**Northern Fury 8, Plug the GAP**

**AAR By Joel Radunzel**

Post 1

It's the second night of the war. The Soviets have overrun north Norway, managed to land at Trondheim in central Norway, and something is developing over Iceland. Intel suggests we have two Soviet battle groups, one centered on a *Kuznetsov* and one on a *Kiev*, headed our way. If the Russians are making a real push for Iceland than that probably means we are off the hook here north of Scotland, but I'm sure there are surprises in store. Regardless, the Russians have torn wide holes in the GIUK gap that are likely to get bigger before they get smaller and are making a strong push against the north Atlantic SLOCs. Our o A screenshot of a map

Description automatically generated with low confidenceverarching mission is to plug the gap north of Scotland.

On the NATO side, the HMS *Invincible* with a full complement of Sea Harriers has put to sea west of Scotland with a strong escort. East of Scotland, a surface action group consisting of four frigates, two German, one Dutch, one Belgian, with the flagship on the Dutch Frigate *De Ruyter* (hence the name, TG *De Ruyter*) is also steaming north.

We have operational control of a squadron of Buccaneer attack aircraft and one of Jaguars at RAF Lossiemouth, though their standoff armament is limited, consisting of sixteen Sea Eagle anti-ship missiles and a whole bunch more Martel anti-radiation missiles. The remainder of the anti-surface armament consists of 1000lb dumb bombs and 70mm rockets, not the best loadout for going up against modern warships.

At RAF Leuchars we have a squadron of Tornado interceptors and another of Phantoms, both equipped with Sky Flash missiles which are essentially British copies of the American AIM-7 Sparrow. While these aircraft are inherently better air-to-air platforms than the Harriers on Invincible, the Harriers have the much more deadly AIM-120 AMRAAM, so those will be the ones going up against the best Russian fighters if I can help it. Unfortunately, stocks of these missiles on Invincible are limited.

The Government has charged us with protecting the evacuation of the Faroe and Shetland Islands, which complicates things. Charter aircraft are shuttling people south and four commercial ferries have departed, two from each archipelago. The MoD is concerned about a Soviet play for these islands, and as such two battalions of the Parachute Regiment, 1 and 3 Para, are going to be dropped on each location to secure them. Jumping will get the troops down faster than trying to land the C-130s at the small airfields, but the paras will only be able to bring light weapons. The Danish Coast Guard Frigate HMDS *Hvidbjorgen* is in the Faroes to provide some security for the evacuation. We want to hold these island chains, but more importantly we want to forestall any attack on Scotland itself.

And that's it. The Russian juggernaut is heading south. Let's try and stop them again!

Post 2

HMS *Invincible* steamed through the night northwest of Scotland, her escort all around her. The task force, of which the small carrier was the flagship, was the strongest that the UK had put to sea since the Falklands War twelve years earlier. The admiral commanding sipped his tea while his staff filled him in on the situation.

A pair of AMRAAM armed Harriers were pulling CAP over the task force, ASW and AEW helicopters were out, and a BARCAP of Tornadoes and Phantoms was taking off from RAF Leuchars to patrol just off the north Scottish coast. There hadn’t been any signs of the Soviets yet but reports from Norway put two of their task forces headed south past Trondheim.

A Nimrod MPA was patrolling between the Shetlands and the Faroes, using its radar to search for surface contacts. So far, the radar technicians onboard had located a gaggle of five ships spread out along the northeast arc of the compass, all moving southwest. Commercial ships had been fleeing the northern ocean warzones for days now, and these appeared to be some of the last stragglers. The pilot of the Nimrod took his four-engine aircraft down through the clouds to visually identify each of the radar returns. Over the next hour, close passes over the ships confirmed that they were all commercial vessels. One was a medium tanker, two were dry bulk carriers, and two were heavy lift transports, both with bulky cargo embarked under large tarp-like coverings.

Things started to develop in the early hours of the morning. Technicians aboard the Nimrod and also at listening stations on the Faroes began to pick up radar emissions from Soviet patrol bombers, followed minutes later by the signatures of two Su-33s to the north and two Yak-141s to the northeast. Based on reports from the fighting off of Norway over the past two days, this indicated that the Kiev-group, centered on the Baku, was still to the east, while the *Kuznetsov* group was advancing out of the west side of the Norwegian sea. The pattern of the enemy fighters indicated a CAP over each group.

After a few minutes, the technicians began to pick up more signatures, coming south between the two pairs of fighters. The sensor operators began to sort these out into the signatures of eight Tu-22M bombers, based on the emissions of their powerful Downbeat radars.

The admiral aboard Invincible ordered his task group to alter course to the east to stay out of the radar detection range of one of reconnaissance Tu-16s, which was working its way south between Iceland and the Faroes. Then he ordered another pair of Harriers into the sky and directed that these and the rest of the airborne CAP proceed north to meet the incoming threat.

The two Harrier pilots rotated their vectored thrust nozzles down and rolled down *Invincible*’s short deck, then lurched up the ski ramp at the bow and into the cold night sky. There was no need to bank. The ship was already oriented along their intercept vector.

The pilots of four Harriers, two Tornadoes, and two Phantoms proceeded north towards the Faroes-Shetlands gap, hoping to prevent the Russian bombers from getting into range to launch their missiles at the NATO ships to the east and west of Scotland. These hadn’t been detected by the Russians yet, as far as the NATO EW experts could tell, but with several Soviet recon aircraft working south it was only a matter of time.

As the flights of Harriers approached the Faroes to the northwest, a distress call came in from the ferry evacuating civilians from the western side of the Shetlands. A massive explosion had torn a gaping hole in the ships side moments before, and the large craft was taking on a massive list. There were hundreds of civilians onboard. The culprit could only be a submarine lurking offshore, but why the Russians would stoop to sinking an evacuation ferry was unclear. In horror, the admiral realized that there were no assets anywhere near the stricken ferry that could offer assistance, particularly with two Soviet carrier groups bearing down. The passengers and crew, those that were still alive, would have to survive in their life rafts for a while. The Admiral directed a second Nimrod, outfitted for ASW work, to transit north and search the waters around the sinking ferry for the prospective Soviet submarine.

Just then the voices of the technicians at both the Faroe and Shetlands radar stations came over the net with the dreaded “Vampire! Vampire!” Several small, supersonic objects had separated from the oncoming Soviet Backfires and were heading towards both island chains.

The two flights of Harriers arrived over Vagar in the Faroes as the AS-4 missiles arced into their supersonic flight paths. The pilots of the flight of Tornadoes flipped on their afterburners to try to reach the airspace over the Shetlands as well, but they were further away and slower than the incoming missiles.

Several of the Soviet weapons were obviously radar seekers, homing in on the radar stations at the northern end of both archipelagos. The technicians at both places switched their sets off to confuse the Russian seekers. These tactics nullified the attacks, causing the Soviet projectiles to miss their marks by hundreds, sometimes thousands of meters.

Behind the ARMs came the anti-surface variants. Over Vagar the Harrier pilots turned into the diving missiles and volleyed off their AMRAAMs in a bid to protect the facilities at the airfield below. Only three of the AS-4s survived the onslaught, but these did damage enough. One dove onto Vagar airfield and exploded on the taxiway, shattering a charter aircraft that had been earmarked to fly evacuees south. The other, an anti-ship variant, acquired another of the evacuation ferries and dove into the defenseless vessel’s hull, exploding and causing the ship to slowly fold in half and sink in minutes. There would be no survivors. The third missile acquired the Danish Coast Guard frigate HMDS *Hvidbjornen* and dove. At the last second the Danish captain ordered chaff rockets fired. These streaked away and exploded. The radar-guided AS-4 followed a false return straight into the sea beyond the patrol ship, exploding in a dull flash that lit up the night and the underside of the clouds nearby.

The damage was far worse at Tingwall airport in the British Shetland Islands. Here the Tornadoes had not arrived in time to intercept the incoming Soviet weapons, and it was doubtful their less capable Sky Flash missiles would have been effective anyway. Eight big Russian missiles dove onto the airfield, wreaking havoc on the five parked charter planes around the small strip and lighting fires all over the complex. The destruction was terrible, made more so by the fact that the field was crowded with civilian evacuees and the small airport lacked the sort of damage control equipment necessary for this situation. With all of the charter aircraft burning or broken and dozens of casualties at the airport, there would be no more evacuations from Tingwall that night.

On *Invincible* the admiral was stunned. In the opening minutes of the battle he had completely failed in his directed task to protect the evacuation of the islands. Dozens, maybe hundreds of civilians were dead. He raged at the seeming carelessness of the Russians and the stupidity of his own government that had put them in harm’s way in the first place. Now his airborne Harrier pilots were out of AMRAAMs, and the listening stations on the Faroes were picking up emissions from a large group of Su-33s gathering to the north, and the radar station on the Shetlands reported another group of four Tu-22Ms angling southeast towards TG *De Ruyter.*

Post 3

The Russians were presenting the British air defenses with a serious dilemma to deal with. Patrol bombers and Tu-22Ms were heading towards the *De Ruyter* task group’s four modern frigates, requiring the attention of the Tornado and Phantom interceptors that had failed to intercept the missiles bound for Tingwall airport. At the same time, a major sweep by a squadron of Su-33s from the Russian carrier lurking somewhere to the north was developing towards the Faroes, where charter aircraft that had survived the missile attack were readying to get as many civilians off of the islands as possible. Both threats would need to be met, but resources were scarce. To complicate matters, pairs of contacts flying in loose military formations were also transiting south between the two island chains towards Scotland.

Controllers on the Invincible vectored the four Harrier pilots who had expended their AMRAAMs defending Vagar from the Soviet missiles eastward to intercept this latest threat, while another pair of jump jets lifted off from the British carrier and accelerated north to intercept the squadron of Soviet naval fighters. A pair of Phantoms and another of Tornados out of Leuchars would join them, while the Tornados over Tingwall vectored northeast to intercept the Backfires making for TG De Ruyter.

The first NATO pilots to make contact with the Russians were the Harrier pilots sent to block the two flights splitting the distance between the Faroes and Shetlands. In the darkness the two Brits banked until they were behind the lead pair of contacts and closed until they could visually identify the intruders as Tu-22 Blinders in the moonlight. A Sidewinder missile exploded off of the rails of each British fighter and streaked into the tailpipes of the unsuspecting Soviets. Two flashes followed and both Russian medium bombers belched fire is they fell through the clouds below and into the sea. The British pilots were already turning north to identify the next pair of intruders, each Harrier carrying one remaining Sidewinder.

The pilots used the same tactic to identify this second pair of contacts, they approached obliquely from the front as their radars tracked the bogeys, trying to get within range to perform a visual ID. These two contacts were behaving the same as the Tu-22s which had just been downed, but the behavior was a façade. As the Harriers approached, the Soviet pilots of the two Yak-141 fighters turned into their assailants and launched IR seeking missiles of their own at point blank range. The British pilots barely had time to yank their sticks over in an attempt to evade this unexpected attack.

One of the Soviet missiles exploded into the belly of the lead Harrier, shattering the small jet and killing the pilot instantly. The other Brit managed to evade his assailant by a clever combination of flares and creative use of his thrust vectors. This maneuver also brought his nose around towards the Russian fighters which were maneuvering to reengage him, allowing him to snap off his remaining Sidewinder at point blank range. The missile shredded the cockpit of the lead Yak-141, and the two surviving belligerents engaged in a turning cannon dogfight in which the better-trained Brit quickly gained the edge. A burst of 25mm ADEN cannon fire shredded the Russian’s tail, sending the Yakovlev into an uncontrollable spin. With the local sky clear, the British pilot swooped low to see if he could spot any evidence in the dark water below that his wingman had survived. When he could locate nothing in the darkness, he turned back towards *Invincible* to rearm.

To the east the four Tu-22Ms were on a vector southeast towards the four European frigates, which were arranged in a diamond formation with the Danish Frigate *Niels Juel* leading and the two Dutch frigates and the German *Lutjens*-class *Brandenburg*. Altogether they represented a formidable collection of firepower including dozens of Standard and Sea Sparrow SAMs, as well as two dozen Harpoon anti-ship missiles. They would need the firepower.

Long before the Tornadoes approaching from Scotland could get in range to engage the bombers with their Sky Flash TEMP Mods three of the Soviet bombers released two supersonic AS-4s each and turned north for home. The six missiles accelerated to their full speed and arced southeast towards the small surface group.

Warned of the incoming weapons by the AWACS orbiting over northern Scotland, the crews of the ships in TG *De Ruyter* lit off their radars and prepared to defend themselves. As the Russian weapons came in range and began to dive, SM-1 missiles exploded into the night in fiery arcs away from their launching ship. The first Russian missile exploded in a cloud of shrapnel, then two more. Then the shorter ranged Sea Sparrows joined into the defense and knocked down the remaining three missiles. The sailors aboard the NATO ships breathed a sigh of relief.

Then, as the two NATO Tornado pilots came within range of the remaining Tu-22Ms, approaching from broadside, they loosed two Sky Flashes just as the Russian bomber loosed its own two anti-ship missiles. The Russian turned and evaded the two Sky Flashes, then two more, before a fifth missile fired by the Tornado pilots broke one of the bomber’s swing wings, sending it tumbling down. But the damage was already done.

The two anti-ship missiles approached TG De Ruyter, and more Standards exploded northwestward. One of the AS-4s was knocked down, but the other evaded the two SM-1s intended for it, and the Sea Sparrows launched to compensate turned too sharply to engage and lost the return from the launching ship’s radar. The big weapon slammed into *Niels Juel*’s superstructure, penetrated deep amidships, and exploded. The Danish frigate shuddered briefly, then began to fold inward, here keel broken. The bow and stern tilted upwards, and in minutes the two halves of the warship slipped between the waves.

Post 4

The major Soviet threat now was the sixteen Su-33s sweeping down on the Faroes from the north. To oppose them two Tornados and two Phantoms were approaching from the southeast, while a pair of heavily-AMRAAM-laden Harriers were on an intercept vector from Invincible to the south. The Sky Flash TEMP Mods carried by the Tornadoes out-ranged any missiles the Sukois could carry, but they required the launching aircraft's radar to remain pointed at the target through the missile's entire flight. The Phantoms carried a much shorter ranged legacy version of the Sky Flash. The AMRAAMs couldn't match the range of the TEMP Sky Flash missiles or those carried by the Russians, but they had the advantage of being fire-and-forget, meaning the Harrier pilots could launch them and then turn to flee from the inevitable counterattack.

The plan of attack worked out by the controllers on the E-3D AWACS over Scotland was for the Phantoms to attack under the cover of missiles launched by the Tornados. As the Russian interceptors responded to this threat, the Harriers would dash in and unload all eight of their AMRAAMs against into the flank of the Russian formation. If all went well, this would blunt the Russian attack long enough for more NATO fighters to join the battle and tip the scales in the Brits' favor.

The attack started off well enough. The pilots of the two Tornados each selected a contact on their radars and launched two Sky Flash missiles apiece. The Russian pilots responded immediately and as expected, turning into the attack and going to afterburner. The Soviets' situational awareness was hampered by the fact that they were operating beyond any friendly air, sea, or land-based radar or control and they failed to notice the two Phantoms approaching at an off angle from the first attack.

When the Russians were in range, the British pilots of the two Phantoms lit off their own radars, acquired a target apiece, and engaged the Soviet naval fighters with two of the older Sky Flash missiles each. As the bright trails of the British missiles lit up the night, the Phantoms could see the first flashes in the distance of the Soviet counterattack. The Brits began to sweat as their RWRs growled that the enemy radars had locked onto them, a sure sign that Soviet air-to-air missiles were inbound.

At this point the NATO plan began to fall apart. The British flyers had eight missiles in the air targeted on four Russian aircraft. The flashed into the Soviet formation and exploded, but only managed to down two of the nimble Soviet Su-33s. That left fourteen of the Russians to contend with. The Tornado and Phantom drivers were already banking their aircraft into a tight turn and punching their afterburners when the Soviet riposte arrived. Some of the Russian missiles had gone wild when their launching aircraft had been destroyed, but several remained, but not enough.

The first NATO casualty was one of the Phantoms, blown to pieces when a Russian missile detonated feet away from its underbelly. Then one of the Tornadoes took a cloud of shrapnel into its engines, turning the interceptor into a glider from which the fighter bailed out over the dark ocean. The two surviving pilots were now clawing every knot of speed that they could get from their airframes as the more modern Soviet fighters closed in. Just as it looked as if they would lose the race, eight AMRAAMs exploded into the Soviet formation from the south in a concentrated volley.

The two Harriers approaching from *Invincible* had kept their radars off, vectoring off of guidance provided by the network of NATO ground and airborne radars still active. As they closed with range of the southeast bound Russian fighter sweep, both pilots had flipped on their radars and as rapidly as possible volleyed off their entire load of eight missiles targeted at four of the bigger Soviet jets before turning back towards HMS *Invincible*.

The Soviet pilots attempted to avoid this new threat, evading a few of the active radar-homing missiles but not all. In the end all four targeted Soviet fighters were downed. The surviving Russian pilots broke off their pursuit of the fleeing Phantom and Tornado. Unfortunately for the Harrier pilots, the ten surviving Su-33 drivers now concentrated their attention on the two Harriers, which lacked afterburners and were far outmatched by the Russians in a footrace.

A deadly drama developed northeast of the Faroe Islands as the Harrier pilots attempted to flee into the protective SAM envelope of the Invincible task group while the Russian tried to overtake them and shoot them down first. The Russian naval aviators quickly overtook the slower jump jets, and missiles leapt off the rails of the lead Soviet fighters.

RWR warning buzzers filled the Brits' helmets as the Soviet weapons closed, the pilots tipped their noses downward to try to gain speed as the they twisted in their seats to try to locate the incoming threats. The two Harriers dropped through the clouds as the Russian missiles closed. One of the AA-10s exploded directly behind the lead Harrier, causing the small jet to tumble and disintegrate midair. The trailing Brit, seeing his leader die, flipped his stick over just in time to evade the missiles meant for him.

The surviving British pilot, after his evasive maneuver, leveled his aircraft out meters above the choppy Norwegian Sea, still heading southwest towards the Faroes. The Russian pilots, struggling to pick the small British jet out of the sea clutter, descended as well and continued to close. The British pilot's helmet again filled with noise as more Soviet missiles streaked towards him from behind. Without altitude, he had no room to maneuver anymore. With just seconds remaining until impact, a dark shape loomed in the darkness ahead. The pilot tilted his nose up and rocketed over the rugged coast of Suduroy, the southernmost of the Faroe Islands.

The Russian missiles followed him up, but just in time the Brit tipped his nose downward and was past the southwest coast of the island. Now the rugged land mass was between him and his pursuers. The Soviet missiles, lacking a radar return to home in on, flew off into the night. The British pilot, staying low, banked left and settled into a new course due south. Two minutes more and he was within the protective range of the Sea Dart missiles carried by the Type 42 destroyers of *Invincible*'s escort. The Russians broke off their pursuit and climbed back to altitude, returning to a patrol station north of the Faroes. The British had traded three of their jets for six Russian fighters, but the Russian now held sway in the skies over the northern island chain.

Post 5

With the Soviet naval fighters patrolling over the Faroe Islands, the British command aboard HMS *Invincible* was forced to pull back their western aerial flank. Tornados and Phantoms from RAF Leuchars still pulled CAP over the three surviving ships of TG *De Ruyter* and the Shetlands, while the AMRAAM equipped Harriers of the British carrier task group remained within the protective bubble provided by the long-range Sea Dart missiles carried by *Invincible*'s escorts.

As the night moved into the early morning hours both sides scored successes and suffered losses. The pilot of a lone RAF Tornado from the TG De Ruyter CAP, working from direction offered by the controllers in the E-3D over Scotland, switched off his radar and turned north. After several minutes of cruising he was within range of the valuable Tu-95 Bear reconnaissance bomber whose crew had provided targeting for the Tu-22M strike on the surface group earlier. Once in range the pilot flipped on his radar, locked it onto the huge Russian four-engine turbo-prop aircraft, and lofted a single Sky Flash missile northward.

The crew of the lumbering Soviet aircraft barely had time to react to the threat. Their radars were meant for surface search, and without an airborne radar asset they had been oblivious to the approach of the loan NATO interceptor. The Soviet pilot was just beginning to put his aircraft into a banking dive when the Sky Flash detonated over the middle of the port wing, sending shrapnel through both engines and starting a fire that quickly engulfed the entire wing. The pilot maintained level flight to allow his crew to escape. Once all had bailed out over the dark water below, he put the bomber on autopilot and made his way to the emergency exit. Just as he got there the structural integrity of the wing failed. The bomber folded in upon itself and tumbled towards the moonlit clouds below. The pilot did not escape.

Further west, the helicopter ASW screen for Invincible had been tracking several contacts during the night. One after another proved to be false contacts or biologics, which hadn't stopped one of the Task Group's more jumpy helicopter crews from launching and expensive Mk46 torpedo into a school of codfishes. But one contact remained persistent and was drawing closer to the NATO formation from the northeast. The NATO helicopter crews used passive sonobuoys and dipping sonar along with their MAD sensors to localize the contact. After about an hour they screen commander was willing to accept the contact's designation as a Soviet Sierra-class submarine and ordered his aircraft to engage.

Two Mk46 fish were dropped from one of the helicopters directly onto the tail of the Soviet boat, whose crew were unaware that they were even being tracked. The Russian captain, belatedly aware that he was under attack, barely had time to order his ship to flank speed before the two fish, diving from above and behind, detonated their warheads, one against his ships screw, the other above the engine room, which quickly flooded. The sub's engines stopped, and the ship slid backwards into the depths of the Rockall Trough.

To the east, the NATO ASW effort was less successful. In TG *De Ruyter*, the frigate *Niels Juel* had been the ASW picket for the four-ship formation. The destruction of that ship in the strike by the Tu-22Ms had allowed the captain of a Soviet *Tango*-class diesel-electric boat to successfully stalk the NATO ships. The first warning that the crews of TG *De Ruyter* received of the threat was the sound of high-speed torpedo screws approaching from directly ahead at close range.

While the three ships maneuvered violently to try to evade the sudden threat, the airborne ASW help sped towards the location where the torpedoes had first been heard and began searching the back bearing for the enemy ship, which the dipping MAD equipment quickly detected. The helicopter dropped smoke to mark the site, banked into a circle and came back around to drop a Mk46 into the water.

The NATO counterattack was too slow for the German frigate *Brandenburg*, however. The two big Soviet torpedoes pressed in relentlessly and detonated under the ship's keel, causing structural failure throughout the ship. Even so, the frigate did not break up, but rather settled in the water, giving much of her crew time to scramble into life rafts and boats.

The Soviet captain had erred in concentrating his attack on one ship, however. With the Mk46 in the water chasing his boat, he was unable to execute a second attack on the two surviving NATO frigates. In the end, his evasive maneuvers were futile as well and the *Tango* joined the *Brandenburg* on the bottom of the North Sea.

Perhaps the most satisfying NATO victory of the night so far occurred when the Nimrod, sent to locate the sub that had sunk the evacuation ferry off the west coast of the Shetlands, detected, localized, and engaged its prey, a Soviet *Kilo*-class submarine. The destruction of the Russian warship did nothing to bring back the dozens of civilians who had been dumped into the frigid waters earlier in the night, but the NATO crew felt that at least some justice had been served for the travesty. However, the Nimrod's pilot was quickly forced to withdraw south due to ominous developments north of both island goups.

Post 6

As night advanced into the dark early hours of morning, a new and unexpected threat appeared that threatened to deliver control of both the Faroe and Shetland Islands to the Soviets without even a fight. Powerful radars on the patrolling British Nimrod aircraft had allowed the crews to locate and track the eastern Soviet surface force, centered on the smaller Kiev-class carrier Baku. To the west, the captain of the submarine HMS *Turbulent* had come to communication depth to report that he had detected and tracked the entire *Kuzentsov* group, but the geometry of his approach was such that he had been unable to attempt a penetration of the carrier group's screen, electing instead to shadow in their wake in hopes that the Russian ships might turn back and offer him a shot.

South of these groups, a gaggle of merchant ships had been fleeing south. Some of these ships were in contact with Scottish maritime authorities, some not, which wasn't in itself particularly strange. What was strange was a radio conversation in the clear between two of the vessels, spoken in Hungarian accents, that produced the following transcript:

-Ship 1: (~63 2N 04 3W) … in position for delivery are you?

-Ship 2: (~62 2N 01 2W) One ….. other soon.

-Ship 1: Good, flooding … good riddance.

-In Russian: (~67N 02W) Terminate all transmissions immediately.

The Russian command had abruptly ended the radio conversation. The Admiral's intelligence staff was still trying to make sense of these intercepts when a Flash message from US 2nd Fleet arrived. The message announced that NATO forces were abandoning Iceland due to a major Soviet airborne operation there, and indicating that the Shetlands-Faroe sector could expect only continued probing attacks as the Soviets concentrated their major forces against Iceland. The message also limited air operations to south of the line 63 Northing and naval operations to south of 61 Northing. With the attacks on Northern Norway and Iceland, it appeared not to the Admiral's staff that all of the major Soviet forces in their theater were decisively committed. They were only partially right in their assessment.

Thirty minutes later the meaning of the cryptic radio intercept began to become clear. Earlier in the night a Nimrod had buzzed the two ships who had transmitted and identified them as heavy-lift vessels, both carrying large, covered objects that hadn't been identified in the darkness and because of large tarp-like coverings. Now, radar operators on the patrolling Nimrod watched two smaller contacts break away from each of these vessels, bearing south at over fifty knots. Only one kind of ship of that size and speed existed in this part of the world.

Four massive Soviet MDK *Zubr*-class hovercraft thundered southward across the choppy Norwegian sea, two making for each island group. Each vessel, propelled by three gigantic fans and capable of carrying an entire company of naval infantry with their armored vehicles, would reach their destination in less than a hour. If they made it, the islands would fall. British Paras from 1st and 3rd Battalions, the Parachute Regiment, were scheduled to drop at Vagar and Tingwall at dawn, but these operations would be suicide for the lightly armed paratroopers if Soviet marines and armored vehicles already occupied the drop zones by then.

Fortunately, the NATO commander had assets to deal with this surprise development, though dealing with it would come at a cost. Buccaneer attack jets were being readied at RAF Lossiemouth for a strike on one of the Soviet surface groups. Some of these could be dispatched to attack the hovercraft, though this would deplete the already limited number of standoff Sea Eagle missiles available for the attack on the better defended Soviet carriers. Still, the Admiral determined that the loss of the islands north of Scotland would be a far worse outcome than a delayed or ineffective strike.

After extremely abbreviated mission briefings, four RAF Buccaneer pilots rushed to their waiting aircraft, went through a truncated pre-flight checklist, then taxied to the runway before taking off in pairs. The two flights of attack jets, each aircraft carrying two of the precious Sea Eagles, split up based on guidance provided by the Nimrod and pushed their throttles forward to full military power. They had enough time for the intercept, but there would be no opportunity for a second strike if this one failed. To the east, the CAP of four Tornadoes also turned north to provide the bigger jets with protection.

Now the threat became more complicated. The surviving radar station in the Shetlands reported detecting contacts rising from the Baku group that were faster than the helicopter escorts which had been airborne throughout the night. Soon eight fast-moving contacts were in the air, heading south directly between the two pairs of *Zubrs* and directly into the path of the oncoming British Buccaneers. The pilots of the four Tornadoes, taking direction from the AWACS further south, pushed they throttles to full and leapt forward to the intercept.

What followed was the most one-sided engagement of the night. The British pilots, armed with long-range, radar guided Sky Flash missiles, began to engage at maximum range. Their targets, the slow, stubby-winged, Yak-38s of Baku's air component, possessed nothing more lethal than short-ranged IR-guided missiles. They came on, but one after another was blotted from the sky by the volleys of British missiles. In minutes, the Soviet aerial coverage of the developing naval landing had been annihilated, clearing the way for the Buccaneer drivers.

The Yak-38s had accomplished one thing, however. They had forced the patrolling Nimrod, which had been tracking the Soviet hovercraft, to switch off its radar and flee south to clear the aerial engagement area. Now the Buccaneer pilots had to rely on their own, powerful surface search radars for the final targeting of their missiles. As each pair of aircraft reached their release point, the pilots flipped on their sensors and between the two assigned their targets. Once they were certain of their targeting vector, each pilot released his two Sea Eagles. The eight weapons launched off their rails, engines ignited, and dropped down until they were flying northwest at sea skimming altitude.

Here again the Soviet lack of aerial radar coverage hampered their response. The crew of the first *Zubr* targeted didn't even know they were under attack until the lead missile plowed into the port bow of the craft, exploding among the crammed naval infantrymen, BTR-70s, and PT-76 tanks. The impact shredded the front skirt of the hovercraft, causing its bow to quickly settle while the massive fans in the back continued to push the ship forward at high speed. The second missile then impacted and demolished the ship's bridge, ending any hope that it could be saved. The fans continued to spin at full power, and in moments the wedge-shaped bow caught the choppy waves. The huge ship lifted violently by the stern, almost flipping over as vehicles and men tumbled forward inside. Then the craft crashed back down and was rapidly pushed beneath the waves by its own propulsion system.

Lookouts on the trailing *Zubr* had seen the double flash signifying the death of their sister ship and had alerted the captain. The *Zubr*s possessed some defenses against missile attack, including two AK-630 30mm CIWS, and two quad Strela-2 missile launchers. The captain of the second hovercraft ordered his radars active. These quickly detected the fast-approaching Sea Eagles and the hovercraft's defenses came alive. 30mm cannon fire ripped from the port CIWS system, walking into the leading missile and detonating its warhead in a flash that lit up the dark clouds above and sea below. But it wasn't enough. The second missile was too close, and the automated AK-630 system failed to lock onto it before it too plowed into its target, wrecking the Zubrs propulsion fans and shredding the rear of its skirt. The captain, his ship dead in the water, was forced to order his crew and the infantrymen in the hold to abandon ship, trusting their lives to the icy Norwegian Sea.

The results were the same for the second pair of Soviet landing ships. In that case, one of the missiles targeted at the lead craft malfunctioned and flew straight by the ship, but not the second. The second ship also managed to down one of the incoming threats, but it too was damaged beyond repair by the last surviving missile.

As the four Buccaneers flew south, the British pilots were gratified to hear the report from the Nimrod, now back on station, that their targets had either disappeared below the waves or were dead in the water. The Paras' drops on the Faroe and Shetland airfields could proceed. Once there, capture by a Soviet *coup de main*, as had just apparently been attempted, would be much, much more difficult.

Post 7

As the situation now stood, the Soviets were in tentative control of the airspace over the Faroe Islands, patrolled by Su-33s from the *Kuznetsov*, while the British Tornadoes and Phantoms patrolled over the Shetlands to the southwest. The British would need to push the Soviet patrols back from the Faroes, at least temporarily, if the dawn paratroop drop by 1 and 3 Para out of RAF Brize Norton in the south was to have any chance of success. The Harrier pilots aboard Invincible, after discussing the imperative with the men who had already engaged the powerful Soviet fighters and survived, settled upon a tactic they hoped would neutralize the Russians’ advantages in speed and performance. The squadron commander went off to raise RAF Leuchars on the radio to work out the coordination.

It took over an hour to get the pieces in place. A pair of Harriers had taken off from *Invincible* and headed northeast until they were several dozen miles southeast of the patrolling Soviet fighters. A flight of four Tornado pilots circled several miles to the Harriers’ southeast. On order from the AWACS, the Harrier drivers turned towards the closest pair of patrolling Russians and lit off their radars. The Russian pilots responded immediately, turning towards the threat and going to afterburner.

The Sukois’ pilots were met by four AMRAAMs, which they attempted to evade. One succeeded, but his wingman’s aircraft tumbled into the sea. The surviving Russian pilot, enraged, pressed his pursuit of the now withdrawing Harriers. He was just pulling within range of the trailing one when his RWR started to squawk that he had been locked onto by a hostile radar. Looking up he could make out the fiery specks of two Sky Flash missiles, fired by the oncoming Tornadoes, arcing towards him. He threw his fighter into a defensive maneuver to shake the missiles and succeeded, at the cost of losing the chance to engage the Harriers. The maneuver also bled his speed and altitude so that when the second pair of Sky Flash missiles arrived there was little he could do but pray. It didn’t work, as the second missile exploded, sending shrapnel ripping into his cockpit.

The NATO pilots were elated with the success of their tactic. Using the AMRAAM armed Harriers as bait put the Russians in a bind because they could not ignore the jets longer-ranged missiles, but pursuing the jump jets exposed them to concentrated fire from the Tornadoes. In the next couple of hours the British pilots executed two more of these ambushes, downing several more Su-33s for the cost of a Harrier and a Tornado. The British commander began to feel confident that he could clear the skies over the Faroes before the Paras arrived.

The Russians weren’t sitting on their heels either, however. A surprise low-level dash by a pair of Su-33 pilots managed to catch the British Harrier CAP over the Invincible group out of position. The Russians penetrated the outer screen of the task force and made for a pair of *Invincible*’s helicopters at the northern end of the formation. Though the helicopter pilots were maneuvering for their lives, they never had a chance. Russian missiles slammed both of the craft down into the sea. Worse, these had been the Task group’s local AEW platforms. As the Russians escaped northward, chased by Sea Dart missiles which fell into the sea, the situational awareness for the British fleet stood much reduced.

Though the *Kuznetsov* was drawing closer the Faroes, making it easier for the Russian pilots to keep their patrols over the islands, the losses inflicted by the British pilots’ ambush tactics were such that the Russian naval aviators were now forced to pull back, mingling their patrol with that of the Russian carrier’s CAP.

Dawn was now breaking to the southeast. The rising sun saw two streams of C-130 transports crossing northward over Scotland. They carried two battalions of the Parachute Regiment, who would jump into Vagar and Tingwall to secure those airfields from the Soviets. The British commander felt confident enough in his situation to leave the less capable Phantoms to protect the drop on the Shetlands while he ordered his Tornado pilots with their longer-ranged TEMP mod Sky Flash missiles to forestall any Russian interference over the Faroes. The Harriers would patrol the Faroes airspace as well, but the stocks of AMRAAMs on *Invincible* were almost exhausted, meaning that the jump-jets’ air-to-air usefulness would soon be radically reduced.

As it turned out, the Soviets didn’t contest either drop. The Hercules transports came in low over both drop zones and lines of parachutes blossomed out of plane after plane. The British paratroopers hit the tarmac and the surrounding snowfields in tight stick patterns. The soldiers shrugged out of their harnesses, took their weapons out of the padded jump cases, shouldered their rucksacks, and moved out to their assembly points. Squads formed up, then platoons, and soon units were moving out in tactical formation to occupy their defensive positions. Both island chains were now more or less secure from Soviet invasion.

The Soviet carrier groups continued south, however. The group centered on the smaller helicopter carrier *Baku* was now angling its course southwest towards the Faroes. The *Kuzetsov* was further north and showed no signs of altering its course, which would eventually bring that formation to the west of the islands. The admiral commanding HMS *Invincible* and her escorts had placed his task group on a course that would put them into a blocking position between the two groups of islands, from whence he could engage the smaller Soviet group, if the conditions permitted.

To facilitate those favorable conditions, the Buccaneers and Jaguars at RAF Lossiemouth were preparing a strike on that group that would hopefully weaken it enough so that *Invincible*’s strike could be decisive.

Post 8

While the Buccaneers and Jaguars readied for their strike mission at RAF Lossiemouth and the Invincible Task Group rendezvoused with the two surviving frigates of TG *De Ruyter* between the Shetlands and Faroes, the Admiral's staff aboard the British carrier worked to establish communications with the Paras on the ground at both Vagar and Tingwall. To this end, *Invincible* dispatched two helicopters, one to each airfield, carrying small contingents of Royal Marines with communication equipment so that the soldiers could communicate with their naval support offshore.

The helicopter flying to the more southerly Shetlands arrived at its destination first without incident, but the bird destined for the Faroes became the center of an aerial drama that drew in increasing numbers of fighters from both sides.

The helicopter with its cargo of Royal Marines was detected by a two-ship CAP of Su-33s who had been patrolling north of the Faroes after their earlier scrapes with the British Harriers and Tornadoes had forced them out of the airspace directly over the islands. Sensing an opportunity for an easy kill the two Soviet pilots accelerated to full military power and vectored onto the lone contact. Seeing this, the controllers aboard the British AWACS over Scotland ordered the two pilots of *Invincible*'s CAP, composed of AMRAAM armed Harriers and which had been shadowing the helicopter at a distance, to intervene to protect the transport.

The two British aviators sped north as fast as their airframes could carry them, interposing themselves between the vulnerable helicopter and the oncoming Russians. The range closed, and four AMRAAMs streaked northwest into the predawn darkness. The Russians returned fire, launching their own long-range missiles, but the British weapons had the advantage. Both Soviet fighters were shattered by shrapnel from exploding warheads. The Russian missiles, left without guidance, flew on harmlessly until they ran out of fuel. The first attack had been defeated, but TG *Invincible* was now entirely out of the wonderful AMRAAM missiles that had given them such an advantage.

As the Harrier pilots withdrew, another Soviet Su-33 pilot, this time alone, turned his big naval fighter towards the low-flying helicopter and accelerated. This threat fell to the pilots of two Tornado pilots, who were trailing the helicopter by several miles, to deal with. A pair of Sky Flash TEMP Mod missiles arced northwestward towards the lone blue and grey painted Russian fighter. The Soviet pilot tried to evade and withdraw, surprised by this new threat after the Harriers, but he couldn’t avoid the second missile, which exploded into his aircraft as he was pulling out of his evasive maneuver for the first. A few minutes later a fourth Su-33 attempted to dash in from the north, but this one two was engaged and destroyed by the escorting Tornado drivers with their much longer-ranged missiles.

The helicopter flared and landed at Vagar, its occupants unaware that they had been the center of a fierce battle that had netted the NATO air forces tentative control over the Faroe islands. With the *Kuznetsov*’s air group heavily attrited, the NATO fliers could concentrate on their first purely offensive mission of the day. As the helicopter headed back towards Invincible, Buccaneers and Jaguars began to roll down the runway at Lossiemouth.

Post 9

The squadron of Buccaneers formed up over RAF Lossiemouth for the strike on the Kiev-class carrier Baku and her escorts, which were now passing from northeast to southwest on a course for the Faroe Islands. The plan was to attempt a heavy strike on the carrier, hopefully crippling her, so that the *Invincible* task group, reinforced by the remnants of Task Group *De Ruyter* could engage the Russians in a decisive surface action. The Russian task group had passed below the 62nd parallel, meaning it was fair game for the Scotland based strike aircraft.

The strike package suffered from some serious weaknesses. The Buccaneers carried the Sea Eagle sea-skimming missile, which far outranged any of the defensive systems carried by the Soviet ships, but there were only sixteen of the missiles available. The rest of the Buccaneers were armed with either Martel anti-radiation missiles or dumb bombs. The squadron of Jaguars, following behind, was armed entirely with unguided ordnance, a mix of dumb bombs and 70mm rockets. There were no electronic warfare planes in the package, they all being committed to the fighting in Norway and Germany.

The plan of attack was for the Martel-armed Buccaneers to approach to just outside the maximum range of the Soviet SAMs. Then the Sea Eagle armed Bucanneer drivers would loose their missiles in a concentrated salvo against the Russian flagship. As the Soviets lit off their defensive radars, the first group of strike pilots engage them with the Martels, which, with a 300-pound warhead, were potently destructive weapons in their own right. The Jaguars would then sweep in to clean up the survivors.

The Buccaneers swept in at the flank of the Soviet formation from the southeast. The airspace above the formation had already been cleared of the solitary Soviet fighter aloft, an unlucky Yak-38, by a sweep of Tornadoes whose pilots had engaged the aircraft from beyond the reach of the Soviet SAMs. On an order from the strike commander, sixteen Sea Eagle missiles dropped from their mounts, their engines ignited, and the dropped to wavetop level to speed towards the flattop.

As the missiles crossed into the Soviets’ engagement envelope the Russian crews began to turn on their radars. Defensive missiles left launchers on the Russians ships atop fiery contrail in the grey morning light, and the SEAD Buccaneers responded by launching their supersonic Martels.

The NATO attack suffered from the fact that the Martels had to be programmed before takeoff for the type of radar they would engage. This made the SEAD effort uncoordinated at Buccaneer pilots maneuvered to try to get a shot at ‘their’ radar. In the time it took them to do so one Sea Eagle after another was shot down by SA-N-9s launched by *Baku* and her escorting *Udaloy*-class destroyer. The weight of the NAT O salvo just wasn’t heavy enough, and the last Sea Eagle blew apart more than three miles from the *Baku*, its target, allowing the Russian crews to concentrate their fire on the Martels approaching several ships from multiple vectors.

These more difficult targets were also engaged effectively, but now the Soviets were running out of their ready supply of defensive missiles. Switching off their radars and ringing up flank speed saved several of the escorts from damage, but not all. Three missiles dove into the *Udaloy* and exploded, starting fires that quickly raged out of control. Two more struck the nearest *Krivak*-class frigate’s fantail, blowing shrapnel into the ship’s engine room and causing damage to one of her shafts. Even so, the results of the strike were disappointing, the Soviet defenses in daylight and in the absence of electronic jamming were surprisingly effective. The British strike commander decided to call off the second stage of the attack by his remaining Buccaneers and Jaguars, lacking as they were in stand-off ordnance. The British pilots turned south, frustrated.

The commander of TG *Invincible*, too, decided that discretion was the better part of valor and that the safeguarding of his carrier at this point in the war was a better option than recklessly flinging his ships against a Russian task group that was well-endowed with standoff anti-ship missiles and that could be supported at any time by missile-armed bombers. *Invincible* and her escorts turned south. At the same time the Russian commander of the *Baku* group, who had kept his force on a steady course for the Faroes until this point, ordered his ships to turn north and disengage as well.

TG *De Ruyter* did get some measure of revenge for the losses they had suffered. The two ships of the task group detached from the *Invincible* and sprinted north for a couple of hours until they were in range of the two stricken Soviet ships, which were themselves struggling to keep up with their withdrawing task group. The NATO crews fired two Harpoons each, which skimmed northward. The Soviet crews, focused on fighting the fires and flooding in their damaged vessels, never even saw the missiles coming. Their first indication that they were under attack was the detonation of the first Harpoon’s thousand-pound warhead as it plowed into the fantail of the *Udaloy*. Three more explosions followed in quick succession.

Both Soviet ships were now wrecks, and the captains ordered abandon ship. The sailors of TG *De Ruyter* had at least been avenged. Now the Dutch survivors turned back south for the protection of the Royal Navy.

The Battle of the Shetlands and Faroes had checked the Soviet southward advance. While the NATO forces had failed to inflict crippling losses on the Red Banner Northern Fleet, they had managed to check its advance. This was important, as it would be another several days before the Americans could bring more than one of their own carriers to bear in the theater. Moreover, the *Kuznetsov*’s air group had been severely depleted and an attempt to land Soviet Naval infantry in the islands had been soundly defeated. The Paras were now entrenched and there would be very little the Soviets could do at this point to dig them out.