

Aces High!

Over Flanders Fields

The Baron returns



“I think the most compelling aspect of a simulation is to recreate those factors that dictated the experience of the pilot – the limitations of the aeroplanes, facing off against skilled enemy aces, the sights and sounds of combat. When executed properly, these aspects combine to recreate the emotional experience of air combat,” – Damon Slye - (Lead designer of Red Baron).

Two combat sims, which were viewed at the time as the benchmark sims against which others were measured, were the original Red Baron and its successor Red Baron2/3D – both of which were published by now defunct Dynamix – back in 1990

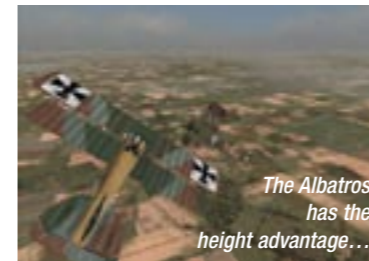
and 1997 respectively. Focusing on the aerial conflict of WWI, they seemed to capture the flavour and atmosphere of an era in which pilots flew in aircraft made of wood and canvas. Although the graphics and flight modelling would be considered rather ‘basic’ by today’s standards, these simulators contained elements that made them engrossing and atmospheric. Features included evocative menu interfaces, the ability to fly a wide variety of aircraft for either side, varied and imaginative missions and campaigns, mission builders, challenging AI (artificial intelligence), convincing flight models, the ambient sounds of church bells, whistle-blowing

steam trains and air raid sirens, and even award ceremonies – all the ingredients that go together to make an immersive and memorable combat experience.

Although other WWI sims have been published over the years - Knights of the Sky (Microprose, 1990), Blue Max (Three-Sixty Pacific, 1990), Dawn Patrol (Rowan Software, 1994), Wings of Glory (Origin, 1995), Flying Corps Gold (Rowan Software, 1997), and Wings of War (Gathering, 2004) - none have quite managed to capture that intangible immersive quality that Red Baron possessed. However, if the internet forums are anything to go by, the latest addition to WWI simulation – Over



Initial engagement!



The Albatross has the height advantage...



The Albatross gets on to the tail of the Nieuport...

Flanders Fields (OFF) - has now made a significant challenge to Red Baron’s dominant position. Over Flanders Fields is a third-party WWI expansion for Microsoft’s Combat Flight Simulator 3 (CFS3) and is produced by a group of talented enthusiasts calling themselves Old Brown Dog (OBD) Software, headed up by Mark Andrews. Having played this sim, I can confirm that OFF contains many features and qualities that seem to echo those found in Red Baron; but the question is can OFF be truly called a worthy successor to Red Baron?

The concept

When I asked Mark Andrews why he had decided to create a WWI simulation, this is what he said: “My



and fires his guns!



...the Nieuport falls to the ground!

passion has always been for the early craft - the dawn of fighting in the air and of course a tribute to those who really had the odds stacked way against them. When you consider how young the art of powered flight was - and to have to then go to war in those aircraft, it certainly takes a particular type of person who deserves a great amount of recognition. Finally, I guess I grew tired of waiting for a good WWI sim to come along so we made our own.”

The end result was Over Flanders Fields - a freeware (freely downloadable) product obtainable from www.off.oldbrowndog.net. However, weighing in at a hefty 613MB, OFF is more than just an ‘add-on’, because not only does it provide new aircraft, but it also creates a whole new virtual world and weather system in which to fly these aircraft. Since its initial release, a number of updates have also been issued for OFF. However, these have now been combined into a single ‘SUPA PATCH’, which is 100MB in size. From the outset, OFF was designed as an ongoing, phased project. Each phase would add new aircraft and additional features to the original product. Initially, there were to be three phases, however, it was decided to amalgamate phases 2 and 3 into a single Phase 2. So, Phase 1 is called ‘Bloody April – Late 1916-1918’ and allows you to fly many of the aircraft of that time period. Phase 2, currently in development, is to be called ‘The Great Air War’ (TGA) and includes further aircraft that are not covered by Phase 1, as well as additional features and enhancements to the original product.

Installation and interface

Installation is fairly straightforward. Obviously, being an expansion you have to first install CFS3, then its patch – 3.1. It is also recommended to run CFS3 at least once before installing OFF. The installation process takes a few minutes because OFF makes extensive structural changes to much of the host software – CFS3. Once you have completed installation, you can fire up the simulation.

You can normally gauge the ‘character’ of a combat simulator, and the mindset of the developers themselves, from the design and content of its menu interface. In this case the menu gives the impression that the aim of the developers is to immerse you into the look and feel of the WWI era at every opportunity, by paying



The Briefing Screen and map

“My main aim was to create a ‘living world’ with believable graphics and believable activity...”

meticulous attention to detail. For example, the mood of the sim is immediately set by the music that is used as a backdrop to the menu - Samuel Barber’s Adagio for Strings op. 11. This sombre and evocative piece of music is designed to remind you that although the program has been created for entertainment, this simulation is about a serious subject - ‘The Great War’. A tragic war in which many lives were lost and many sacrifices were made.

The main screen for the menu has been re-designed and is very different to the one that comes with CFS3. At the top is the OFF name and logo placed over black and white period photographs. At centre is a screen shot taken from the sim and at the bottom are buttons that give you entry to the various parts of the sim. In fact, although this is an add-on for CFS3, OFF actually envelops the CFS3 engine. OFF’s Manager is effectively the new main user interface, because it controls almost everything within the simulation – CFS3 is used in the mission/assignment aspect of the simulation, but data is then passed back to the manager for evaluation.

Your flight sim needs you!

OFF is a pilot-based simulation, so your pilot is an important and integral part of this sim’s concept. This means that before you can proceed, you have to first ‘enlist’

The Hangar





Sopwith Camel

(or create) your pilot and then make him 'active'. You can enlist up to 99 pilots, flying for Britain, Germany or France, but you can only 'activate' and use one pilot at a time. A flight log is kept of each one, which details dates, times, location, aircraft flown, hours flown and events – the latter of which includes 'claims' of aircraft shot down and any injuries incurred by your pilot. During enlistment you also make a choice of flying in a fighter, bomber or for the 'Home Defence', the squadron you fly with - Jasta or Escadrille (German and French equivalents respectively), the date you would like to join (1917-1918) and your rank. The choices you make at this point will determine the type of aircraft in which you will fly. One innovative feature of this pilot-based concept is that if you use OFF's



Nieuport 17

default 'difficulty' settings (which will be examined in more detail in a moment), and your pilot is 'killed' in combat, that particular pilot is permanently 'deceased' and so cannot be used in future missions; you then have to start a new 'tour of duty'. This means that if you have acquired kills or medals over a period of time, you have a vested interest in keeping your pilot 'alive'. This principle applies whether you are flying in a 'quick flight', single 'mission' or 'campaign' (more on these in a moment). This invariably affects your approach to each mission and the way in which you fly and fight. During a dogfight you often find yourself trying to decide whether to take a risk and pursue an opponent, or retreat and return to fight another day; knowing that if you make the wrong decision, and your pilot 'dies', you will have to start from scratch! I personally welcome this approach, because this element of 'role-playing' adds realism, tension and immersion to the simulation.

Quick flight

Having set up your pilot, you are then granted access to the rest of the simulation. Here you can choose between 'quick flight', 'missions' and 'campaigns'. Quick flight allows you to create your own combat set-up, with the click of a few buttons; setting the various parameters to suit your



Sopwith Triplane



Hanriot HD.1

taste. Parameters include: 'free flight' or 'dogfight', the season, time of day, type of aircraft flown by your flight and the enemy, the altitude, the number of wingmen and opponents, nationality of the opposing side, enemy skill level and more! This is a particularly flexible module that is not only great for practising dogfighting, but can also be used as a kind of 'laboratory' for testing theories and recreating encounters and set-ups that you may have read about.

Missions module

The second route into the simulation is via the 'missions' module. Here you can launch into the simulation to play missions that you have personally created or have been supplied with OFF. The season, time of day and weather are all pre-determined. However, at the time of writing, only one mission was available to fly – a Combat Air Patrol. However, Mark Andrews of OBD has informed me that Phase2 of OFF will see the inclusion of actual historical missions in this section.

Campaign

The heart of OFF is the 'campaign' section. This is where your skill and stamina will be tested. The average life expectancy of a new pilot during WWI was measured in a matter of weeks. Once you start a 'campaign' in OFF, you



Spad 13



RAF R.E.8

begin to understand why! Survival is your main objective in early missions. In fact the developers challenge you to survive more than 17 hours of flight! You can increase your chances by learning how to handle your particular aircraft in various situations, as well as becoming aware of its advantages and limitations compared with other aircraft. Once your confidence begins to grow, you can then move on to perfecting your dogfighting skills! In short, you cannot expect to be successful in aerial combat if you cannot handle your aircraft with confidence!

The designers of OFF have striven to make a 'dynamic' and historically accurate campaign. A 'dynamic' campaign in this instance means that the location and movement of your squadron will mirror its real-life counter-part, the appearance of Aces in your squadron will be historically accurate and you will receive news of the progress of the war in the same time frame as the real war. By the way, the 'campaign' module also includes full biographies on many of the 'aces' of WWI.

Campaign missions are continually generated. Apparently, up to 14 different mission types can be generated, with more than 450 different targets on offer. With every new mission you will receive a written brief, which is accompanied by a map showing the route to be taken, to and from the target - this can be scrolled and zoomed. The brief details the mission type, such as combat air patrol, take-off time, target area to be patrolled, distance to travel, altitude, mission duration and other 'pilots' in your flight. You also have the option of choosing an 'optional flight'



Spad 7



Short 184

to another target. Once you 'accept' the mission, you will be presented with a weather report, and then will be given the opportunity to be taken to the hangar.

The hangar is basically the old CFS3 mission-briefing interface design, but contains a painting depicting a typical WWI airfield scene by celebrated aviation artist James Dietz (www.jamesdietz.com). This is a nice touch and adds a period feel to the interface. However, this section does allow you to alter your fuel and ammunition load to your taste and judgement. This in turn is placed on a backdrop of an airfield scene, using the in-game graphics engine, showing your aircraft and animated pilot, dressed in his WWI flying outfit.

Workshop

This module, consisting of a series of sub-sections, allows you to set specific parameters that affect the way in which the campaign is run by the AI. The most sophisticated section is the weather control panel. This tells the weather AI how to control the prevailing weather within the simulation. For example, you can select the interval (measured in days) between weather fronts and their duration. As an example, you can specify that the weather AI creates a new front every three to six days, which lasts for three days. You can also set different fronts for each of the four seasons. The end result, when viewed within the simulation, is nothing short of stunning! (More on this subject in a moment). Another panel gives you control over the level of precipitation – low, medium or high being the three options given. Another setting, which is



Albatros D.III



S.E.5a

a first for this reviewer, gives you control over how many days it should take for snow on the ground to thaw! These are just a few of the available options that you can play with in the workshop. Others give you control over the level of campaign activity, the number of aircraft in a flight, and also whether your pilot lives or dies in the event of a crash!

The world according to OFF

The first time you enter the virtual world of OFF, you immediately notice the visual difference between this world and that of the original CFS3. Quoting the head of OBD, Mark Andrews: "There is not an awful lot of CFS3 left - we have changed everything including the grass, sky, clouds, terrain, houses, FM (flight models), aircraft models, infantry, visual effects - the works! My main aim was to create a 'living world' with believable graphics and believable activity, with front lines recreated as accurately as possible and an historically accurate dynamic campaign to immerse the simmer into WWI."

So, for those who may have been disappointed in CFS3's terrain, OFF's transformation of the original may come as a pleasant surprise! Comparing CFS3 and OFF, we find with the latter that the tones and colours of the ground textures are much more subtle and therefore convincing (CFS3's original terrain was a little too course in appearance). The trees are more numerous and more varied in type and colour and the houses populating the villages and towns have more character, detail and variety of style. Some towns even have shops, while you will



Fokker Dr.I

Further reading

Readers wishing to learn more about the aeroplanes of WW1 should sample the following two journals, both of which are highly recommended!

Windsock International

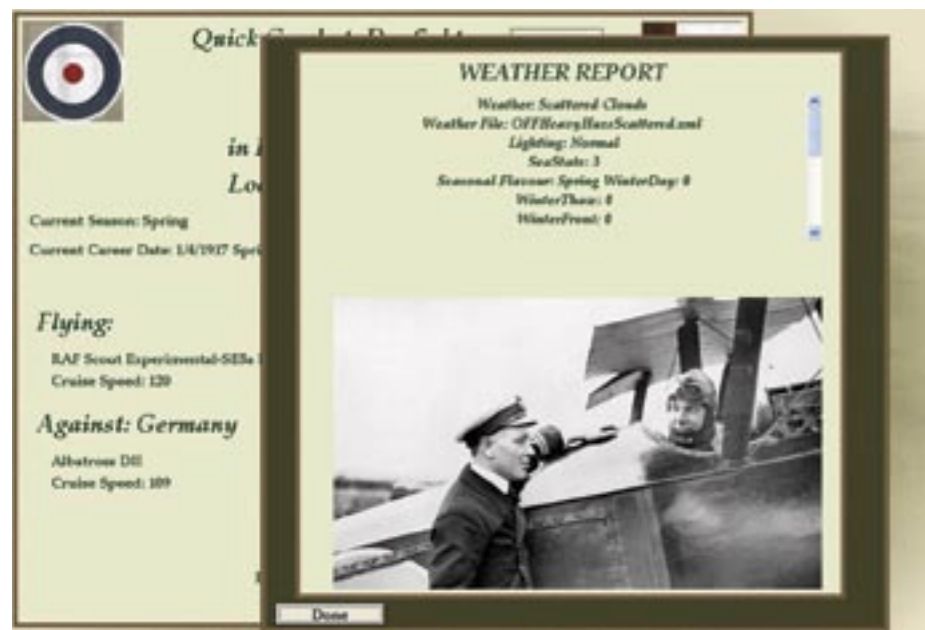
Windsock International is a bi-monthly journal for modellers and WWI enthusiasts wishing to learn about the aeroplanes of WW1. The publishers of this magazine – Albatros Productions Ltd - also produce an extensive range of 'Datafiles' and 'Specials', which combined profile over 100 aircraft, in great detail using photos, plans, and colour profiles. These explore the most famous WWI types - from AEG to Zeppelin! To find out more log on to www.windsockdatafilespecials.com. Free listings are sent on request. Just write to Albatros Productions Ltd, 10 Long View, Berkhamsted, Herts, HP4 1BY or telephone - 01442 875838.



Cross & Cockade International

Cross & Cockade International (CCI) is a non-profit making First World War Aviation Historical Society, with members in 25 countries. All officers of the society, organisers and contributors to the journal give their services voluntarily. The Society researches and publishes information on all aspects of the First World War in the air, 1914 - 1918. They are best known for their high quality journal, which is produced quarterly and contains articles written by their members. Further information can be obtained from their web site: <http://www.crossandcockade.com/main.htm>. Alternatively, call the membership secretary, Roger Tisdale, on 01237 474703.





The Weather Report - giving details of cloud formation and lighting levels, amongst other things

often see smoke billowing out of chimney stacks! At night some buildings have light shining through the windows on to the ground. Airfields, of which there are over 350 new ones, have not been left out of the equation and are liberally furnished with such things as tents, hangars, stationary aircraft and moving vehicles. As you fly around this active world, you will hear church bells peeling, birds singing, dogs barking and anti-aircraft guns constantly 'booming' in the distance. Sometimes you will also see soldiers marching and vehicles driving along winding roads. As you near the 'frontline' (the area where the opposing forces meet), the terrain begins to change in appearance and takes on a pock-marked brownish complexion, where the earth has been continually pounded by anti-aircraft fire. In addition, those trees that have been caught in the cross-fire have lost their foliage and are therefore bare in appearance - the change is quite dramatic! The sky has also been painted with the same care and attention and offers a wide variety of cloud formations which are always impressive and life-like in appearance. These can be fluffy clouds, cumulus clouds, heavy rolling clouds, broken clouds, heavy stormy clouds – the list goes on! OFF's treatment of the

world around you is designed, as Mark Andrews says, to make you feel that you are part of a 'living world' - and they have certainly succeeded! All this added detail however does come at a price - frame rates may suffer on some computers. So you will have to experiment with the detail settings to reach a compromise between performance and visual quality.

The Hangar

The aircraft included in Phase 1 of OFF represent many, but not all, of the aircraft available during the period 1917-1918. As I alluded to earlier, many of the other aircraft used during WWI will be included in Phase 2. However, Phase 1 does come with a generous selection of classic flyable aircraft. For the Allies we have the Sopwith Camel, RAF RE8, Hanriot HD.1, Nieuport 17, RAF SE5a, Short 184, Sopwith Triplane, Spad 7 and Spad 13. An inspired inclusion is that of a bicycle on which you can actually ride around to take in the new scenery at ground level and at a more leisurely pace! Now that's what I call attention to detail! For the opposing side – the Central Powers – you can fly the Albatros D.II, D.III and D.Va, Fokker Dr.I, Hannover CL.III and the Zeppelin L30.

Externally, each aircraft has been well

rendered and OBD are to be commended on their accuracy and attention to detail, particularly when it comes to the Sopwith Triplane, which is the most impressive of the bunch. However, when it comes to the internal cockpit rendering, things are not so consistent. One of the criticisms of CFS3 was its lack-lustre cockpit areas. Unfortunately, some of the cockpits found in some of OFF's aircraft are reminiscent of those found in CFS3, which is a little surprising, given the production values present in other parts of the sim. For example, the cockpit detailing and textures found in the Hanriot HD.1, S.E.5a and Nieuport 17, could have been more refined. On the other hand, the cockpits designed for the Sopwith Triplane, Albatros and Spad series of aircraft are much more refined and detailed in appearance. Please note that these comments do not refer to the quantity of detail, but rather the quality. It should be borne in mind that the cockpit of a typical WWI aircraft was not a plethora of dials and switches, which at the best of times were placed arbitrarily within the cockpit area. So those used to flying aircraft from WWII and beyond may find the WWI cockpit a little sparse!

Flight fidelity

Now, this is the part of a sim that can make or break its credibility. The team of OBD are in a particularly difficult situation, because few people know what these aircraft, made of wood and fabric, are really like to fly. As Mark Andrews points out: "The hard part for us was gathering sufficiently accurate data, not only the specifications/performance figures but the feel of the craft and their 'quirks' and moreover to create a balanced feel between them. Fly the Camel and feel the 'twitchiness' of the high torque short fuselage 'combo' on take-off. Dive too fast in the Nieuport and she will shed her lower wings. The Spads are classic 'Boom and Zoom' fighters. We feel we have captured this quite well but of course we are always refining and improving FM [flight models] as we learn more."

The flight modelling contained within the original CFS3 was not very convincing and was in fact very forgiving. Not having flown these aircraft, but having read many books on the subject, I can vouch



A Sopwith Camel returns home, as another falls in the distance



Always try to regain your height advantage

for the general relative performance differences between them. For example, in OFF, the Camel can out-turn the S.E.5a, when turning to the right, but is not so agile when turning to the left. This is true to documented evidence. This was due in part to the gyroscopic effect of the Camel's rotary engine. A rotary engine is one in which the cylinders and the body of the engine actually rotate around its crankshaft in order to aid cooling.

Flying wood and fabric

Unlike CFS3, stalls and spins are convincingly modelled in OFF; the latter being difficult to correct. Another feature that is faithfully reproduced is structural failure. Diving at too high a speed will result in the shedding of a wing... or two! High-speed manoeuvres also have a similar affect. However, you will find that some aircraft are more robust than others. Those with structurally weaker lower wings, such as the Albatros and Nieuport are more prone to 'wing shedding' than others like the Spad 13 and S.E. 5a. So when in combat you find yourself paying close attention to your speed and the 'creaking' sounds emanating from your aircraft. Ignore these at your peril! Performance of your aircraft is also affected by altitude. So you have to adjust your fuel mixture to suit your current altitude in order to optimize engine performance. As Mark Andrew says: "If you do not adjust the mixture properly then you will eventually fail to gain any height!" This adds another dimension to any dogfighting encounter in OFF, which in itself is an exhilarating experience.

If you are more used to flying aircraft from WWII and later, you may find WWI types a little frustrating at first. To begin with they fly at much slower speeds. As a result you will find, for example, that it will take longer to gain altitude. Turns, particularly at high speed, will 'bleed' off speed much more quickly. So the key to flying these WWI veterans is to try to maintain your speed and hence your 'energy' state - without it you will be a sitting duck! When you lose height, try to regain it at the earliest opportunity. If you have a height advantage over your

opponent, you can often dictate the terms of engagement, even if you are flying an aircraft of inferior performance.

The AI performs fairly 'intelligently' and has a comprehensive suite of manoeuvres. However one thing that is a little irritating is the fact that enemy aircraft seem to be able to shoot at longer distances than you are capable of, but hopefully this will be addressed in Phase 2.

If you are lucky enough to get a 'kill', you have to put in a 'claim' before it is confirmed. During the war confirmation of kills varied between air corps, but the common requirement was that your 'kill' had to have been witnessed by one or more persons. I asked Mark Andrews why they had decided to adopt such an innovative, but realistic, approach to 'kills': "I decided that the 'shoot an enemy - gain a kill' function in most sims was so predictable - now your claims get processed and this means they get sent to the Home Office for verification and within three to 15 days you will either be credited with a kill or not".

This approach certainly adds credibility and immersion to the simulation.

Conclusion

Over Flanders Fields is a monumental project created by a group of talented individuals and not a corporate studio. It has all the ingredients that are essential in a good combat sim, such as atmosphere, attention to detail, challenging AI, convincing flight models and stunning scenery. However, it's also the little things that count, such as pealing church bells, smoke billowing from chimney stacks and dogs barking – these all combine to immerse you into OFF's virtual world and create a memorable experience. So, in spite of my reservations about the rendering of some of the cockpits, I have no hesitation in awarding Over Flanders Fields 5/5 and our PC Pilot Classic award! Well done chaps! As a footnote, so you can see OFF in action, we have prepared a selection of recorded videos, which you will find on this month's cover disk. ■



Adversaries - Sopwith Camel and the Albatros D.Va



In my sights! An Albatros tries to evade my guns



The rendering of this Sopwith Triplane is superb!



Zeppelin L30



Balloon busting!

Review Score ★★★★★

Publisher: Old Brown Dog Software
Price: Free
Website: www.off.oldbrowndog.net
Developer: Old Brown Dog Software

At a glance: Over Flanders Fields has a great blend of atmosphere, excitement and detail. A long overdue WWI combat sim that has a great future ahead of it!

Requirements: Combat Flight Simulator 3

Derek Davis