**Northern Fury #9 – Hold the Line**

**AAR by fitzpatv, July 2021**

Sorry it’s been a while since my last post, but this scenario is an absolute transatlantic epic and took several days and a lot of grey hairs to play. It is a very tough challenge indeed...

Matters have grown worse for NATO. Not only have the Soviets taken Iceland, but Norway has now surrendered and even Stavanger and Oslo are marked as enemy-held. The Russians have moved aircraft, radars and SAMs to Iceland with remarkable speed and turned the island into a fortress, while their subs are flooding into the Atlantic and, with the Varyag and ubiquitous Kuznetsov carrier groups, are advancing to cut the NATO SLOC (Sea Line of Communication) with Europe.

American troops and supplies are en route for France in several convoys and an enormous stream of airliners, the latter constituting the ALOC (Air Line of Communication) and also encompassing return flights. Unfortunately, they are very lightly escorted by a few destroyers and frigates of limited capability. With American carrier groups only just starting to arrive in-theatre, the USS Enterprise has to shoulder the burden of defending the entire region for two days.

The iconic carrier, escorted by three cruisers, two destroyers, two frigates and trailing a supply ship, has a large complement of aircraft and plenty of SAMs, as well as Harpoons for surface combat. Powerful though this force is, its reach is limited in the vast Atlantic and, if the Enterprise is lost, so is the game…

Elsewhere, you have US and Canadian fighters based at Goose Bay, Labrador and Gander, Newfoundland, along with tankers, AEW and patrol planes. More fighters are due to be ferried-up from as far away as Louisiana, some to be re-based in Thule, Greenland, some at Goose Bay and others (with AMRAAMs and AGM-84 missiles) to reinforce the Enterprise air group. The latter risks overloading the carrier, so you have to consider sending some of your less-capable (Sparrow-armed) Hornets to Goose Bay to make room.

In the UK, you have RAF Tornadoes, the F-15 Eagle squadron previously engaged in Norway (with Ace status), plus more tankers, EW, AEW and patrol planes. The French are now joining the fray, with Breguet Atlantique turboprop sub-hunters based in Lorient and you have a screen of three US subs for the Enterprise, another near the convoys and the British SSN Talent to the NW of Scotland.

A big problem is that the convoys and their close escorts are under AI control, so you can’t alter their course or give them orders and have a classic ‘responsibility without authority’ issue.

Numerous aircraft have Reserve settings and can be equipped as desired. As usual, there are lots of pre-set missions which you can take or leave. I kept the Ferry missions, the Goose Bay tanker one and those relating to Gander, otherwise creating my own, some of which needing tailoring as the game progressed. In general, I prioritised long-ranged Phoenix missiles for my carrier fighters, kept ships’ radars dark and, as is my preference, had aircraft on Winchester, with Auto Evade off and one shot per target. Note that you will need to define Doctrine for your land-based reinforcement squadrons when they arrive at their destinations, as well as assigning them weapons instead of Ferry settings.

Though there’s no penalty for disobeying this, Bart suggests having morale thresholds for some of your squadrons, typically when they are reduced to 3-5 aircraft. Thankfully, this only happened once, late in the game.

Hostilities commenced with the UK-based fighters engaging Russian Flankers screening the Varyag group as it negotiated the Iceland-Faroes Gap and the Enterprise CAP duelling with the Kuznetsov’s SW of Iceland. Things started badly, with a Tomcat and Tornado lost for one Su-33. A MiG-31 Foxhound then popped-up in mid-Atlantic and shot-down a Shadow EW plane that I was using for recon. NATO air losses typically cost 4VP, while Soviet planes score half that, larger aircraft being worth more.

It became apparent that the enemy were using tankers to extend their fighters’ range and threaten the ALOC, while numerous Fencer and Badger EW planes were creating an electronic fog to the S of Iceland. The latter was a real nightmare, making it very hard to see where the enemy were and leading to several incidents where NATO fighters were surprised by MiGs. Attempts to hunt down the jammers were utterly frustrating, as it was impossible to locate them accurately enough to fire. I tried using different types of aircraft and having my own EW planes in support, but nothing worked. It was much more difficult than dealing with Soviet jamming in earlier scenarios.

As fighters began to arrive at Thule and Goose Bay, it became apparent that the Varyag group was attempting to cut the SLOC, leaving Kuznetsov to take-on Enterprise. Meanwhile, the two Foxhounds pulled-back before reaching the SLOC (probably went Shotgun after bagging the Shadow) and, flying with radars off, were intercepted and destroyed by a Lossiemouth F-15. The Soviets took revenge by downing an F-15 and a Nimrod patrol plane W of Ireland, but seemed to be taking ‘operational losses’ due to fuel mismanagement, a theme which continued throughout the game.

A Victor II SSN then appeared near the most Easterly convoy and was bounced and sunk by an Orion for 25VP. Aerial duels continued to go the way of the Soviets and I decided that giving battle anywhere near Iceland was a bad idea, going on the defensive. I had, at least done some attrition to the Varyag’s fighter group with my British-based planes, making Enterprise’s task easier. This decision anticipated a directive along these lines from High Command, which arrived soon afterwards.

Down South, the frigate USS Patterson was suddenly torpedoed and sunk by a sub, costing 50VP. More positively, a Hornet with AMRAAMs, one of a handful so-equipped on the Enterprise at the outset, headed-off and terminated another incursion by a pair of MiG-31s.

Disaster then struck when a Soviet sub attacked a convoy of five transports, sinking the lot for a total loss of 250VP. The submarine USS Sturgeon, nearby, was moving at Creep speed, but totally failed to detect the culprit. Given the deadly Stallion and Starfish ASW torpedoes carried by most Russian SSNs, she wasn’t too inclined to go hunting.

An Oscar II SSGN then approached the fleet, opting for a torpedo attack rather than launching her Shipwreck missiles from a distance. This proved a poor choice and she was sunk by a Viking patrol plane. Not long afterwards, a swarm of Su-24 Fencer attack planes barrelled-in at the Enterprise group from the NE. CAP intercepted them well outside their missile range and splashed 15 without loss, giving us a major morale boost.

Kuznetsov’s Flankers then began to make their presence felt N of the fleet. I engaged them with Tomcats and Hornets armed with 120nm ranged Phoenixes, which proved highly-effective, rapidly wearing-down the opposition.

Matters continued to heat-up, with a Sierra SSN making a run at the fleet and getting sunk by a Seahawk. Kuznetsov and friends (a Kirov, Slava and a pair each of Udaloys and Sovremennys) then began hurling the heavier ships’ Shipwrecks and Sandboxes at the task force. This attack was mostly thwarted by a combination of CAP and RIM-67s, but a couple of missiles got through and sank the frigate USS Simpson for a loss of 25VP. Another submarine arrived (a Victor III this time), to be destroyed by an Oceanhawk chopper.

Given a lull, I experimented by launching a TALD decoy flock at the Kuznetsov group in an attempt to make them waste SAMs (Bearing Only Launch menu option required). Unfortunately, this didn’t work, mainly because the Russians had their radars off.

Air skirmishes continued. With the Varyag group now further from Iceland and somewhat to the E of Enterprise, I resumed harrassing them with Lossiemouth’s planes, chipping away at the Su-33s at some cost to myself. More Foxhounds penetrated towards the ALOC and, though none survived CAP, one got far enough to shoot down an airliner, which cost 20VP. To combat this, I had to use Canadian-based fighters with tanker support and such aircraft as Enterprise could spare.

Matters came to a head in this respect when a dozen or so MiG-29s made an all-out attack on the ALOC. Their ‘radars-dark’ approach put them at a disadvantage and ten were destroyed at a cost of two Canadian Hornets. The survivors went Shotgun and withdrew.

By now, a dozen AMRAAM-equipped Hornets from the US were beginning to arrive at Enterprise, after a nervy tanker operation to shepherd them across the Atlantic (with everything else going-on). These needed time to rest and prepare, but usefully augmented my air group. I’d lost some of the weaker Hornets already onboard and flown others off to Goose Bay, again with tanker support. Hopefully, I’d be able to avoid undue congestion with what I now had available.

I now mounted a strike against the Kuznetsov force with my dozen Intruder attack planes (Harpoons), a couple of similarly-equipped Hornets, a pair of Prowlers with HARMs and some TALDs. The latter again failed to attract any attention, but the main strike took some advantage of the initial lack of Soviet radar to surprise and sink an Udaloy II (25VP) and cripple an Udaloy I, leaving her dead in the water. Both Harpoon Hornets strayed into SAM range and were lost. The Russians retaliated with medium-ranged Sunburn missiles, but these were fired out-of-range and fell short.

With the worst possible timing, three more MiG-29s chose this moment to go at the ALOC. I intercepted and shot them down, but at a cost of two fighters. A pair of Fencers made a desperate run at the fleet and were swatted like flies. Meanwhile, the Kuznetsov’s air group was whittled away by CAP and Flankers became an endangered species in the vicinity. With the crippled Udaloy bringing their progress to a dead stop, the Kuznetsov group had literally been fought to a standstill and I could now largely ignore them beyond using my Sparrow-armed Hornets to chip away at their recon and ASW Helixes, eventually exterminating these in turn.

Enterprise now turned her main attention to the Varyag group, which was approaching from the E at 18 knots. Identical to the Kuznetsov group, it consisted of a carrier, two cruisers and four destroyers. I sent fighters from the carrier and Lossiemouth to wear down the Flankers and, given a high proportion of planes with AMRAAMs or Phoenixes, could either use range or the hit-and-run tactics perfected in Norway. The aerial exchanges shifted heavily in NATO’s favour and the Su-33s were eventually wiped-out at little or no further cost, the Russian choppers then following.

Elsewhere, two Soviet SSNs appeared near the Easternmost convoy. The AI-controlled chopper from the frigate USS Doyle probably hit a Victor III without sinking her, as she dropped to a dead stop before vanishing, not to be seen again. A Victor II made a damaging torpedo attack, sinking one transport and hitting several more. Doyle’s chopper was the only ASW asset nearby and she only had one torpedo. Some French Breguets were on their way, but took some time to arrive. When they did, they caught and sank the offending submarine.

The Varyag squadron drew into range and unleashed its very own Northern Fury in the form of a hail of Shipwrecks and Sandboxes. Things were hectic for a few minutes, but CAP’s AMRAAMs and Phoenixes prevented all but a handful of the enemy ship-killers from getting near and those that did were snuffed-out by SAMs.

Enterprise struck back with her Intruders and Prowlers, sinking an Udaloy II and badly damaging another, while also hitting the Kirov. The enemy speed dropped to nine knots, allowing us the option of disengaging at will. As before, a Sovremenny fired a few Sunburns from outside their effective range and these fell into the sea.

By now, a squadron of twelve Hornets with AGM-84 missiles were arriving to bolster Enterprise’s strike capability, courtesy of another elaborate tanker-supported operation.

Off to the S, an Orion finally found the Victor III that had sunk the five transports earlier and took belated revenge. By now, I was doing what I should have implemented from the start and assigning patrol planes to missions to guard each remaining convoy, with mission areas moving relative to the latter’s’ positions.

W of the Kuznetsov group, the SSN Portsmouth had been having a quiet time observing the enemy from a safe distance. Life then got much more interesting for her crew!. First, she detected a submarine to the SE, too close for comfort. Thankfully, the Russian (the Victor III Tambov) was asleep and Portsmouth slipped into her baffles to sink her with an ADCAP Mk48 torpedo. At this point, a formation of Russian aircraft was detected approaching at 260 knots – a half-dozen Mail ASW flying boats!.

Portsmouth dived as deep as possible, went to Creep and prayed that CAP would get there in time. A fighter intercepted the enemy and destroyed all but two of them, downing one with her 20mm cannon, but then had to break off. The survivors droned around over Portsmouth’s position, but mercifully failed to find her and a second Tomcat intervened with Phoenixes and cleared them away, earning the submariners’ heartfelt thanks.

I’d intended Portsmouth and the nearby San Juan to attack the Kuznetsov with Harpoons, but a bug made it impossible to switch from torpedoes. As Portsmouth had fired a torpedo, the software relented and let her obey the Reload Priority order, but her strike failed to penetrate the enemy SAM shield. Peace and quiet returned for the sub’s crew.

Just as I was beginning to get complacent, a second big Fencer strike was mounted from Iceland, co-ordinated with a volley of Sunburns from the Kuznetsov group. As before, the Russian missiles were loosed beyond their effective range and fell short. CAP then scrambled in force and massacred the Fencers, including a trailing group of three behind the main wave.

All this time, the Russians had been making execrably bad use of their numerous Backfire bombers. With their Kitchen missiles, these could have been a deadly threat to the fleet, but the Soviet approach seemed to be to use them singly against the SLOC instead. This might have been worthwhile had they been able to find it!. Instead, they droned into mid-Atlantic or a position E of Greenland, flew in circles, then withdrew, often to crash-land on the way home to Siberia. After a while, I worked-out their flightpaths and set-up ambushes which scored a steady flow of VP, with about 40 of the bombers destroyed in one way or another. An occasional hazard was attracting the attention of the MiGs S of Iceland. On one occasion, I lost an F-15 that was refuelling from a Viking tanker in this area. The Fulcrums pursued the tanker, which miraculously survived several missiles before getting into the shelter of CAP, which blasted the bandits with Phoenixes.

With my aircraft re-readied, I launched another Intruder/Prowler attack on the Varyag group. As the planes were lifting-off, an Oscar I SSGN appeared, dangerously close to the destroyer O’Bannon!. A Seahawk launched in a hurry and removed the threat before it got into torpedo range, but it was a close call. The strike managed to sink a Slava cruiser for 75VP, taking me into Triumph territory with a score of +506. A nuisance to watch-out for is that both Harpoons and AGM-84s need to be launched from 35,000’ or less, so you have to remember to dive slightly before attacking.

My AGM-84 Hornets followed-up, but failed to penetrate the still-impressive Soviet SAM shield. I was having a few problems with ASW planes on Missions straying into enemy SAM range and had to adjust the Close ASW Mission area to prevent more losses.

Russian submarines kept appearing and USS Thorne’s Seahawk ended the voyage of another Sierra NE of the fleet.

By this stage, I was operating AAW missions E of Greenland from Thule and Goose Bay with advanced tanker support and these added to the enemy Backfire losses. It would have been satisfying had the AI not been so mindless.

I kept battering away at the Varyag squadron. A third Intruder/Prowler strike failed to damage them and prompted another bizarre out-of-range counterstrike from the Kuznetsov group, using Silexes as well as Sunburns. It caused some alarm, but no hurt.

With no Harpoons left for the Intruders, I re-armed them with Skippers and Walleyes. The gauntlet passed to the AGM Hornets and these finally made the breakthrough, sinking the Varyag herself for 150VP and the Kirov for 125.

At this point, a Lossiemouth Eagle was bounced by MiG-29s and lost while I wasn’t looking, though it cost the enemy two fighters. This took 293 Squadron down to three aircraft, so I suspended their operations, as suggested by Bart.

The plan was now to use Intruders and the SSN Chicago to finish-off the remnants of the Varyag force, while doing what I could against the Kuznetsov with my remaining AGM-84 strike, Harpoons from the fleet and the other two subs. Unfortunately, at this point the game crashed and there was an error on the Save file (done every hour of game-time) which stopped me restarting. Under the circumstances, I was happy(ish) to take the Triumph, with the score approaching +1000. There were only six hours remaining, the Varyag had been sunk, the Kuznetsov bled white and the Soviet air groups neutered, while Enterprise remained in rude health. Many enemy subs had been destroyed, which offset the losses inflicted on the convoys, while the ALOC had been almost totally safeguarded. The only residual danger was that a sub could somehow slip through and sink the Enterprise, but this was extremely unlikely.

The Soviet bid to dominate the mid-Atlantic had been thwarted and, with more US carrier groups arriving on the scene, the tide of war was beginning to turn.