**Northern Fury – The Longest Battle**

**Playtest Report by AndrewJ Nov 2016**

Wow, this one's a monster! I've been staring at it for three evenings now, plotting and planning, and I still haven't had the courage to hit play.

I suddenly have a much higher sympathy for the guys who had to plan and execute convoys in real life. Reign in all those dispersed merchants to form convoys, or try to dash them for port? Multiple convoy routes, or a few sanitized lanes? Send a stream of small convoys, or lose the time to form a couple of monsters and pile all my defence onto them? Every sound defensive measure cuts into travel time. It's soo tempting to send the fast container ships together in fast convoys, but then I double the number of targets, cut the defences for each in half, and make it much more difficult for the escorts to hear anything. But the guys in Europe are desperate for supplies! Aaarrggghhh!

Nearly ready to go here too, after ~ 4 to 5 evenings of looking at it.

THE PLAN (such as it is...)

Generally similar to magi's layout. Convoys will be restricted to specific paths. I will not try to sweep the entire path at once, but will concentrate on an area preceding each convoy.

On North America's east coast, convoys will follow the coast north, meeting up and growing at each major port until I have two main convoys underway, one fast, and one slow. These will be proceeding in deep water, just off the continental shelf, to take away any bottom-hugging advantage the subs could get, and to allow me to use convergence zones to my advantage. Once the convoys are off the southern heel of the Grand Banks they will split and either head on a single path for Europe, or the Med. Westbound convoys from Europe will follow these paths in reverse. The Kennedy will be going this way, along with most of the coastal frigates and destroyers. Hopefully Kennedy's planes can deal with any Bears that come snooping down from the Iceland direction.

Texan convoys will follow a similar route once they round Florida, but there's the Cuban problem to deal with first. I suspect we'll have subs in the Florida Straits, but I can't patrol them with MPA as long as the Cuban air-force is flying. Therefore, I'll be making heavy fighter sweeps at the beginning, to try and knock out as many of their planes as possible, and I'll park TG Dale off Havana where its long-range SAMs can interfere the moment Cuban planes lift off.

The Panama convoys will head out the Mona Straits between the Dominican and Puerto Rico, and straight-line across the ocean to the Med, with Europe-bound ships heading north to the Bay of Biscay as they approach the coast. Warships at Panama will proceed as escort, with the exception of the Tatnall, which will stay behind to patrol the mouth of the Canal and provide SAM cover. (I'm not willing to leave the Canal Zone completely undefended at this point.) My policy towards neighbouring foes will be to monitor but avoid combat if possible.

Off Brazil the Asturias group has been ordered to turn south and meet up with the Rio convoys, before taking them in the direction of Europe via Cape Verde. The convoys heading from Rio to the US are on their own... I wouldn't want to be on those ships. Further south the Falklands forces turtle in and patrol, hoping the Argentines will be quiet for the moment. Across the ocean TG Stump will turn south and try and round up the scattered merchants and make a convoy before heading north again. Some of the more northerly merchants will put in at St Helena and Ascension to wait for the convoy to catch up. My main concern here is the potential for Bears to be operating out of Nigeria, where I have no air cover at all. Again, the life expectancy of these scattered merchants is probably poor.

The main other operation at the start will be a surge of recce (i.e. maritime surveillance) and ELINT aircraft, to try and pin down what sort of merchant (or pseudo-merchant) traffic is out there, and limit the effect of any nasty Soviet-shaped surprises that may be lurking in innocent fishing boats. (Looking at you, invasion of Iceland.)

The thing that worries me the most is that these routes and precautions will take too much time, and that I should simply be straight-lining across the ocean. We'll have to see. I'm also concerned that as new merchants trickle in I won't have a good way to cover them, and they'll either have to go it alone, or wait far too long for an escort to arrive.

Fingers crossed!

Well, after a couple of days of play I'm about half a day in.

Fighter sweeps against Cuba went well, and I think I've dealt with the remains of the Cuban air force, the three SAM sites intel reported, as well as all their surface ships that I could find. (A number of Boghammer clones and a pair of Osas.) Guantanamo had a visit from an odd little high speed intruder, but that was spotted at a distance by my drone, and dealt with afterwards. The drone continues to patrol around, and found an artillery battery, but so far nothing else.

I've been trying to avoid the lesser combatants, but in some cases that hasn't worked. Nicaragua sent out some Mig-21s towards one of my helicopters on maritime patrol, and they opened fire at some of my F-16s that came to warn them off, so I shot them down shortly afterwards. Honduras also sent a flight of F-5s in towards my Panama convoy, so those were shot down too. The Venezuelans and I are keeping an eye on each other. Some of their small Constitucions have gotten a look at my convoy (and probably called in the Hondurans), but so far we're not shooting at each other, and I'm content to keep it that way. There's certainly enough of them to cause a real problem. Down south Argentina and I have been shadowing each other as their recce planes make circuits around the island, but they have no radar and they're above the clouds, so I'm content to let them do that. I've got a Nimrod in the air now, and I should have a reasonable look at their navy soon if it's at sea. I fear I'll get shot down if I'm too close to the coast, so I'll have to be careful.

The submarine war was going well - at first. Helicopters ID-ed and eliminated an SS in the channel between the Dominican and Puerto Rico, and the Trepang snuck up behind a Kilo in the Florida Straits and torpedoed it in the baffles. Things going well! This should be easy! Then my convoy of beautiful high speed military transports runs right over a goddamned Tango before they can meet up with their escorts, and suddenly I've got multiple inbound torpedoes. Three of my ships collect a torpedo each, one of them gets hit by two, and only one manages to dodge them all. Thank god none of them sink. The French deal with the Tango, but my hopes of multiple high speed runs with these valuable ships are dashed. The one with two hits is heading back to Brest for repairs with the big coast guard cutter as escort, and the others are pressing on with the crossing, tucked into the middle of Convoy 94/01 for their protection. They can still steam faster than most merchants, but when they reach North America I'll have to take them out of service for repairs.

The biggest casualty here is my plan for high-speed convoys with the civilian container ships. Although they can cruise at 20+ knots, I can't escort effectively at that speed, and it would be so easy to blunder into another sub and lose a convoy. So we're forming up into big slow convoys and churning along like a wallowing tanker, dammit. The boys in Europe will have to wait a bit longer. As it happens, the new policy is soon vindicated when my big Panama convoy detects a Victor closing in (probably directed by those 'non-combatant' Venezuelans), and deals with it by helicopter. Another Victor (this time a Victor III) gives me a scare when it gets dangerously close to one of my fancy SURTASS ships. I had assumed these ships were so good they could detect anything inside the nearest CZ. Not so... A lucky MAD contact saves me from disaster there.

Other than that my maritime surveillance patrols have found one big Russian support ship tucked into a bay on the African coast, resting at anchor. I consider sending a pair of frigates down from Gibraltar to deal with it, but that would take days, so I send a P-3 instead. A 4 Harpoon night-time BOL salvo, timed for a very close range activation, takes it by surprise. FLIR shows that multiple hits are achieved, but the burning ship is still afloat. I'm not sure what it was doing there. Sub tender, perhaps? I'll have to restrike.

So far a very interesting game, but with my arthritic computer the best I'm achieving is ~ 1.75 times speed (pulse times often in the 500 to 800 ms range). And that means for a 1 month scenario played a few hours a night I could expect this to take three months or more to complete. I'll keep going for one crossing, I think, but unfortunately it may not be practical to complete the entire scenario.

The game continues. It's now Feb 25, and convoys continue to form up and head out into the ocean. The badly wounded T-AKR is nearly back to Portsmouth for repair, and the others are continuing west with convoy 94/01. My main convoys haven't had any direct sub contacts yet, for which I'm grateful. A couple of SSKs were found in the Americas when their courses took them into water that was so shallow they had to put their masts above water, allowing them to be detected on radar. The Asturias carrier group took care of another sub off the Brazilian coast, and P-3s got lucky in mid-ocean as they were prepping a convoy route. Total kills of Warsaw Pact subs are now at 6 SSKs (plus 1 Cuban SSK) and 4 SSNs, all of them Victor I or IIIs. No sign of the truly modern subs yet, nor of any SSGNs, which could be a big problem if (when) they show up. Hopefully they're all busy up north fighting the carrier groups around Iceland.

In the Caribbean I'm nervous that the Cubans will bring a few airplanes out of maintenance depots or dispersed sites, so I've been bombing their runways to crater them and try to prevent any unpleasant surprises in that respect. Honduras and Nicaragua have been quiet since their aircraft probes on Day 1, so I'm leaving them alone. (Crap. Spoke to soon. Goblin directly in front of my Panama convoys! But fortunately just Tuna.) Venezuela is watching, but so far no hostile action, despite some close passes with some of the Constitucion class patrol boats. I am worried about the one patrolling between the Dominican and Puerto Rico, which will probably sail right through my Panama convoys, which should be interesting.

Things are also interesting down in the Falklands. My MPAs have spotted three Mekos patrolling off the Argentine coast, which is to be expected, along with regular visits from the LearJets. A bit more of a surprise was the warship about 500 miles to the ENE of the Falklands. I had not expected them to be so far out. This has prompted Nimrod searches in the area, and an overflight of South Georgia, but so far nothing else has shown up there. Much more alarming was the sub that stuck up its periscope within spitting distance of the Port Stanley docks! Fortunately the Jupiter was nearby, and I was able to rush in an ASW helicopter. This was well within my territorial waters and much too dangerous to let go, so I sank it. So far no response from the Argentines. Fingers crossed... I'm very concerned that this was a special forces insertion, preparatory to a landing, so I've been sending FLIR equipped helicopters to scour the area (and other likely positions), but so far no sign of anything. Unfortunately the odds of actually spotting a special forces team is remote.

Sad news for the crew of the P-3 that was visiting the Nigerian coast. Despite staying well out to sea they had a visit from a Mig-25, and were subsequently shot down, but they did have time to report a couple of ships in the area. I think I'll have to keep some fighters and MPA in Ascension in case of aggressive action from that direction. (I'm still betting on a Bear to cue an SSG or SSGN.)

New merchants keep reporting in, and so far I've been dashing them to catch up with the tail of recently departed convoys, but soon I'll have to start gathering for new convoys. Sloooow!

Hoo boy, the waters are hot around the Azores...

The first missiles turned on their radars right between the two frigates screening the front of a 37 merchant convoy out of Gibraltar, prompting my ships to light up too. Those missiles missed (presumably fired at coarse CZ contacts), and I was able to shoot down the next few while everything that flew converged on the area and finally managed to pin down the Oscar some 35 miles out. Brown pants all round, but the Oscar was shooting based on poor targeting, and only got off about half its missiles, so no losses. Celebration!

The second Oscar a few minutes later was further out. It got off almost all its missiles before my frantic helicopters could close in and sink it. SAMs went flying everywhere, some missiles were shot down, some overflew or missed due to coarse targeting, but then I mostly ran out of SAMs. Those box launchers for Sea Sparrow and SeaWolf just don't have the capacity to handle a major engagement like this. One merchant and on British warship went down, frantically trying to reload. Losing ships is never good, but trading two lesser ships for two Soviet capital ships like Oscars is probably marginally in my favour.

I never saw the third Oscar. It launched everything. A radical convoy course change saved me from some of the missiles, but the remainder struck home and two more merchants and another three frigates went down, firing off their last few SAMs as they went. Now I've got to get 34 merchants across 3/4 of the ocean with 3 exhausted frigates for escorts. If there's another Oscar out there these guys are toast.

Tense times... What a difference an Aegis ship could have made...

March 1 1994, 20:00 Zulu.

First merchant unloads! "War good as won" says Secretary of the Navy. "Mission accomplished" proclaims president. "One lone ship from Halifax to New York without any losses. A magnificent demonstration of naval power."

So maybe it's not quite that significant, but a good excuse for a sitrep nonetheless.

The fight against the Russians continues. After the Oscar attack I tried putting an ASW aircraft cordon between the probable location of the third Oscar and the African coast, in case it was headed for the location of the sunken sub tender, but nothing turned up. The damned thing could be anywhere. Hopefully they don't have any missiles tucked away in an African port somewhere. At the moment my forces are claiming 6 lesser SS (including that ugly Romeo conversion), 8 moderns SS (various Kilos, including the Cuban one), 7 SSN (including an ancient Hotel), and 3 SSGN (the third being a Charlie up north). Rather alarmingly, intel is also muttering about the Russians losing a Badger in theatre, although they won't tell me where. (It showed up unexpectedly on the losses chart.)

Westbound convoys in the north are closing in on the Grand Banks, passing the Eastbound convoys in the same area. A new convoy is leaving the Brest area, with 14 freighters and the repaired T-AKR (freshly patched in Portsmouth), mostly escorted by second-rate ships coming on station in the last few days. The convoy which tangled with the Oscars near the Azores continues on, gradually dropping a trail of damaged stragglers behind it. (I've got a tug coming out of Europe to bring home one mangled tanker with no engines left.) Near Bermuda I've got escorts dropping in to top off their tanks before heading back to their eastbound convoy. My Panama to Med convoy is getting a bit nervous as it watches some if its escorts heading back to the mainland for lack of fuel. Hopefully nothing too dangerous lurks in its path. The Asturias is bringing its eastward bound convoys across the equator now, but the westbound ones have branched off and are heading up the coast of South America (albeit ~ 250 miles out) without escort. Nobody's available to escort them, poor fellows. TG Stump, way down south, is in a bad way for fuel, and is hoping the oiler coming up from South Africa can save the situation. (I copied the A 14 from the Asturias group in order to replace the Unrep-less South African oiler.)

The situation with the lesser combatants is relatively calm. Cuba, Honduras, and Nicaragua are all quiet at the moment. I'm keeping an eye on Venezuela from a distance. There is one sonar-less patrol boat which was in the strait my Panama convoy needed was sunk in the dead of night by a discrete Mk48. A set of three missile boats which were on a flank speed course for my convoy were engaged at dawn by A-4s coming out of the western darkness and sunk before they could ID their attackers. Without firm intelligence on what happened, the Venezuelans have not launched further attacks, although I did have to pull my E-8 further north in response to their fighter sweeps. Down south the Argentines and I continue to patrol and keep an eye on each other. More Tornados have flown in, and the Perry is on station, but no hostilities so far. I haven't sent everything down to the Falklands, and I'm retaining some units at Ascension in case of Nigerian troubles.

Lessons Learned

Fuel is Important! Those Perrys have short legs. At this scale oilers and bases become so much more important. (Suddenly the lumbering old Protecteur is one of my most valuable assets.) This is especially true at the inefficient convoy speeds I need to travel at in order to get any decent sonar performance, and to stay with slow-moving tankers. A Perry can go 4200 nm on a single tank of gas - at it's fuel efficient cruise speed of 20 kts. Of course it can't hear as much at that speed, and it would leave its convoy far behind. If I'm travelling at 12 kts, like a cruising tanker, my range is only 2700 nm. That's a single crossing in a narrow spot.

Sprint and Drift eats fuel! You're essentially trying to cross the Atlantic at fuel-inefficient low speed, and fuel-inefficient high speed. You probably won't get there. It may work nicely for a couple of days in a restricted zone, but not so much on the grand scale of this scenario (unless you have enough oilers).

Not all oilers carry all fuels! Gas Fuel is not Oil Fuel is not Diesel Fuel!!

I, naturally, have cleverly made sure my task groups need all three types of fuel at once, while only half my oilers can provide it, and two thirds of those are down in the southern hemisphere. Now I really respect the Protecteur!

March 4 1994, 23:00 Z

Time for another progress report!

All P-3 squadrons are now deployed and operational, many of them out in the islands. (I've been using those 747s on cargo missions to simulate bringing in torpedoes and supplies for them.) Because I have so many MPA operating in so many different areas, I had to take a moment to re-organize. Instead of having task-based missions I now have Squadron-based missions. Each squadron is assigned one zone, and these zones are applied to different routes or areas of interest as needed, sometimes stacking multiple zones if I need a concentrated effort. I had to make myself a squadron map to keep organized, and I think it's helping.



Several of my big westbound convoys are headed south along the American continental shelf, and should reach their ports in a day or two. My two big eastbound convoys are about 1000 nm out from Europe and should be arriving sometime on the 8th. The convoys from Texas and Panama will take several days more, and the Brazilian and African convoys will take even longer. (The African convoy is currently anchored at St. Helena, waiting for stragglers to catch up. I suspect I'll only get one trip out of these guys.)

Fuelling continues to be an issue. I'm learning to really admire diesel powered ships, with their tremendous range. Its funny how in most scenarios I really admire ships with great weapons fits, or powerful sensor arrays, but in this game, I'm ogling the size of the fuel tanks. A mighty ship isn't much use if it can't get there.

The lesser combatants remain quiet for the moment. Another Argentine sub made a close appearance, within a mile of the Falklands shore, so I broke contact with my ship, carefully tracked it with helicopters, and then sank it with MPA when I was confident they wouldn't know who fired the shot. No response from the Argentines so far, so I think it worked. I'm aware of another of their subs off in deep water, but I'm letting it be because it's not in my territorial waters.

A few more Russian subs have fallen victim to my aircraft. The score now includes an extra Tango, three more Kilos, four more SSN (all Victors of various types - only one truly modern SSN seen so far), and an SSG.

The SSG was an interesting one. The Asturias carrier was approaching Cape Verde, heading NNE, and some units were hurrying ahead to refuel when Vampires were spotted coming from the SSE. For a moment I had a sick feeling that yet another Oscar was perfectly placed to annihilate a convoy from behind, while all my escorts were screening out in front. Fortunately, the contacts resolved into Shaddocks, not Shipwrecks, and there were only four of them. The Harrier CAP was able to scramble and deal with the medium altitude slightly supersonic missiles, which are a much easier target than the Oscar's brood. (It's amazing what a difference an AWACS helicopter and some air support provide!) A look at the radar plot showed the Shaddocks had been aimed at one of my ships which was moving fast out in front, which seemed odd since the missiles came from the rear quarter. Fortunately, I clued in in time to realize something else out there had to be doing the spotting, and I cut the throttle so I was able to hear the torpedo launch before I ran over the Tango. Running away at flank speed gave my helicopters time to sink the Russian sub, but if it hadn't been for the warning shot from Juliett I would have stumbled right onto the Tango and lost another escort. (The Juliett was eventually found and dealt with by my Sea Kings.)

Lessons Learned (sorta)

Convoy, convoy, convoy! I'm always tempted to send just one more late-appearing merchant ship running after the convoy to try and catch up. Don't do it! That's when a Kilo pops up and puts a pair of torps into the helpless isolated ship, which now has to limp into the Azores (where there's no dock big enough to fix it) while hoping there's no other surprises in store. Or the trail of damaged stragglers from the Oscar attack? They can make it alone, right? Nope. Not with that Victor ready to bite off a helpless target. This one's not coming home...

But despite all these learning opportunities, I still have several completely undefended isolated ships or mini-convoys coming up from the southern hemisphere, where there simply aren't escorts to be had. And I'm still trying to dash ships up and down the coast to form up or make port. Not a good sign...

March 8 1994, 17:00 Z

The long battle continues, but after the heavy initial losses among the Soviet submarine force it looks like things are calming down. MPA patrols and escorts are claiming three more older SS (including another of those Romeo conversions - I thought they had only made one?), and two more older model Victors. The missing Oscar continues to weigh on my mind. No sign of it anywhere. But then, just as I'm worrying about Oscars an old Victor bites off a container ship which was trying to make a high-speed dash for Rio, 230 miles NE of Nassau. (Remember what I said about trying to dash up and down the coast alone? Lesson not learned.) P-3's pounce on it, and it's dead within half an hour. So make that three older model Victors, and a lot more letters to the families of the deceased...

In better news, the mystery of the missing Badger report seems to have been solved. I flew one of the EP-3s down to Ascension, and then sent it out for a couple of night patrols with a tanker and a Tornado in attendance, cautiously probing to see if the Mig-25s or any ships were about. Over the course of two nights they were able to pick up the emissions of Badgers hunting as much as 600 miles off the coast of Nigeria. Three of them have been shot down, in addition to the one lost before. Fortunately, my shipping in the southern hemisphere has been routed by way of St Helena and Ascension, which are some 1400 nm out from the coast, which would keep them safe from all but the most extreme edge of a single missile loadout range. (Unless they've got a tanker. Hmmm...)

Lesser nations are still keeping quiet, and even Argentina continues to be content to monitor us without taking offensive action. I've got 5 nuclear subs down there, and I'm starting to wonder if that major force concentration is truly needed. British subs have now localized the patrol zones for four of their better SSKs, which seem to be patrolling in pairs off the continental shelf in mid and northern Argentina. Their need to snorkel gave them away.

Convoy progress is promising. My first round of major convoys has reached port, and most are in the process of unloading now. Up to this point 280 ships have reached their transfer zones, and another 150 or so are two or three days out from their destinations. The torpedoed military transports and the tankers damaged in the Oscar attack are starting to get repaired now, and warships are refuelling in port before forming up again (with a bit more attention to who needs what fuel this time). The Fredericton just reported in, and a few more units are still due to arrive, which will be helpful, although probably not critical. I just wish they were down in the southern hemisphere, where coverage is painfully limited.

March 11 1994, 10:30 Z

MPA squadrons report a sharp drop in enemy submarine activity in the last few days, with only one more Victor and a couple of phantom targets falling victim to airborne torpedoes. A number of submarine-cued hunts up north turn out to be nothing but wildlife.

The geriatric Argonaut, one of the old Leanders retrofitted with an extra-long tail, has an adventure when she picks up a passive sonar contact while patrolling alone in the Bay of Biscay. Despite her extra-long tail it's a direct path contact, and the captain slows to 2 kts to listen, thinking it's probably another biological. "SS!" says the sonar operator, and the captain orders a flank speed turn away (thinking to outrun a possible 533mm torpedo) while he hastily scrambles his helicopter to investigate. The Lynx manages a 1-shot kill, amazingly enough, and the Argonaut continues running for a few miles, before slowing and turning aside - at which point the Type 65 torp goes rumbling by a mile and a half off the port side! Not a Tango or a Fox, but an equally elderly Romeo, retrofitted with deadly 650mm torps.

Down south there's little activity. The Badger hunt off the Nigerian coast doesn't find any more targets, so the EP-3 presses in closer to the coast with radar on, hoping to provoke a response. Sure enough a pair of Mig-25s come out to investigate, and while the EP-3 turns away its escorting Tornado burners around behind the Migs (staying out of their radar), and then lights them up from behind. Both are shot down, but their return fire gets uncomfortably close. I think I'll not repeat that stunt. Beating up lone Badgers is one thing, but this is too risky.

Harbour master reports show a total of 287 ships unloaded or passed through their transfer points, as of this time, with a further 68 processing at their destinations now, and an additional 40 a couple of hours out. Major convoys have just left New York, Gibraltar, and the Channel/Brest area, with strong escort. Lesser convoys in the southern hemisphere and the Central America area still dream of strong escorts, but they sure don't have them. I just know there's a disaster out there somewhere.

(You wouldn't believe how awesome it is when a Knox checks in. Strong active sonar, good tail, helicopter, ASROC, and a nice long range. These are quickly becoming my favorite escorts for a no-air threat environment. Just the thing for the smaller convoys!)