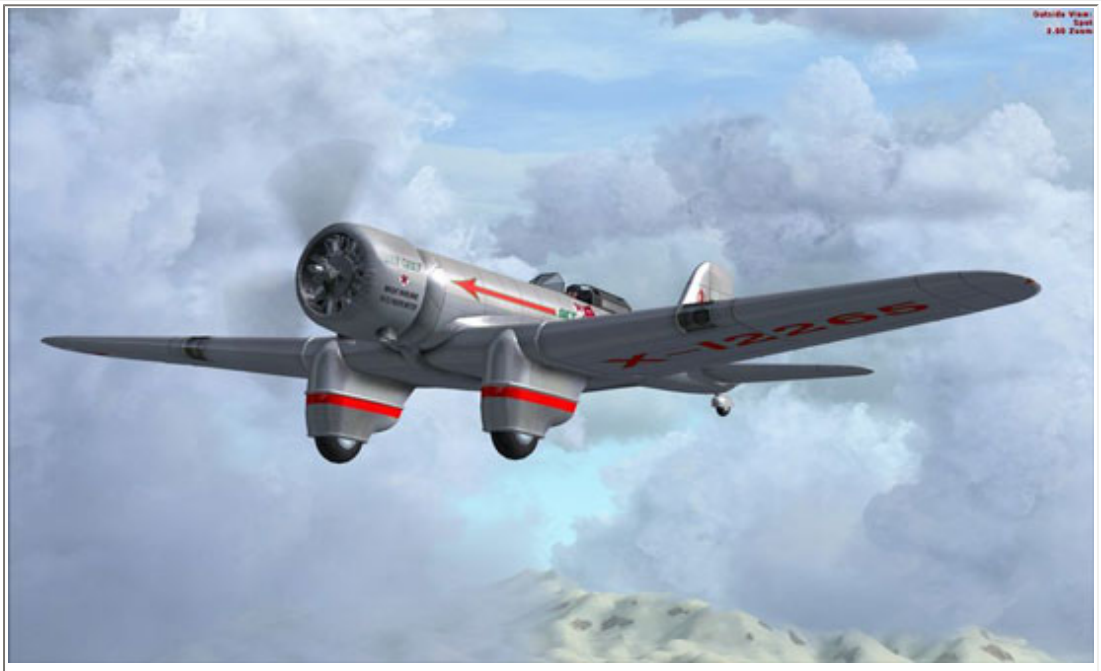
AVSIM Commercial Aircraft Review

Northrop Gamma



Product Information		
Publishers: Icarusgold		
Description: Cross-country racer from the golden age of aviation.		
Download Size: 22 MB	**Format:** Download	**Simulation Type:** FSX (SP2 or Acceleration required)
Reviewed by: David Wilson Okamura AVSIM Senior Staff Reviewer - February 14, 2009		

Introduction

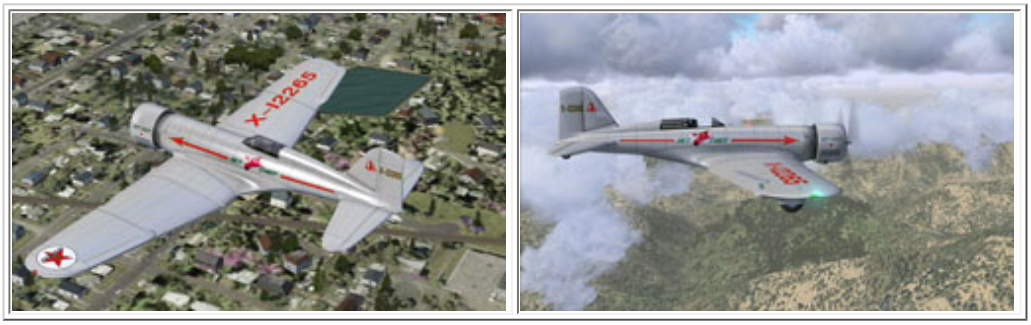
The Northrop Gamma was developed in the early 1930s to carry mail, and it was adapted by the U.S. Army to act as a light bomber. What made it famous, however, was a trio of records: two transcontinental speed records (including one by Howard Hughes, while his own racer was being modified) and what supposed to be the first flight across Antarctica (it had 25 miles to go when it ran out of fuel).

Icarusgold, a publisher that specializes in vintage aircraft, came out with a model of serial number one in the Gamma series, the Sky King owned by Texaco and piloted by Frank Hawks, who used it to set the non-stop speed record from Los Angeles to New York in 1933. Our review of the model will cover installation and documentation, visual modeling, cockpit and instruments, sound, scenery, and performance.

Installation and Documentation

The download is relatively small, only 22 MB. Installation requires a serial number and an activation code, which is checked online. I understand the need for developers to protect themselves from pilots. What worries me is longevity. What happens if the company I purchase the product from goes out of business a year from now, and I need to

reinstall? Will there be a server to validate my install? There's no reason to worry that I know of, but there has to be a better way: one that protects purchasers as well as producers.



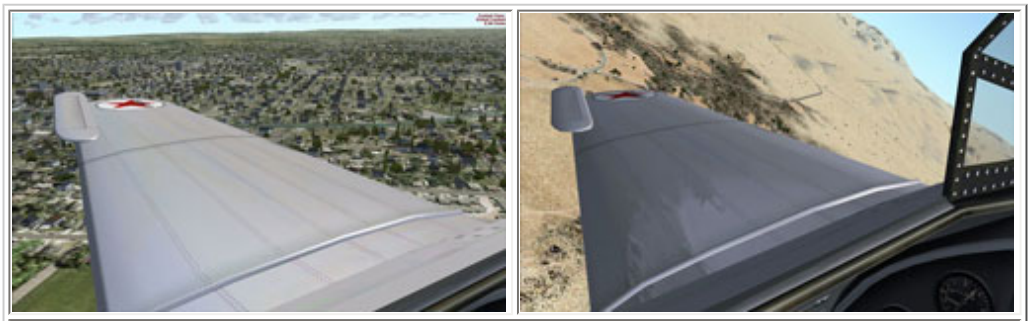
Once your installation has been approved online, the rest of the process is automated. The scenery is installed in your Add-on Scenery folder, so unless that's deactivated in your scenery library, no further action is needed on your part.

Documentation is minimal. There is an illustrated guide to managing the scenery library (if you need it), but no checklist or reference speeds in the kneeboard. There is a readme file, with a short paragraph about the Gamma's history and a list of keyboard commands that don't actually do anything on this model: engine door open, rescue hook, tailhook, and radar door! I'm guessing that this part of the documentation was carried over from another product, presumably a military one.

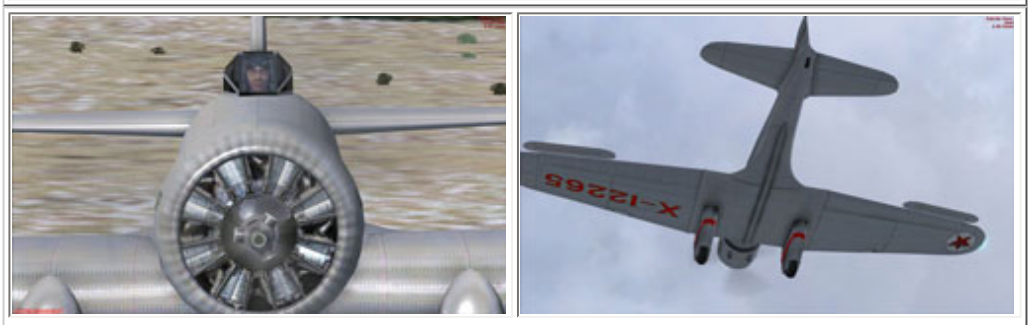
Visual Model

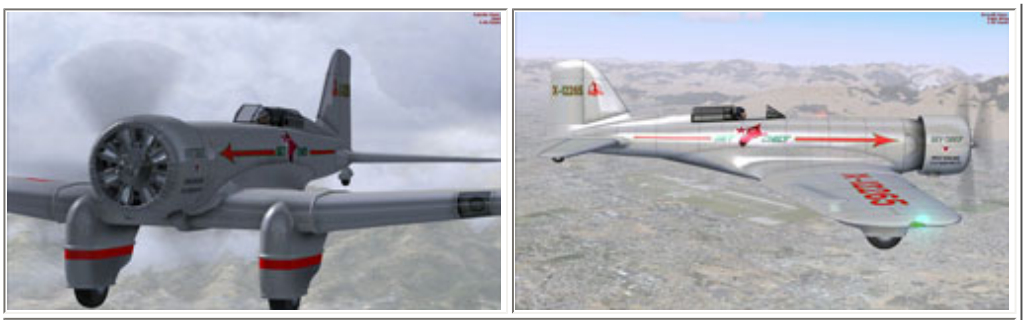
There is one livery, Texaco Sky Chief, and one visual model. The model is FSX-native, so the propeller will not disappear in front of clouds. Bump mapping is used for seams and rivets, but nothing is raised high enough to cast very dramatic shadows. What's more noticeable is the specular shine on wings and fuselage.

When you bank, you'll see the reflection of clouds moving on the surface of the wings; they aren't the real clouds (since it will still happen on a cloudless day) but the effect is well done.



Bump mapping and wing reflections

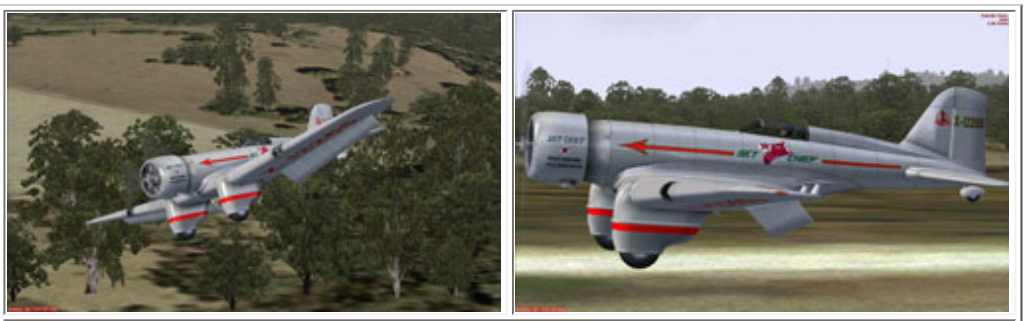




Exterior modeling

The usual animations are here, but there is some kerfuffle about the flaps. They are massive, and they extend in four stages. The problem is that the first stage is not visible in the external view. You can hear the flap motors working, and in the virtual cockpit you can see the flap lever move back -- but don't see any movement outside.

The next three stages work as expected. A smaller problem, which I don't care about but will mention in case someone does, is the brake pedals in the virtual cockpit. They work, but they aren't animated. Again, I don't consider this a major, or even a minor, shortcoming.



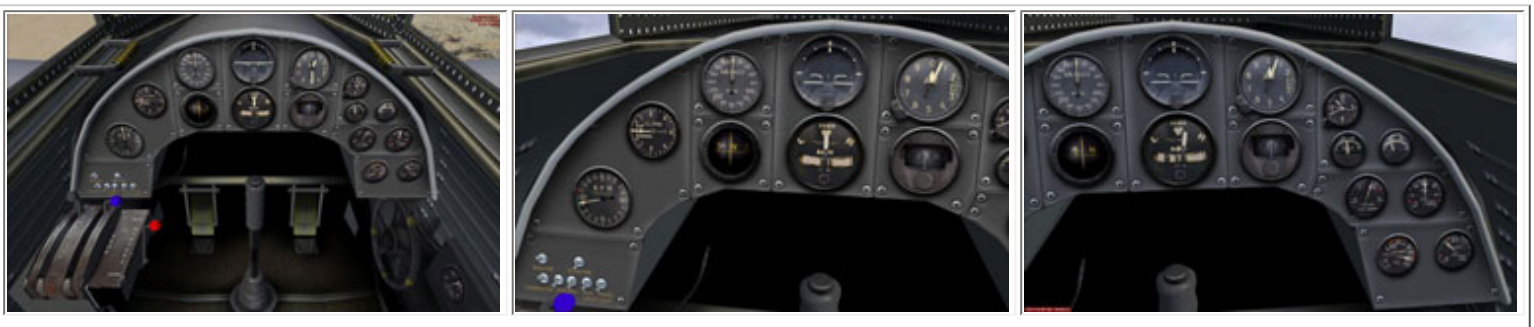
Flaps

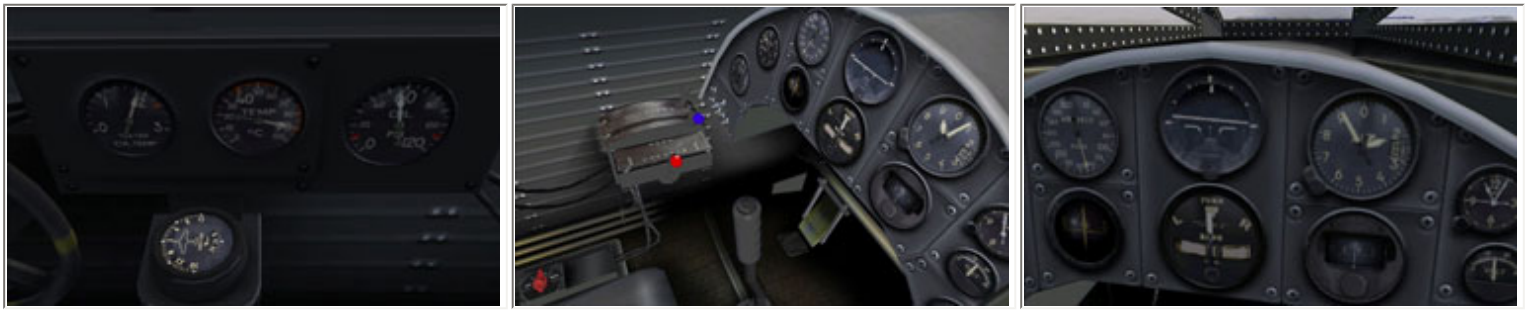
Virtual Cockpit

The Gamma comes with a 2D mini-panel, but is meant to be flown from the virtual cockpit (VC). The gauges here are mostly from the default Douglas DC-3 (which is still part of FSX) and the default Lockheed Vega (which appeared in FS2004, as part of the "Century of Flight" theme, and then disappeared in FSX). No doubt this kept development costs down, and the Vega gauges make a kind of sense, in that the Gamma's chief designer, Jack Northrop, worked on the Vega in the late 1920s. There are some problems, however, with using the Vega gauges.

First, there is no manifold pressure or boost gauge. Second, the tachometer stops working about 2500 RPM, but the Gamma exceeds this number in climb and cruise; if you let the cursor hover over the gauge, a tool tip will appear and display the correct value, so this problem isn't insuperable.

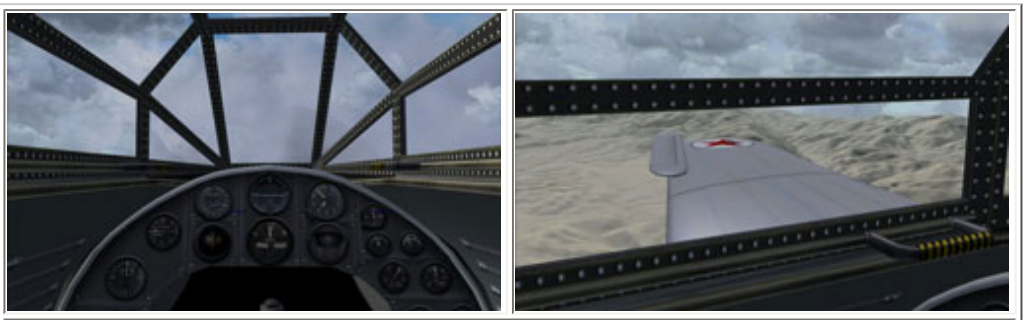
Finally, the temperature gauges aren't calibrated for the Gamma's engine; for example, if you try to keep the oil temperature under the Vega's redline value (of 90 degrees Celsius) you will never achieve the Gamma's cruise speed of 220 mph at 7,000 feet. The engine will always seem to be running too hot. The other problem with using the default gauges is that they look fuzzy when viewed up close.





Gauges from the default DC-3 and Vega

That's the bad news. The good news is that the modeling of the cockpit itself is clean and quite pleasing. There are no gaps (at least when viewed from realistic angles) and the textures, while not photorealistic, are crisp and blend well with the vintage gauges.



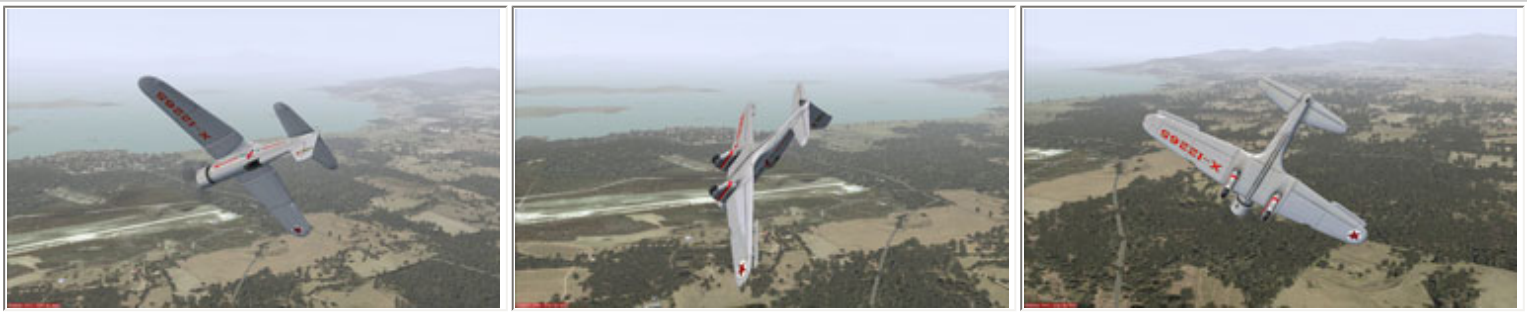
Virtual cockpit

Sound

There are one or two default sounds (the flap sounds are from the Maule Orion) but everything else seems to be custom. I particularly like the engine sounds, which maintain a good, low, vibrating growl in all phases of flight. Sound cones are not implemented

Flight Model

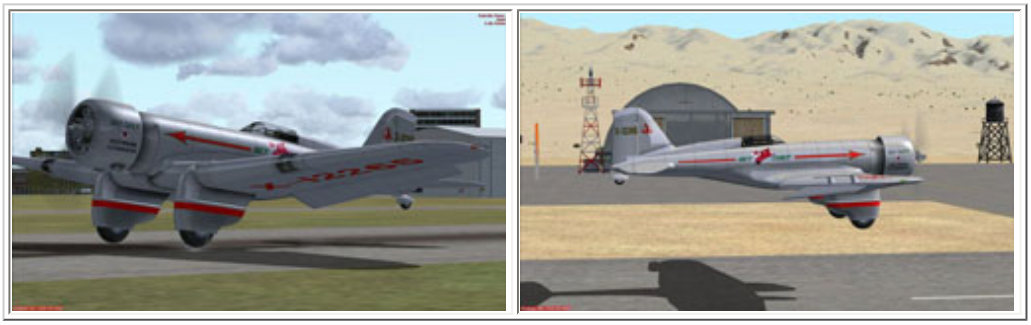
I have never flown a real plane, much less a racer like the Gamma, so my remarks on the flight model must be impressionistic. On the ground, it's relatively docile for a tail dragger, but corrections need to be made gently if you want to avoid fishtailing. In the air, the Gamma is a fast climber and responds easily to the stick. I was able to do a couple of low, diving rolls with no special preparation and no mishaps. While not intended for bush flying, the Gamma can take off and land on relatively short runways.



Low, diving rolls

Landings – my landings, anyway -- always started with a little bounce, but landing rolls tended to be quite short. I managed one landing in a stiff, almost perpendicular crosswind, and was surprised by how well the Gamma handled it. I was also surprised that tight turns at low speed (i.e., I was late turning base) did not result in a stall.

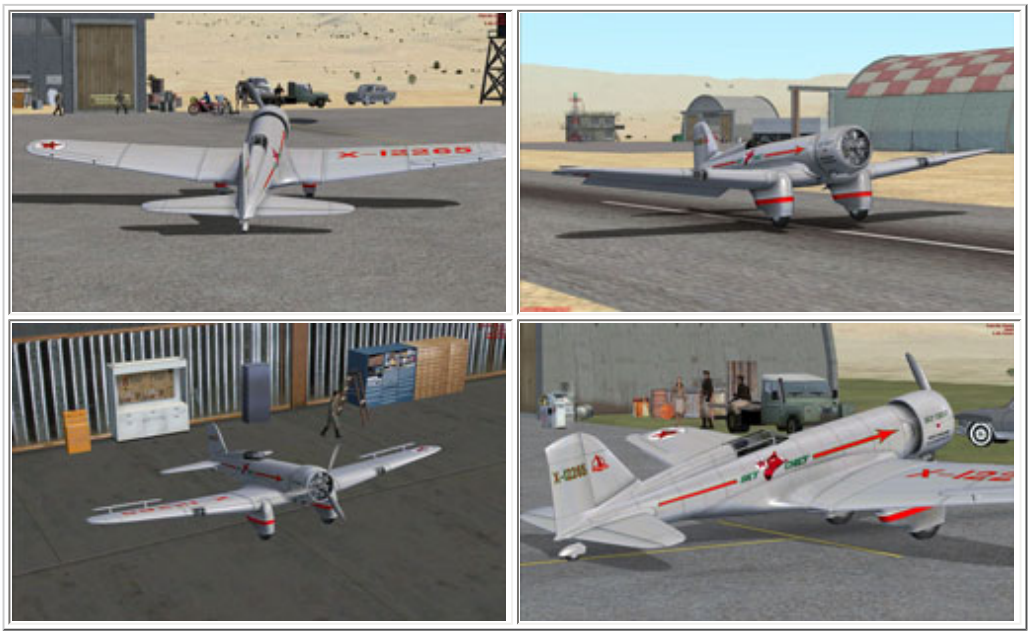
In spite of its heavy looks – a consequence of the massive wheel pants – the Gamma turns out to be rather dexterous.



Scenery

The Gamma comes with three flight situations and two vintage airport sceneries: one at Furnace Creek, in Death Valley, California; and one in Buffalo, New York. The flight situations are simple: take off from one of the two included airports, or land at Furnace Creek. The airport sceneries are more interesting.

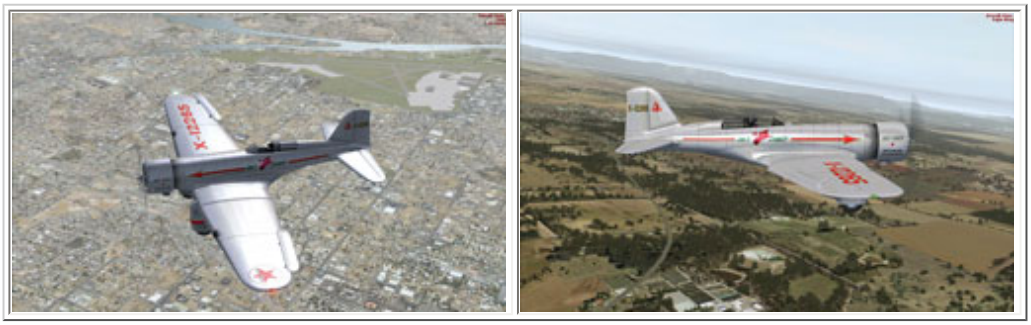
If you have crash detection enabled, the intro flight will place you inside a hangar at Buffalo, and this will trigger a crash. This happens with a lot of scenery, and the solution is simple: turn off crash detection.



Once you do and start looking around, there's quite a bit to see. I was particularly struck by the animated human figures at both airports and the animated birds at Furnace Creek.

Performance

Frame rates are high, comparable with the single-engine default aircraft.



Conclusion

The Gamma sells for US$20. As a product, it doesn't break new ground like the Hughes Racer that I reviewed six months ago: you can run the engine at the highest settings for as long as you please with no consequences. But the model costs less and it comes with scenery.

This is not the first product from Icarusgold, but it's the first for FSX and we look forward to seeing more.

Test System

Core2Quad Q6600 @ 2.4 GHz
4 gigabytes RAM
Nvidia 8800 GT (512 Mb)
Samsung 20" widescreen LCD (1680 x 1050)
Windows XP Pro SP2
TrackIR 3 with Vector Expansion
CH pedals, yoke
Saitek X45 throttle
Sidewinder Precision Pro joystick
Buttkicker Gamer
Sound Blaster X-Fi XtremeGamer sound card
Logitech X-540 5.1 speaker system

Flying Time:
7 hours

What I Like About The Northrop Gamma

- Convincing reflections
- Satisfying custom sounds
- Vintage-style virtual cockpit
- Detailed vintage airport scenery
- High Frame rates
- Low price for an FSX add-on

What I Don't Like About The Northrop Gamma

- Minimal documentation
- Flaps aren't fully animated in exterior view
- Borrowed gauges don't match Gamma's engine parameters

Printing

If you wish to print this review or read it offline at your leisure, right click on the link below, and select "save as"

Northrop Gamma

(adobe acrobat required)

Comments?

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