**Northern Fury – Out on a Limb**

**Playtest Report by AndrewJ Aug 2016**

Well, it's 12:41 Zulu and things are really tense on the Ike, but there seems to be a brief moment for a sitrep.

With a main mission of 'defend Iceland', and a secondary of 'beat up Jan Mayen' it didn't look like I needed to stay so far NE. Why snuggle up to the enemy? I've got plenty of range to bombard the island, so the Ike is ordered to reverse course and head SW, and eventually meet up with the AOE closer to Iceland in a zone patrolled by my P-3s. Let the enemy spend time and fuel coming to me. This move leaves the Spruance dashing to catch up and get out front again, but it's a chance it'll have to take. (So far, no submarine problems. Fingers crossed.) My own sub is given a course ESE, and ordered to periscope depth, where it creeps along providing ESM and plane spotting data. I consider an initial TLAM strike on the mainland, but there's probably AEW and CAP and SAMs up there which would make it a wasted effort, so I hold off.

The Jan Mayan strike launches immediately. The first element in is the pair of F-18s with iron bombs, which hook around the SW end of the island, staying in the radar shadow of the ridge. A hard right turn sends them E over the narrow mid-section of the island, laying a stick of bombs on the SA-3 before it can react, and dropping another in the center of the weather shelters. Two quick-reaction Migs make it into the air, but I manage to deal with them while escaping amid Grouse fire, and then the LGB planes move in to tackle their targets from a safe altitude. A string of bomb malfunctions weaken the strike, but the command bunker and big runway are destroyed, and the secondary runway and access point are heavily damaged.

Meanwhile my ESM is giving indications of jammers to my NE, so the CAP spreads out to investigate, and destroys some of them before Mig-31 radars start showing up on the screens. Before long I'm facing heavy pressure from Mig-31s from the NE, followed by a very heavy push of many aircraft from the E. I manage to deal with the first group of Mig-31s, but the massive eastern formation (which turns out to be a heavy recce probe, with numerous Brewers and high altitude Mig-25s) is more problematic, and I literally end up launching every single fighter before I can fend it off. I'm trying to ignore the Mig-23s and pick on the Brewers selectively before they can get close enough to see me with their radars. Fortunately, their radars are old technology, and I think my Jammers have managed to keep them from getting a clear look at my main formation. Nonetheless, doing this puts me at some risk, and more Mig-31s come down and interfere with the northern flank of the fight, causing some losses.

While all this is happening I do manage to in-flight refuel one of my F-14s and sneak it up N of Jan Mayan, where it manages to shoot up more jammers and ELINT planes, including a prowling recce Backfire, before it gets driven away by the Mig-31s. The U-2 is in a dangerous place up there with so much enemy air activity, so I pull it back to do BDA on Jan Mayan, and do ELINT duty. No way I'm sending it east to play with Mig-31s.

Once that heavy enemy push is over most of my planes are running for the carrier to reload, but the few stragglers with missiles left push east into the vacuum, catching sight of the enemy tanker line. I'd really like to interfere with that, and I try hard, but there just aren't enough assets to succeed. I manage to launch 5 extreme range Phoenix shots at them, but one strikes an enemy jammer that gets in the way, three more miss by the slimmest margins, and only one kills a tanker. That's not enough to disrupt operations significantly, and soon another wave of Mig-25s and Mig-31s is coming off the tankers, driving me back again.

There seems to be no end to the Mig-25s, which get closer and closer to the carrier, and I'm left nervously counting the seconds until the first few of the reloaded F-14s lift off and manage to stop the last of them. (What wouldn't I give for a 30 minute turnaround a la Sweden - an hour and a half is excruciating!) Now I'm in a bit of a lull, I think, although a couple more Backfires have tried to take a look, and I'm getting ESM hits on more Mig-31s, 23s, and SU-27s, which are starting to fill up their patrols again. My air-to-air missile situation is looking rather bad. I only have 26 Phoenix left on the carrier, and they're all mounted on aircraft. No spares! Everyone else is filling up with Sparrows at the moment, but I've only got 30 of those left in the magazines. I'm also down to 35 AMRAAM in the magazines, although I've got 7 full loaded F-18s ready to go, so that's not too bad. Still, if I have to face more Mig-31s (and there's probably a dozen or more of them still out there) I'm going to have problems, not to mention any heavy bomber raids. And there's still 20 hours to go...

The lull doesn’t last long, although the fierce attacks of the early morning seem to have stopped, and soon my forces are grappling with small units of Mig-31s and occasional recce Backfires. The exchange usually goes in my favour, but I’m still watching my missile stocks dwindle.

I figure I have two options. I can either continue to fall back and attrite the Russian air forces as they arrive, and hope they don’t have a second surge coming, or try and gather my forces and make a spoiling attack of some sort. I decide on the latter. I refuse combat as best I can while my carrier group steams south and the AOE heads north to meet it, and then in the early afternoon, when most of my aircraft have recycled, I launch.

The first to go up are the second wave of Jan Mayan strikers, headed north, and then the main body launches east, taking jammers and tankers and every single Phoenix I have, and leaving only a pair of ready F-18s and a few re-arming F-14s to defend the carrier. Their target? The enemy tanker line! If I can punch through and kill that I figure it might disrupt any planned operations directed at my receding carrier group.

As the aircraft head out they are passed by a wave of TLAMs headed for the nearest enemy airbases. I don’t expect the TLAMs to get through, but I do hope they will disrupt the enemy by forcing them to direct CAP and interceptors against the missiles, instead of my aircraft.

The plan actually works! The Jan Mayan strike successfully pummels the remaining facilities on the island, and then my OCAP punches through the remaining Russian fighters before destroying the five tankers orbiting off the coast. Some of my planes head north and south, making a clean sweep of the arc of recce and ELINT birds. Meanwhile the TLAMs astonish everyone by reaching their targets. Some draw fire from the reserve Mig-31s, but most make it to their airfields, and despite the SAM defences I manage to severely crater three runways (two at Andoya, one at Bodo) and chip a few other facilities.

At this point I have a chance to leave cleanly, or hang around and try to exploit my success. I (recklessly) decide on option B. The Mig-31s that went after the TLAMs are now out of position to defend (wait for it…) an AWACs. I can’t resist! While I engage some Mig-23s and Su-27s one of my F-14s gets into Phoenix range, and spends two precious missiles to down the radar plane. This does not impress the Russians, who decide that a mix of two dozen fresh Mig-25s and Mig-23s is the perfect response. It’s time to run away. Wouldn’t it be nice if I had fuel?

Speaking of which, two fresh tankers launch out of Bodo, and a pair of Mig-31s are heading in for a drink. I can’t resist this either, and turn back some more of my F-14s, knocking down the tankers, and sending the thirsty Migs back to base. (No, they didn’t run out of fuel, alas.) Total tanker score is now 8, which should put a hole in their plans. But all this has delayed my retreat, and it’s now a desperate rearguard action, pursued by that swarm of angry new fighters. Hasty over-the-shoulder AMRAAM shots cool their ardour a bit, but it’s touch and go all the way back to the carrier.

After that I’ve got no offensive power left, and my only strong defences are my SAMs. (The AOE group has joined up with the carrier now, and the extra cruiser reassures my greatly.) I have a whopping 6 Phoenixes left in the entire fleet, and only 26 AIM-7Ms, which means some F-14s don’t have loadouts. All my F-18s have loadouts, but I’ve only got 1 AIM-7P and 3 AMRAAMs left in the magazines, so there won’t be any reloads. I’m even starting to count Sidewinders (there’s only 13 in the magazine).

So, for the rest of the night and into the next morning I steam cautiously north towards Jan Mayan again, nervously watching the ESM traces of pairs of patrolling Mig-31s. I occasionally sneak a fighter around them in the dark to pick off their remaining ELINT planes, using Sidewinders in order to preserve my few precious long-range missiles. The Russians make no further efforts to engage, and with dawn I can turn about and head for Scotland.

Comments

Looking over the scenario afterwards I can only say Wow, that’s a lot of attackers! You weren’t kidding about bad things happening if you’re detected. If they launch, you’re screwed. I’m thinking complete loss of carrier group.

I’m very glad I didn’t head east. I might have earned 100 pts in 6 hours, but only by sticking my head in the lion’s mouth, and I wouldn’t get it back out again. The Russians actually detected my position by radar even though I retreated, but they didn’t get the positive ID they needed to launch their strikes. That’s the only thing which saved me.

This is a tough one. It took me a combination of intense micromanagement and running away in order to preserve my carrier, and I doubt that anyone playing this using missions will be able to manage a complete success.