**Indian Ocean Fury #4 – Gate of Tears**

**Playtest Report by AndrewJ June 2018**

One day in, and here's where I'm at so far...

**THE PLAN**

After the heavyweights have passed through in the last couple of days, my remaining forces, mostly British and French with American amphibs, have been tasked with the capture of Socotra, and the various islands and narrows in and around the Bab al Mandeb.

My first thought is to consolidate my naval forces heading for Socotra. I’m most concerned about small task groups stumbling into an enemy submarine, and I want to bring them together into convoys which are easier to defend. The UK carrier group is ordered to slow down to a fuel efficient creep so the other two groups in the area can catch up and join it, and the Pelilieu group SE of Socotra is to do the same thing to wait for its trailing LST. The little Floreal will head south to try and offer a little protection for the oiler coming up the African coast. The Jeanne d’Arc group heads over to help escort the minesweepers, who seem very exposed with their single escort. The support ships in Oman put their two escorts out front, and start steaming west along the coast. I’d like to put up some MPA ASW patrols in the area, but since there are probably still aircraft lurking in Socotra I’m holding off for now. The French in Djibouti will stay in port for now. The lone Brit up in the Red Sea is just asking for death. Hopefully nobody notices it.

Looking over my airborne assets, I can see I’ve got a lot of Harriers carrying stores that need buddy-lasing, so I decide to request the assistance of the Tornados, who are equipped for that task, and have the long legs to do it for an extended period of time. These and other aircraft from up north in the Gulf are ordered to relocate down to Thumrait for Socotra operations. I don’t have a lot of dedicated high-speed fighters, except for the French over in Djibouti. For Socotra operations I’ve got Harriers with AMRAAMs on the Brit carrier group, and Harriers with Sidewinders elsewhere. Other than that it’s a few AMRAAMs carried as secondary weapons on American strike aircraft. If we’re just facing a Mig-21 or two with older missiles we should be okay, but beyond that? Hmmm…

**DAY 1**

As operations get underway I decide that foolish moves are the best way to throw the enemy off-guard, and I try and sneak some of the little French Gazelles in at low altitude to take a look at the Ethiopian airbase in Dire Dawa, and to peek over the mountain into Aden. What could go wrong? Well, enemy fighters, that’s what. My scouts are shot down before they can exfiltrate. Dumb move…

The only benefit is that it provokes skirmishing between the French Mirages in Djibouti, and the Yemeni airforce, and the French quickly make a good score of F-5s and Mig-21s. Things start getting tougher when Mig-23’s start appearing out of Sana’a, but they’re usually coming 1 at a time, so they can be taken down at numerical advantage. Then the Mig-29s start to appear, and the French have to cool it for a bit. After taking some time to consolidate they start to launch strong 6-plane fighter sweeps, which gradually eat away the enemy air forces in Sana’a, before burnering back home to take advantage of their quick turnaround. It takes a while, but their final sweep of the evening even manages to get rid of the impudent jammer (and his silent ELINT friend) which have been loitering impudently in the region.

In one of the pauses in the air-to-air fight, my E-8 cruises through far in the background, plotting defences in the Bab. There’s plenty of those, as expected, but it also spots a large column of contacts headed south to the Bab al Mandeb area. My recce Mirage makes a high-speed dash down the line, and brings back footage of an entire armoured regiment + on the move. I’ve got no way to hit it with any effective strength at the moment. If it stays in the region and contests the Bab then any landing on the far shore is going to be a miserable failure. The E-8 also spots a bunch of high speed naval contacts up north which may be a problem if they come south to interfere with the French Amphibs.

Cargo planes need to get into Djibouti, and the French decide that the Ethiopian fighters in Dire Dawa are a menace along that route. Therefore a strike of some Mirage fighters, one Mirage with AS-30Ls, and the attack helicopters head south to hit the base. A couple of enemy fighters are shot down, a couple more are destroyed on the ground, and the strike returns safely, leaving the airfield empty (for the moment). As they arrive home they are just in time to receive the diplomatic briefing saying “Please don’t antagonise the Ethipians”. Ooops….

Over in Thumrait the drones and recce planes start lifting off, to ID the various armed fishing boats (spies every one, I’m sure), and take a look at Socotra. The E-8 does a very good job of pinpointing enemy positions as it flies around at a distance, but an incautious naval helicopter, which tries to come in hidden by the radar shadow of the southern escarpment and ID an isolated radar blip on the south shore, gets spanked by a Mig-29 which was based on the island. Active Mig-29s on Socotra? Hmmm… That crystalizes my decision, and I request the air superiority Mirages to fly down to Thumrait as well.

The first strike against Socotra happens in the afternoon, after the Harriers have flown down from Kuwait and readied again. Everybody goes. A speculative HARM shot towards the surveillance radar prompts the SA-15 to light up, and a shower of anti-radiation missiles descend on it, but it shoots them all down. Fortunately it then runs out of missiles, and is finished off by an LGB. My LGB and laser Maverick forces then start working on enemy air defence vehicles. Once those are gone the first of my iron bombers swoop in, only to find that there are plenty of MANPADS active in the area, and I can’t see where they’re coming from. My pod equipped strikers drop down ‘till they’re a kilometer above missile ceiling, and that’s when they spot the full scope of the enemy deployment on the island. That’s a lot of guys! My remaining LGBs destroy some of the MANPADS, and my other bombers work over outlying troops where the little SAMs can’t reach.

Three naval contacts are spotted during the attack, huddled up against the Socotra shore, and the Trenchant manages to sink them with one Harpoon apiece. The Trenchant gets a surprise of its own, when, despite its very good sonar, it gets ambushed during a cruise-speed transit. The Trenchant fires a torp back down the bearing, and turns and runs as fast as it can. After a couple of minutes, in which time the enemy sub has hopefully turned to run and thus made itself blind, the Trenchant turns aside. The enemy torpedoes pass by on their original course, and the Trenchant runs silent. The enemy sub, which turns out to be a Victor, gets hunted down and killed by a helicopter from the Jeanne d’Arc group.

Another sub, which turns out to be an SSGN, also turns up in the path of the supply ships coming from Oman. Fortunately, the P-3 which laid the sonobuoy which detected it manages to sink it before it can do any damage. It’s ID-ed as a Charlie, with short range missiles. An Oscar would have been in range.

**NIGHT 1**

The first night comes with interesting political developments. I have orders to escort my commander on a night flight into Ethiopia, in order to work out a potential cease-fire.

My boss’s flight path will take them near the edge of Yemeni radar cover, and very close to one of their damaged bases. So, I plan to send an EC-130 to knock back radar range in that area. Some Mirage fighters from Thumrait will meet up with the diplomatic plane in that region, before escorting them down into Somalia. My F-15Es and Tornadoes, with their long legs and good night vision, will rendezvous in the same zone, along with the E-8 and E-3, which will look for suspicious air and ground activity in the area. Four tankers are tasked to support.

It’s a lot of activity, but it goes well, and the operation is an unopposed diplomatic success (and I’m expected to operate against Eritrea now). However, it does delay the second strike on Socotra until the F-15Es and Tornados get back to lead the strike on their return trip. So the second strike begins shortly before dawn, which is later than I would have liked. On the up-side, as the planes cross the island from the SW they find another cluster of troops up in the mountains, which are added to the target list. The second strike finishes off the last of the known MANPADS with LGBs, and then works on the remaining targets. The little carriers are close enough to participate now, and the Harriers do a great job against the newly spotted troops in the mountains. Most effective are the Cobras, which do great execution against the main body of infantry with their death-ray 20mm cannons. By the end of the strikes only a modest number of troops remain around the port.

My minesweepers have been slowly closing in through the night, travelling along the coast from west to east, but they are appallingly slow. I’m sweeping at their 2 knot creep speed, sonars on. I suppose mines are most likely in the landing area, but I can’t trust that, and they could be anywhere along the coast. The coast is very long at 2 knots… The Jeanne d’Arc group is immediately behind them, impatient to do some NGFS. From the other side, I’ve detached most of the gunfire capable ships from the carriers and amphibs, and they’re being sent along the coast in single file from east to west. The Perry’s in the lead with its mine-hunting sonar blasting away, so they should be okay, right? Right?

The night was calmer in the Djibouti region, with cargo planes flying in full of troops, but one of the French Mirages doing a recce sweep found that the fast moving patrol boats from the Red Sea were transiting the Bab and heading towards Socotra. A Sea Harrier (with tanker support) made the long flight in from the Ark Royal to sink two of them with Sea Eagles, a Mirage with AS-30L got another one, and the American SSN used a Harpoon on the fourth. I think that’s all of them. The recce Mirage also spotted an AN-2 up in the Red Sea. I’m not sure what it was trying to accomplish in the dark, but it’s dead now.

I’ve ferried some helicopters up to Djibouti, including some Lynxes with good night vision equipment, and they had time do a little scouting before it became light. They found there were still some boats in docks in the Bab area, so the AS-30L Mirage blasted a pair of docks, and they can repeat this if more turn up.

**PLANS FOR DAY 2**

Airstrikes in Socotra are winding down, so I’m going to start shifting aircraft into Djibouti. The F-16s with HARM are already on the way, and I’ll send more as the day progresses.

The amphib landing will proceed on Socotra (barring minefield disasters) but I’m already behind schedule. I should have read my timelines more closely and planned better at the beginning. Slowing and consolidating into task groups was prudent, but took time my commander did not want me to spend! Pelilieu is expected to stay at Socotra, but I may try hurrying Ark Royal towards the Bab. The American SSN hasn’t found anything hidden en-route yet, but a Tango or Kilo shaped surprise may still be lurking about, so a high speed transit would be risky.

In Djibouti I need to find where the regiment went (the E-8’s on its way now), and see if there’s anything up near the Russian naval base in Eritrea to worry about. Recce Mirages will get to work there. At the same time I’ll start infiltrating recce teams onto the nearer islands by helicopter, and the more distant ones by parachute.

I know there’s still a couple more Mig-29s up in Sana’a, and probably some fighters in Eritrea, so we’ll do some more Mirage sweeps before converting most of the Mirages over to bombing. I’d like to get rid of the radars in the Sana’a and Ataq area too, and I may be able to sneak some TLAMs in through the mountains to do it. (I should have done that last night, under cover of darkness.)

If it looks like air defences are mostly down then it’ll be time to start working over the enemy in the Bab, before landings on Day 3.

Had a little time over the weekend, so here's the next installment.

**DAY 2**

Day 2 begins with the French recce Mirage zooming up the Red Sea to overfly the small islands where I need to set up observation posts. It turns out that a few of them have enemy OPs in place already, so the French attack helicopters set out to destroy the nearer ones, passing Mirages provide strafing support, and the Lancaster uses naval gunfire to destroy the one in the north. With the islands clear, Puma helicopters land some infantry sections on the nearest three observation objectives. The furthest islands are occupied shortly before dusk by a few of my valuable paratroops.

The Soviet naval base turns out to be poorly defended, with only a scattering of infantry and technicals visible on the island. I should be able to take it without too much difficulty, presumably by para-drop, provided I can spare some forces to deal with it. I expect the attack on the Bab will take most of my resources. Speaking of the Bab, the E-8 makes another pass, and it looks like the regiment has parked in a very dense concentration just east of the peninsula. It will take a lot of work to get rid of it, and the dense concentrations of what are presumably AAA emplacements along the shore won’t make things any easier.

Overhead the morning fighter sweep goes very well, and the six Mirages head north to tackle Sana’a. Four more Mig-29s come up to fight, but they’re spaced out enough that they can be tackled individually. While some Mirages are fleeing from enemy missiles, others can close in and make successful engagements. A dangerous surprise comes when enemy aircraft start appearing behind me, and I realise they are coming from the airbase on the Red Sea shore, which I had assumed was empty. This means they have an unobstructed path to the E-8 (which is only ~ 125 miles away over Eritrea), and if they go to burner I am on the wrong side to intercept them! My last Mirage scrambles from Djibouti, the E-8 turns off its radar and flees south, and the other Mirages turn to close in. Fortunately, the enemy (which turn out to be Mig-21s) join the general engagement, rather than chasing the E-8. They’re badly outclassed by the Mirages, and four of them die in short order. The Mirages then head home, where most of them will re-arm for air-to-ground missions.

Over in Socotra a few more Harrier strikes from the Pelilieu deal with the last of the enemy in the Port Mori area. There are still a few technicals dotted around the east cost, but I’m not overly concerned with them at the moment. The minesweepers continue closing in from the west, and the (now jobless) NGFS column closes in from the east, as minesweeping helicopters arrive from Thumrait. These start doing a very good job finding and sweeping mines in front of Port Mori. They will refuel on the Pelilieu, rather than flying back to base, so they should have some effective time on station. It looks like the minesweeping ships may have nothing to do.

My initial landings on Socotra come from the Marine AAVs, which reach the Port Mori and the airfield without opposition, and actually manage to capture some enemy flying boats and a fighter on the ground. (Apparently you can’t use heavy machine guns to engage a tarmac space, so you can’t actually destroy the aircraft in this situation. I simply deleted them when the runway was eventually repaired and they took off.) At first, with the opposition entirely gone, I don’t see any need to unload the main body of the marines. However, later in the day a column of communist rebel troops starts arriving to shoot up the airfield. My helicopters make swift work of them, but when they spot a second column a couple of hours later it becomes obvious that the fighting on the island won’t be over quickly. The marines deploy and set up defensive perimeters, while I go scouting (again) for an enemy headquarters or base area. Nothing turns up, and the marines continue to fend off enemy columns day and night.

The amphibs anchor off Port Mori, where they are joined by the remaining supply ships that continue to arrive over the course of the day. Most of the escorts are detached, and head west towards the Bab in two groups at very high speed, to support operations there. Once the Ark Royal has finished resupplying she picks up speed and heads that way too. My MPA are working on the corridor all these ships will be passing through, so hopefully there won’t be any submarine surprises en-route. Port Mori is left guarded by the Trenchant, providing distant ASW patrol, MPA in the general area, and the Lupo doing a close-in ASW patrol banging away on her active sonar. Shortly after she starts patrolling the Lupo meets a proximity-fused mine, which caves in some plating and knocks out some electrical connections, but fortunately the blast does not cause any flooding. The minesweepers hurry over, but find nothing else, and the chastened Lupo resumes patrolling until she is joined by a Knox later in the day.

The bulk of my air effort switches to the Perim Island and Bab al Mandeb area, where my forces start engaging ground troops. Priority goes to the pair of nearby SSM sites picked up by reconnaissance overflights, then air defences, and artillery. After that, it’s a matter of pounding away at ground troops again and again, and there are a lot of targets. The Thumrait Harriers move over to Djibouti, which should significantly improve their availability (provided the C-141 from Diego can keep up with the demand), but the Jaguars stay at Thumrait. Their ordnance is less capable, and I don’t think I have room for them as well.

Also in the Bab area, my minesweeping helicopters begin clearing more mines in the straits in the afternoon, gradually working their way towards Perim Island as its defences were reduced. There are still plenty of mines there, but none in the cleared channel yet. (I had feared more sub-laid mines in that area.)

**NIGHT 2**

One thing I want to do is get a clear path to bring in the Mirage’s cargo flights directly from Sheikh Isah to Djibouti, so I make an effort to knock down the SAM and surveillance radars of the two main Yemeni airbases at Sana’a and Ataq. With those down they probably won’t be able to spot or react to any overflights. I think I’ve already dealt with their fighters, since I’ve killed an even dozen of the Mig-29s out of Sana’a, and I doubt there’s more, and the Mig-21s and 23s don’t seem to be active any more.

The attack starts with TLAMs after dusk, which manage to knock down many of the radars and take chunks out of a few of the Yemeni SAM sites. The attack is hampered by numerous weapon failures. Evidently these TLAMs were carefully stored on a pile of mouldy rags under damp newspapers in an open seaside shack. Some follow-up attacks by night-vision Harriers do more damage to the SAM sites, and the attack at Sana’a presses on to bomb some Su-24s which were spotted in open tarmac spaces. That’s when the hidden SA-6 lights up, and, despite an immediate shower of HARMs, one of the fleeing Harriers is cut down before my missiles arrive. Despite that setback, I think the enemy is radar blind now, and I essentially have clear skies for operations over Yemen.

Up north in the Red Sea, the Lancaster turns and heads for the old Soviet base at high speed. Launching one if it’s night-vision equipped helicopters to act as a spotter, it proceeds to steam around the island, blasting enemy emplacements with gunfire. By the time its magazines are empty there are only a pair of isolated technicals left on the island, and the Lancaster hurries away at flank speed to hide in the darkness again. Once the Lancaster sends reports of the successful mission, two C-130s lift off from Djibouti, and arrive in the middle of the night to drop the bulk of my valuable paratroopers on the island. Milans are used to deal with the technicals, and the base facilities are occupied in short order.

Down at Perim Island, continuous air attacks eliminate the last of the defenders, and helicopters from Djibouti land enough infantry to seize the island. Two CH-53s have ferried in from Thumrait, and they begin hauling my 155mm and 105mm artillery batteries over to the island, where they will form a secure fire-base and help with the reduction of defences on the peninsula. Air attacks with night-capable units transition to the peninsula and regiment. The air attacks were using munitions at such a rate that I was down to using napalm, and even had some Harriers waiting on reserve with no munitions available until the C-141s arrived to make things right again.

**PLANS FOR DAY 3**

I think Socotra is secure, and I don’t expect any further developments there.

I need to work hard at clearing the peninsula and damaging the waiting regiment. There are so many targets there that I don’t know if I will be able to destroy them all. Therefore, I will try and clear the tip of the peninsula, and then land there immediately after dark on Night 3, when my night-vision advantage is greatest. My landing force will be armour heavy, screened with all my ATGMs inserted by helicopter, and backed up by artillery on Perim Island. Hopefully that will let me deal with the damaged regiment if/when it advances to engage while it is blind at night.

I’m also supposed to be striking Eritrea, so I will switch the efforts of my long-range strikers (F-15E, Tornado) to hit some of their bases. They’re staying radar silent with their SAMs for now, which may make it awkward to deal with them, and who knows what’s lurking deeper in Khartoum, etc.

We shall see!

A little more time to play, so another half day of progress.

**DAY 3**

When daylight comes the Marines continue to squash heavy rebel probes in Socotra, but the situation there is otherwise quiet, and the construction crews continue to work on the airbase.

Over in the Bab, heavy air activity happens all along the peninsula, where Harriers, Mirages, and Jaguars continue to smash away at the enemy, assisted by the buildup of artillery on Perim Island. I had thought the regiment would be too big to tackle, but sheer weight of bombing starts paying off, and they keep getting loads and loads of dumb ordnance dumped on them in such quantities that the defenceless units are gradually being strafed and battered into oblivion. With such good progress being made, the two ‘big’ French amphibs are ordered to get underway early, travelling through a minesweeper corridor, and heading towards Perim Island.

Shortly after this my Eritrea strike force (F-15Es, Tornados, and F-16s with HARMs) is just west of Sana’a, approaching the Red Sea coast, when a pair of bogeys with Slot Back radars are reported coming up out of Sana’a behind them. Uh-oh. Then more. And more. Soon there must be a dozen of them, all angry Mig-29s, along with some Fencers headed south, and even a pair of low altitude contacts coming out of Ataq! So much for my ‘clear skies over Yemen’.

Tankers and support aircraft turn to flee. Fighters are scrambled from the Ark Royal and Djibouti, the Mirage CAP goes to burner, and the American component of the Eritrea strike force wheels about to face the enemy. Fortunately, American forces with AMRAAM are essentially ‘self-escorting’, and although the Migs’ missiles out-range mine, mine are active and theirs are not. My twelve-missile salvo only gets two of the nimble Migs, and knocks pieces off two more, but it ruins most of their shots when they break away to beam the incoming missiles. The Americans turn to flee, and manage to outrun the few stern-chase shots launched at them. Now that I’m down to Sidewinders, an engagement with the Migs would be on less than equal footing – a bad thing. Fortunately, the Migs, having used their primary AAMs, break off to land and re-arm. That still leaves the Su-24s headed south, evidently towards my ships, and a pair of Fitters from Ataq headed for the same target. Fortunately, the Mirages manage to burner into range before the enemy can launch their missiles, and the four attack planes are shot down.

(I got lucky here. If the Americans hadn’t been passing through a few miles away then it would have been a dozen Migs vs two airborne Mirages (low on fuel) and three more on the ground in Djibouti, all with outranged semi-active missiles, plus some Sea Harriers on deck on the distant Ark Royal. The Russians would have had clear shots at tankers, helicopters, and transport Hercs, in addition to their actual targets. It would not have ended well.)

When the enemy Migs have landed the Eritrea attack force is ordered to change targets, and head back for Sana’a, hoping that there are no active fighters left on the base, and no more hidden SAMs. When they arrive there is no sign of any aircraft on the field at all, so the Migs must be hiding in the hangars, but which ones? The strike aircraft begin systematically bombing hangars with LGBs, even the hangars marked Civilian, and get a few secondaries, but there’s still uncertainty about what exactly is down there. Out of bombs, they head home. Eritrea will have to wait for the evening.

The focus of all this activity was evidently the first of my naval task groups, arriving (desperately short of fuel) to provide NGFS and SAM cover. They seem to have been spotted from the shore, prompting the launch of the air attack. When the ships do make it to the peninsula there’s actually not much left for them to do. They bombard the scattered shreds of a few infantry units, and some 57mm AAA guns, and settle down to wait. With the area clear, and the regiment dispersed, the landing proceeds ahead of schedule. By early-afternoon the peninsula is in NATO hands, and the French amphibs are on their way back to port. The second task group arrives a few hours later, and between the two groups I now have good SAM cover over my landing forces.

Although the Eritrea strike was spoiled by the Russian interference, there is some more discrete activity going on inland. Helicopters inserted some saboteur teams near the southern-most Eritrean airbase, while Hercs came sneaking in low and para-dropped a few teams (the last of my para-capable units) near the two airbases in the north. Creeping in, the southern teams blew up the control tower, fuel tanks, and ammo dump, and put a hole in the terminal, before sneaking out to be removed by helicopter again. The northern teams concentrated on the SAM sites first, destroying the SAM radars, before moving on to blow up the soft targets (towers and above-ground fuel) in their area. They will stay in the region for the moment, in case enemy aircraft forward base into these airfields, in which case they will go all Pebble Island on them. If nothing shows up then the CH-53s will fly in and extract them later.

Once the Eritrean SAMs are down, the French Mirages fly up from Djibouti (with tanker support) and finish the destruction of the AAA elements, and the Harriers are tasked to start destroying airport facilities and coastal infrastructure. The pod-equipped Tornado makes a dash inland to look at the last of the Eritrean airfields, but there doesn’t appear to be anything there (not even air defences). I’d like to take a peek into Khartoum, but that’s probably reaching a bit too far without support, so the exhausted crew flies home.

**PLANS FOR NIGHT 3**

I don’t expect major activity in the Bab or at Socotra. The Lancaster is heading south in the Red Sea, patrolling for subs, and I may move some MPA into the area (being careful to keep them away from shore-based AAA). My task groups will consolidate and begin to refuel in the Djibouti / Bab area. (The first of the oilers should make it there shortly before dawn.) The biggest activity will be strikes on Eritrean facilities, and possibly a little bit of cleanup of the Ataq and Sana’a air defences, where some damaged units still remain.

And now it’s done…

**NIGHT 3**

Strikes starting around dusk destroy most of the buildings at the two northern Eritrean airfields, as well as levelling the nearby port. Some mop-up attacks are also made to eliminate the damaged remains of the Yemeni SAMs. After that, with most target concentrations gone, the strikers are allowed to stand down. Munitions for the American Harriers are essentially exhausted in Djibouti, as are the pilots who have been making attacks night and day because of their night vision capabilities. Rest is welcome!

Militia fighting continues on Socotra, but extensive searches with FLIR-equipped helicopters don’t turn up any signs of headquarters or support elements or bivouac stations.

In the Bab area task group consolidation goes as planned. Minesweeping helicopters progress further north, finding a couple of mines off to one side, and the American SSN proceeds very cautiously through the straits into the Red Sea. MPA start patrolling the Red Sea, and the Lancaster continues to sweep south looking for subs. False contacts and fish pop up here and there, but midway through the night the SSN (creeping very cautiously at 2 knots) gets a direct path contact to something slow and quiet at reasonably close range. As the solution improves it becomes clear that the crossing contact is close enough that a shot from us would get a speculative shot in return, at a range we can’t dodge. The SSN quietly turns to an opposite course to try and work around into the enemy’s baffles, but, in the meantime, it radios a nearby Atlantique. That turns out to be a much safer solution, and the Atlantique quickly pinpoints the enemy between two active buoys, and sinks it.

Towards dawn there’s a bit more excitement, when one of the EP-3s up north gets a whiff of fighter radars near the north end of the Red Sea. A pair of Sea Harriers from the Ark Royal head north in the dark (with a tanker and then a pair of Mirages in support), eventually homing in on a Mig-21 which is doing something over the Saudi shore. As they approach they also start getting indications of a helicopter radar in the same area. Is this some sort of insertion activity with fighter cover, or perhaps a naval helicopter searching for targets along the Saudi shore?

The Mig-21 gets intercepted and shot down as it returns to its base at Port Sudan, but each time the Harriers turn east to try and deal with the helicopter another Mig-21 pops up behind them in the west. Several more Migs get shot down this way (the Harriers having a huge missile range advantage), until there are no more ready fighters, and the Harriers can finally deal with the helicopter. There’s a little nervousness that the helicopter might be operating from a frigate or the like, which might have SAMs, so the approach is made discretely, radar off, relying on ESM. It’s surprisingly hard to localize the helicopter off the flickering ESM contact, and several (presumably) close flybys in the dark still don’t ID it. Eventually the Harriers stand off and engage it as a radar target, and that is the end of that.

Back on deck, the Harrier pilots don’t get the happy reception they were hoping for. They’re directed to go immediately into closed door conference with the captain and other officers, and the discussion is tense. It seems the Saudis are reporting the loss of one of their coast-guard helicopters, in an area where NATO and WP aircraft were both present. Can the pilots shed any light on the situation?

And on that somewhat sobering note, the next day dawns and the scenario comes to an end.

**SCENARIO THOUGHTS**

This is an interesting scenario, with plenty of things to do. I wasn’t sure how much I’d like all the cargo shuffling, but it wasn’t as painful as I had feared. I think I could have done better by studying my timeline requirements more carefully at the beginning, but all in all it worked out reasonably well.

The mission to escort the dignitaries to the peace talks was unusual and interesting, especially when all the contingencies for failure and the different fallback plans were spelled out. Covering those possibilities turned a simple escort mission into something more detailed and thought provoking. (Even though nothing bad happened.)

I really liked the regiment (++) coming down the coast. When I spotted it with the E-8 the long thin line of contacts snaking down the coast put me in mind of the Iraqi troop movements in Desert Storm, which were also detected by E-8s. Very thematic!

The endless stream of rebel militia from western Socotra may be a little questionable. By dusk on day three I had killed 1444 7.62mm infantry sections, which works out to 361 militia groups, of which somewhere over 300 would have been militia on Socotra. Looking at satellite pictures it seems like there’s almost nothing in the way of cover on that end of the island, and nowhere for this heavy concentration of manpower to hide. I could see this sort of situation being a problem with militia hidden in densely populated urban areas, or well-established troop concentrations under heavy tree cover, but maybe not so much here, on an exposed mostly empty desert island? (But then again, isn’t that what air power planners always say?) At this point I simply went into the editor and turned the event off. Perhaps having a number of formations (maybe with an ancient SA-7 or two) appearing from different directions at different times, rather than a ceaseless spawn walking down the same route into the grinder, would seem less artificial?

***Note: this has been changed***

I found my two-seater, pod-equipped, strike aircraft to be particularly useful as long duration FACs. The Tornado with its extreme loiter time was particularly useful in this regard, spending hours loitering over the regiment, and designating one target after another for Harriers with LGBs and Laser Mavericks.

Friendly fire! How embarrassing. Preconceptions shaped my actions, and it never occurred to me that there would be Saudi helicopters that I wouldn’t be aware of. A very realistic outcome however, when I decided to shoot an unidentified target.