

Flight Sims for a bygone era

First Eagles • Flyboys Squadron • CH Products Combat Flight suite

After a long hiatus, the good ol' canvas-covered wings with flying wires have made a comeback. I think that these combat simulations depicting the early days of aviation have hit the shelves almost simultaneously in part because of the releases of the freeware CFS3 add-on *Over Flanders Fields* and the movie "Flyboys."

First Eagles: the Great War 1918

For folks who enjoy the early days of flight and flight simulations, this is where it all comes together. With an emphasis on sim "lite," *First Eagles* offers such offline antics as single missions and two campaigns. Multiplayer has never been a strong point, but it is supported and it's fun.

I downloaded from the link and followed the instructions provided; then I fired it up and, for the most part, found that my controllers were already dialed in. With a little tweaking on the new controller set, I was easily able to navigate the screens, which are laid out like *Wings Over Europe* but have that "old world" feel.

There are only three flyable models in this edition, but more will be added. I fired up a

quick run in the SPAD XIII over the trenches and quickly got a feel for this well-detailed airframe. With just a few flights under my belt, I dived right into a campaign over Meuse-Argonne, France, and quickly found myself blazing away at the enemy! Observation balloons and flak guns are the major ground targets. Various German Albatros and Fokker fighters and two-seat bombers that include rear



First Eagles, The Great War 1918 Euro version.



Another Hun out of the fight.

More graphically modern simulations have been lacking since *Red Baron 3D* became too antiquated.

The first is from a company that has been the benchmark for expandability and unprecedented offerings from add-on specialists at some of the finer simulation sites on the Internet. USAFMTL and MK2 at CombatAce.com in addition to Gramps, RussoUK, Kout and many others at SimHQ.com have labored to bring a long life to the Thirdwire series of *SF:PI*, *Wings over Vietnam* and *Wings over Europe*. The fourth in the collection steps back in time and is titled *First Eagles: the Great War*.

First Eagles: the Great War 1918

Developer: Thirdwire Productions

Publisher: direct download until U.S. distributor is secured

Platform: PC with Internet connection for download
Minimum system requirements: 1.0GHz, OS: Windows 2000/XP, 512MB RAM, 500MB free space, 64MB DirectX 9.0c

Available: now

Price: \$30

Website: thirdwire.com

AT A GLANCE

Highs: low system requirements; ideal for first-time gamers and seasoned combat-simulation enthusiasts.
Lows: artificial intelligence is a little low, but Thirdwire has been good for patches.

Bottom line: for those who want to relive the good old days of wings with wires, this is a must-have!

gunners are the most notable aerial opponents—no radar, missiles, or beyond-visual-range engagements here. Just a pair of trusty lead spitters along with the stick and the rudder stand between you and defeat. Blazing away with guns that jam and can be un-jammed in flight was the most fun I've had with a sim for quite some time. Some well-done third-party add-ons are available. Based on this start, I anticipate much more, and its replayability will be measured in years and not just months. Another hit from this crew!

Now, if your tastes run more to the online offerings, you may already be familiar with the *Total Sims Warbirds* series; it now deals with the early years, too—but with a twist with a sim called *Flyboys Squadron*.

Flyboys Squadron

Anyone who has been around combat simulations for as long as I have will recognize the name of the now-defunct MicroProse. It was one of the best at creating enjoyable deep simulations. After its demise, in the early '90s, one of its founders, "Wild Bill" Stealy, created Interactive Magic (iMagic) and produced fine offline titles. With the advent of the Internet, the company switched to an entirely online format and renamed itself "iEntertainment."

The old iMagic moniker has been resurrected in this title; it seems to be loosely based on its *Dawn of Aces* segment of the Internet gaming arenas. The biplanes and triplanes of the Great War in Europe are yours to fly and fight. On

installation, you are presented with clips from "Flyboys" to get your heart racing and then a menu of items from which to choose: campaign, online, settings, update, credits and exit. After I entered the settings area, I clicked the only offline option available: campaign. This is a series of single missions that can be played in any order; the sequence given seems to be the most logical and follows the movie's storyline.

The missions feel like an online frag-fest; there are tons of enemy and friendly labels over aircraft that are swirling around. Most missions start in the air near the action. The first few times, I kept failing, as I had not realized that the top line over the shot from the movie given in the briefing tells you your goals. Most are real challenges, and at the end, there's a link to special online arenas for other simulations that are included in this boxed version.



FlyBoys Squadron.

Flyboys Squadron

Developer: Interactive Magic
Publisher: Electric Distribution
Platform: PC CD
Available: now
Price: \$29.95
Website: ient.com

AT A GLANCE

Highs: a gateway into massive multiplayer online combat.

Lows: dated-looking graphics, offline play scripted and limited.

Bottom line: good value when you consider its price and the bonuses.

As a bonus, iMagic's award-winning *Warbirds* and other features show up—*Armored Assault* (a WW II tank game), extra maps for WW I and II aircraft and armor, a training area for more modern aircraft and the T-6A in the San Antonio, Texas vicinity. The more I rummaged around, the more I found. Generous bonuses abound. For the sheer amount of combat flying in this package, this product is well worth its price; and I barely scratched the surface of its online capabilities, which seem to be its main selling point.

It is a good thing I had the right tools for all this aerial mayhem; I used CH Products Combat Flight Suite.

CH Products Combat Flight Suite

The folks at CH Products put together the ultimate combat suite! It features its newest addition to an already impressive line—the Multi-Function Panel. This rascal gives new meaning to custom tailoring, as you can attach any key anywhere on its removable clear plastic surface, which allows you to place any guide to keys you would like to print out.

Whether it's games, utilities, or wherever your imagination takes you, these options

allow you to use this suite for anything. For this review, I whipped up an early 20th century steam-powered-looking panel, slipped it under the plastic, plopped a dozen of the included 25 keys down and then assigned them different tasks. Through the CH control manager, I slid my keyboard tray back under the desk. With a much smaller footprint, I had more room for the Fighterstick and Pro Throttle, both of which were easily picked up by Windows. Here's a tip: when you peel the clear plastic off the keys, hold onto it because if you want to return the keys to the box, they will stick to it without the backing.

I immediately loved the flat trajectory of the throttle; the fine-tuning of percentages

CH Products Combat Flight Suite

Developer: CH Products
Platform: USB 2.0 for PC
Available: now
Prices: Pro Throttle, FighterStick (\$150);
Multi-function Panel (\$190)
Website: chproducts.com

AT A GLANCE

Highs: easily integrated and incredibly versatile.

Lows: so many possibilities, so little time.

Bottom line: this is how virtual combat should be done!

Virtual Pilot

was more linear and easier to adjust. I also took a little time to get this trio, along with the rudder pedals from the prior review, into a jet sim. A little more artwork, a repositioning of the keys and presto!—I had all my routine items such as gear, flaps, autopilot and mission map on the MFP and the combat-oriented controls right at hand on the throttle and stick. The conventional keyboard was tucked away for less entertaining things such as typing articles.

My desk was, with the slide of a tray, a virtual cockpit, and I was ready to harm the enemy with all the required tools within reach and readily available. ➤

—Aaron Watson

