**Caribbean Fury #3 – Rumble in the Jungle**

**Playtest Report by AndrewJ Sept 2020**

It’s mid-Feb in the Caribbean, and the globe-spanning conflict continues to evolve. After heavy fighting around Cuba, US forces are refocusing towards Europe, but that doesn’t mean an end to the regional fighting. Cuba and Venezuela may be down for the moment, but Honduras and Nicaragua are still an active problem, and Belize is politically unstable with an active insurgency ongoing. All of this has to be dealt with in the next couple of days.

**THE SITUATION**

Aircraft on hand are reduced compared to a few days ago. No carriers, no AWACs, and no high-level assets are available. My main striking force comes from two ANG fighter wings of F-4s and A-7s in mid Florida, plus a mix of rag-tag elements (F-4s/16s/18s, A-4s, and Kfirs) in southern Florida. Fortunately, I have enough tankers in the southern USA to get my planes to their targets. There are also a scattering of units around the Caribbean, including A-4s way over in Puerto Rico, a few F-16s and OV-10s (and an AC-130!) down in the Canal zone, and some MPA and cargo aircraft on various islands.

I’ve got four small task groups in the area, mostly of older second line ships. My most capable unit is probably the Dale, a Leahy class cruiser with powerful long-ranged SAMS, which is patrolling off Belize with the British Westminster, a capable ASW ship with good close-range defenses. Together, they make a very good pair. Further north, I have a very nice ASW group of a Spruance and a pair of Knox, up near the strait between Cuba and the mainland. Out in the Caribbean I have a creaky old Permit sub, some Pegasus hydrofoils, and a trio of older NATO frigates, and closer to the canal I have a four-ship of frigates and old destroyers based around the little nuclear cruiser South Carolina.

The Brits have their own problems in Belize, where they’ve got a handful of Harriers, a recce Canberra, a bunch of assorted transport helicopters, and a reinforced battalion of ground troops, to face off against several thousand angry rebels which are trying to over-run the country. Fortunately, there are a number of additional troop formations around the Caribbean which can be used as reinforcements for British efforts to stabilize the country.

**THE PLAN**

We’ll start in the south, where orders go out to start loading up troops on the islands and flying them over to Belize. Colombia has offered the use of the airport on the Island of San Andres, off the coast of Nicaragua, so my Puerto-Rican A-4s, OV-10s from the canal, and some F-16s all the way from Florida are ordered to forward base there for operations in the morning. TG South Carolina is directed to make full speed towards the island, where it will patrol to provide close SAM support in the event of any interference from Nicaragua. Meanwhile, the F-16s from the canal zone will make immediate aggressive fighter sweeps in the area, to bring the Nicaraguans to battle.

My other ships and subs will move in the general direction of Belize and the north coast of Honduras, hunting for any of the enemy patrol boats which are reported to be around. TG Dale will provide long-ranged SAM support, interdicting any attacks between Honduras and Belize, while the other two groups concentrate on sub-hunting. The Brits will start trying to localize rebel positions in Belize, while refining their defensive position around the capital city. I’d like to have more air-power on-scene, but I’m very reluctant to put aircraft on the ground there in the middle of an insurgency. Therefore, the assorted attack elements out of southern Florida start ferrying down to base out of the Caymans, where they can make attacks at daylight. It’s more flying, but it’s much safer, with no risk of rebel saboteurs stuffing satchel charges up my tailpipes. Meantime, the ANG squadrons begin prepping for an attack in the morning. The F-4s will concentrate on knocking out Honduran airbases, while the A-7s will provide ARM support and general ground attack capability.

**PRE-DAWN OPERATIONS**

Initial fighter sweeps go well, and my southern F-16s are soon racking up a pleasing score against the Nicaraguan MiG-21s, which are badly outclassed in the dark against BVR and front-aspect missiles. They even find some little Cessnas out on maritime patrol, which they are pleased to add to their score. I don’t have many fighters immediately on hand near Belize, and the Honduran F-5s start making threatening runs on my MPA which are trying to hunt for patrol boats in the area. This is when the Dale starts showing off, using the 100-mile range of its SM-2ERs to knock them down with satisfying regularity. The F-5s don’t have any countermeasures, so most shots are kills, and the captain is very proud of his crew.

The Dale’s escort, the Westminster, also proves her worth when her sonar picks up a suspect underwater contact amid the swarm of marine life in the area. A couple of schools of fish had already received an ASROC surprise (perhaps the captain of the Dale isn’t quite as calm and composed as he seems), but this contact isn’t quite the same. A visit from the Westminster’s helicopter confirms it as an active submarine, and the pilots quickly sink it (a Kilo) in fine Royal Navy style.

Meanwhile, ELINT gear on the MPA has confirmed the presence of several operating air search radars in enemy territory. We’ve been allocated four TLAMs, and this seems like the perfect use for them, so the South Carolina opens fire, getting four precise hits which greatly reduce the enemy’s off-shore air surveillance capability.

At this point, it feels like we can be confident of superiority in the air, but that turns out to be premature, and the Hondurans start trying to push us around. The first sign comes with the detection of powerful fighter radars coming from the direction of Soto Cano. These aren’t old F-5s! They’re modern Flankers, presumably escaped from Cuba, and they’re headed north, ahead of a pack of attack planes. My fighters are out of position, away at tankers or refueling in the Caymans, and although they turn and hurry back, they can’t get there in time. The Dale opens fire again, but the agile Su-27s are well defended with jammers and chaff, and one manages to evade the SAMs and shoot down one of my little BN-2Ts which was out on a maritime patrol mission.

The Flankers can’t evade forever, and the Dale finally manages to hit them both, before tearing up the attack planes. These turn out to be old Super Mysteres and Aviojets, which are even more helpless than the F-5s, and they get swatted down like target drones. When the crew finally figure out what they’re shooting at they cease fire, to preserve the remainder of their SAMs, and they let the first of our arriving fighters kill off the last of the attack. All the same, it’s been a very good performance, with about 20 kills for 32 shots, and a unit citation is definitely warranted for the crew of the Dale. (Those SM-2ERs are awesome. With one ship I can control the airspace 100 miles in all directions, preying on distant patrols and anyone trying to travel at fuel-efficient altitudes, disrupting strikes, and retaining good missile performance out to 50 miles. It’s a shame the USN gave them up.)

**MORNING LIGHT**

Honduras tries again with a second raid on Belize shortly after dawn, this time using more powerful MiG-23s, coming in at wavetop height where the Dale can’t get at them. Fortunately, by this time my fighters are on station, and, despite the Cub jamming in the background, the F-16s spot them and pounce on them with salvoes of Sidewinders. The result is a quick and efficient execution, and the F-16s fly back to Florida for more missiles.

My own strikes are finally ready by now, and a powerful force of F-4s comes flying south, refueling in the gap between Cuba and the mainland, before continuing south towards Honduras. (The exclusion zone over Cuba is a real constraint, and it must add a hundred miles to my flight path, compared to simply overflying the island. Still, orders are orders, and we must obey. Scuttlebutt is that they still haven’t found all the SA-10s that were hidden in the Cuban hinterlands…) The Phantoms are carrying GBU-15 glide bombs with heavy penetrator warheads, and they’re accompanied by a strong escort of A-7s carrying Shrike anti-radar missiles, plus some Phantoms with air-to-air missiles only.

The Hondurans try to interfere with some more Su-27s, but these are met by such a barrage of Sparrows that they are blasted down before they can attack. This lets my F-4s release their ordnance unmolested, and the runways and taxiways of all four Honduran airbases are heavily cratered without loss. My escorting A-7s had expected some sort of SAM or AAA radar activity, but none was encountered, and all twelve of them took their missiles home again. Twelve planes could have held a lot of ground attack ordnance, so this was a significant misjudgment on my part. Of course, if I hadn’t brought them it would have been wall-to-wall SAMs.

**DAYTIME IN BELIZE**

The British government is putting a lot of pressure on us to deal with the insurgency, and they’ve issued a series of intelligence reports about suspected rebel troop locations, rebel logistical activity, and important infrastructure to be secured and protected with troops on the ground. We’ve also started getting confused reports about a potential hostage situation on the coast in the Placencia area.

My Harriers have been outfitted with recce pods, and they join the Canberra to start making runs over areas of interest in Belize the moment dawn breaks. There’s definitely something going on at the hostage location, as someone down there takes a pot-shot at the passing Harrier with MANPADS, and we also start finding indications of troop concentrations and supply caches throughout the country.

The British start things off by helicopter landing strong troop formations at several chokepoints in the north, and then, as more troops arrive from the islands during the day, they start making landings progressively further down the country. The helicopters don’t have all the fun, and small RHIBS are also used to make landings at a few of the closer coastal LZs. Some of the Lynxes, en-route to LZs in the west, suddenly get shot at by more MANPADS, which reveals a series of large troop concentrations encircling Belize City about 25 miles out.

A wave of A-7s arrive from Florida mid-morning, along with the lesser attack aircraft that forward based to the Caymans, and they start systematically bombing the troop formations and supply dumps. Cluster bombs do tremendous damage to the enemy infantry, and Snakeyes work well too. There’s sometimes return fire from SA-7s, but the little missiles have a terrible hit rate and tiny warheads, and, fortunately, the few that do hit only manage to cause damage. I’m generally pleased with the way things are going, although an attempt by some A-7s to hit a supply depot with 2,000lb Mk84s also wrecks the adjacent airport control tower, which draws some unpleasant criticism. I hand those targets over to F-4s with small Mk 82 LGBs, whose accurate impacts and reduced blast radius cause less damage to the neighborhood.

Collateral damage is definitely a concern with the hostage situation on the coast, since it looks like the MANPADS-rich enemy infantry is clustered right around the building where the tourists are being held. Attempts to attack with Maverick missiles have limited effectiveness, only killing one or two of them, conventional bombing is out of the question, and I’m reluctant to get into an infantry fight. But then one of the planners points out that if the hostages are safely secured deep inside the building, then they’re probably safe from small warheads. A flight of A-7s is ordered to the area, and goes hurtling overhead at minimum altitude, one on each side of the building, dumping full warloads of cluster bombs on the concentrated infantry. When the storm of small explosions is done the enemy infantry are dispersed, the building is scuffed but intact, and my helicopters can land to rescue the tearful hostages.

My AC-130 arrives in the early afternoon, flying up from the canal, and begins ripping up the rebel truck traffic, as well as clearing away more of the southern troop concentrations near the logistical hubs in the south. Fighters use strafing and Mavericks to deal with rebel boat traffic in Amatique Bay, and my small groups of attack planes reload in Florida, and make follow-up attacks on rebel infantry. This all takes time, and dusk is approaching before the occupation of the LZs is complete.

The British are quite satisfied by the progress, but when I wear my NATO hat, I realize that this ate up a lot of resources that could have been spent on the war effort in Honduras and Nicaragua. Other than hitting the Honduran runways, we’ve done little ground damage to them at all.

**WAR AT SEA**

Overnight MPA searches have revealed the presence of enemy patrol boats in the region, with one cluster near Belize/Honduras, and another cluster off the north coast of Nicaragua. While I could have my ships engage with Harpoon, the missiles are probably worth more than the little cannon-armed patrol boats are. Therefore, the Pegasus hydrofoils are sent to engage the ones near Honduras, hoping to shoot them up safely with their 76mm guns. Unfortunately, the sea state is so rough, and the shooting is so bad, that the hit rates are awful. When my hydrofoils finally get there in the morning it generally takes a full magazine of shells to sink a single patrol boat. Frustrated, and running low on fuel, the hydrofoils head to the Caymans for replenishment.

The remaining patrol boats are finally dealt with by aircraft. Maverick-toting F-4s do an efficient job sinking the ones off Honduras, as well as getting rid of the surface search radar on the little island 100 miles off the Honduran coast. The Puerto-Rican A-4s launch from San Andres Island and beat up the Nicaraguan fleet and radars, before turning to dump the majority of their iron bombs on the port and airfield of Puerto Cabezas. It turns out the enemy are alert and ready, and a storm of small-caliber AAA downs one of the A-4s, but that doesn’t stop my pilots from wrecking the docks and the control tower.

Meanwhile, the Soviets are prowling beneath the waves, and TG Banckert (the NATO 3-ship frigate patrol) is suddenly fired on in the mid Caribbean! Torps are detected boring in at 50 kts, and it looks like they’re headed for my little Floreal, the slowest of the three frigates. My ships counterfire and turn to run, while both helicopters scramble and dash towards the probable location of the sub. The Floreal makes a hard turn to the north, hoping it can get out of the sensor cone of the approaching torpedoes, because it sure as heck can’t outrun them. Fortunately, it works (the heavyweight wake-homers don’t have a wire, so they can’t be redirected), and the big torps go thundering by two and a half miles away. Simultaneously, the helicopters are using a combination of dipping sonar and sonobuoys to localize the sub, and they each get a hit with a Mk 46, putting an end to the Victor.

**BRONCOS ATTACK!**

At noon we get an unusual message from high command. They want to stage a daylight B-52 raid on Managua, in plain view at low altitude, to exert political pressure on the regime. We could theoretically launch now and get there before dusk, but that could be a suicide run, with God-knows-what popping up to engage the plodding bombers. There’s a lot of prep to be done first.

My F-16s from the Canal zone go probing towards the airport in Managua, which provokes a swarm of cannon-armed MiG-17s to come streaming up to fight. These get cheerfully slaughtered by the F-16s and some of the Puerto-Rican A-4s, which then escort in a radar-carrying OV-10 to look for ground units. Nothing turns up, and it flies back to the island, but that prompts the other OV-10 pilots to start talking. If B-52s can attack, why can’t they? Don’t they have bombs too? They can’t get to Managua itself, but the two coastal airports are in reach. They know the northern one at Puerto Cabezos is well guarded, but the smaller one down south at Bluefields probably isn’t, and it’s only 125 miles away. Attack! Diving down towards the waves, the four little planes push their twin turboprops up to a blistering 220 kts, and hurtle in, silk scarves freshly laundered for maximum effectiveness.

Well, Bluefields has plenty of AAA, and MANPADS, and, can you believe it, a fully functional SA-6, and it all starts firing the moment the OV-10s pull up to bombing height. Tracers and smoke trails are crossing in all directions, and the Broncos start dumping their ordnance and spraying rockets and cannons at whatever’s in front of them. The lead drops everything on the control tower moments before he’s cut down by 23mm fire, while number two manages to shoot up an AAA site before turning aside in a desperate maximum performance turn at wingtip height. Three and four hurl everything at the terrifying sight of the SA-6 battery before hauling away to the north, the white-faced observers craning around behind in time to see secondary explosions tear through the SAM launchers.

When the wing commander finds out he starts ripping people up for such a reckless and ill-prepared attack, with no attempt at reconnaissance or support. The pilots can only shuffle their feet. How could they know the only significant SAM in the entire theatre was there, at the smallest airport of all?

**DUSK IN HONDURAS**

My second main attack of the day focuses on Honduras, attempting to destroy as much infrastructure as possible, without any more diversions to help out in Belize. Tankers bring in F-4s, armed with the Mk 84 version of GBUs and LGBs, followed three quarters of an hour later by A-7s with Mk 84 iron bombs. The F-4s arrive as dusk is falling, and smash hangars, control towers, and radars at the four Honduran airbases, all while staying safely at high altitude. The A-7s arrive just after dark, using their FLIR to target the three Honduran naval bases, before moving on to continue pummeling the two airfields near the coast. These low-level attacks draw some disorganized AAA fire, but, fortunately, not enough to cause damage.

As the battering is ongoing, we get reports that the Honduran government is fleeing to the presidential retreat near the Toncontin Airport, and we’re authorized to use TLAMs to attack it. However, my A-7s which were bombing the Caratasca naval base still have half their bomb-load on board, and they’re significantly closer than my ships. Urgent radio messages redirect them to the new target, and they use their night vision and radar to find it and hit it in the dark.

As my aircraft fly back to their tankers our intel starts reporting a complete governmental collapse in Honduras, and we’re ordered to disengage and clear out. We’ll be keeping a watchful eye on the region, but we don’t expect further hostilities for the moment. (I have to wonder how much sooner this could have happened if I hadn’t diverted so much effort to help out in Belize.)

**NIGHT-TIME PREP-WORK IN MANAGUA**

There’s one more major attack planned for the night, in preparation for the B-52 raid on Managua tomorrow morning. I don’t want any chance of fighters or SAMs popping up to interfere while the vulnerable bombers are present, so the actual functional attack is going to happen tonight.

Six F-4s carrying GBUs with penetrator warheads will target the runways and taxiways, while four more with heavy penetrator LGBs will hit the hangars, radar, and control tower. Four A-7s will be on overwatch with Shrikes, in case the Nicaraguans have another heavy SAM site, and then another eight A-7s will perform the riskiest part of the strike, going in low to find any enemy air-defenses with FLIR, and hit them with cluster bombs. The strike requires two tankings on the way in, and one on the way home, and we end up borrowing the B-52s’ tankers to help out. Now that Honduras’ airspace is closed, we have to go around the country, which adds an additional 110 miles to the trip each way, pushing strike time back to nearly 1:00 AM.

The first part of the strike works perfectly, and the runways and infrastructure are catered and put out of commission, without any interference by fighters or SAMs. The second part doesn’t go as well. The A-7s dive in, and despite their FLIRs they have the devil of a time trying to find and engage the low-level air defences. They manage to spot and bomb some of the AAA and MANPADS in the open land to the east of the airport, but the defences hidden among the built-up terrain in the west remain frustratingly elusive. By the time one A-7 is shot down and two more are damaged it’s clear this is a bad decision, and the attack waves off to return home. (In retrospect, I should probably have brought in some of my F-16s with IR Mavericks, which seem to have superior spotting ability, and could have hunted from a safe altitude.)

In practical military terms the Managua airbase is out of the fight, and I really have no need for the B-52s. But politics is politics, and diplomatic pressure comes from B-52s, not mysterious explosions in the night. They’ll come in tomorrow morning, make their theatrical bomb run, and hopefully get away with it.

**NICARAGUA BY DAY**

Daylight sees a bit more prep work around Managua, with an AC-130 arriving to try and spot the anti-aircraft defences lurking off the west end of the Managua airfield. That doesn’t work, and eventually a pair of F-18s arrive, and, using the IR sensors on the most modern Mavericks we have at our disposal, they finally manage to spot the lurking miscreants. Some accompanying flights of A-7s apply cluster bombs until the problem goes away. They then repeat the process at the other Nicaraguan airbases, working over the air defences and leaving the airfields open to attack.

The B-52s arrive over Managua precisely at noon. The Managuans have lined up their folding chairs by airfield fence, clapping politely as each stately bomber makes its fly-by, and grumbling about ‘Charging $10 for an air-show hot-dog, it’s robbery I tell you, that’s what it is”. It then takes them three hours to get out of the parking lot before they can go home. Still, the State Department seems to be pleased.

In mid-afternoon another F-4 strike arrives from Florida, this time carrying heavy penetrator LGBs, and heads for the Nicaraguan airbases, where they strike ammo bunkers and buried fuel facilities. As the strikes get underway, word comes in that the Nicaraguans are also capitulating and orders come in to cease attacking them and leave their airspace.

**CONCLUSION**

At this point Honduras and Nicaragua have both withdrawn from the conflict. There are probably still rebels active in Belize, but vital regions have been garrisoned with troops, and the situation seems to be stabilizing. Now the ANG squadrons can have the pleasure of heading overseas to face the Soviet juggernaut head on…

**Play Impressions**

There's an interesting resource allocation dynamic going on here. I probably should have started out with massive focused attacks intended to knock Honduras and Nicaragua out of the conflict as early as possible, but I found that Belize kept sucking up more and more aircraft on CAS and interdiction. Initially, most of the ANG A-7s and almost all my small-unit aircraft from Key West were dedicated to anti-rebel bombing runs, plus a number of ANG F-4s with small LGBs to hit supply depots. Belize was acting like a magnet that kept trying to pull resources away from larger war objectives. It took a conscious effort to put things back on track again.