

I've recently discovered this Print 'n Play game thanks to a thread on BGG. Since I want to get this game some publicity, and since I've long wanted to try my hand at writing a review, I'm going to do that now. This is the official description of the game from its BGG entry:

“Table Air Combat is a fast, simple air combat game that can be played on any flat surface. Each player has a flight of fighters, represented by two-sided counters. Aircraft counters move by means of curved “performance rulers” that represent the aircraft’s historical cornering ability and maximum speed. Each performance ruler is unique to each aircraft, and contains all the speed, cornering, and weapon information needed. TAC is designed for portability. The entire game can fit in a plastic bag. Even the largest battles can take place on a fast-food restaurant table.”

That sounds pretty simple, right? I think there is a lot of goodness under the surface of that brief (and accurate, except that you aren't limited to fighters, as bombers of all shapes and sizes are part of this package) description. I'll hopefully convince you to feel the same way.

WHAT'S IN THE GAME / WHAT IS THE GAME?

Table Air Combat, in BGG terms, is actually a game family. Each “game” in the family is a single plane. From now on I'm just going to call them planes, not games. Each plane has its own .pdf file which contains the base rules for the game itself, any additional rules needed for that specific plane, a number of scenarios utilizing that plane and one or two other types of planes, some basic instructions for creating the components, and the graphics needed to create the components you must assemble to play the game.

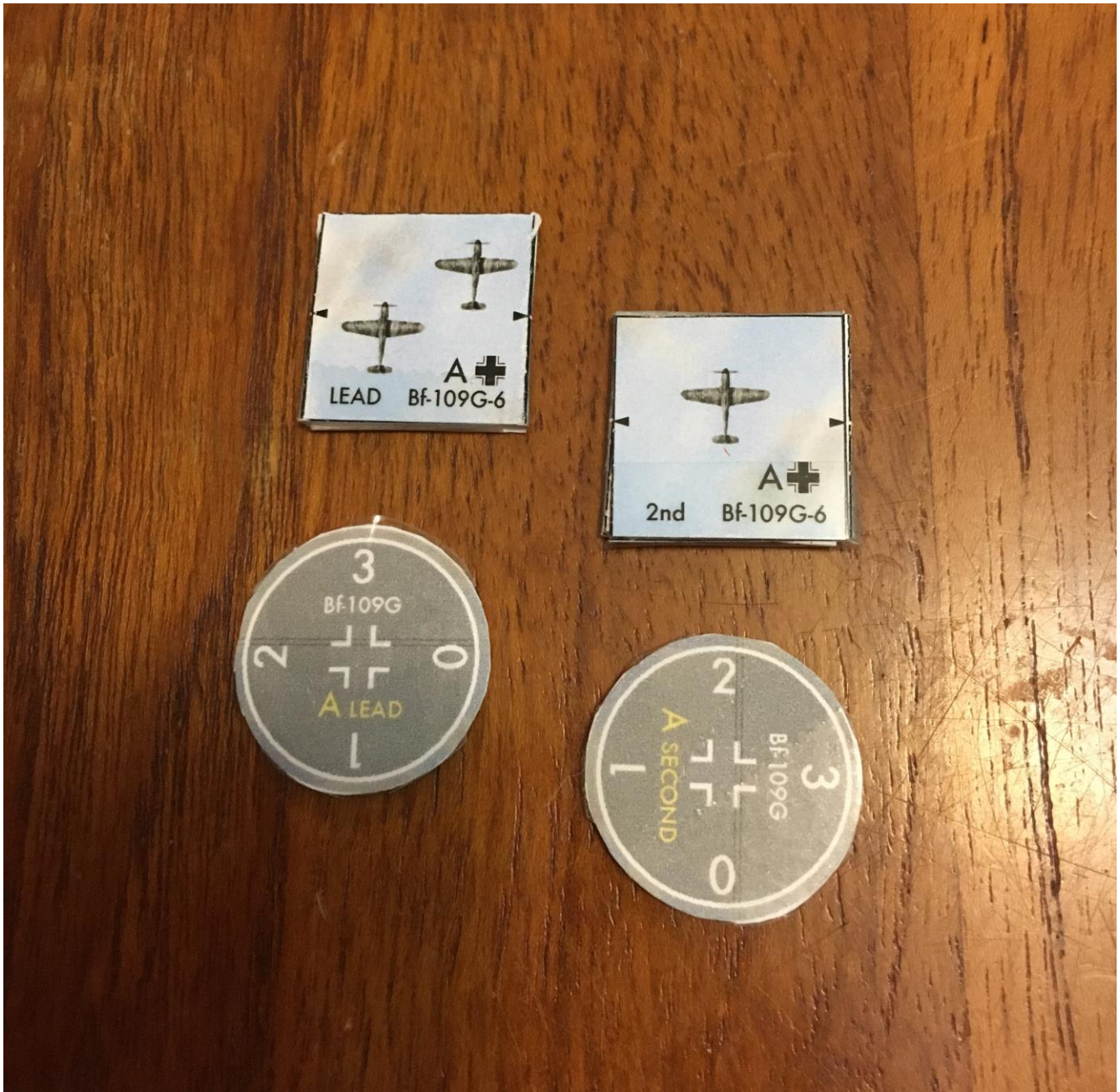
You can buy the planes at War Game Vault for \$1.99 each (except the Spitfire Mk. V which is “pay what you want” item, so that you can get for just a penny). Note that each plane has one scenario which you can play using only the planes in that game. So you can dogfight a Spitfire Mk. V against itself, or make a bombing run against a flak defended target using only He-111's if that's the plane you bought. Each plane also contains at least one additional, and usually 2-3 additional, scenarios that include other planes. So if you buy the Spitfire Mk. V, you can dogfight some Spits against each other to see if you like the game. If you do, you can buy the Bf-109F game and dogfight against those planes. If that isn't enough, you can buy the He-111 game and use your Spitfires to attack the bombers while they are escorted by the Bf-109's. Of course, each other game you buy has additional scenarios including other planes. And nothing says you can't fly the Zero A6M2 against the Focke-Wulf 190D, just to see what would have happened. All right, let's wrap this part of the review up by saying that the replay value of the game is based on how many different planes you purchase, and with just a few planes in your collection it is very, very high.

Components

What's in a “plane?” As I said, this is a Print 'n Play game. In order to play it, you'll have to craft some components on your own. Other than one of those little post card war games, I've never tried to make a PnP game before. I'd say I earned an A for effort, and maybe a B- for results. You can tell me what you

think about that. Technically this is a miniatures game. The plane miniatures are two sided square counters that are folded together to form a square. Each mini represents an element of two planes. Two elements form a flight. Each plane miniature has a top down picture of two plane silhouettes, and element designation (A, B, C) and designation as either Lead or 2nd. Those designations are simply to keep track of which element is which, the rules don't dictate that the Lead element has certain abilities or responsibilities. When an element takes damage, it is flipped over and the image is a silhouette of a single plane (no wing man, and that's not a good thing).

You print the planes out (I used card stock, regular printer paper would be too lightweight), fold them up around some heavy object (the game recommends an American nickel, I ended up preferring an American penny), and seal them (I started using tape, tried white glue, fun tack, glue sticks, and ended up using a combination of fun tack and glue stick). I'll get into energy later, but most planes (and all fighters) have energy counters included in the game. Those are just simple cut-outs and you mount them (again I used a penny) to track each elements' energy throughout the game. If the plane you're working on is a bomber, it will come with at least one target, some hit markers and possibly flak counters. Again, those components need to be cut out, I found that card stock was heavy enough and didn't need to mount them on anything else. Here are pictures of the components I've mentioned so far.



Plane elements and energy counters

Targets and Flak. Yes, the ships move, and the Akagi launches planes (I'm telling you this game has A LOT of cool stuff going on).

Now we get to the real heart of the game, and what I think makes it special. Each plane has its own performance ruler. The performance ruler basically contains all of the rules for each specific's plane performance. It shows you how fast the plane can move, how tight it can turn, how much energy it can amass, how many guns it fires and how much damage those guns do. Here is a performance ruler:

Guns	□ □	□
Firepower	+2	+2
Defense	☑	☑
Airframe	☑	☑
Speed	5	5

Bf-109G
 1942

Span 32' 6"
 Length 29'
 Weight 6834 lbs
 Engine 1475 HP Daimler-Benz 605 V-12
 Airspeed 406 mph
 Armament 2x 13 mm machine guns
 20mm cannon

ZOOM CLIMB:

- Move stall speed in a straight line
- regain 2 energy

WINGOVER:

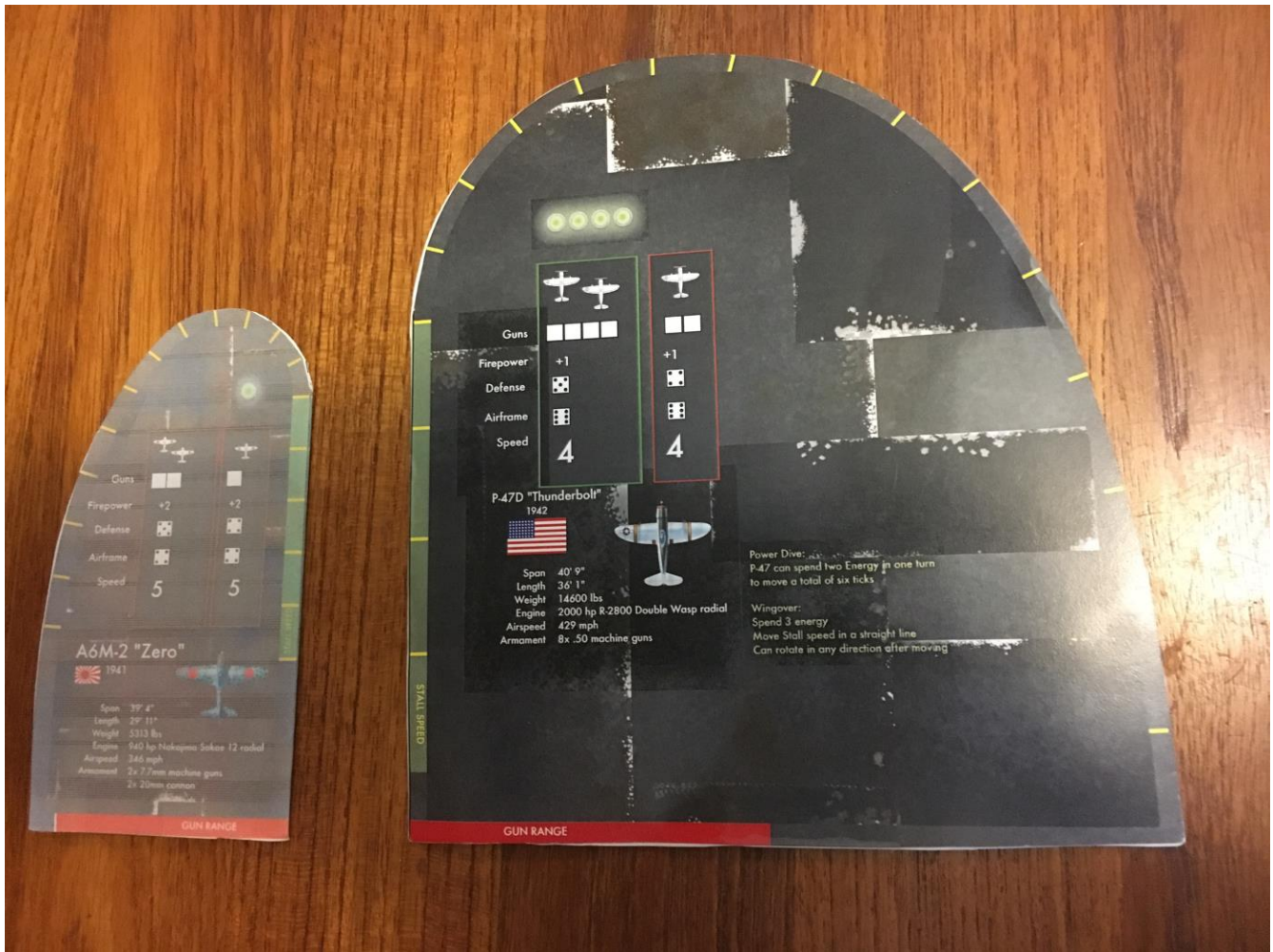
- Move stall speed in a straight line
- Use 3 energy
- point element in any direction

STALL SPEED

GUN RANGE

The Bf-109G

Cool isn't it? Since each plane had different abilities, strengths and weaknesses, each plane's performance ruler is unique. Of course the bombers have much different performance characteristics than the fighters. Different fighters, though, have different rulers. Some are very similar (not a huge gap between the Bf-109E, F or G), some are very, very different. Here is a comparison between the P-47D Thunderbolt and the A6M2 Zero.



A6M-2 Zero vs. P-47D Thunderbolt

These planes were so different that I use them to highlight how the performance rulers demonstrate what each plane can do. Just a quick glance tells you the basics. The Zero was a super nimble, highly maneuverable but fairly delicate airplane. The Thunderbolt was a huge beast that didn't turn very well but it moved fast, dished out and absorbed a great deal of punishment.

Rules

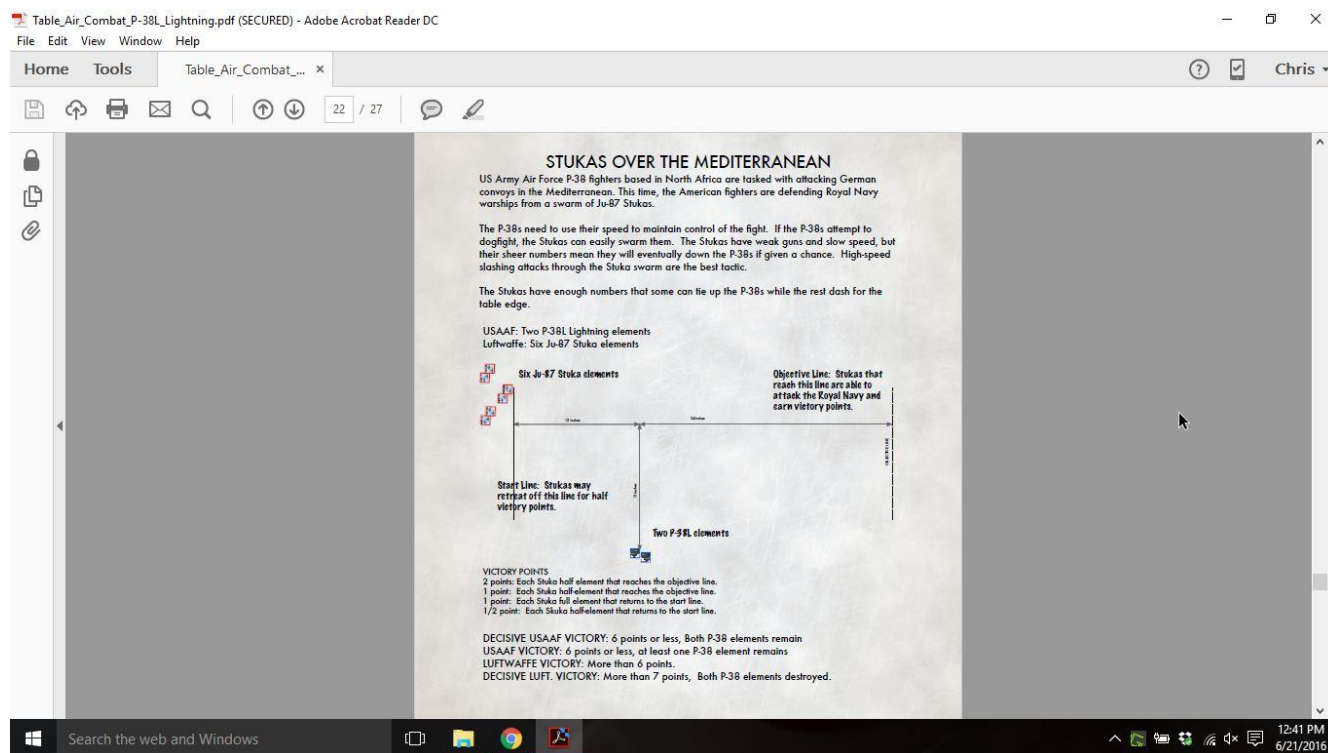
The base rules are 17 pages long, with lots of graphics. They are very simple and easy to learn. I was playing the game about 15 minutes after finishing the first set of components. If the plane is a bomber then there are additional rules for bombing, flexible gunfire and flak (about 8 pages), if it's a torpedo bomber an additional page for how to do that. This review is going to go into quite a bit of detail about the rules, I hope I don't make them seem complicated. I think the game has a lot of depth, but it is super easy to learn.

SEQUENCE OF PLAY

I wrote an AAR specifically focusing on game rules and concepts, so I'm going to use excerpts from that for a major portion of this review. If you want to read it beginning to end, you can use this link to see all of my AAR's if you have a BGG account.

<https://www.boardgamegeek.com/thread/1597606/aar-subscription-thread-fatgreta-aars>

The Scenario



Can you do as well as the Americans did in the real war?

Movement



Partial view of a larger object with text, including 'P381' and other illegible characters.

The sequence of play in Table Air Combat is very simple. Movement, then combat. All elements complete their desired movement, one element at a time. Movement order is determined by initiative [NOTE: The game rules don't use the term initiative, I use that instead of the bulkier "determining who moves first and who moves last."], which we'll get to later. For now realize that the side listed next to each turn number won the initiative roll for that turn. Once all planes have moved, any planes that have valid targets may shoot. You'll see in this picture that one of the P-38's has moved farther than the other. That element spent one energy to move one extra tick. Those pilots are eager to get into the fray.

Performance Rulers



These are the performance rulers for the P-38L Lightning and the Ju-87 Stuka. Everything you need to know about the planes is shown here. First, you can see at a glance what the plane's relative turning radius is. In this case the

Stuka is much more maneuverable than the Lightning. That doesn't mean it's a better plane, but it turns more tightly.

You can also see how fast each plane is. There are two depictions of speed on the performance ruler. Each plane has a number indicating its speed, 5 for the P-38 and 4 for the Stuka. That doesn't mean that the P-38 is exactly 20% faster though. Each ruler has a straight side and a curved edge. Note the tick marks along the outside of each ruler. The speed number is the number of those tick marks the plane can travel each turn. If the plane is turning, then the space the plane moves is less. If the plane moves in a straight line, then each tick mark covers more ground. The green area indicates the maximum distance the plane can fly in a straight line. The tick marks for the P-38 are much farther apart than the Ju-87. Even if the Lightning moves only 4 ticks in a straight line, it's basically moving at the Stuka's stop speed.

Note the orange shaded portion of the Stuka's performance ruler. That area encompasses the tightest turn the plane is able to make. Since the Stuka has a tail gun, that orange shading means that in any turn that the aircraft moves through any of that area, the tail gun is not able to fire.

There are green spheres along the top of each plane's performance ruler. Those indicate the amount of energy each plane has. The role of energy will come up later, but your plane is better off with more of it. It basically represents altitude, and to some extent how much speed the plane maintains after complex maneuvers. Greater maximum energy indicates a plane with better performance, so it's no surprise that the P-38 has three times the amount that the Ju-87 has, knowing as we do how much faster the American fighters are than the German dive bombers. Energy can be used in two ways. Most commonly, a plane will expend one energy to move one extra tick (it's diving and going faster than if it stayed in a straight line). Some, but not all, fighters have the ability to perform certain advanced maneuvers. The P-38 can perform the most common one, a wing over. If that happens during this fight, I'll explain it then.

The Stuka, while not a fighter, is a highly maneuverable airplane. Here we see a Stuka trying to get onto the P-38's tail so it can shoot. It has moved 3 of its allowed 4 ticks at this point, and can't line up a shot.



A very hard bank gets the German on the Lightning's six. Note the tail gun won't be able to fire this turn.



Ju-87B "Stuka"

Tail gun cannot be used in orange area



P-38L
Lightning

B
LEAD



2nd
Ju-87B

⊕
C

Being in position doesn't always mean you get a shot. You have to be in effective range for your guns. The Stuka with its poor armament is just put off range. Wanting to draw blood, it spends it's only energy to close.

Speed

Bomb Load

DIVE BOMBER:
Must use 1 energy when bombing

TAIL GUN RANGE

GUN RANGE

+0

+0

Span 32' 4"
 Length 28' 5"
 Weight 12880 lbs
 Engine 1200 hp Junkers Jumo 211 V-12
 Airspeed 238 mph
 Armament 3 x 7.9mm machine guns
 1100 lbs of bombs

4

4



Initiative

Initiative is crucial in Table Air Combat, as it determines who moves first and who moves last. Moving last is nearly always a BIG advantage. If there are an unequal number of elements on one side (such as 6 Stukas vs. 2 P-38s), then the side with the most units moves enough elements to have an equal number of unmoved elements, then an initiative roll is made. The side that wins initiative moves last, but not all of its planes wait until the very end. With two elements per side, the side winning the roll moves one element, then the losing side moves both elements, then the winning side moves its final element last.

The US won initiative this turn. Its lead P-38 raced toward the enemy planes that are trying to make their bomb run, using 1 energy to close the gap. That element now has two targets to close from.

P-38L "Lightning"
1944



Span 52'
Length 37' 10"
Weight 17500 lbs
Engine Two 1475 hp Allison V-12
Airspeed 414 mph
Armament 4x .50 machine guns



WINCOVER:

- Move stall speed in a straight line.
- Use 3 energy
- point element in any direction

GUN RANGE

LEAD
Ju-87B



+

B LEAD



★
P-38L
Lightning

B



This allowed the Germans to close for a tail shot, but because the US moved last the 2nd element was able to draw a bead on that Stuka.



Stall Speed and Stacking

Stall speed is an important concept also.

Bomb Load

Speed

Airframe

Defense

Firepower

Guns

Ju-87B "Stuka"

1938

Tail gun cannot be used in orange area

STALL SPEED

+

C

LEAD

Ju-87B

This Stuka expects the American planes it just shoot at to fly past and make a high speed run at the other bombers. It wants to make a right and slow turn in hopes of ending up on the enemy's twin tail. It must move the minimum indicated stall speed. Since each ruler tick in a sharp turn is less than stall speed, it has to move a little farther. We will eyeball this.



Now both US elements have to move, then the Stuka closest to the bottom will finish the turn, hopefully with an unopposed shot from behind.



Moving slowly the last German element did close.

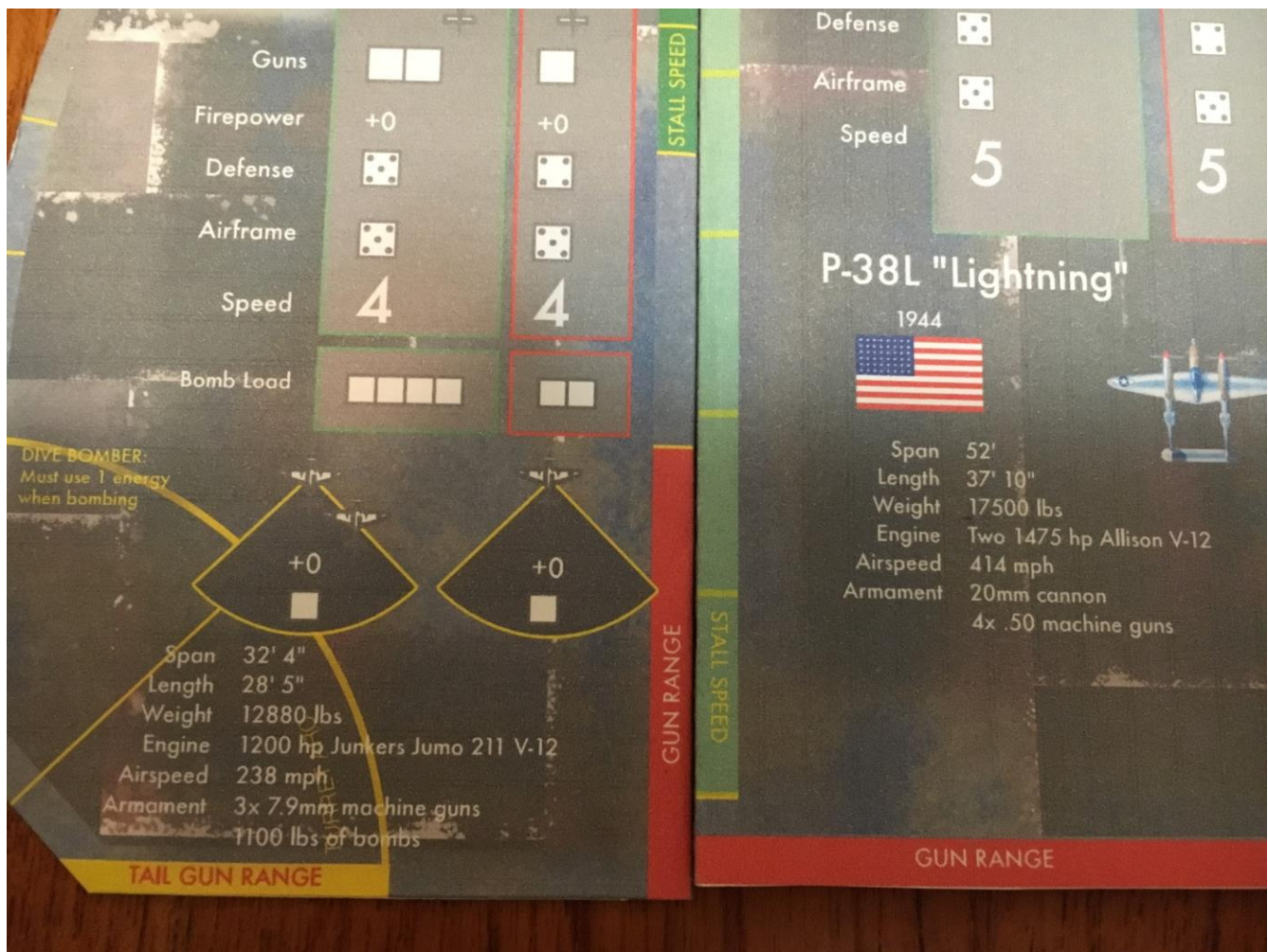
It is possible to stack elements on top of each other. Elements can complete their move stacked on one or more elements as long as the underneath elements have finished their move(s). Planes stacked on top of other elements must move before those elements move, which might impact turn order. Also, an element cannot attack on an element yet to move, which can (and often does) affected the way you are able to move your planes.

Combat

Combat at its core is very simple. After all elements have moved, any elements that are in range and pointing at an enemy element gets to fire. To fire with fixed front guns some part the target element must line up within the side edges of the firing plane extended. Some planes have tail guns, and some even have side gunners. Those are flexible guns and they have a firing arc.

Hits, Damage and Max Damage Per Attack

This is one of the elements of Table Air Combat that I love. The performance rulers indicate how many dice each element fires when attacking. Elements roll that many D6 and compared the results to the target's defense. Each roll that equals or exceeds the defense total is a hit. For each hit scored the attacker roles another die and compared the results to the defender's airframe. Some planes take more damage than others. Likewise, some guns do more damage than others. Each plane types has a firepower rating. When rolling for damage, that number is added to each die.



Here you see vital stats for each planned type (another thing I love about this game). The Stuka has three 7.9mm (about .30 caliber) machine guns, but one of them is in the tail. The P-38 Lightning has a powerful 20mm cannon and four big .50 caliber machine guns, all nose mounted.

Tail gun cannot be used in orange area

Ju-87B "Stuka"

1938



Guns



Firepower

+0

+0

Defense



Airframe

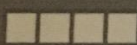


Speed

4

4

Bomb Load



+0



+0



32' 4"

28' 5"

12880 lbs

1200 hp Junkers Jumo 211 V-12

238 mph

3x 7.9mm machine guns

1100 lbs of bombs

GUN RANGE

STALL SPEED

GUN RANGE

STALL SPEED



Guns



Firepower

+2

+2

Defense



Airframe



Speed

5

5

P-38L "Lightning"

1944



Span 52'

Length 37' 10"

Weight 17500 lbs

Engine Two 1475 hp Allison V-12

Airspeed 414 mph

Armament 20mm cannon

4x .50 machine guns

WINGO

- Move
- Use 3
- point

GUN RANGE

Here you see that both planes fire the same number of dice, but the Lightning had a +2 modifier when checking to see if its hits did damage. Note that both planes have the same defender and airframe ratings.

In this combat, the Stuka stacked beneath the lead P-38 fired and scored 1 hit, but rolled a 4 for damage, doing none. The Stuka tail gunner scored a hit with one die AND rolled a 5 for damage, so the lead P-38 element is reduced.

The P-38 cut loose at point blank range (no effect for near or far shots in the game, you either have the short or you don't). It scored 2 hits AND both hits did damage (a 6 and a 4, both of which receive the +2 firepower modification). HOWEVER, a single attack, no matter how many hits and damage it secured, can not destroy a full strength element. So the Stuka is reduced. If both Stukas that fired on the P-38 had done damage, it would have been destroyed, as those C are separate attacks. Note on the performance rulers that reduced elements roll fewer dice (there are half the number of planes) and have a lower defense value (there is no wingman).

Targeted by multiple sources



TAIL GUN RANGE

Span 32 ft
Length 28 ft 5 in
Weight 12880 lbs
Engine 1200 hp Junkers
Airspeed 238 mph
Armament 3x 7.9mm machine guns
1100 lbs of bombs

TAIL GUN RANGE



Note that this P-38 can be fired at by both tail gunners, since the edge of the counter overlaps the trailing Stuka's gun arc. A smarter play might have been to move so that only the trailing German plane had a front gun shot. Same number of dice, but only one potential damage. Note on that later. The trailing Style is just out of range.

All shots once again miss.

Bombing Runs

Table Air Combat has dive bombers (the German Stuka and the US Dauntless), medium level bombers (German He-111), torpedo bombers that can also carry iron bombs (US TBF-1C Avenger, Japanese G4M Betty) and so far one heavy bomber (US B-17F Flying Fortress). Those bombers can attack land targets or naval targets. Those targets have AAA defenses, flak for ground targets and both flak and close in AAA guns for ships. Each target type has a hit number and a number of circles representing the number of hits required to destroy it. Some targets need two rolls of 6, some four rolls of 4, some three rolls of 5... you get the idea. In the picture of the Stuka's performance ruler you saw an indication for "bombs." When the plane makes a bombing run it rolls that number of dice. Any rolls equal to or above the hit number is a hit.

Fighters can strafe ground targets also, but doing permanent damage that way is hard unless the plane in question has the ability to fire The Whole Nine Yards. Think P-47D, I'll leave the rest for you to figure out.

Here is a photo of a bombing run from a different AAR, Surprise Attack.



That is how the game works, probably in more detail than a game review needs. Still, I wanted to show how what is a simple and inexpensive game can offer a lot of interesting game play without an exorbitant number of components or very heavy rules.

PROS

Clearly I love this game, so I think virtually everything I've written is a pro. Here are what I find to be the most compelling elements:

- Simple rules
- Fast, fun gameplay
- Lots of variety in planes and scenarios
- Inexpensive & easy to assemble
- Portable, fast setup and breakdown

CONS

Personally I find very little lacking here. I know that some folks who are actual fighter pilots or more experienced tabletop / computer flight sim players will find that the game lacks some important details related to realism. I'm not very experienced or good at that so I don't know what I'm missing, if I'm missing anything. [thread=1596550]If I get better at it[/thread] and decide the game has a problem there I'll update this review. I heard one person say he wished the plane graphics were a single strip, rather than a T shape, for easier cut-out and assembly. I will say I'd find it easier and faster to assemble the game that way, although the quality might suffer. I'll weigh in and say my preference would be a strip as the final quality of the elements isn't important enough that it would make a difference. That is a super minor quibble though, as I see it. I think you could make the point that some of the planes are so similar in performance characteristics that having each of them isn't necessary (the multiple Bf-109 models are really the only place that applies though). And again, that is a minor point. It's OK not to buy every plane that's available. Well, it's OK for some people. If anything that last point only speaks to how hopeful I am about new releases in the series. When I first discovered this game it seemed that the designer primarily supported it through his Facebook page, and since I'm not on FB that was a bummer. But he has been on the forums here answering questions a lot, so I don't see that as a con.

Brass tacks time – for me there are no real cons to this game.

FINAL THOUGHTS

What more can I say? I hope some of you buy a couple of plane types (or more), build them and put them on the table. I'd love to see more reviews or AAR's show up here on BGG (I don't think there's an entry for it on CSW yet), and to get some more folks giving it a go.

Here is a photo of my completed collection, which was rendered incomplete by the welcome addition of the G4M Betty a few days back. I'll update the photo when I can. I hope that it is made out of date quite often.