**Northern Fury #26 – Land of Fire & Ice**

**Playtest Report by AndrewJ March 2020**

Well, the new computer's finally installed, so what better way to christen it than with a good game of Command?

**SITUATION**

The liberation of Iceland proceeds apace, with the Soviets being broken up and forced into pockets around the island. My particular concern is in northern Iceland, where Soviet forces are consolidating near Akureyri. I've been instructed to make a heliborne landing to cut the important Highway 1 west of the city, where it passes through the mountains near Bakki.

My landing force is mostly foot-soldiers (no surprise), with a limited amount of heavy weapons support (Javelin ATGMs, a few Stingers, and some mortars). Most of them will go in on CH-46s, with a few CH-53s to carry the heavy gear, and also some UH-1s. I've also got some Cobra attack helicopters, and a small number of F-18s and Harriers.

The Soviets will have their own infantry, and presumably some arty support of some sort, as well as some local air defence (MANPADS, and possibly some mobile SAMs of the SA-8/9 variety). However, what worries me the most is their AFVs, which they may still have in reasonable numbers, and the possibility of some attack helicopters. They reportedly have some fixed-wing aircraft still operational, but I suspect I will be able to handle those.

My plan is reasonably mundane. After loading troops, the helicopters will get underway and head for the LZ, following the highway through the mountains to limit exposure to radars and long-ranged SAMs. They will all fly in directly from their airbase, have troops on the ground by dusk, and will only refuel at the FARP on the way out, if necessary. My F-18s will proceed ahead to sweep the area, checking for troops in the LZ, and providing top cover. My only real innovation is that two of my Hueys will load special force saboteur teams, and head for the FARP. After a gulp of fuel they will split up, one heading NE for the airfield at Akureyri, and one heading for the airfield at Saudarkrokur. Hopefully they will be able to mess up any aircraft based there after dark.

**TRANSIT AND LANDING**

Loading and launch proceeds uneventfully, and I've soon got a long string of helicopters clattering north in the fading light.

My F-18s pass overhead, and as they approach the LZ they get AWACS reports of bogeys lifting off from Akureyri, evidently cued to our presence by the air-traffic control radar operating there. A single HARM puts an end to that radar, and the four F-18s manage to knock down the pair bogies with Sparrows, before proceeding down into the valley to recce the LZ. They soon find signs of Soviet infantry posted around the valley, which they start engaging with cannon-fire and cluster bombs. (Just like in the real-world ODS, the pilots find the IR sensors on their Mavericks to be particularly helpful for locating enemy units.)

The situation's going well, until the F-18s approach the eastern end of the pass near Akureyri, and an SA-8 opens fire at them. Two HARMs go streaking towards the battery, knocking out one of the launchers, and the two Maverick-toting F-18s dive to the deck and head towards the battery at high speed, hoping to kill the remaining vehicle before it can do anything to the incoming helicopters.

The F-18s are almost at their target as the first helicopter sets down in the LZ, and then things start going very wrong...

**SAMBUSH**!

All throughout the LZ, Soviet troops fling off their snow-covered camouflage covers, shoulder their MANPADs, elevate the barrels on their anti-aircraft guns, and prepare to fire. SAMs fly in all directions through the dim twilight air as the helicopter pilots wrench their machines about, trying to dodge missiles and run for cover down the narrow mountain valleys that lead off from the main pass.

The two low-level F-18s fire their missiles at a battery of 14.5s directly in their path, before hauling around on afterburner and fleeing out of the kill zone and into the mountains. They have to stay low, because the other pair, loitering at medium altitude with one HARM left, start screaming about new SAM emissions from the far side of the fjord north of Akureyri. Is it an SA-11, they hope? Hell no! It's an SA-20, and they dive for the deck, firing their last HARM in its general direction. They make it down safely, as the SAMs roar blindly overhead, but the SA-20 easily swats down the single HARM. All four of the F-18s clear the area at low level, until they can make it to the safety of central Iceland.

Down in the Bakki pass things are going badly for the leading helicopters. Two UH-1s go down immediately, taking both my valuable FO teams with them, and two more CH-46s are hit and go staggering into the mountains. The SAM gunners are merciless, and fire repeatedly, and neither of the wounded choppers survive. Only the marines from the first helicopter get landed, leaving a dozen infantry-men and a single Javelin team all alone in the center of the LZ.

**REGROUP**

The only thing that has saved this from being a complete disaster is the long single-file formation I used coming up the highway and into the LZ. Most of the formation is still a long way from the kill zone when the Russians open fire, so the middle and tail of my formation survive.

My pilots are ordered to abort the landing, and instead drop off their troops on the highway about five miles west of the CANSOF observation post. There, safe from the MANPADS kettle, the pilots unload their troops, then head back for the safety of their airbase and another load of troops.

The Marines aren't where they wanted to be, but they have cut the highway as effectively as if they were in the LZ at Bakki. After some confused re-organization, they set out eastwards, marching up the road towards their initial LZ. This isn't the first time the Marines have had to make a winter march, and the enemy aren't going to like it when they get there.

**INITIAL AIR ACTIVITY**

As the helicopters are turning for home, AWACS starts reporting new airborne contacts. Two more MiG-23s launch from Akureyri, rocketing and bombing the infantry in the LZ, leaving only one lone isolated Javelin team dug into the snow. The problem is, that with that damned SA-20 near Akureyri, I can't safely take in fighter aircraft of my own to cover the area (unless I want to go low enough to play with the MANPADS - no thanks). After that, two more took off, and start heading west, in the direction of 3/8 Marines.

In the meantime, AWACS reports four more contacts, not quite as fast, headed for 2/6 Marines. These ones don't have SAM cover, and my home-bound F-18s vector in on them and shoot down four Su-25s before they can hit my neighbours.

I may not be able to get my aircraft into the original target area, but the CANSOF OP reports multiple Soviet infantry units adopting defensive positions along the highway below, about four miles in front of my advancing marines. They don't seem to have MANPADS cover, and my attack helicopters and night-vision equipped Harriers can get there safely at low altitude. Between them, they smash up and disperse the enemy formation, so my troops can pass through unopposed.

The attack helicopters also try their hand at SAM hunting, sneaking around mountains to try and surprise their prey. Unfortunately, their optics aren't great, and they manage to kill one, but a number of close calls drive them away from the rest, and they abandon the project.

**EARLY NIGHT**

As night deepens, and my troops continue to march along the highway, we try some other ways to regain the initiative.

One of the retiring F-18s had gotten a radar contact on a few moving vehicles south of Akureyri, so some attack helicopters are sent in that direction to reconnoiter the area. They are startled to find a column of trucks and AFVs headed south, out of Akureyri, along the 821. I'm not sure where they're going, since the passes the road leads to are closed in the winter. Maybe they are relocating to avoid anticipated air strikes, or to hide and then take any of my troops reaching Akureyri in the flank?

In any case, they are alert, and they opened fire with 23mm cannons when my helicopters got too close. Fortunately, their aim isn't great, and a combination of careful TOW missile attacks and then close-in rocket and cannon fire managed to wreck the convoy.

I was also concerned, based on initial briefings, that there might be enemy approaching from the Soviet areas to the west. Some helicopters are sent in that direction, along probable roads of approach, but thankfully nothing turns up.

Shortly after this my saboteur teams approach the enemy-held airbases. The team at Saurdakrokur doesn't find any sign of Soviet aircraft, so they wreck a few airport facilities (which does not make any friends with the locals) before retiring for pickup. The team at Akureyri has an accident crossing the river, and most of their explosives are swept away. Only two charges are left! Sneaking into the airfield, they stuff a charge up the tailpipe of the first two MiG-23s they come across, making a satisfying bang, but still far less than they had hoped to accomplish.

**SA-20**

As the helicopters refuel and are boarded by the remaining troops, two Harriers are sent out on a perilous mission. Flying towards Akureyri, they dip below radar, and head into the deep mountain valley that heads north, along the east side of the Akureyri fjord. The SA-20 is just beyond the end of that valley, and the planes come hurtling in low in their green night-vision world, and haul hard right around the mountain. There's the SA-20, right where it was predicted, and they're inside its minimum range. Multiple 500 lb bombs crash into the SAM site, tearing up the radars and wrecking the launch vehicles. One stalwart MANPADS gunner gets off a shot, riddling the tail of the leading Harrier with fragments, but failing to bring it down. While the damaged plane heads home, the other turns for its secondary target, destroying the nearby surveillance radar, and hopefully leaving the Soviets blind in the air.

**SECOND WAVE**

With the SA-20 destroyed, things feel a lot more comfortable for the next set of helicopter activity. Three of the helicopters set off towards the observation points, carefully plotting routes which approach from over the mountains outside the Bakki valley MANPADS trap. They reach their destinations without being spotted, and unload and retire without difficulty.

The other helicopters bring the remainder of the marines to join their marching comrades (still staying outside the valley of death), and then the complete force continues forwards, headed for their initial LZ, then the liberation of Akureyri.

(At this point things seemed to have reached a conclusion, so I ended the scenario.)

**PLAYTHROUGH**

This was an interesting one, with plenty of tactical decision-making and action, despite its relatively small size. I really liked the briefing, with lots of specific details to make the mission objectives clear. I thought I was pretty much on top of the situation, seeing what I had expected around the LZ (some minor troops, some modest mobile SAM defences) until the landing started. I have to admit I was pretty incensed when the ambush sprang ("I already looked there!"), but I suppose it makes sense given what you could accomplish in terms of digging in to hide in the snow, which could certainly defeat IR surveillance. It seemed no matter which way I ran, there was another SAM in front of me, cutting me down just before I could make it to cover. And the SA-20, well that was a sphincter tightener to be sure, and certainly forced me out of the high-altitude environment. Fortunately, mountain valleys are deep!

My inherent laziness saved me on this one. My helicopters went in at the same rate they take off from their base, which made the long thin formation. If I had done course modifications to achieve a simultaneous landing the results would have been disastrous. It also turned out that the AI was taking a lot of your forces in unexpected and vulnerable directions, and I think that made things easier than you had wanted.