

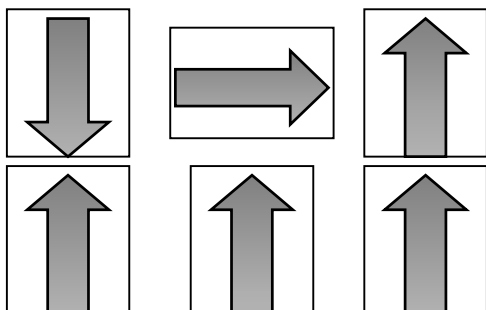
ZERO!
A Down in Flames Expansion
GMT Games Inc.
Design: Dan Verssen

Blatant Cheerleader Warning: I may wax enthusiastic here, as I'm a fan of this series. I may NOT be objective enough for the cynical out there. Of course, I wax enthusiastic until I describe in loving detail the shortcomings of American early war aircraft, then my invective becomes quite colorful indeed. On the plus side, I have played ZERO quite extensively since picking the game up, so I've had a very good chance to see how it plays. While ZERO isn't everything I've been expecting (after a six year wait, I do get a little picky), it does manage to deliver a valuable addition a great game series and will have air combat fans busy for months to come.

To begin with, ZERO is the latest installment in the DOWN IN FLAMES series started in 1993, with RISE OF THE LUFTWAFFE (RotL), which detailed the early war in the air in Europe. RotL was followed up with EIGHTH AIR FORCE (8AF) in 1995, which brought the late war aircraft, expanding bombing campaigns, and all those funky "Hitler's Secret Weapon" style aircraft into the mix. In addition, C3I, the magazine that has served as GMT's house organ, has introduced several expansions to the game since 1995. Since the last Paper Wars review of a Down in Flames product almost certainly took place during the previous incarnation of this magazine, a small thumbnail of the mechanics might be in order for those that are new to the system. If this is old hat to you, skip the next three paragraphs, please.

Down in Flames is a diceless card game series about air combat in World War II. There are two levels to the system, the strategic campaigns and the tactical dogfights. The campaigns give you a sense of accomplishment, the dogfights are great visceral bloodlettings (many avid DiF players rarely play anything more than dogfights, as they can be played quickly, which has a certain appeal). There are two decks of cards in a DOWN IN FLAMES Basic game; the action deck and the aircraft deck. The aircraft cards are classified as light (fighters and fighter-bombers), medium (bombers) and large (bombers). Each game in the series delivers a nice variety of aircraft—the standards you'd expect to see as well as some pretty obscure aircraft. The fighters are subdivided into two classes, Leaders and Wingmen. The leader card represents YOU, essentially, and the Wingman another plane in your group assigned to cover your flank.

Combat is very abstract—the Leader and Wingman start in a Neutral position versus the enemy aircraft (Left hand position in the diagram below). In "Neutral" essentially anyone can attack anyone, the planes are in 'open sky' mode. The action card deck is



dealt out in accordance with the performance rating of the aircraft, and played against the other player. The enemy aircraft may elect to respond directly to the cards played against him, but if he can't the Leader may gain a positional advantage on

him (middle cards in the drawing). When the leader shoots at another aircraft, he fires in “bursts”, which are affected by the plane’s burst rating. Being advantaged (middle situation in the drawing) effectively raises the burst level on your aircraft, due to the Leader having the drop on his helpless victim. The last situation, being tailed, adds even more bursts to the Leader’s rating, and is a very nasty spot to be in this game. During all this card interaction, the Wingmen dodge around, conducting his own attacks and helping maneuver the enemy into a spot to his disadvantage or help his own Leader out of a jam. I’m sure this comes off as a very abstract system to the newcomer, but I find it simulates how I view air combat quite nicely—there’s a lot of give and take to Verssen’s design.

Lastly, the game does not JUST present a blood n’ guts approach to air combat—DiF would be a fine system just as a standalone, but the GMT people added a very rich layer of strategic material into the mix. Each game in the series has scenario cards for historical and hypothetical bombing campaigns. A campaign is a multi-step process, where the player may have to address several serial missions or one mission with many interruptions (enemy fighters, certainly, but also elements like weather, flak, etc.). The campaigns are very complex, given the basic mechanic of the game, and add a unique dimension to the series.

So how does the Pacific Theater stack up? What does ZERO add to the mix that hasn’t been seen before? Starting with a strict “Eye Candy” approach, the game sure is a beauty—gone are the two-tone aircraft cards of yesterday. Now each aircraft is rendered in accurate historical camouflage or historical markings. This isn’t just a marketing feature—the color serves a purpose in that you can readily distinguish Navy from Army aircraft, on both major sides. There’s a nice mix of historical/technical notes on some of the cards, and the action cards also look much more dynamic than before. The scenario/campaign cards are still in black and white, but they are as concise and readable as ever. More importantly, the game has added features—campaign log sheet pads for the Coral Sea, Midway and Pearl Harbor solitaire campaigns, and a giant resource reference foldout for campaign use. Very useful indeed, especially the log sheets. The box recycles some of Rodger MacGowan’s FLAT TOP (Avalon Hill) artwork, looking like a scene out of TORA!, TORA!, TORA!. However, the box is *sturdy* and more importantly deep. My 8AF box is starting to fall apart under the combined weight of two each of RotL, 8AF and the many card inserts that C3I has published over the years. It looks as if the people at GMT built ZERO with expansion in mind.

Mechanically, the game is hardly changed at all, but you would expect this from a series game. Some of the airplane cards have “Special Powers” now, like the Japanese A6M2 Zero or Zeke. The Zero has an “Agile” special ability that can be traded, once per turn, for the ability to convert a regular card into a scissors card. Given the notorious maneuverability of the Zero (at the stage of the war being covered here, a Zero could turn inside most allied planes’ turn arcs), this seems fair. I’m glad, however, that GMT did not go overboard with the concept of the “special power” concept because airplane performance did change over time during the course of the war—if the Zeke is “agile” now, how will it stack up to the P-51, or Corsair? Food for thought. In terms of dogfighting, ZERO is pretty much the bare bones system that was refined in 8AF. The

basic system has not changed. Campaigns are a little different. Much of the campaigns in the earlier editions of DiF were versus static objectives. The Pacific War was much different. Historically, planes had to fly over vast distances to tiny points in the ocean, conduct a mission and fly home (hopefully without ditching from lack of fuel)—and that was for targets that you knew were there. Often, the targets were task forces and enemy carriers that you had to search for. Thus, ZERO has included some special campaigns called Carrier Campaigns. Carrier Campaigns include new Carrier Strike and Search mechanics that haven't been utilized in the system prior to ZERO. The rest of the campaigns are standard land campaigns, not much different from the ones presented in RotL and 8AF:

Carrier Campaigns:

Name	Period	Comments
Coral Sea	April 1942	U.S. slightly outnumbered—nothing new there. U.S. primary fighter aircraft pretty bad (F4F).
Midway	May 1942	U.S. not as outnumbered as at Coral Sea, same awful aircraft but a nice mix of them at least. I found it hard to replicate the historical surprise that caused the overwhelming historical American victory.
Pearl Harbor	Dec 1941	Well, you know the situation going into this one. Interesting concept—it's a solitaire campaign where you play the Japanese against the system. Nice learning scenario!

Land Campaigns:

Name	Period	Comments
Philippines	Late 41-42	Outstanding. Long duration, many targets, varied resources, and a lot of decisions to make as either side. The best of the bunch.
Burma	Winter 41-42	Nice mix of bombers and fighters, Provides a chance to get the better Allied planes in the game (especially the Hurricane), since this was primarily a British campaign at this point in time.
Malaya	Winter 41-42	I found this one to be fairly brief compared to the Philippines—better as a short duration game at any rate. Lots of interesting aircraft mix-ups, though better for the Japanese (shocker!).

The historical period being was not, alas, the high point of American aircraft engineering. The best fighter airplane on the Allied side was British (in my opinion)—the Hurricane IIB. The best Japanese fighter, hands down, is the Zeke. The added agility factor is pretty devastating against the earlier American airplanes, particularly slowpokes like the F4F. Unless you are something of an aircraft masochist, like myself, and actually *enjoy*

flying fragile crates like the Brewster Buffalo or F4F, I have to warn you, you might be a bit turned off by the American side. Their airplanes are not exactly hopeless, but it takes luck and skillful card play to take down a Zero as an American. It is “doable.” The Japanese planes are extremely maneuverable but fragile as an eggshell—if you can score about five points of damage on most Japanese fighters, you can put them in a “world of hurt.” The American planes can stand up to the punishment far longer... but are slow and lumbering compared to many Japanese fighters. To new purchasers of the game, the ultimate match up is the Hurricane versus the Zeke. As something of a veteran (if I may humbly assert this), I find “best plane versus best plane” matches not as exciting as winning a dogfight when you are clearly outmatched in terms of performance. So my advice is try the lesser planes on BOTH sides before you settle into a routine of Zekes and Hurricanes only. You’ll be surprised at how interesting (and short!) dogfights can be.

I’m more of a dogfight fan than a bombing campaign fan, but I have no problem with the aircraft mix for both sides. I wish some of the planes from 8AF that saw duty in both theaters might have made it into ZERO! (like the P-38 for example), but perhaps these will be covered in the next installment, CORSAIRS AND HELLCATS. Certainly the aircraft mix will provide great fodder for design-your-own campaigns. My colleague and I recently reenacted the bombing of Dutch Harbor on a long lunch hour recently and had no problem with the cards included in the basic game.

One final thought I had while playing out some of the many fragile-aircraft versus fragile-aircraft dogfights possible with ZERO: It seemed to me that the worse the aircraft get on the front end (earliest aircraft), the harder it gets to simulate the entire air war period using the Down in Flames mechanism. For instance, I’ve tried creating DiF aircraft for the Spanish Civil War and none of them have a burst rating higher than zero (except the BF109) and few of them had a very high horsepower rating – you get a somewhat unrealistic situation where airplanes are endlessly jockeying around to get advantage on each other and nobody gets shot down. You can see just a glimmer of this phenomenon with some of the aircraft matchups in ZERO. I hope the Verssen team addresses this a bit with the anticipated World War ONE DiF module, scheduled for some time next year.

In summary, I am quite gleeful that I have a new edition to my Down in Flames library—the planes are not the most powerful in the world, but they can lead to some very challenging tests of skill on both sides. The campaigns are excellent. I am eagerly looking forward to the new aircraft scheduled to be introduced with the next module in the series, CORSAIRS AND HELLCATS. ZERO! was very much worth the six-year wait, and an absolute *must* if you are an air combat fan.