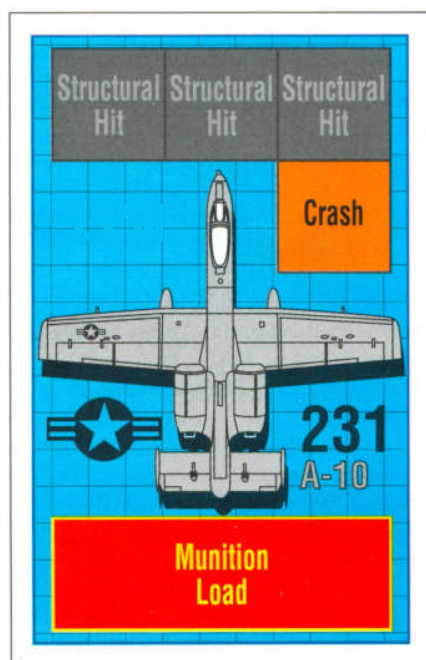
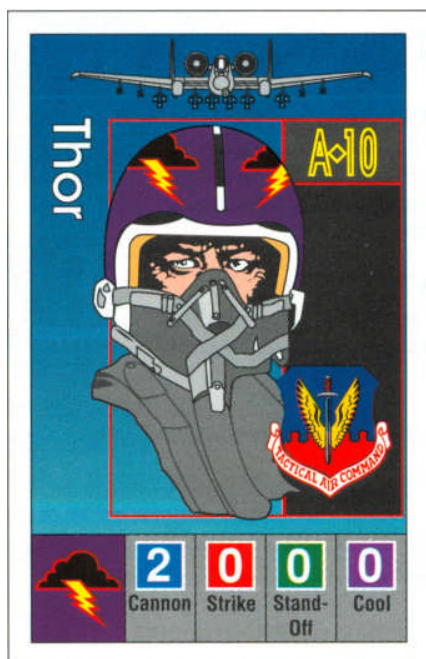


# WINGS: AIR LEADER SERIES

## A Look at Thunderbolt + Apache Leader

BY JAY C. SELOVER

A brief overview of the game followed by an Interview with designer Dan Verssen, Designer's Notes and Rules Clarifications.



Dan Verssen has designed his second solitaire air combat game for GMT. Following on the heels of the highly successful and CSR Award winning *Hornet Leader (HL)*, *Thunderbolt/Apache Leader (TAL)* explores close air support operations focusing on the A-10 *Thunderbolt* (known affectionately as the "Warthog") and the AH-64 *Apache* helicopter. Much of the basic feel of *HL* has been carried over to Dan's new game, but he has also made some very significant changes in the system to account for the operational realities of close air support. If you both a few missions in *HL*, you don't find your aircraft carrier has been "over-run" by enemy troops, but you sure do in *TAL*!

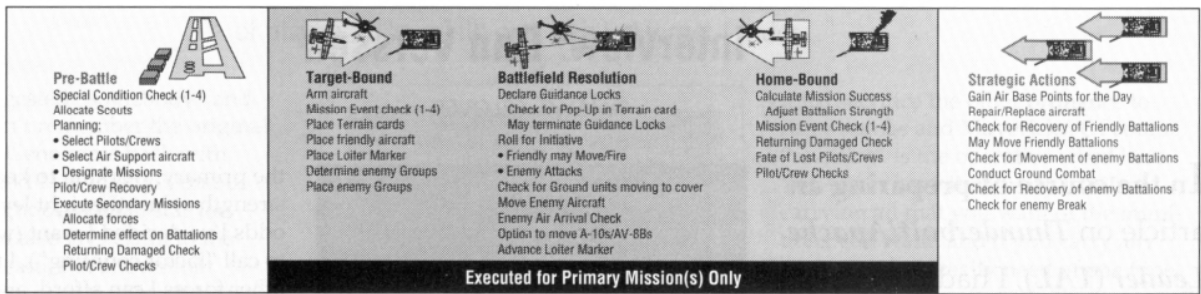
The game is similar to *HL* in terms of components; a combat display gives you all of the tables and sequence of play information. Cards are used for the individual aircraft under your command, and the pilots and crews are also represented individually. Counters represent the individual weapons loads you can choose. *TAL* allows you to command a close air support squadron consisting of either A-10 *Thunderbolts*, AH-64 *Apache* helicopters, or you can choose a mixed squadron with both.

Pilots or two-man crews (for the *Apaches*) are also selected and contribute unique characteristics. Each pilot (or crew; I'll refer generically to "pilots" even where I mean "crews") is rated for abilities with cannons, strike weapons (bombs, Rocketeers, etc.), and stand-off weapons (Hellfires, Mavericks, Sidewinders, etc.); as well as the familiar "cool" rating. In addition, several pilots have individual "special" abilities such as increased chance to hit particular targets (tanks and APCs) or the ability to make two "strike" attacks in a turn (instead of the usual one).

In the broad sense, *TAL* is played as a discreet campaign, where your squadron is contributing to the overall combat effort against an enemy force. The game starts with many enemy battalions arrayed against a few U.S. battalions and, of course, your all-important squadron flying from an air base behind the front lines. The types and quality of enemy battalions are determined by the type of campaign you choose to play; anything from a delaying action where your goal is to forestall the capture of your base for as long as possible, to an all out assault where your goal is to eliminate all enemy forces. The campaign is broken down into combat "days", and your missions (both primary and secondary) occur each day along with possible movement of all ground forces (friendly and enemy) and ground combat. Thus your air missions are not the only thing going on. It is possible to badly mess up all of your air missions and still win a campaign by some extraordinarily lucky die rolls in ground combat (this never seems to happen), and it is also possible to totally decimate all of the enemy forces that you fly against and still have the surviving enemy forces soundly defeat your ground forces (this seems to happen with uncanny regularity). The total package gives a very accurate feel for the importance of close air support missions without giving the impression that they are the only thing going on in

# Thunderbolt + Apache Leader

## Sequence of Play



combat areas.

The basic supply constraints which you face as you ponder operations each day are represented by "air base points". These are used to "buy" nearly everything you need; they are expended to obtain ordnance for the A-10s and AH-64s, they can be used to "activate" a additional support aircraft (AV-8B *Harriers* and AH-1 *Cobras*), they are expended to fly recon missions against enemy battalions, and they are used to repair or replace aircraft damaged or lost in combat. Of course, there are never enough air base points available to do everything you want. How you manage them is likely the greatest single determinant of success or failure in any campaign.

When you get down to flying missions each day, there are some significant similarities between *TAL* and *HL*, but you will never be confused about which game you are playing; the "feel" of the two games is totally different. In *TAL*, to conduct a primary mission, you first select a target battalion from among the various enemy battalions on the battlefield. Then, you select aircraft, crews, and specific weapon loads based on what you think will do the best against the individual different target types likely to be on the battlefield (which will ultimately depend on the type of enemy battalion you have selected and on numerous die rolls for random selection and placement of enemy units). Mission Events cards are still selected on the way to the battlefield (and on the way home) and, as usual, these can really help or really mess up your plans. Finally, you place randomly selected "terrain cards" in a pattern of ten and place your initial forces on them. Enemy unit selection and placement follows, and then you start moving your aircraft around and over the arena, knocking off as many enemy units as possible before your loiter time expires (and hopefully without getting a

bunch of your guys shot down as well). The procedure used to determine enemy fire against your aircraft is exquisite. Each enemy unit within range and with line-of-sight to one of your units gets to draw a number of chits from a cup during the enemy fire phase. These chits are printed on one side for minor hits and on the other side for serious hits. There are about fifteen different hits you can take; everything from the fairly minor "lose your guidance lock" to the dreaded "Killed, Crash" (thank goodness there are very few of those)! A neat feature of the combat system is the immunities; most of the combat chits have either an aircraft type or an enemy troop quality (or both) listed in a corner. If your aircraft is of the type listed on the counter, then that counter has no effect on that aircraft. Similarly, if the enemy troop quality is listed on the counter, then the counter is a "no effect". A large number of the combat counters list "poor" in the troop quality area, while almost none list "elite". And by the same token, the workhorse A-10 is listed for immunity on many counters, while the significantly less hardy AH-1 *Cobra* is listed on only a few. The whole combat system ends up working out very smoothly, and it gives very realistic results; you really do end up feeling that you could fly one of those *Warthogs* through a hail of gunfire, holes ripped in both wings, and still complete your mission. All in all, *TAL* has so many things going for it that it's pointless to try to list them all; you'll just have to try it for yourself!

