**Indian Ocean Fury #3 – Socotra Scramble**

**Playtest Report by AndrewJ July 2017**

***From Primarchx:*** I hit the three closest airbases to Thumrait nearly immediately in quick succession. The closer two with Jaguars and Ataq Airbase with the full USAF package of Strike Eagles, Vipers and Bones. The Jags didn't find much to hit but took out ammo facilities and bombed revetments at night on the chance there were a/c there. Ataq was hit first by the Bones coming in low at full speed, first targeting the SA-3 sites, which they wiped out, before turning to the aircraft parking at the base. Some SA-3s were launched but were quickly silenced without effect. Lots of AAA had to be sped through as they rocketed along at near-Mach on the deck. They decimated the aircraft at the base and headed for home. Follow on Vipers and Strike Eagles hit secondary targets such as EWRs and the SA-2 site near the base.

Meanwhile Nimitz is probing Socotra, taking out radars and interceptors while goading any hidden SAMs to come on line. Having a load of fun with this one

--------------------------------

I took the opposite approach, launching an immediate and massive strike on Socotra which arrived just as dawn broke. Carrier aircraft approached from the south, while shore-based ones came in from the north. A few probing shots at the surveillance radars prompted the SA-10 to light up, and then a HARM sandwich took care of it and several of the other SAMs. TLAMs (about 40% of my total) came over the mountains from the south, the first bunch aimed at weather shelters (and acting as a SAM soak) and then a concentrated salvo on the runway and access point. SLAMs also came over the mountain around this time, engaging short-ranged SAMs after they had emptied their ready magazines. All the while a massive fighter presence kept the enemy down until the runway was shut.

CBU carrying F-18s dealt with the SA-2s from low level (although I had to dodge retributive SA-7s), but when some of the F-18s went hunting radars on the way home they found some modern Shorads, which taught them a nasty lesson. Those got hunted down from high altitude by Mavericks and 500 lb LGBs. With the air-defense environment neutralized the Jaguars came in to pummel the docks and the airfield, reducing Socotra to a smoking ruin. My BLU-109 carrying F-15s turned out to be unnecessary, so they're going back home and taking their bombs with them. I may divert them to some of the closer airfields in Yemen, since they have plenty of gas, but I want to count my bomb inventory first.

I haven't used the B-1s yet. I didn't want to send them into a heavy SAM environment like Socotra, and I don't feel like using them in the day when everyone can see them a mile away. I'm actually thinking about using them to hit Khartoum when it gets dark again. They've got the legs for it, and if ever there was a place that shouted "Please base Badgers here!" it's Khartoum. A big base with facilities for very large aircraft which is safely isolated far behind the front lines would be ideal for bombers. But we've no evidence that anything is there. Hmmm...As the Socotra strike heads for home, the four F-14s with the longest range loadouts (which haven't yet used any of their ordnance) are refuelled and directed to head west and tangle with forces in the Aden area. After initial successes against Mig-21s patrolling the area they head NNW towards Sana'a, and start running into more credible opposition in the form of Mig-23s and Mig-29s, and a couple of support planes. Their range advantage keeps them out of immediate danger, and they manage to get a decent score before running away back towards the tanker with their tanks nearly dry. (In retrospect, maybe I should have sent more of the heavy CAP F-14s along, and tried to get a more decisive engagement. But I'm nervous about leaving the carrier so undefended, so I hurried them home instead.)

I had originally intended to have all my naval forces rendezvous NE of Socotra and proceed along the N shore of the Gulf of Aden, but looking at the distances I don't think I have the time. So the CV and the AO will have to proceed nearly due W, meeting up to the SW of Socotra and passing through the straits there. With Socotra in ruins I've sent a French Atlantique to start patrolling the straits for subs before my ships get there. Meanwhile the task group from the Gulf has to make good time along the N shore at 30 knots, praying they don't run over a sub at those speeds. I've got P-3s looking around in front of them, so hopefully that will help.

Now that Socotra's down the French decide to get a bit more aggressive, and the Mirages start darting out to pick on the Mig-21s flying out of Al Anad. Their missiles aren't great, but they significantly outclass the Mig-21s, so all is well in that regard. However, the Russians up in Sana'a are an entirely different story, and any time the Mig-29s start heading south the French flee the scene. I'm always keeping four Mirages on ready alert, rather than commit them all, since I've got airbases all around me (including Dire Dawa to my rear) and an anti-airfield strike could arrive at any time. However, I do send one of my recce planes hurtling north through the Bab al Mandeb, getting a nice look at the docks packed with Boghammers and the nearby arty batteries (and the angry 57mm gunners...). He then heads north up the Red Sea to overfly some of the central islands. Nothing's there, fortunately, so he strafes the central Square Tie radar for good measure, and then heads home again. Meanwhile another Mirage pilot has put a pair of AS-30s into the crowded docks in the Bab. I've only got one plane set up for this at the moment, but I've got plenty of AS-30s. The plane will be back every 6 hours with a different pilot to keep wearing away at the foe before the carrier arrives. I think I'll sneak in a helicopter raid with HOT once it gets dark too.

As this all goes on I'm looking at those fishing boats with some distaste. Low overflights have shown me armed men on deck. Fishing with RPGs? I think not... So far they haven't fired at me despite some low and slow passes overhead, but I wonder what they'll do (or who they'll inform) when my ships get closer. Should I risk international censure and sink them? Probably not a good idea at this point. Maybe I'll have to risk a frigate to see how they'll respond to a warship.

----------

Ha ha ha! We the French are ready for your perfidious sneak attack from behind! Victory is ours!

Er, a second incoming wave, you say?

Zut alors!

--

Good lord, it's an An-2! It's just like an RPV, only slower...

---

**Playthrough**

Stepping back a little, here's how the rest of it went.

After the air to air engagements mentioned earlier I got a little lax, while waiting for my planes to re-arm, but finally decided I should send another heavy counter-air sweep of F-14s towards the Bab al Mandeb. This would have been great if I'd done it sooner, but as it was they were only ~ 1/2 way there (the 400 kt cruise of those older F-14s is really painful) when the Pact decided to teach the French a lesson in Djibouti. Strikes arrived from both sides, and I really started to regret going on the offensive with half my Mirages, because the four planes which were available weren't able to stem the tide, and it took almost all my AAMs, many shots from my I-HAWKs, and micro-managed cannon fire to keep them out of my airbase. Even my little frigate took a few shots with its deck gun as the attackers came rushing in - and that was a problem, because the attackers radioed back the position of the little frigate to the anti-carrier strike units!

These started to show up on radar just as I was congratulating myself on my hair-thin victory, and it was clear I wouldn't be able to stop them all before they hit their target (which at this point I assumed was the base). My forlorn little frigate shot as best it could, but it's death was assured. (This is where reality splits, as discussed in the earlier posts. The AI ran the rest of the anti-ship attackers through my SAM barrage and then turned the survivors for home. I re-ran it under human control, destroying the HAWKs, some of the Crotales, and wrecking the docks and sinking all of the minesweepers there, before getting away without casualties. I decided to keep playing from that outcome.)

My F-14s arrived too late to interfere, and only a few of them were able to catch up with the tail of the raid returning to Sana'a and shoot down a few Su-24s. However, they did have tanker support, so they stayed around to engage and destroy fighters coming up to challenge them on intercept missions, using their range advantage as much as possible, and being particularly careful to keep Mig-29s out of Archer range.

The fighting in Djibouti had made it clear that the advance planes in Sana'a were a real problem, so the next main strike was directed there. Three pair of F-14s lead the F-16s with HARMs, while F-18s with SLAMs delivered powerful warheads on the SAM sites, and F-15Es came in with LGBs to shut the runways once the defences were down (all under the watchful eye of EA-6 and EC-130 crews). The attack was a success, although I proved that I still haven't learned that high value fighters probably shouldn't go down to strafe - in this case because the pair of Mig-23s that popped up were able to put a pair of Aphids into a reckless F-14 the moment their wheels left the ground.

This was followed by a dusk strike from the Jaguars, which all concentrated on bombing the runway and facilities at Ataq. One-thousand-pound bombs aren't ideal anti-runway tools, but when you have twenty attackers inbound you can get the job done. So as darkness fell I knew the main Russian base at Socotra was a wreck, Sana'a was down, and Ataq was shut. This meant most of the more advanced enemy aircraft on my side of the AOO were out of operation and relieved a considerable amount of pressure on me. The most advanced fighters remaining were probably the Mig-23s on the far side of the Red Sea, plus whatever might be hiding out at Khartoum.

That's why the pair of B-1s settled down to nap-of-the-earth altitude as they crossed the Red Sea in the deepening darkness and entered enemy territory near the border of Eritrea and Sudan. Radar cover was thinnest there, and my hope was that they could remain undetected as they swung to the SW and entered Sudan. As their advanced ESM picked up emissions of a Side Net radar to the north of their flight path, and then a pair old model fighter radars. Had they been detected? The bombers turned further south and accelerated to military power, and the emissions faded behind them. Then it was time to turn north again and make the low level run across the large Khartoum airport. The bombers flashed across the airport, glimpsing dozens of small airframes as they dumped 48 one ton bombs on the runway and facilities. They didn't wait to look around, but as they turned and headed back east they could see the glow of fierce fires lighting the skies over Khartoum. (Satellite intel would later reveal 38 wrecked fighter airframes and a demolished runway. Not the Badgers I'd been fearing, but well worth it nonetheless.) The route out was adjusted further south, to stay away from the radar, and the B-1s returned safely home in time to prep for their trip to America.

Other night-time activity was somewhat less spectacular, but still very useful. A large part of my remaining TLAMs were used to strike known SAM positions around airfields in Yemen and Ethiopia, paving the way for my F-15Es to use their LGBs (with the very useful BLU-109 warhead) to shut the airfields at Aden and Al Anad, and to start working on Hodeida. The last of the TLAMs shut the runways and taxiways of the Ethiopian airfields of Aksum and Mekele. The Cairo-based 366th arrived to do the same thing to Port Sudan, and they had enough LGBs to shut Asmara in Eritrea, and then cross the Red Sea to finish off Hodeida. By dawn all enemy airfields were shut, with the exception of Dire Dawa, and since strike aircraft losses during their Djibouti raid had been 100% I did not expect any trouble from that direction.

SAM opposition had been very weak during the night, presumably because once the search radars were down they had no way to track my aircraft, so many of the HARM shooters went back with their missiles, and re-armed with other ordnance. A large amount of effort was devoted to the Bab al Mandeb, where F-15Es flew along the coast using their FLIR pods to identify a large number of small-boat docks, SSM sites, large caliber AAA, and artillery emplacements. These could be safely engaged with LGBs and Mavericks from beyond AAA range (and less safely with CBUs, trying to stay out of the AAA zones). One surprise was the identification of an SSK by FLIR, with a pilot reporting a moving hot-spot with a wake when the sub was in very shallow waters just south of the Bab. Surrounding AAA pieces had to be bombed before an Atlantique could safely get in to sink it.

Once the coast was clean in the straits my surviving mine clearing helicopters started working on a passage near the Djibouti shore, finding and sweeping numerous mines before dawn, and continuing into the day. By mid-day all known enemy units in the area had been destroyed (including those on the islands in the Red Sea), and there had been no further enemy air activity. Some aircraft (the Jaguars in particular) worked on destroying aircraft which were trapped at wrecked enemy airbases. As dusk fell a second time my southern naval units were well into the Gulf of Aden, and the HMS Lancaster which was making good progress southwards along the E shore of the Red Sea to meet them. There are 26 hours left to go, and the Nimitz has a clear path to get to the objective in 22 hours at 20 knots (to escort the slow moving oiler). If she wants to leave the oiler with an escort she can speed up to 25 knots and get there in 17.

So with 1 day 2 hours to go, and no effective opposition left, I think it's fair to call it over.