**Baltic Fury #1 – Storm the Gates**

**Playtest Report by AndrewJ Aug 2018**

So that's what Sepals are for...

I'd always dismissed them as the 'poor-man's' navy for choke points only. But they've got me in threat pretty much the moment I leave dock. I haven't even hit play yet and already I don't like the things, lurking smugly there in what is sure to be excellent SAM cover. And those are only the ones the Russians want me to see. An Aegis cruiser could shrug them off, but my little patrol boats sure can't.

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What are you carrying, Emden?? I wish there was a way to say 'Heave to, or else!'

Not that I really have an 'else' at the moment... I've got at least 140 inbound bogeys, so that's a whole heck of a lot more 'else' than I can deal with.

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Survived the first wave, commended myself on my dashing Kormoran counterstroke, only to find that just as my best fighters have landed to refuel the orcs are boiling out of Mordor for the second wave. Oh boy, that's a lotta planes...

Still playing V1.0 and loving it!

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**SITUATION**

The Russians are coming! The Russians are coming!

Well, we’re heading into a hot war with Russia, and I’ve got to defend the Baltic. I’ve got some old Drakens with bad Sidewinders, a fair number of F-16s with a mix of good and bad Sidewinders, some reworked Phantoms with Sidewinders, and, in an ironic twist, some re-unified Mig-29s which are actually my best fighter. Their AA-10s will be my best missile until some Tornadoes start showing up from England in a few hours. I also have a multitude of strike Tornadoes, a few Alpha-Jets, an occasional helicopter, and a bunch of Atlantiques.

My navy’s mostly in port, where a large number of patrol boats and diesel subs are readying. I've got a few diesel subs at sea, along with two pairs of patrol boats, and some isolated larger ships. I've got some decent SAMs (HAWKs, and a Patriot) too. It's not a Russian air defence belt, but it should be useful.

I’m up against the might of the Russian air force, with all sorts of everything (except, fortunately, Mig-31s), plus their enormous patrol and missile boat fleet, and somewhere out there lurks a very capable task group of modern DDs and FFs built around the aging Kynda class cruiser Grozny. They've also got long range coastal SSMs, which will be able to attack me all the way out to Zealand.

**THE PLAN**

Going up into the teeth of this will probably be futile. I plan to fall back out of the forward base at Bornholm, attriting raids where I can, and probably falling back out of Zealand (Roskilde and Vaerlose AB) too if necessary. I expect some sort of air-drop or amphibious landing at Bornholm, and possibly some dirty tricks near Zealand, so my navy will (for the most part) form up in the rear to be ready to make a strong attack once heavy enemy forces are detected, and I'm reserving some of my attack planes to deal with enemy on the ground. My subs at sea will mostly proceed east, looking for any heavies coming from that direction. My Atlantiques won't have a hope of surviving in the open Baltic, so they're sent off to patrol the Skagerrak, except for a few sent on ELINT duties near Laage. Land based radars are almost all turned off, and we'll be relying on AWACs as long as we can in the face of expected Russian ARM attacks.

**PLAY**

As things get under way my surveillance assets report on the positions of several merchant ships. It seems all of Poland and Germany are at sea on a fishing holiday, and there are a number of large merchant ships transiting the area. Most of them are tanker, bulk cargo, or container ships, but one is a Ro-Ro, which piques command's interest. It's called the Emden, and it's heading for the north tip of Zealand. Being dutiful officers, we've all read our Clancy! Could this be a boat-load of commies in disguise, ready to pounce on a vulnerable coastal airfield? Observation helicopters are put on patrol to monitor it continuously, and the Alpha-jets and some of the Drakens are warned to be ready for immediate action if it needs to be sunk.

First hostile action comes when ASMs are spotted inbound towards Bornholm from the east, on a course which would take them over the island and directly towards the Russian patrol boat on the west. Is this some convoluted attempt to fabricate a pretext for war? "Missiles from Bornholm sink Russian patrol boat!" screams Pravda! " Russia demands immediate occupation of hostile island," proclaims Russian UN ambassador! The order goes out to shoot them down before any incident can happen, and it takes several minutes before somebody points out that some of the Russian missiles can engage ground targets too. Like those radars directly in the flight path...

The missiles are shot down by the two ready Bornholm F-16s, who then abandon Bornholm and run for Roskilde, and as this is happening the official word comes in. It's war.

Not long after AWACS starts detecting large numbers of aircraft headed for Bornholm, and fighters (4 Migs and 4 Phantoms) scramble from Laage to intercept. AWACS keeps reporting more and more planes crossing the Russian coast, with the count well up over a hundred. Just as my fighters are about to pounce on the first of the Bornholm attackers the controllers recognize that a large stream of the Russian fighters are headed for Laage. I'd like to fight, but Laage is far more important than Bornholm, and the Migs and Phantoms are recalled. Bornholm, and its last two F-16s are on their own!

The F-16s make it into the air just before the strike arrives, and they get a few before they flee to Roskilde under afterburner. Surprisingly, the Stinger gunners do a really good job, shooting down multiple inbound attackers and damaging more, but the surviving strikers bomb Bornholm, and do a moderate amount of damage. That's all right, I suppose, since I'm essentially ceding the island to the Russians. They can fill their own bomb craters. I don't think I'll be back.

Two huge raids develop after this, one up north against the airbases on Zealand, and one down south against Laage. I really want to keep Laage intact, since it houses my best fighters, and a combination of the recalled fighters, last-minute scrambles, some Sidewinder toting strike Tornadoes, and F-16s from Skrydstrup do their best to keep the enemy away. Patriot shots (judiciously managed due to the ARM threat) prove to be very useful for disrupting the enemy's SARH shots and breaking up his formations. Despite this I keep getting driven further and further back by the fighters, and many of the Su-24s launch their Kazoos before I can get at them. (Fortunately my abundant Sidewinders can deal with those relatively easily.) The rest press on at very low altitude, getting ahead of their escorts (who have slowed down to crank). I manage to get them all, but even my Rolands are in action to do it, knocking off the last few before they hurry to relocate to new hilltops. Laage remains intact.

The situation up north is not as good. All I have there are Sidewinders, not AA-10s, so I'm at a huge range disadvantage. I scramble what I have, including large numbers of ground attack Tornados with air-to-air loadouts, and send them in with support from HAWK batteries where possible. I manage to take a heavy toll of the attackers, particularly those out front, but it's a costly endeavour. Many Su-24s launch just before I get to them, and I have to shoot Kazoos instead, and most of the HAWKs exhaust their ready loadout and get pummelled by ARMs with target memory. I had thought of pulling back again (and was wondering if I should have evacuated the Bornholm planes further back than Roskilde) when I got the message to preserve the Gulfstreams and escort my officials out. Rotten timing! A few Tornado F3s dash in, having flown direct from England and now perilously low on fuel after a final afterburner run, and manage to break up some more of the attack, but it's not enough. Vaernes and Roskilde are both bombed.

In the final tally I've done very heavy damage to the enemy, especially their attack planes with close range weapons, but my fighters, particularly the seven lost strike Tornadoes, suffered to do it. The three HAWK batteries in the region have been destroyed or rendered inoperative, and only the fourth down by Stevns Fort is still in operation. Vaerlose was bombed, losing some soft structures and access points, but the helicopters in the hardened shelters made it through safely, and the base is theoretically operational. Roskilde takes numerous hits, particularly on the hangars at the north end of the field, but amazingly the two Gulfstreams are intact. For whatever reason, the attackers chose other targets, or I got lucky and managed to hit the planes which were assigned to strike that tarmac space. A few minutes later the first Gulfstream takes off and escapes at low level, and an hour later its colleague escapes too.

While this is happening, events are moving at sea too. The Rugen patrol, two brave little patrol boats, decide to strike quickly once hostilities commence, and dash eastwards towards Bornholm, sinking the patrol boat there with Exocets. They draw volleys of fire in return, but the RAM on the Nerz proves to be amazingly effective, shooting down missile after missile from the incoming barrage. Unfortunately my missiles run out before theirs do, and the Seeadler takes a hit, and turns to limp home. The Nerz, however, turns south and plunges into the school of fishing boats, firing Exocets at the two patrol boats along the Polish shore, before turning back for home. Unfortunately neither of them make it, and, isolated and defenceless, they succumb to missile strikes from the closing Nanuchkas.

My little Danish sub, the Nordkaperen turns to close in on the AGI that's lurking east of Bornholm, sinking it with little difficulty, before turning its attention to the swarms of passing missile boats that are headed west. The British sub Unicorn is also trying to come to grips with them, but they are charging past at 34 kts, while the pathetic British torps can only do 35 kts. The missile boats would essentially have to run over the Unicorn to be in any danger, and neither of the subs manage to engage any. Instead, the missile boats proceed further west, and start firing at the Niedersachsen, which has formed up with the two patrol boats in the area and is now lurking under the protective cover of the surviving HAWK battery at Stevns Fort. Numerous missiles are fired at this little group, both SS-N-9s from the closing Nanuchkas, and even gigantic Shaddocks from the distant Kynda. The missiles are being fired extreme range at a moving uncertainty zone, so some miss by several miles. Others are shot down by HAWKs, Sparrows, RAMs, and F-16s and Drakens and F-4s flying CAP. Almost all the enemy SSMs are expended against this brave group, and none get through. After this, the Russian missile boats withdraw, leaving me free to operate in this area.

After the SSM barrage is over, one of my patrol boats rushes north at 40 kts to intercept the Emden. It arrives just as the Emden is about a dozen miles from the shore and closing. I've got a FLIR equipped helicopter on station overhead, some bomb and rocket equipped fighters loitering in readiness, and more on hot pad alert, just waiting for the call. Itchy fingers rest on triggers. What will those sneaky commies do? Turn back, that's what! The innocent Emden decides a war zone is a bad place to be, and placidly turns about and sails back towards the Atlantic. The bemused pilots watch for a while, before being ordered home, shaking their heads about paranoia in the upper ranks. The commander tosses his copy of Clancy in the trash...

The early part of the night has some ongoing skirmishing with Russian fighters, and the Fort Stevn HAWK makes a good score against enemy planes which pursue me into its reach. A Russian sub tries snorting in the Skagerrak, but that's a short-term strategy. My two eastern subs manage to kill a couple of the slower moving ASW patrol boats, as well as sinking one Krivak and damaging another. (Good job Nordkaperen!) ELINT and AWACS start getting indications of emissions from a surface group coming west along the coast, probably the cruiser group we've been warned about. The Russian aircraft have landed and are recovering from their strike, and many of their patrols have been shot down, so now is the perfect time for a Kormoran counterstroke.

A heavy strike of Tornados with Kormoran and HARMs launches towards the east, escorted by the almost all of my Tornado F3s, half my Mig-29s, and a fair number of Phantoms and F-16s. They manage to knock down the limited number of fighters the Russians have up at the moment, and the attack moves in. About half of them tackle the SAG, while the remainder spread out to tackle patrol boats and other targets. The HARM salvo is instrumental in defeating the SAG, allowing the Kormorans to get through in good numbers, but the pilots are puzzled. There were supposed to be four ships in the formation. They only found three. Where was the cruiser? The other pilots confidently expected to clear the patrol boat scourge, at one missile per boat, but there are some hiccups in that too. One of the targets is an alert Krivak, and its SA-N-4s knock down a surprising number of incoming missiles. Still, they manage to account for another 15 patrol boats, two Krivaks and a Kanin, so it's a decent night's work, and they retire in good humour. (They maintain that it was probably a Russian missile, not an errant Kormoran, which put a hole in the side of the Solar Star LNG tanker, and the colossal flash which lit up the night sky two hours later was completely unrelated.)

Partway into the raid comes the announcement that the Poles are being reincorporated into the Warsaw Pact. Does this mean we'll start getting engaged by Polish units or air defences shortly? So far nothing's happening, but it's certainly something to bear in mind.

The Russian calm doesn't last much longer. Some of their Fitters try making a raid, which is destroyed easily enough, but then we start picking up ESM indications of something big coming: at least 15 planes and counting, emitting Slot Back radars. It only takes a few minutes to tell that there's a massive strike coming up north, and most of my best fighters have just landed! It's come as you are, with no SAM support, and only a handful of long range missiles, in the face of the Russian horde. Most of the battle takes place over southern Sweden, as we try to hit the SU-24s before they can launch their payload, and the leading ones (somewhat in advance of their escorts) go down, but then it's into the cloud, and the ones that go in almost never come out. My survivors fall back, as Russian cruise missiles stream in, but Drakens (which are hopeless in dogfights) do quite well against missiles and were well positioned to catch them all. F-16s dive in on low-level attackers, killing more Fencers, but having a nasty surprise when the next pack of "Fencers" turned out to be Fulcrums with their radar off. By the time it's over I've got 11 beepers going off in southern Sweden and the Vaernes area, and those are just the ones who managed to eject. I'm not sure if it was worth it, to defend empty airbases, but I've savaged the Russian attack planes for a second time, and none of their ordnance crossed my airbase perimeters.

As dawn approaches the Russians try an un-escorted raid, which gets eaten alive, and then a tiny (2 attackers!) but heavily escorted (12 Flankers!) attack on Laage. I manage to execute a beautiful wall on that one, with 8 Tornado F3s engaging at long range, killing the majority, and then disengaging successfully. At the same time, 2 pairs of Phantoms circled around behind, to pounce on the survivors who RTBed. My main surface combatants had formed up into a decent surface group by this point, and were headed east towards Bornholm when they suddenly had torps inbound. ASROCs at the suspected launch point produced a kill, to my surprise, and my group managed to turn and outrun the torpedoes (as well as putting some Harpoons into ASW patrol craft near Bornholm). A second anti-shipping strike mid-morning did finally get rid of the remaining patrol boats, with some of the older SAM-less ones getting hit with bombs instead of Kormorans. (I'm running low on Kormorans, with no more in the magazines, but I've still got a force of 18 Tornadoes, loaded with Kormoran and HARM, to help attack expected amphibious forces.) As mid-day approached there was some more ASW activity, with the Unicorn stalking and killing a pair of Foxtrots, and another sub getting detected and sunk by surface forces near Kiel.

The scenario came to an end with a few Russian patrol craft near their shores, where I did not want to venture into the SAM zone, and the skies mostly empty of their aircraft.

**Assorted Observations**

This one's a workout! Tons of planes and action, and lots of weaving and dodging for a micromanager to play with. It took me just over two weeks of occasional evening play to finish it. I must admit I was looking over my shoulder for dirty tricks, a la Iceland, and seeing them where they weren't. In retrospect, a one-boat invasion of a Danish province of 2.3 million is a far cry from picking on isolated settlements in Iceland.

I hadn't appreciated how shallow the Baltic really is. There are numerous places where my subs couldn't fully submerge, and the ones coming out of port actually spent a lot of time cruising on the surface until they eventually got to deeper water. Sub spotting is not easy in these conditions, and I never saw any of the four subs in the western Foxtrot barrier, although I crept through it, and I only met two of the eastern barrier. (One of which made noise as it was trying to ID a fish.) I never got to the Romeos. One of the Kilos I met heard me and shot first, and I only detected one myself.

I never did see the cruiser, despite my searching. After it had expended all its missiles in very long range shots, it left the group and headed back to port to reload. I never laid a glove on it.

It was interesting being on the back-end of the missile technology curve here. Those high-off-boresight AA-11s make closing with planes extra perilous (and I had to do a lot if closing). Even if you sneak up behind, they turn a little to beam your shot, and suddenly you've got a missile coming in head-on. Those long range IR missiles (Alamo Bs and Ds) are extra nasty too - can't be jammed, can't force them to break lock, and they can follow you forever.

I sent my cargo runs to Skrydstrup, Aalborg, and Vandel. Everything which could fly was evacuated out of Bornholm, Vaerlose, and Roskilde, except for a couple of rescue helicopters.