**Caribbean Fury #2 – Retribution**

**Playtest Report by AndrewJ Sept 2018**

**SITUATION**

After initial operations against Cuba have greatly reduced its combat power, I'm left with somewhat reduced forces to deal with it. I have plenty of older aircraft on shore, and I've got the Kennedy carrier group, which is decent, if a bit old, operating to the south of Cuba. There's a nuclear cruiser group to the east coming in from the north side of Haiti, slightly ahead of an oiler with a coast-guard escort. Three older SSNs guard various choke-points around Cuba, and there's another oiler (the Suribachi) north of Havana, recklessly close to the island, in my opinion, with only a single old frigate on guard.

This would be quite enough to keep Cuba from taking any significant offensive action, and let me continue to reduce its defenses, except that someone ambitious in the SOF hierarchy has convinced the administration to make a risky raid to paradrop into the outskirts of Havana and seize a series of intelligence sites, before coming in with helicopters to get them out again. I need to clear the way for that operation before tonight, and conduct and cover the insertion and extraction. I've also been assigned a variety of government administration and communications targets, logistics targets, and army assembly area targets. At the end of it all, I'm expected to have my ships assembled 250 miles south of Cuba, ready for operations further south.

Cuba's defences are not entirely gone. While the Havana region's taken a battering already, there are still an SA-10 and plenty of lesser SAMs in the area, and the central spine of the island is a continuous chain of dangerous SA-10s. I don't expect any surface ship opposition, although a misplaced enemy sub could be unfortunate, and I think the air situation should be in my favour (although I'm never happy when there are rumours of Mig-31s still active). I am a little worried about Guantanamo Bay being exposed to ground assault, and I'll have to keep an eye out there.

**THE PLAN**

In the east, the cruiser group is ordered to form up around the oiler, and then escort it in pretty much a straight line to the assembly area. They should be able to make the trip at a reasonable 15 knots and arrive with a few hours to spare. They have to pass through the straits between Haiti and Cuba, where I expect an SS would love to lurk, but it would be risky to operate ASW planes in the area (plus, I don't have any nearby), so it'll be active sonar all the way.

In the north, the oiler Suribachi, only 35 miles off the coast of Cuba, will skirt the island at 18 knots, before rounding the western tip of Cuba and heading to the assembly area. It'll be active sonar for her only escort too, and rabbits' feet and four-leafed clovers all around in the hopes that we haven't been noticed.

The Kennedy carrier group will steam slowly eastwards, staying about 100 miles south of Cuba, ready to support operations for a little more than a day, before turning and heading down to the rendezvous.

My focus on Day 1 will be a massive alpha strike around mid-day, with the specific goal of eliminating air defences in the vicinity of our SOF targets, and also damaging soft targets in the Havana area, but only as a secondary objective. I would rather start with strong fighter sweeps, but I'm mostly loading for air-to-ground, and I probably don't have the time to wait. If I'm to get into Havana tonight I must concentrate on immediate SEAD today. Night 1 will concentrate on covering and executing the SOF raid. Day 2 will be devoted to tackling communications targets and the like, before the carrier is so far south it can't support effectively, and Night 2 will be the rendezvous in the assembly area.

**DAY 1**

As my cruiser group moves to form up with their oiler, the surveillance radar in Guantanamo starts reporting a large slow-moving bogey far to the south. A maritime patrol aircraft? It could be problematic if it gets closer and turns on a radar. A pair of lightly laden F-14s and an S-3 tanker head off to intercept it, and eventually ID it as a maritime patrol Bear before they shoot it down as it nears Jamaica. If it was operating out of Cuba that's one thing, but it also raises the possibility of unfriendly (but not yet hostile) surveillance aircraft operating out of Central or South America. Something to keep an eye on.

Meanwhile, the Kennedy group, which has been sailing along in a stately fashion while rearranging its formation, suddenly reports torpedoes coming in from behind! The startled group accelerates as fast as it can, while launching helicopters and S-3s down the torpedo bearing, and fortunately the torpedoes run out of fuel before they reach us. It seems the sub captain fired a little early. The S-3 soon picks up the contact, and sends the Kilo to the grave, and the Kennedy group resumes course.

Not long afterwards the Spadefish, creeping in the strait between the Yucatan and Cuba, picks up another sub at long range. This one's a modern Victor, but it's still a long way off, so the Spadefish sticks up a mast and calls in an S-3. (I've started using a house rule for myself: if I want my other units to react to a contact detected by a submarine, then I first have to send my sub to periscope depth and turn on the radar for 15 seconds, to represent a burst radio transmission to a satellite somewhere. It feels a bit less 'gamey'.) Intel reports the nearby San Julian airbase is closed, but I send an escort along anyway, and a good thing too when a pair of Mig-23s try and bounce the S-3. They're shot down, the Victor is sunk, and the three planes head back home safely, keeping a watchful eye for more planes. (I never did meet the Mig-29s there, since they were still readying when I flew past, and I never went to that tip of the island again.)

While we were hunting the Victor, the White House sends an SR-71 to fly around Cuba, taking advantage of the good weather to get excellent imagery of the entire island. Although an SA-5 takes a potshot at it, and a MiG attempts to intercept near Guantanamo, it escapes unscathed. Analysis of its data reveals several important items: an SSM battery waiting on the east tip of the island, heavy air defences and troop concentrations around the 62nd Division barracks near Holguin, and the layout of air defences and troop concentrations in and around tonight's SOF operations area.

The SSM battery will require reasonably prompt action, if it is not to engage my cruiser group as it passes the straits. They could probably shrug off attacks from lesser missiles, but I'm not sure what exactly is in the tubes, and if I have bad luck with my defences the results could be fatal. Therefore some A-7s are sent down with a tanker in attendance. They had to dodge a wandering MiG-23, but eventually refueled and came in low over the hills from the north, bombing the SSM launchers, and hurtling away to safety. They all made it back to base, although one wide-eyed pilot kept eyeing the AAA hole in his wing all the way back.

About the same time, an Su-27 lifts off out of Jose Marti airport and makes a dash north, possibly headed for the tankers over Florida. My flight of F-16s on CAP salvo their Sparrows at it and shoot it down, and then turn and start burnering back home for a quick turnaround. As soon as they're too far away to be of further use, multiple enemy planes start lifting off out of the two Havana airbases. Judging by their emissions, at least some of them are Fencers. Alas, poor Suribachi! You've been spotted...

With nothing on CAP over the Suribachi I start desperately scrambling planes out of Key West and Homestead, and burnering them towards my ships. (I've got no F-14s up in the area. Some are escorting the S-3 out west, some are hunting the Bear out east, and I've decided to 'save' the ones on ship for the strike later in the day. Not good!) The first of my planes make it in just before the enemy, and they manage to shoot down a swarm of incoming Mig-21s, but now fighters of all sorts are launching out of the Cuban airbases (including Mig-31s - I thought those would be held in reserve!), and missiles start flying in all directions. I could open up with the SAM on my frigate, but two of the Su-24s are hanging back, and that means they've probably got ARMs, so the radar stays off for the moment. The desperate fighter combat continues at wave-top level, and at least I'm better there than the Mig-31s, which are fairly clumsy down low, and I manage to claim a couple, much to my delight. The incoming flight of Su-24s, presumably trying to bomb, are shot down, and I manage to wing one of the ARM carriers (making them drop their loadout and RTB), so the frigate finally manages to take a couple of shots. In the end it's desperately close, but I manage to keep the enemy from firing on my ships, although some of my fighters are damaged or lost in the process.

Shortly before 10:00 my heavy SEAD strike begins, bringing in essentially everything I have, and attacking from the north and south simultaneously. First shots are taken by my TALD-carrying F-14s, but the Cubans show their contempt for the decoys by shooting at the planes instead! Once again their tactics are rendering my decoys useless. Heavy strikes by HARMs and Shrikes manage to shut down the big radar-guided SAMs. Enemy fighters popping up are a real problem, shooting before I can get a shot off at them, but fortunately they spend most of their missiles trying to hit my ARMs. This time I have plenty of Phoenixes waiting for them, so they don't manage to land in one piece. With the major high-altitude SAMs destroyed, Maverick carrying planes move in to deal with SHORADs and the numerous MANPADs that ring the combat zone, as well as swarms of AAA in my immediate target areas. This allows my planes with iron bombs (and I have a lot of them) to inflict heavy damage on soft targets and troop concentrations in the area of operations. When the raid departs, around noon, I'm confident I've cleared the air defenses around the targets. I've not attacked the airfields directly though, so if they've got anything more lurking in the hardened shelters, then that could be a problem.

The afternoon is mostly spent preparing for upcoming activities. C-130s load paratroops, extraction helicopters forward deploy south to Key West, and my C-130 tankers move in to MacDill to reduce flight time. I'm concerned about Guantanamo, especially as there looks to be heavy activity near the 62nd Division barracks, so I ferry some of my conventional attack planes from Key west and Homestead over to Nassau. They won't be making attacks in the dark, so they can rest overnight and be ready to defend Guantanamo Bay if it is attacked in the morning. The Commando Solo (with escort!) flies to the Havana coast and starts broadcasting reruns of 'I Love Lucy', to demonstrate how well America understands the common Cuban man.

At sea, the Soviet AGI has been spotted along the south coast, so a flight of F-18s take care of it with Harpoons. Further east, the cruiser group gets a hard sonar contact on something near the Haitian coast, and patrolling helicopters are sent to investigate. They find and sink a Foxtrot, which makes everyone on board breathe easier. (Fortunately the water's too deep for it to have been laying mines in the straits.) North of Havana, the Trepang gets an intermittent contact on an SS some distance away, as it comes in through the first CZ, but the contact is difficult to hold, and it's lost as the Trepang maneuvers to close. If it changes course there's the very real possibility that I could inadvertently put it in my baffles before I can re-establish a direct path contact, which could be fatal. The commander chickens out and calls for help, and an S-3 is sent to cut across Cuba west of Mariel. It makes the risky journey, joins the hunt for the SS, and finds and sinks another Foxtrot.

**NIGHT 1**

Just before evening another strike is sent into the Havana area. Heavily loaded with Shrikes, it concentrates on destroying all remaining radars in the area. These are mostly AAA radars, but I want them dead anyway, so the skies are radar dark for my night-time raid. My iron bombers stay home (it's too dark for most of them to see), but LGB carriers wreck the remains of the naval base at Mariel, and start working on the missile supply depot. The soft structures there are quickly destroyed, but the bunkers take an enormous pounding. I eventually use up all my BLU-109s and still don't destroy them all. No fighters come up to oppose me, so things are looking hopeful for the SOF raid.

A couple of hours later the paratroopers arrive, jumping accurately on target. They've got fighter cover, a TARPS bird overhead, and the AC-130 inbound. I've already bombed and destroyed the troop concentrations in the region, so I'm expecting local militia resistance, if anything. Probably light infantry, and a few soft vehicles. What I get is a mechanized infantry quick response force in quick lightly armoured BTR-60s! Uh-oh... Fortunately they're some distance away in the hills, so I've got a bit of time. I scramble night-vision equipped F-18s from the Kennedy and Key West, while the AC-130 bores in. Unfortunately, that turns out to be a rather clumsy thing to operate, nowhere nearly as nimble as the fighters I've been using here. It manages to severely damage some of the first attackers, but its wide turning circle takes it too close to one of the remaining Grouse gunners, who manages to blow the 40mm cannon out of the side of the aircraft with a well-aimed shot. Fortunately my F-18s arrive before much longer, and between strings of well-aimed 1,000 lb bombs, night-vision Mavericks, and shots from the damaged AC-130, they manage to break up the attack. (I should really have had those overhead before the raid...)

There is no further resistance to the raid, and the helicopters manage to fly in and recover their troops. The MH-60s need some refueling to make it to Blanding, but the big MH-53s can make the flight directly, and they all make it back to their destination, with bundles of intelligence materials for the spooks to pore over.

In the small hours of the morning a few Tomahawks are used to strike isolated TV transmitters. (I haven't used any up to this point, wanting to preserve my limited supply.) The ones directed at the station near Bayamo prompt a Mig-23 to lift off out of Holguin, so there's definitely resistance there.

**DAY 2**

When morning comes, and they can see again, some of my attack planes with iron bombs strike the three locations I raided overnight, flattening the buildings unopposed. (I suppose I could have taken some saboteurs along to do this during the raid, but at the time I was more concerned with having anti-infantry firepower, so I had taken nothing but line troops.) While that's happening, fighter probes towards Holguin prompt several more MiG-23s to lift off and get shot down. Reconnaissance along the coast near Santiago de Cuba reveals that the SA-10 there is too close to the escarpment, and I can actually pop up over the ridge and get within its minimum range before it can react! F-14s manage to strafe it and put it out of commission, which gives me much more freedom of maneuver. (Post-war analysis was later to reveal that this battery was actually out of ammunition, and only serving a surveillance function. The F-14s were strafing empty missile tubes...)

This is all preparatory to another major strike, intended to destroy the 62nd Division barracks, vehicle parks, and air defences, and prevent them from attacking Guantanamo Bay. This time I do use my TLAMs, in a combined attack with HARMs and SLAMs from both sides, and Shrikes from the north. The attack focuses on the SA-10, which is overwhelmed and succumbs, and then the other major SAMs are dealt with in sequence. Fortunately this is enough to take down the entire high altitude air defence, which allows the Maverick shooters, LGBs, and Bombers to tackle the remaining targets in sequence. It was a major tanker operation to get all these planes here at once, and it is gratifying when they all manage to make it home.

Once the attacks are recovered, the carrier turns and heads for the rendezvous area, moving at a brisk 20 knots, until it is the same distance out as the cruiser group, at which point it slows down to match its 15 knot speed.

**NIGHT 2**

The Suribachi group is the first to arrive in the rendezvous area, followed by the carrier group and the cruiser group. The sudden appearance of an enemy sub in the zone, picked up on long range active sonar, is cause for a brief flurry of action, which is a bit more surprising because it turns out to be a Victor, not another SS. After that, patrolling in the zone continues uneventfully as the carrier UNREPs in preparation for moving south.

**Play Observations**

I really enjoyed this one. There’s a lot of different objectives to achieve, which require a good amount of planning and coordination of different types of units to achieve good results. Immersion is excellent, and it really feels like stepping into a live environment, with planes already coming and going about their business, some part-way through their fuel loads, etc, and spotting reports already in place at enemy airbases. Details like that really make a difference. Seeing some mission objectives that aren’t just military units (in this case the civil broadcasting net) and taking steps to influence the population (the Commando Solo broadcasts) was interesting too.

As a micro-manager, I probably had a more power than I really needed, and I could concentrate a lot of land-based aircraft to batter my way through the enemy soft target list with optimized strikes. (Especially with the tell-all SR-71 giving away most of the enemy positions in advance.) Players purely using missions will find it more challenging, I think, especially if they try and rush it in a series of small strikes, instead of coordinating a big one. Having a secondary objective (62nd division) was great for keeping the action going on day 2.

Those Grouse gunners are a real hazard for low-level work. I had to punch holes in the ring around the Havana zone (I never did get them all) for freedom of low-level operation in specific areas. Fortunately, the TARPS birds can see them from above their launch envelope, so once I had found them I could use PGMs to engage them safely. If the weather had been bad it would have been a very different story. And those SA-5s may seem obsolete antiques, but they can be a real hassle, messing up all sorts of ingress and surveillance plans.

I never did find the final Foxtrot near Florida. He’s going to be an unpleasant surprise for ships transiting the ‘safe’ area.