes out a sound, complete set of wargame rules reference notes.

Campaigning

The great forte of *Carrier Strike*, besides its quick, clean play, is the ability to link battles together to form a campaign game. Each campaign game consists of several month-long turns where players are given an intelligence estimate of enemy activities and

both side's forces (the enemy forces are, of course, estimated by the amount of activity expected). Players will have the opportunity to sortie out that month and risk their fleets (ships damaged in battle might be many months before being repaired and those sunk
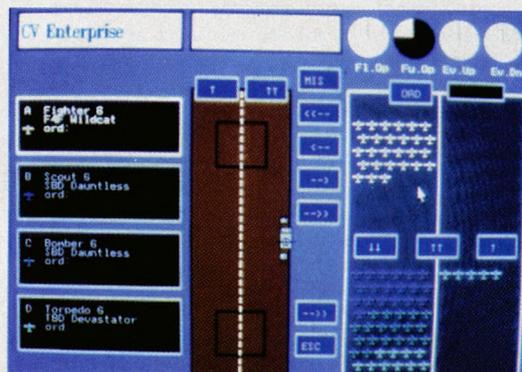
are out for the rest of the war) or to sit and wait for additional strength, forfeiting campaign points in the process. In all, the campaign is a fast, riveting little system that will keep *Carrier Strike* fresh for quite a while and give it plenty of replayability.

For those who were expecting to see an epic campaign game covering the entire war in the Pacific, land and sea, for all of WWII, don't worry. That game is still forthcoming and very much appears to be a combination of the *Front* games and *Carrier Strike*. One might venture to say that "Grigsby's Grognards" will be able to drive right into this one with nary a glance at the documentation.

For those who are interested, an experimental version (1.1x) of *Carrier Strike* is available on **GEnie** (file #4825 on the Games RoundTable). It adds an extended memory function which reduces the amount of disk access time for owners of extended memory, increases the chance for airplane landing damage based on flight time (to penalize the overly strong second and third strikes which can occur in the game) and puts up a screen between the American player phase and the combat phase during a two-player option (hiding information from the Japanese player). Presumably, the results of these experiments will appear both in a potential later version of *Carrier Strike* and in Gary's pacific theater wargame.

A Wing and a Prayer

There's no doubt in my mind that *Carrier Strike* is only getting the full attention it deserves because of the high expectation level created by the impending release of *Carriers at War* from SSG. *Carrier Strike* is likely to be overshadowed by that game's release, and that is too bad. Quite simply, the campaign feature alone makes *Carrier Strike* unique among its peers. This, combined with its quick playing time and thorough docs will beckon for a rightful place for this game on a player's shelf. Frankly, no matter how many shots are taken at this game, it has a durability that always seems to bring it in for a safe landing. **CGW**