

RAF: The Battle of Britain 1940

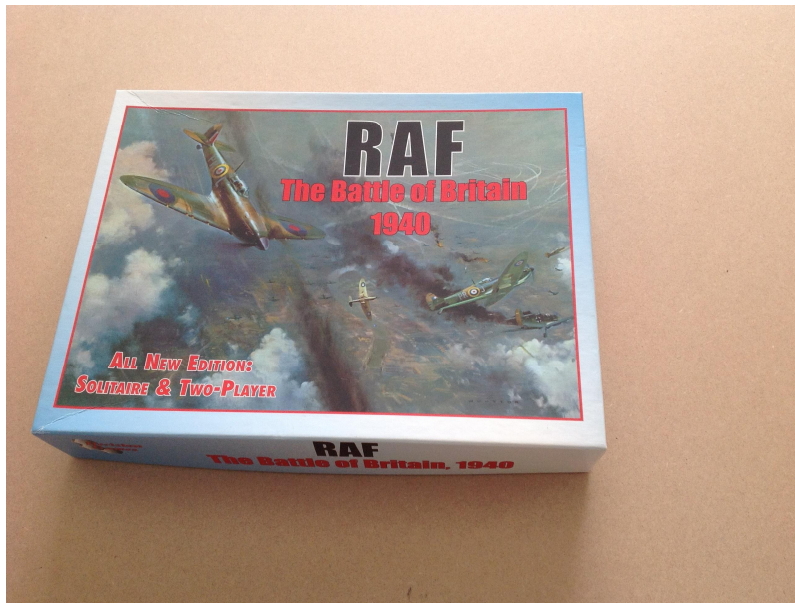
Decision Games (2009)

Designer John Butterfield

Review by Paul Le Long

Overview

This is a solitaire game of the Battle of Britain on the operational level. You are not involved with individual dogfights, instead you are deciding which squadrons to put up on patrol, which raids to respond to and where to base your squadrons. The game can be played from 11 August through to October 1940. Several days might pass between raids but when they come, several raids will take place in a day. You are in the planning room, not the cockpit. You respond to intelligence from coast-watchers and radar, scramble squadrons to meet raids and try to get grounded squadrons refuelled in time to meet the next waves.



Actually you get three games in the box: Lion ó a solitaire game where you play the British; Eagle ó solitaire but you play the Germans; Lion versus Eagle ó 2-player game. I've only played Lion so my remarks only refer to that.

Can it be played solo?

This is a solitaire game (well, apart from the 2-player version, obviously).

What are the components?

176 counters (standard wargames fare), 165 cards (these mostly control the enemy AI), 2 maps (Eagle uses a different map). The map is attractive, depicting southern England split into zones. The components are nothing special but they are nice enough.

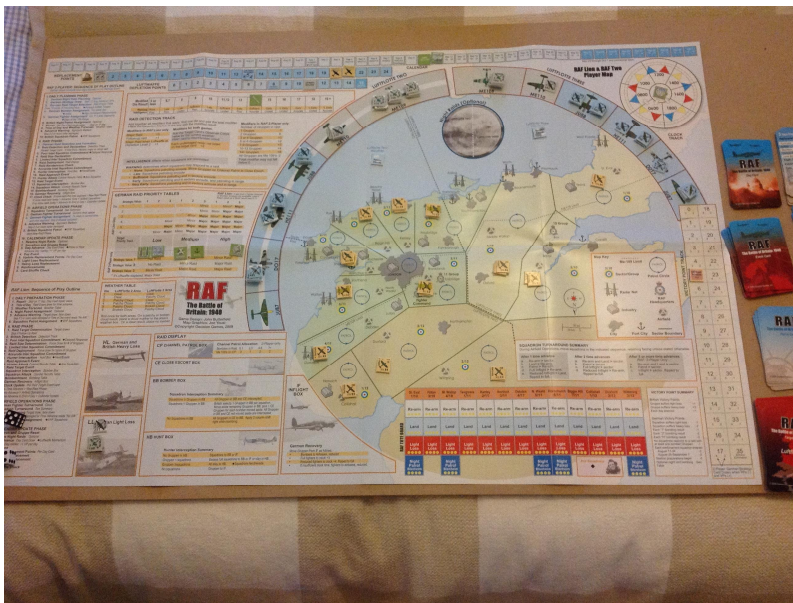
What is the level of complexity?

The box rates it 3/5, medium complexity. That's probably right. I found it a struggle at first but after a few games I'm fluent. The rulebook is not the best; I think it could be better laid out. Actually the biggest help was watching play-through videos on YouTube (see below) which did a good job of explaining the rules.

There are several scenarios ranging from playing through a single day (this is an introductory scenario to get you going) to playing several days or weeks, right through to the full campaign. The box says that playing time is 2-15 hours depending on scenario and that's about right. So the full campaign is a large undertaking but well worth the investment of time and energy.

What do you spend your time doing during play?

I won't go through the whole turn sequence step by step. By and large you are drawing cards from a variety of decks. These cards tell you a variety of things: what time the first raid of the day is, an indication of where the next raids will come in, the strength and target of a raid, the number of fighters/bombers in a raid, the amount of warning you get and the accuracy of the intelligence (sometimes you'll know exactly when and where to expect the enemy and in what strength but usually your information will be sketchy). You will get squadrons airborne and cycle through varying states of readiness for squadrons. Sometimes you'll only face a couple of raids in a day; other times you'll face many.



When enemy groups enter British airspace you meet them with defending squadrons and there is a fight. The fight is abstract but very elegant. We are not concerned with individual dogfights or whether 1 or 2 planes were shot down or we are concentrating on the overall battle-worthiness of the forces following a battle and how many German bombers get through and what

damage they inflict. More cards are drawn in the battle sequence and there's a combat results table plus the roll of a die or two. Simple stuff once you get into the swing.

What are the tactical decisions?

Well, the enemy formations are coming in waves whatever you do so your challenge is to get squadrons in position to tackle them. The biggest choice is whether to spread your defences thin and cover all possible targets with few squadrons or cover a few likely targets with more resources. And even then, do you meet every raid with a few squadrons or do you let a few go by and conserve your forces to really clobber a raid later on?

Victory points are earned/lost by both sides according to damage inflicted on targets and on aircraft. So there are implications for every strategy or if you meet every attack with just a few defenders, you'll prevent bomb damage but lose planes; if you clobber raids

that's good from one point of view but you'll inevitably let some raids go relatively unmolested which loses you points elsewhere. It's a tricky balancing act, especially since the intelligence you receive on where the next raid might strike is often very patchy so you have to make an informed guess and hope you get it right.

The British can generally replace aircraft but they start to suffer from pilot losses. The Germans have a vast air force but once losses accrue beyond a certain tipping point they struggle to replace machines. Ultimately the British have to have enough victory points (it's a running tally) to prevent the Germans launching a seaborne invasion. Typically a campaign will start well for the Germans and the RAF is just trying to survive. If it can inflict enough attrition on the Germans then the latter struggle in the later stages to put together raids that are sufficiently strong so at which point the RAF can jump all over them. It's tricky though.

Web Links

There are a few YouTube shows that are an excellent resource for this game so watch them to see if it's a game you will like and watch them again to learn the rules before you read the rulebook.

The best is Stuka Joe:

https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLXNXDdm27tTfXsueEHXb7iT_D9JK8SSLK

He has two videos, one (30 minutes) is a full play-through of the introductory scenario (a single day of battle) and the other is a play-through of the Hardest Days scenario (1 hour 40 minutes) which covers about a week. Don't be put off by the length of the videos, they are oddly compelling and really give you a sense of the game and the rules.

Next up is Left Hand Reviews: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Caj6nt1n1vU> This is just over an hour and is a combination review, rules digest, and how-to-play instructional. It's well worth it.

There are others but these are the best and will give you everything you need.

Final assessment

I think this is a wonderful game. I've seen comments on the web about this being the best solo game ever. Well, I haven't played them all but this is certainly the best I have played. It's designed by John Butterfield who has created many solitaire wargames and this one is a triumph. The game is exciting and puts you right in the operational HQ - reports coming in, people pushing blocks around a map with big sticks, ordering airfields to scramble and so on. The enemy just come at you in waves and you're often just fending them off. Often targets will go undefended because your squadrons are elsewhere, damaged or refuelling; then you take a pounding as some radar station, town, shipyard, factory or airfield gets stonked. But when you get the jump on a small raid and blast several enemy squadrons from the sky so well so that's satisfying.

As I said earlier, I have only tried Lion (where you play the British). Eagle looks similar but from a different perspective and looks interesting as a result and I will definitely play

it. The 2-player game is likely to be of less interest to readers of this blog but nevertheless, three games in one box is great value for money.

I cannot recommend this one highly enough.