**Mediterranean Fury #5 – Serbia Right!**

**Playtest Report by AndrewJ July 2019**

War has come to the Adriatic, in a gradual way, and I've been tasked to oversee operations in the area. Although there has been little activity for the previous few days, indications are that this will change. Significant concentrations of Warpac aircraft are reported in Hungarian and Czech airbases, and it's unlikely they'll remain inactive much longer. It also looks like the enemy has started to mine the entrances to Split, on the Croatian coast, as well as undertaking sabotage operations in Italy itself, by means of seaborne smuggling and infiltration.

I've been given a flotilla of minesweepers and tasked with clearing and re-opening the approaches to Split, removing a mine-damaged ship, and escorting in four more cargo ships with military supplies. My chiefs also want me to undertake strikes against the Warpac airfields, and evaluate the possibility of strikes against potentially hostile naval forces based on the Balkan coast.

**Forces**

My naval forces are spread out, from the Garibaldi group approaching the heel of Italy in the south, through a range of frigates and destroyers scattered along the length of the Adriatic nearly as far north as Venice. None of the ships are exceptionally powerful, but the Italian ones do have long range Otomat missiles, whose 100 nm range should give me a comfortable advantage over the enemy ships. Although NATO made the case for deploying the Garibaldi to the eastern Med, the Italians have decided it will stay in home waters, and its aircraft may be helpful against lesser foes in the south. Four Sparviero hydrofoils give me a welcome strength boost in that area too.

My fighter aircraft are in reasonable strength, including F-16s with AMRAAM up in Aviano, a pack of Tornado ADVs in southern Italy, and smaller numbers of Spanish and French aircraft to back them up. I also have a large number of aging F-104s, which may be obsolescent, but I think the combination of their high-speed dash and decent SARH missiles (Aspides) may make them useful against lesser foes.

I have a surprising number of attack planes, including swarms of Tornado IDS in northern Italy, and numerous G.91 light attack planes, as well as some F-15Es and A-10s. I should have no troubles mustering large numbers of bombers, provided I can keep the enemy (and any saboteurs) away from them.

**The Plan**

Initial steps call for force consolidation and reconnaissance.

Most of the ships in the Adriatic will converge to cover the minesweepers and cargo vessels approaching Split, while helicopters hurry to put liaison teams on the civilian ships. The Garibaldi group will tighten up and head north, picking up their oiler en-route, before cautiously entering the strait between Italy and Albania. This would be a great place for an enemy sub to lurk, which is why one of mine will lurk there too, teaming up with an Atlantique, and hoping to out-ambush the ambushers.

My other sub will close on the naval base at Kotor, to keep an eye on the area and hopefully forestall any enemy concentrations putting to sea. I'm also ordering a French Mirage with recce pods to make a dash down the coast to see what's in the base, and the Sparviero hydrofoils, on the other side of the Adriatic, are being put on alert to handle emerging threats.

This takes most of my ships away from anti-smuggling duty, other than the northern-most one near Venice. It's being assigned patrol duties there, where I hope fighter cover from local airbases can keep it safe. For the rest of my coast, I'm relying on good airborne radar coverage and air attack to deal with any small-boat incursions. (Edit: which may not help much if they're infiltrating by sub.)

My air-forces are ordered to push CAP further east into the former Yugoslavia, to cover UN forces there, and to see what response we can provoke from the Warpac forces in Hungary. Hopefully we can begin attriting enemy patrols in the area.

While this is ongoing, planning will commence for a dusk attack on the two western-most Hungarian airbases. The initial concept is for a powerful HARM barrage from the Tornadoes, followed by low-level Tornado strikes dashing in to sever runway access points and ruin SAM sites with their cluster munitions, leaving the way open for the F-15Es to shut the runways with heavy LGBs. No doubt plans will change, depending on what we find earlier in the day.

So, time to press 'Play'!

*(All through my impressionable late-Cold War youth, you couldn't open an aviation book without seeing spectacular pictures of the Tornado spewing submunitions out of its enormous MW-1 dispenser.)*



*These planes, we were told, would swoop in at ultra-low level and savage enemy ground forces and runways in an unstoppable hailstorm of bomblets. Finally, I have my chance to try it out. My prediction? Disaster... If I'm up against MANPADS and the Soviet low-level air-defence net the casualties will be ruinous. But I can't resist. I have to try!*

Finally, some more time to actually play!

**First Afternoon**

As the scenario gets underway my planes and helicopters rush about to get a good picture of the naval situation, getting eyes on the large number of fishing boats and occasional cargo ships that are in the Adriatic. Liaison teams get dropped off on the four cargo ships headed for Split, and once communications are established the captains are instructed to form up into a northern and southern pair, while warship escorts hurry to meet up with them. My tugboat and the minesweepers also get escorts (although the feeble St. Laurent, which is escorting the sweepers, is essentially helpless against anything fiercer than a rowboat) as they head east towards the minefields near Split.

My recce Mirage flies down from Aviano and makes a close flyby of the Kotor naval base to get a count of the vessels in port. There's a sub and about 17 ships in the harbour, including a Koni, plus another Koni frigate patrolling nearby. The most modern adversaries are the pair of Koni frigates, which have effective SAM defences, but the remaining missile boats and minor patrol craft are a lesser concern. The sub could be a real problem, but it's out of reach for the moment. As the Mirage turns for home it finds another enemy patrol boat further north along the coast, headed into my waters. It's not a powerful ship, but it's worth keeping an eye on. I am tempted to hit the base, even though the Serbs aren't actively hostile yet, but I would have to use my G.91 light attack planes, and I'm not sure they have the punch to wreck the docks. They'd also be facing three SAM sites plus the ship-based SAMs, so it might not end well for relatively basic planes, and I set the idea aside.

The Garibaldi's planes might be able to contribute later on, but for the moment the Garibaldi group is well south of the region. It's headed north, but slower than I'd like because the oiler Stromboli has joined the group. I'd like to move faster, but I really don't think it's safe to leave the oiler behind, so I'm reluctantly accepting the slow pace. To avoid friction with Albania, I'm setting a course for the west side of the straits, and the group should be passing Otranto and Brindisi this evening.

**Air Skirmishing**

At first I keep things calm in the air, while I concentrate on reconnaissance and consolidation, and I start the process of bringing some of the more distant F-104s from Cameri to Rivolto, to improve their reaction time.

After a couple of hours my CAP pushes up towards the Hungarian border, detecting the usual array of Soviet jammers operating in Hungary, and an AN-71 Madcap AEW plane (known to fly by pure force of ugliness), which is flying a route between Hungary and Serbia which brings it temptingly close to my border where those two countries meet. My initial probes towards it are uncoordinated, and I soon have a few MiG-29s and a swarm of MiG-21s crossing the border to engage me. My missile range advantage pays off, and I take no casualties before I withdraw, but I don't get anywhere near the Madcap.

My second sweep is more carefully concentrated and manages to kill the Madcap and a number of jammers and ELINT planes too. The Mig-21s and Mig-29 trainers out of Kekskemet try and interfere, but they are outranged, and fortunately the better enemy planes seem to be grounded for the moment. (Two of them try and chase my jammer across the Adriatic, and get jumped by F-104s, but that is all.) The SA-5 wants to play too, lobbing missiles my way, but the range is great enough that I can dive below their radar long before the missiles arrive.

The most significant result of these exchanges is that some Serbian MiGs came to join the fight, and got shot down for their troubles, so it appears that the Serbs consider me hostile. Fair enough...

**Naval Engagement**

In addition to their attempted intercept, I'm also getting intelligence briefings of MiG-23s concealed in Kralijevo, and troop movements near the Bosnian border, and then my southern AWACS starts reporting that six enemy ships are making a sortie from Kotor. Both the Serbian Konis are at sea now, but they're still well out of their missile range with their short-ranged Styxes, while my 100 nm Otomats can reach all the way across the Adriatic. It's the perfect time to strike!

My four Sparviero hydrofoils come dashing out of Brindisi, and they combine their fire with the two other Italian ships in the southern Adriatic, to send 10 missiles towards each of the Konis. The Konis' SAMs are quite effective, and they knock down many of my missiles, but a few manage to get through, sinking both frigates and a couple more of the nearby patrol craft. This leaves me empty of missiles, but also leaves the Serbs without any SAM cover for their ships at sea, so it's safe to send the Italian attack planes now, and they swoop in and sink the exposed targets.

As usual, my sub is a few miles out of place to engage, but it keeps closing on Kotor, hoping to get a shot at one of the remaining ships, or maybe their sub, if it has put to sea. Meanwhile the high-spirited Sparvieros wheel about and dash back into Brindisi harbour, where the dockworkers leap to reload the ships with fresh missile canisters. This is fortunate, since its not long before three more ships emerge from Kotor, and one of them's another Koni! The reloaded hydrofoils dash out and unleash a second missile salvo, which manages to sink the little fleet. That's three Konis so far. Hopefully they don't have a fourth.

**Upcoming**

Reviewing the intelligence information about increased Serbian activity, it's plain that something's coming soon. High command is even advising me to reconsider my strike plans for tonight. For the moment we'll keep loading for the airfield attacks. Its late afternoon now, and this may be wishful thinking, but my hope is that the enemy won't make significant moves before dawn. They're not as well equipped for night fighting as I am, and I think they'd want to maximize the effectiveness of their strike planes, and possibly take advantage of another night of sabotage. (I wish I had some airfield security troops.) Although if they make a big ground push tonight, many of my own light strike planes are effectively daylight only, so there's little I can do to engage them until tomorrow. They could go a long way against disorganized UN troops.

We shall see...

Well, my hope was that the enemy wouldn't make big moves before morning, to deny me by advantages in night-fighting, but it doesn't look like they feel the same way...

**First Evening - First Wave**

Things still looked calm after my successful second fighter strike on their AEW and support planes, and my planes withdrew to reload, while another pair of Tornadoes moved into the area to provide cover for UNPROFOR. Another jammer AN-12 was temptingly near the border as they arrived, and my pilots were able to dart into Serbia to knock it down. My AWACS started reporting enemy fighters scrambling nearby, which seemed like a reasonable response to my provocation, but then there were more and more contacts, first at multiple airbases in Serbia, and then at airbases in Hungary.

Looking around, I realised I had left myself with exactly two (2) Tornado ADVs in the region, with partially exhausted missile loads, and the enemy horde was growing by the moment. The order was given to start scrambling aircraft in response, but the question was how many to launch, since it wasn't certain how big the attack would be. This caused a somewhat drawn-out launch process, rather than one single scramble, which had the largest effect in the south where my transit times were greatest. In the meantime the pair of Tornadoes did what they could, darting into a pack of light attack planes that were forming up and knocking down four of them with Sidewinders, before running for their lives from the growing swarm of fighters.

The attack in the south was composed of swarms of lesser fighters and attack planes making a two-pronged attack. Dense packs of light attack planes closed in on the UNPROFOR facilities at Sarajevo, while a longer stream of bomb-laden MiG-21s headed for the UNPROFOR logistics base near Split. A few flights of MiG-29s preceded the planes headed for Split, and a dense screen of MiG-21s and 29s guarded the southern flank of the Sarajevo attack. Tornadoes and F-104s came rushing across the Adriatic on afterburner in an attempt to head them off, but the enemy started much closer to their targets than I did, and UNPROFOR forces at Sarajevo soon came under heavy bombardment by the light attack aircraft. My Tornadoes attempted to clear the way through the fighter screen with their Sky Flash SARH missiles to get to the attack, but their success rate was feeble, and many missiles passed blindly by their targets. (Recent changes to the behaviour of SARH missiles, which now seem to do lag pursuit end games, make it very difficult to achieve hits.) I couldn't get through enemy fighter screen to engage, and had to abandon any attempts to protect the forces in Sarajevo, which suffered repeated hits on the tent-sites and some damage to observation posts.

My planes did better against the Split attack, managing to kill the leading MiG-29s (not before one overflew Split and shot down a naval helicopter) and draw more fighters away to the north. (Let's pretend that was deliberate, not the by-product of fleeing desperately on afterburner.) This left the MiG-21 bombers relatively exposed, but even so, the enemy fighters mixed in with the pack kept interfering and preventing me from lining up for clean shots or cannon fire. It took a lot of desperate dogfighting, and the last-minute arrival of late-launched F-104s and Tornadoes, to shoot down or drive back the attackers. In the end, none of them made it to Split.

The attack in the north, from Hungary, was entirely composed of high-grade fighters (Mig-29s and Su-27s), and they seemed to be headed for Aviano. Most of my AMRAAM-bearing F-16s hurried to meet them, with some F-104s in support, and a fierce combat erupted. The enemy's long-range missiles actually outrange my AMRAAMs, but fortunately they weren't firing at extreme range (MiG-29s have feeble radars, and I think the EC-130 jamming behind me hampered the Su-27s). As a result we opened fire at about the same time, and my AMRAAMs seemed able to stymie their SARH missile shots, by forcing them to turn and break lock. Nonetheless, my hit rate was low against the nimble and well defended fighters, and before long I was falling back under the pressure until I could gradually attrite the attackers. I lost several F-104s here, when they closed in, but my F-16s (and a couple of F-18s) all managed to stay BVR, and only a few of the enemy managed to return home.

I'm not certain if this was actually an "attack", per se, since no bombers or attack planes made an appearance (unless there were some PGMs on the MiGs which never got launched). Perhaps it was more of a fighter sweep intended to keep my best planes pinned in the north? If so, it certainly worked. AMRAAMs would have made a merry massacre down south, but they were all defending Aviano instead.

**Brief Interlude**

While the tail end of the first attacks were still being fought off, AWACS began reporting additional contacts forming up over enemy airbases. So far, it looks like another set of 18 or so Su-27s and MiG-29s plus a few MiG-21s coming through Hungary in the north, and I'm seeing large numbers of MiG-23s (at least 14) forming up in Serbia, and hints of other radar emissions further away in enemy territory. ELINT also reports that the enemy has replaced their jammer losses, and another AEW Madcap is up, so they will have eyes on the fight once more.

What are the enemy's actual objectives?

The northern forces look like more modern fighters, for the moment, so I suspect that's another pin. There may be attack planes coming too, but so far I haven't seen any there. UNPROFOR HQ, in Zagreb, is very close, however, and if a ground attack comes from the north it may well go there. The southern force is showing two variants of the MiG-23, and I suspect the old ones will be toting bombs, so I smell a strike brewing there. They may try and hit the two southern UNPROFOR facilities again, and there is the possibility that they will have a go at the shipping steaming towards Split. Thanks to the fishing boat navy, they definitely know I'm there.

How am I to deal with this?

I didn't launch all my fighters against the first attacks. Instead, I tried to keep a reserve of about a third of my good planes on the ground, none of the Mirages participated, and a couple of F-104 squadrons remained completely at ready. Now I have no choice but to use them.

Orders have gone out to launch all remaining fighters from Aviano, to deal with the enemy coming through Hungary. Half my Mirages, and the remaining F-104s forward-based to Rivolto will participate, and the EF-111s are launching to assist. This will still leave me with a worse force-ratio than for the first fight. None of my airborne F-16s will have the time to do a quick turnaround before the enemy arrives in the north. Instead, two thirds of them will head south-east to guard Zagreb. They only have Sidewinders left, but that may be enough to severely damage any attack planes headed there. The remaining F-16s are burner-dashing for Aviano to begin reloading, as are the F-104s headed back to Rivolto. (I'm also considering flying ready AWACS, ELINT, and tankers from Aviano back to bases in western Italy, to get the vulnerable planes a bit further from the fight.)

In central Italy, I'm emptying a complete F-104 base (Grosetto), with half heading for Zagreb, and half for Split. In southern Italy the last of the Tornados and F-104s are lifting off to head for Split, passing planes which are hurrying back from the southern fight.

What does this leave me?

Well, the cupboard is essentially bare now. I've still got a full squadron of ready F-104s and a few Mirages at Cervia-Pisignano at the north end of the Adriatic, but that's about it. I'll have some F-16s reloaded with AMRAAM at Aviano in about 45 minutes and some replenished F-104s shortly afterwards. My southern fighters should be home and reloaded within an hour. If the second wave resolves quickly, I might have my Zagreb-bound F-16s home and reloaded in an hour and a half. Will this be enough? We shall see...

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Wild Weasel Foxbats over Hungary! Something big's definitely coming....

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A long weekend means plenty of time for Command, so...

**First Evening - Second Wave**

I though the first wave was bad? It was nothing compared to the storm that broke over me next.

The attack in the north comes first, and we get initial indications from our ELINT planes, which report four MiG-25 Wild Weasels, climbing to altitude far to the east in Hungary. If specialists like that are up, then something's going to happen. Packs of MiG-21s and MiG-23s start assembling in western Hungary shortly afterwards, and we start scrambling fighters in response.

I'd love to hit the gathering fighters, but the Pact has MiG-29s and Su-27s coming in through Slovenia in a screen. My last engagement with those was very costly in terms of good missiles, and I can't afford to repeat that, so I have to try something different. I've got a large number of jammers up, and I find that a 'jam-and-run' tactic, combining fighter feints with intermittent jammer operation behind, works very well. The Pact fighters use up their long-range missiles in ineffective shots, and then turn home to reload instead of closing to engage with heat-seekers. I get no kills on them, and they push me back all the way across Slovenia, but once they're gone I have a clear field for a few precious moments.

The swarm breaks and heads my way at 5:49, in the local dusk, and my planes advance to meet them. There's at least a dozen MiG-21s, something like eighteen MiG-23s, and two flights of Fitters coming in low ahead of them. A ferocious fight breaks out near Zagreb, where my F-16s (who had used up their AMRAAMs in the first wave) pile into the MiG-21s, and ruthlessly exploit their frontal-aspect missile advantage. F-104s and F-18s hammer the rest, picking off the leading Su-22s before piling into the fight. Other than the Su-22s, none of the enemy are bombers - all are fighters, but they are badly outclassed by my missile advantages and my pilots claim numerous kills.

But amid the celebration we see more planes launching out of Taszar (probably the real attack), and even more MiG-29s and Su-27s come pouring in, and I don't have the time or space to do the ECM dance again. I've got two flights of F-16 AMRAAM up and one flight of F-15E AMRAAM, my only active missiles until planes reload, and I have to commit them now, to drive back the modern Russian planes. As this happens AWACS reports long streams of aircraft approaching through Hungary, ten, twenty, thirty, forty, and the number keeps growing! I have one reserve fighter base left, at Cervia Pisignano, and all the F-104s there scramble and head for the fight. At Aviano, I start evacuating AWACS and EC-130s and A-6s, sending them west to get them out of the fight. Everything is up. This is going to be close.

The first stream turns out to be MiG-27s, flanked a few minutes later by a stream of Su-24s, and then AWACS reports a third stream of MiG-27s just behind them. My planes fight desperately, gradually giving way as they tear up the incoming river of planes, but we have radar contacts on more angry Flankers, coming in supersonic from Zvolen, and time is limited. We're not even trying to kill things now. If one missile hit is enough to turn a plane for home my pilots let it go, hurrying to the next target. It's 6:30 over central Slovenia now, and suddenly reinforcements arrive. The very first of the quick turnarounds are here from Aviano and Rivolto, and they pitch into the fight at the critical moment, pinning down and driving off the newly arrived Su-27s, so the rest of my pilots can concentrate on the attackers. By 6:45 it's largely over, and my pilots stare at the amazing 75 mile long path, dotted with flaming wreckage from the Hungarian border to central Slovenia.

The attack in the south begins with MiG-23s forming up in Serbia, giving me a chance to get fighters into the area, but my forces here are a lot more limited than in the north. It's just Tornadoes and F-104s, and the F-104s are getting fuel-limited by the time they reach the conflict zone.

The attack opens up with a stream of a dozen MiG-23s passing south of Sarajevo and headed for Split, another stream of MiG-21s and multiple packs of Oraos headed for Sarajevo itself, and a healthy cloud of twenty or more MiG-23s providing fighter cover, with occasional flights of MiG-29s hurrying in from Belgrade.

My pilots manage to destroy the fighters nearest the southern MiG-23s, and then roll up the line from front to back, and none of them make it through to Split. Unfortunately, the attempt to defend Sarajevo goes poorly. My planes come dashing in to hammer the MiG-21s and Oraos as they line up for bomb runs, and they do manage to get a number of them around 6:10, but this brings them too close to the foe. These MiG-23s have AA-11s, and once I'm in Archer range the tables are turned. My few survivors evade to the north-west, fleeing on burner, and fortunately drawing a pack of MiG-23s away in pursuit, but the writing is on the wall. Once again the UNPROFOR facilities at Sarajevo are abandoned to the enemy, who pummels them until the last of their planes turns for home around 6:40. Firefighters and trauma teams rush through the wreckage, assessing the losses. Several buildings are rubble, a few more are damaged, and the HQ compound has taken multiple hits. A number of the tent-sites have been flattened, and in the light of the flaming diesel tanks they can see that one FOB has been hit, and the other is completely gone.

As my defenders were heavily engaged in the Sarajevo area, and falling back once their missiles were exhausted, they spotted yet another attack, this time of MiG-21s coming in from Romania. These weren't headed for Sarajevo - they were headed for Split, from a direction where I had nothing in defense, and it wasn't clear what (if anything) could be sent to stop them. It was a combination of late-arriving F-104s from Grosetto, and the first re-armed Tornadoes, hurtling across the Adriatic on burner, that managed to intercept what turned out to be a twenty-four plane attack. Most of them were shot down before reaching Split, but a few managed to damage the northern communications outpost before being driven off. (This would not have worked out so well if all those MiG-23s hadn't been busy chasing my survivors away from Sarajevo.)

**First Evening - Operations at Sea**

While the conflict overhead rages to and fro, operations continue at sea. Two more missile boats have sortied from Kotor, zooming past my sub just out of reach of its torps, so my last four G.91s make a raid, but they only manage to inflict superficial damage, and they hurry home to land in the gathering darkness. Meanwhile the missile boats turn and head north, towards my forces approaching Split.

Most of these have gathered into a mini task-group, for fear of anti-shipping attacks from the swarms of enemy aircraft, and after dark they come into range of the closing missile boats. Two Harpoons are launched at each, coming out of the darkness and smashing the almost defenceless ships. One spare Harpoon continues off into the night, and now I know how Andrea G sank his fishing boat!

Once the air threat has died down my Chinook hurries in at wavetop height to drop off the Carabinieri on the Hansa Carrier and adjacent islands. An Atlantique begins patrolling the approaches to Split, and it finds and sinks an SS a few miles south west of our crippled freighter, which is a great relief. My freighters and warships should all be concentrated here within a couple of hours, and I can do without sharing my haven with a sub.

My minesweepers are already in the region and I have assigned two minesweepers to each of the three outer channels. They should be reaching their patrol zones in an hour or so, and we'll see how well they work against modern mines. Hopefully they can find a way through.

Looking at my other ships, I realize I've left my most modern ship (the Emden) with the best air defenses all alone up near Venice, patrolling for smugglers and sub incursions. I could really use it down with the others, but it's six hours away at flank speed, and I'm not sure it's worth the risk to move it so hastily. Meanwhile, far to the south the Garibaldi continues to head north. It's done nothing so far, and I suspect it will arrive too late to contribute meaningfully. I'll be glad to drop off the Stromboli in Brindisi and get on with operations.

**First Night - Continued Air Operations**

The major attacks seem to be over, for now, but there's plenty of air activity ongoing.

I'm constantly skirmishing with Flankers and Fulcrums in Slovenia, and Fulcrums probing from Belgrade towards Split. I've got jammers up in both areas, to allow me to do the 'ECM runaway', which has been crucial to my success so far. Unfortunately, the problem with that tactic is that the enemy just comes back in a few hours with new missiles, so it's not particularly decisive in itself. I try to knock off the tail end Charlie of the retreating planes from each wave, but you have to be really careful, or they tend to whip around to beam your missile and you suddenly find yourself head-to-head with an Archer...

One startling twist on this tactic happened shortly after the main raids, when another four MiG-25 Wild Weasels flew in, making me wonder if something else was in the works. There were a dozen good enemy fighters in advance of them, so I was desperately doing the jam-and-run, and having decent success, when all of a sudden long range missiles were inbound, without radar emissions. The Su-27s out of Zvolen were lobbing Alamo-Bs at me! My pilots managed to dodge most of that, and get the MiG-25s too, but the Su-27s remain frustratingly elusive.

At 19:52 AWACS started reporting another stream of planes coming through Hungary, moving rather slowly, but on-course for the Maribor airfield in eastern Slovenia. Possibly some sort of level bombing attack with obscure old-generation aircraft? (Beagles??) There seemed to be plenty of enemy fighters accumulating in the area too, which raised suspicions all around. A counter-raid was launched, taking plenty of ECM and AMRAAMs, which drove away the first fighters, before engaging the second set. Good Su-27 kills, at last! Then, as we closed on the border an SA-10 opened up on us from near Lake Balaton. Everyone dove for the deck to dodge, and managed to get away with it, but the SA-10 is one more thing to take into account for tonight's attack.

And those slow-moving attackers? An-26s! This was either a coup-de-main / unopposed landing, or a night paradrop attempt (seems risky). In either case, F-104s were plenty to deal with the cargo planes and make their escape before the next set of Su-27s came in from Zvolen.

In the aftermath of this confusion a flight of F-16s, shadowed by an EF-111, headed east to the triple border corner of Croatia, Hungary, and Serbia. With nobody around they pounced on the passing Madcap, before running hard for home with angry MiGs launching in pursuit. This is the second AEW plane of theirs I've knocked down. Hopefully they don't have a third.

**Next steps and considerations**

I have two main items upcoming. I need to hit the enemy airbases, and I need to defend my ships while trying to clear the minefields towards Split.

The airbase attack will probably go reasonably well at first. I have plenty of HARMs and jammers, and I'm aware of the SA-10. (Well, at least one of them. There may well be more.) The Tornadoes with anti-runway bomblets may be a disaster, but I think my F-15Es should be able to mess up the runways with BLU-109s. I can also muster a very credible CAP with good missiles for at least one strike.

I am more worried about the ships near Split. The Pact is pressing hard with fighter sweeps into this area, and I'm running out of planes to fend them off. Playing the ECM-runaway game means they just keep coming back! I don't want to let them in to see me, but it's getting more difficult to muster a CAP at this distance to prevent that. There's six MiG-29s coming in towards Split right now, and all I have there is one flight of Tornadoes. In a few hours I'll have more Tornadoes ready, but even so I'm concerned that I'll get jumped before I can react in strength. (Especially now that I'm sending minesweepers to three different straits at once.) I wish I could refuel F-104s, but that's not an option, and I may need to send some American planes south.

My AMRAAM stocks are also cause for concern. I've used 130 so far. I've got 80 on planes right now, but only 20 left in the magazines. (And once I reload planes coming home from killing the AEW, I'll only have 14.) So my ability to push back MiG-29s and Su-27s will go away after one or two more efforts. I haven't been wasting them on minor targets either, but the odds vs. a nimble modern fighter are low, so it takes a lot to accomplish a little.

It's now 20:50 Local. What's coming next?

Time for another update, I think.

**First Night – skirmishing continues**

As the night deepens, skirmishing continues in the north and the south, as the Soviets keep trying to force air superiority over Slovenia, and the Sarajevo/Split area. Is there no end to the Su-27s coming out of Zvolen? Or the interfering MiG-29s from Belgrade? I keep fending them off, foiling their missile shots, and picking off their tail-end-Charlies, but I’m rapidly using up my ready planes, which are now going into their three-hour recycle phase. Aspides are running low too, and it’s only 7 hours into the fight! Down south, my returning F-104s sometimes have to dump Aspides to lighten their loads enough to get back home, which definitely doesn’t help.

It turns out the Soviets do have a third AEW plane, so another pair of F-18s and an EF-111 are sent out to intercept it, killing it and an AN-12 jammer in the traditional location. Just in time too, since I really didn’t want it up during my attack.

**First night – Airfield Attack**

Our first major attack is a strike on the two forward airbases in Hungary, Heviz-Balaton and Taszar. The plan is for an initial fighter screen to clear the way by 23:00 local, followed by a wave of Tornadoes with HARM at high altitude, to knock off enemy SAM defences. Then the low-level Tornadoes go in, using MW-1 bomblet dispensers to attack the (hopefully) radar-less SAM sites, while those with the anti-runway version hit the airfield directly. Some night-vision AMXs and F-16s with IR Maverick are part of the attack to deal with any mobile pop-up targets, and I also have F-15Es with BLU-109 LGBs, to tackle the runways in case the Tornadoes fail. Jammers and tankers form the support cadre.

The attack goes much more smoothly than I had feared. The lone SA-10 gets knocked down quickly, along with the radars on SA-5s and surveillance sites, and the local SAM radars don’t illuminate at first. The Tornadoes turn out to be murderous against the SAM sites, and most of the first line of SAMs are gone within moments. The Hungarian bases don’t have the heavy low-level defences of a military formation, and the Tornadoes attacking there rapidly sever the runways, while others dump cluster munitions all over the open parking (which turns out to be empty at Heviz-Balaton, but full of MiG-21s and Su-22s at Taszar). There’s some commotion as a pair of MiG-29s tries to land in the midst of the approaching strike, but AWACS directs my attackers to stay clear while the fighters are shot down. There are no losses to ground fire, until a flight of Tornadoes decides to make a second pass, and one gets shot down by the now-alerted 57mm gunners.

The strike is out shortly before midnight, flying home through Slovenia without significant pursuit. As the strike heads for home, many of the planes still have some unexpended ordnance, particularly HARMs, all the F-15s with LGBs, and many of the Tornadoes with MW-1s. Those MW-1s are extremely heavy and draggy, and it takes some hasty juggling of tankers to keep the Tornadoes in the air until they can all land in sequence.

As staff assess the strike, it’s clear they could have been more ambitious, tackling the second line of SAMs and airfields, and still have had good chances of success. On the other hand, that might have triggered interceptors from bases further away, so perhaps it’s best to take it in stages. (As a player, I was really tempted to muster my airborne planes which still had ordnance, and make an impromptu attack. In reality, I doubt an ‘on-the-fly’ change of that scale could be accomplished, particularly for attack pilots who wouldn’t have a detailed attack plan or target briefing, so I managed to avoid the temptation.)

**First Night – Further Air Operations**

Enemy air activity is dropping perceptibly by now, with longer gaps between flights of fighters coming to challenge my patrols. There’s a brief pulse of activity around 01:30, when a few attack planes followed by some MiG-25 recce planes make a probe in the north, but that is dealt with without many problems. Then it’s quiet in the north, and a little later, quiet in the south. The enemy patrols have finally stopped. Is the enemy finally exhausted?

In the pause that follows, a flight of Tornadoes darts into Serbia to pick off the Cub jammer loitering there, prompting an immediate and angry response from MiG-29s out of Belgrade and MiG-23s from Timisoara. It seems the enemy’s not finished quite yet, and my chastened planes scuttle away to safety.

**First Night – Naval Operations**

Naval operations continued throughout the night. After some discussion, the Emden, which was patrolling near Venice, was ordered to head south at flank speed, to meet up with the ships headed for Split. I wanted her excellent close-range air defense systems present to cover the cargo ships when they finally head for the port. In the meantime, the cargo ships are gradually arriving and anchoring at their form-up point near the islands. Their escorts are patrolling around banging away on their active sonars, and an Atlantique is flying about dropping sonobuoys, but so far, the anchorage appears empty of additional lurking submarines.

Smuggling and infiltration activity picks up during the night, and the enemy makes several attempts to sneak agents in using small aircraft (Cessnas and AN-2s) and cigarette boats. AWACS picks up the enemy contacts without difficulty (some coming from ‘neutral’ Albania), and planes are sent to deal with the targets. The little AMXs turn out to be perfect for this, combining a gun, a couple of missiles, and some bombs, along with good night vision and refuelling capability. They spend much of the night loitering quietly, before swooping in to deal with the enemy, and they account for most of the smugglers without any problems, although one does get startled when a cigarette boat takes a shot with an old SA-7. One smuggling boat has the misfortune to dart out of cover right in front of the Emden, whose annoyed captain (who had hoped to transit discretely) promptly sinks it with gunfire.

The minesweepers continued their work, clearing the center channel around the damaged Hansa Carrier cargo ship, and allowing the tug to reach its destination. After a few hours of work to attach cables, the ship is now under tow towards port. (As mentioned, the nearby mines are so close to the ship that clearing them would cause it to sink. This is intended to be changed in future versions, so I used the editor to repair the damage and keep the ship afloat. Then, after a few hours I fixed the engines, to allow it to move, made a two-ship group with the tug, and sailed it at creep towards port. I think this is a reasonable representation of the towing process.)

The minesweepers in the center then proceeded to Split, confirming there were no mines in front of Split harbour. The eastern sweepers cleared the field in the Hvarski canal, although in retrospect I should probably have left it there as a shield. I’m not certain if the sub in Kotor sortied, and if it headed towards Split then that minefield could have been a useful flank guard. Hopefully the other eastern strait, the Bracki canal, is mined too. The western sweepers cleared Soltanski canal, then proceeded to Split, finding and removing a few scattered mines en-route.

The Emden arrived in the small hours of the morning, and then the entire force formed up and moved out in a single line ahead, with HMCS St. Laurent leading by several miles to proof the lane. By 03:30 local the merchants were steaming through the Soltanski canal at a steady 10 knots, under cover of darkness, and headed for Split.

**Second Day – Serbian response**

Not long after my convoy cleared the canal, AWACS began reporting new contacts forming up over Belgrade, and ELINT confirmed both MiG-29 and MiG-21 radar emissions from that direction. Dammit! I had hoped my ships would be undetected in the dark, but evidently, they’ve been spotted somehow, and the enemy is launching an anti-shipping strike against them.

The air controller immediately starts scrambling fighters; F-104s and Tornadoes from southern and central Italy. If they’re using ASMs against me then I’ll probably want some AMRAAMs to tackle the missiles, so some F-16s are called in from Aviano too. I have one flight of Tornadoes stationed on CAP NE of Split, but naturally they’re out of position, refuelling 70 miles away over the ocean.

As the CAP turns to head back, I start getting a better count on the enemy. There’s a dense pack of 9 MiG-29s, and a pair of MiG-21s, and then some pairs of attackers coming in low and only just now showing up on radar. They’re not headed for my ships at all. They’re headed for the UNPROFOR base at Sarajevo – again! My two Tornadoes dash in to interfere as best they can, getting a few shots off before they have to fall back with the MiGs in pursuit, but Sarajevo gets bombed for the third time. Fortunately, my new Tornadoes come burnering in across the ocean, and pile in to the enemy, driving away the Fulcrums and killing many of the attack planes. Then, with skies clear, they zip into Serbia, knock off some jammers and ELINT planes, and withdraw, killing a few pursuing MiG-23s which were launched in response.

An embarrassing misinterpretation on my part, but fortunately no major harm done.

**Second Day – pre-dawn**

It is now nearly dawn. The merchants are starting to dock in Split, and my naval forces are ringing the port to form a SAM defence in the case of intrusion. The Stromboli is safely docked in Brindisi, and the Garibaldi group is approaching the Gargano peninsula, but so far hasn’t contributed anything to the fight. I had considered making a night Harrier attack on the Kotor naval base, but I’ve left it alone for the moment. I have heavy naval overmatch in the Adriatic now, so it’s not an immediate priority, and I’d rather wait for more HARMs to be ready than to rush the SAMs unsupported.

For the moment, plans are for strikes on Kotor and the next line of Hungarian airbases and SAMs later in the day. I’m not sure if I’ll wait for darkness. The real spoiler would be a Pact ground offensive, which may need heavy ground attack work from all those A-10s, AMXs, and G.91s.

The air situation seems to be in my favour for the moment, despite dwindling missile stocks. All my AMRAAMs are on aircraft now, and there won’t be any more, so some of the good F-16s are reloading for ground attack. I’m out of Aspides at Grazzanise, my main F-104 base in the south, so I’m starting to ferry some of the F-104s north to reload. Nevertheless, unless the Pact brings in major reinforcements of high-end fighters, I think I should be able to hold the line for now.

**Second Day - Romanian Dawn Attack**

Shortly before dawn my ships adjust their positions around Split, and the minesweepers find a few more isolated explosives among the islands. My fighters deal with a few wandering Floggers, and an AMX is sent out in the dark to discretely reconnoiter the Kotor naval base using its night vision equipment.

Then AWACS reports a pair of MiG-23s launching out of Timisoara. Just a patrol? Possibly, although all the previous patrols have been MiG-29s out of Belgrade. A minute later a second pair launch, then a third, and MiG-21 radars are detected in Romania near Craiova. This is a raid, not a patrol! Could it be that Sarajevo is about to get bombed for a fourth time, and the command staff still hasn't managed to mount a useful defence? Heck no! Tornadoes are taking off and hurtling across the Adriatic on afterburner, followed by Mirages and F-104s, tankers are hurrying to the area to support homeward bound planes if necessary, and ECM planes are moving up to support positions. This time we're going to get there first!

Elsewhere, the sudden screaming of the SAM warning makes Captain Ceasare Italiano jerk his head up in alarm from the balky navigation display in the cockpit of his AMX. In a moment of brown-pantsed terror he realizes that he's flying directly over the Kotor naval base at low altitude, and SAMs are inbound! Command couldn't have let him get so far astray, could they? (Sure they could... I was staring so hard at the incoming raid I completely forgot my recce AMX!) He wrenches the stick violently, boots the rudder, dumps his Mk.82s on the first thing in front of him, and heads for the deck. The bombs explode and start a string of violent secondaries that destroy an SA-3 site, as tracers streak past him from all sides. The captain just clears a ridgeline, his RWR screaming in his ears, and dives to the water of the harbour beyond as an SA-6, suddenly blind, goes hurtling overhead. He's across the harbour in a moment, then up into a mountain valley and away, white-faced and shaking.

(It's little moments like these that make Command so enjoyable for me. Theater-wide scope, and local action, all in one.)

The enraged captain has a 'frank discussion' with his controllers when he gets back to base, but a review of the recorder for his night-vision sensors has valuable information. The Serbian sub is still in port, which is excellent news, along with a number of patrol boats, and yet another of those darned Konis. It'll be worth a morning strike if I can catch all of those at the dock.

Meanwhile, my fighters have reached Sarajevo ahead of the enemy, and they get a good look at the incoming raid in the light of dawn. There's 27 of them in total, mostly MiG-21s, with some MiG-23s further back, and a couple of packs of Oraos, and then two MiG-21 recce planes trailing far behind. Most importantly, there are no MiG-29s to interfere, and my fighters pile into the fray, gleefully massacring the enemy with frontal aspect missiles, while the enemy cannot reply. Only one escapes, and they never get within sight of Sarajevo. Honour is restored! Most of my fighters head home, but it turns out the fight is not quite over, and in the course of the next hour a dozen each of light attack planes and Mig-21s try making low-level approaches. Without fighter escort they are soon headed off and destroyed.

**Second Day - Morning Strikes**

Now it's my turn to take the offensive, and planes launched in northern Italy head south to strike at the Kotor naval base, pausing to tank over the ocean west of Split. The earlier AMX reconnaissance flight had revealed that there was plenty of flack and MANPADS in the area, so the plan was for the majority of the strike to be done by LGBs, keeping safely above the air defence envelope. However, this still left the heavy SAMs to deal with. Tornados carrying HARMs quickly destroyed the surveillance radar, and then veteran F-16s come in extremely low, less than a hundred feet above the waves, before popping up briefly to launch Mavericks at the SA-6. This turns out to be two SA-6s, not one, but my pilots still manage to do enough damage to each of them, combined with HARM shots, to put them out of action, while SAMs go streaking overhead. The remaining SA-2 and SA-3 radars are also put out of commission by HARMs, and then the Mirages and Jaguars are able to move in with LGBs and pummel the naval base and surrounding infrastructure and forces. By the time they are done the area is a burning ruin, and only the hotel and a scattering of light anti-aircraft units remain intact. All the ships and the sub in port are destroyed, and the attackers fly home in good order.

A worrying consequence of the strike was the unexpected intervention of Albania. Up to this point I had no interaction with Albanian forces, keeping my ships on the far side of the Adriatic, and my aircraft away from their shores. Now my Kotor attack has drawn their attention, and two of their old MiG-21 clones crossed the border into Serbia on afterburner, heading for my strike aircraft. I wish there was some way to say 'turn back or else', but there isn't, and the obsolescent Albanian fighters are swiftly shot down when it's clear they won't turn back. This leaves me with a hostile Albania on my flank. I know they don't have modern combat forces, but they are very close to my southern Italian bases, and a sudden swarm attack of light attackers could be a problem. Now I must keep sufficient fighters ready in case of an attack from that direction.

In the meantime, more skirmishing followed while the attackers headed home, with occasional MiG-29s venturing out of Kiskunlachaza in Hungary, and MiG-23s trying to intercept me out of Timisoara in Romania, whenever I ventured into Serbian airspace to chase the ELINT planes. These are usually in ones or twos, so they're not a major problem. However, my attempt to send a recce Mirage to examine the next set of Hungarian airbases was interrupted and driven away before it could complete its mission. The Papa airbase appears to be empty (except for whatever's lurking in shelters), but I still don't know whether anything significant is on the pad at Buda-West.

The next attack of mine comes mid-morning, when a strike is launched on the next two Hungarian bases, Papa, and Buda West. It follows a similar pattern to my first airfield attack, although it's not quite as big. The major difference is that this is a daylight strike, and I'm reluctant to run my Tornadoes through the airfield flack when they can see me coming. Therefore, the runways are tackled by F-15Es dropping BLU-109 LGBs from medium altitude instead. All goes well, despite the incredible missile-dodging MiG-29s that try to interfere from Kiskunlachaza (13 shots for 2 hits...), and when it's done the second Hungarian SAM line is gone and both airfields are shut.

As the strike planes head home, my HARM-carrying Tornadoes on SEAD duty head further east, and fire speculative bearing-only HARM shots towards the next Hungarian airbases, Kiskunlachaza and Tokol. A hidden SA-10 at Tokol takes the bait, and lights up to engage, and promptly gets a salvo of HARMs in return, which destroy its radars. The Tornadoes then sweep south towards Serbia, killing the Spoon Rest which has been radiating there for most of the game. Speculative shots towards Belgrade don't cause any SAM response, but the MiG-29s based there launch quickly and my Tornadoes prudently decide its time to withdraw to Italy.

**Second day - late morning**

The situation at this point looks good. The four frontal Hungarian bases have had their runways cratered, and the SA-2s, SA-3s, and SA-5s that made up the two Hungarian SAM lines have been destroyed, along with two SA-10 sites. The Kotor naval base has been destroyed, along with the last of the Serbian ships. My merchants are safely docked at Split with heavy naval SAM cover, most of the mines are gone (except for the fourth minefield, which I'm keeping for the moment), and the Hansa Carrier is under tow back to Italy. UNPROFOR HQ at Sarajevo is battered, but repairs are underway, the UNPROFOR base at Split is essentially undamaged, and IFOR HQ at Zagreb was never attacked.

My missile stocks are definitely getting low now. Two of my Italian bases are out of Aspides for the F-104s, Aviano has no more AMRAAMs in its bunkers, and my Tornado ADVs have no more SkyFlash missiles either. While the F-104s can fly to other bases for missiles, the F-16s and Tornado ADVs can't. About 75% of those planes still have long range missiles, but once they use them there will be no more. As a result, I'm starting to transition more of my CAP responsibilities to the F-18s and Mirages.

Fortunately, enemy air activity is greatly reduced at the moment. I am still seeing pairs of MiG-29s flying intercept missions from Kiskunlachaza in Hungary and Belgrade in Serbia, as well as MiG-23s coming from Timisoara in Romania, but I'm not seeing large standing CAPs or extensive ELINT/AWACS patrols. Enemy attack plane losses have been ruinous. I may start seeing damaged planes coming back into play as damage is repaired, but I doubt they can field large coordinated strike packages.

I think I've accomplished most of my given objectives at this point. In the absence of further target taskings from high command, I may try fighter sweeps to draw out the remaining interceptors, and then possibly attack further airbases, although the distances are starting to get quite large. It's now 10:40 hrs local time. We shall see!

I let the game run another hour or so, but nothing else special happened, so I wrapped it up. Many assorted observations follow.

**OVERALL**. This is an interesting scenario, particularly the transition from the little parochial concerns (smugglers and the like) to the overwhelming scale of the massive attacks of a total war. The ominous news updates of things gradually going wrong in the Balkans worked nicely to elevate tension as the opening stages of the scenario progressed. The 'double-ended' attack worked well, and although I managed to hold the line in the north, I was caught somewhat off-balance in the south, and couldn't bring in northern resources to help, so Sarajevo was bombed several times before I got fully on top of the situation. Having to look in both places at once is an interesting challenge.

HOW THE HECK… did I manage to not get overwhelmed by the massive air raids? The one and only reason is that in this scenario I finally figured out how to use OECM. In the past, I have usually flown my OECM planes to their loiter points, turned on the jammers, and left them alone. Having them in the background cuts down the range at which the enemy can use SARH missiles, which is helpful. It gives me a few more miles in which I can shoot while the enemy cannot. However, eventually the enemy gets close enough to burn through the jamming, and then the engagement proceeds as normal.

It turns out what I should have been doing is keeping the jammers off, and letting the enemy fire at normal range. Then immediately turn the jammers on, dropping the range at which the enemy can illuminate the target to less than the current range. The missiles go blind, and five seconds later they self destruct. Then turn the jammers off again. Now the enemy can illuminate once more, and they will fire again. Turn the jammers back on, the second set of missiles goes blind, and 5 seconds later they self destruct. Repeat as necessary… You have to be careful to keep your distance while doing this, and it helps to drop your RCS by turning tail when you’re illuminated, and raise your RCS by turning broadside when you’re not, but if you can pull it off it’s a very reliable way of defeating SARH missiles.

This alone would not have been enough to defeat the enemy, if they had been able to press in and attack with their excellent AA-11s. However, if their WRA is set for BVR attacks only, then they will turn away and RTB once their long-range missiles are gone. That’s what was happening here, as I was able to repeatedly send home enemy fighters by using up their BVR missiles, particularly MiG-29s, which only have two AA-10s. Once the fighters turned away I could attack them from behind as they retired, and I had a much better chance against the undefended attack planes they left behind.

This sort of jam-listen-jam procedure is real, and is applied both in communications jamming and countermeasures jamming. Apparently, always-on barrage jamming isn't always the best tactic, and it is often better to jam only when there is something specific to jam. The trouble is, the AI can't recognise the tactic, and 'falls for it' every time. While human pilots might lose some missiles this way, they'd probably recognize what was happening and hold fire until they could burn through at closer range.

***Note: This was a playtest report and many changes have occurred to the scenario including NATO basing options.***