**Northern Fury – Charge of the Light Bde**

**Playtest Report by AndrewJ Nov 2017**

So, here we go with Charge of the Light Brigade, bearing the famous ominous poem in mind... ("Charge for the guns!", he said: Into the Valley of Death rode the six hundred.)

**THE SITUATION**

I've been assigned the task of reducing the two Russian-held airfields (Orland and Vaernes) in the Trondheim area, by naval bombardment and aerial attack, as well as hunting mines in the Orland approaches, and inserting some special forces in the Orland area. The Russians are naturally all over the Trondheim area, where intelligence reports indicate one or two SA-20 batteries, and they also have two more southerly airfields at Sandane and Sogndal. I've been told to expect small enemy ships and subs, but their major naval vessels are busy elsewhere.

On land I have four Norwegian airbases. They have some good units, but a lot of them are lesser aircraft armed with dumb ordnance (cluster bombs and iron bombs). I have several bases in the Shetlands with Marine F-18s and their tankers, although the F-18s are loaded with dumb ordnance again. Down in England I've got a real mix of everything in Lossiemouth (some air-to-air, some dumb bombs, some ARMs), a big pack of Phantoms with iron bombs and napalm in the south, and assorted long range support elements (AEW, Tankers, MPA, ELINT).

My naval forces are somewhat spread out. I've got two British carriers, each with one long-range missile ship in attendance, and a loose screen of three ASW ships far out in front of them. Closer to the coast I have a group of four British ships (two long range Sea Dart ships, and two close range Sea Wolf ships) forming up for bombardment duties, and even closer in I've got another spread out NATO group providing screening. I've also got a flotilla of minesweepers and two patrol boat escorts approaching Orland from the south, coming through the Hitra Island channel.

**THE PLAN**

Looking things over, I'm really concerned by the situation out at sea. My main task groups are in widely dispersed formations that would be useful for hunting submarines out in the open Atlantic but leave the individual ships essentially on their own in the event of air attack, and I'm supposed to be snuggling up to multiple active airbases. The two task groups are ordered to turn and close on each other at high speed in order to concentrate their SAM umbrella, before proceeding to the coast for bombardment duties. The carriers will also close up, following each other in trail behind a more concentrated ASW screen, in the hope that a narrow densely swept lane will be more secure from submarines than advancing on a broad weak front. My minesweeping flotilla will split in two, one group heading around the sea coast of Hitra Island, and the other proceeding along the channel. Since they are so weakly defended I'm hoping this will preserved at least a few of them in the event of attack.

My initial air attack will send all stand-off attackers (i.e., those with HARMs, Mavericks, and GBUs) from the Norwegian airbases to find and engage the SA-20s and other SAMs expected in the Trondheim area, escorted by as many good fighters as can be mustered. They probably won't achieve conclusive results, but will hopefully attrite the fighters and air defences, and force the expenditure of a large number of the valuable SA-20 missiles.

The southern Sogndal and Sandane airports will not be attacked directly, with the exception of a small HARM attack on the long-range search radar at Sogndal. A large number of my aircraft are set up for conventional bombing, and they could easily reach these targets, but previous engagements have taught me that going into the Russian low-altitude air-defence envelope is likely to cause horrific losses, even when terrain masking. Therefore, the western Jaguars and F-5s are sent along the coast to hunt for Russian patrol boats operating in the area, but the eastern ones are kept on ready reserve in the event that Russian ground forces make a sudden surge.

My English bases will send their F-4 and Tornado fighters to patrol near Sogndal and Sandane, in order to deal with pop-up threats there after my main Norwegian force has passed by. Jaguars and Buccaneers with dumb bombs will join the coastal hunt for Russian boats (staying well away from the airbase defences), and the F-15s and Tornados with ALARMs will head to the Orland/Trondheim area to try and give some cover to my ships, and to try and deal with peripheral air defences revealed by the first attack.

The big pile of F-18s and F-4s in England are armed with dumb bombs, which is a recipe for disaster. These are all ordered to stand down and re-arm with guided weapons: GBUs on the F-4s, and HARMs on the F-18s. Because of this stand-down they will only be able to participate in one attack during our allotted window, but it should be much more effective and survivable. These planes, along with the re-armed Norwegians (those who survived) will make a concentrated dawn attack on Orland and Vaernes. This will be our only attack on the airbases during our allotted mission time, so it will have to work. I expect to be able to rough up one airbase, but I'm not sure if we'll be able to manage both of them.

**THE ACTUAL**

As the scenario starts my ELINT and E-3 aircraft report contacts with numerous active vessels in the Trondheim area (mostly ASW craft), and multiple ships tucked away in various fjords. The ones in the fjords are not moving, not emitting, and I don't know what they are yet. I don't want to waste missiles on what might simply be fishing boats, so no attacks are made yet.

The first action begins at sea, when the Russians spot the ASW helicopters around the British ships, and start making aggressive runs towards them. If I don't engage, they'll slaughter my helicopters, and when they drop below the clouds to finish them off they'll spot my ships. If I do engage my radar emissions will identify my fleet anyway. I try and split the difference. While my helicopters flee for the safety of their ships at wavetop altitude (all ASW patrols are cancelled for the moment) only the Birmingham lights up and starts engaging Mig-31s with its long range Sea Dart (which proves quite effective). Moments later I start getting ESM hits from over-the horizon targeting radars on some of the boat contacts. They're not fishing boats. They're Tarantuls, and their supersonic sea-skimming anti-shipping missiles are on the way in.

A desperate fight breaks out around the merging task groups. As the ships race towards each other, more and more missiles pour in. At first there are only a few, and the Harriers can shoot them down, but then the Harriers run out of missiles or have to flee from Su-27s and Mig-31s, and I have to light up additional ships to defend. Each new ship that lights up brings more missiles in return, and then I have to light up even more, in a horrible progression that gets worse and worse. As this goes on the Russians throw in a Mig-27 attack, and a heavy sweep of Su-27s from the north. My missile stockpile is dropping sharply, and I don't dare spend missiles on the passing enemy fighters, which sweep by and slaughter the AEW Sea King as it was running desperately for the carriers. My Harriers are all out of missiles and fleeing themselves, so they can't be of any help, and my support aircraft have to fall back too, as some of the fighters press past the ASW pickets, until the carrier escorts themselves are engaging with Sea Dart. (Fortunately, I don't need to light up the carriers themselves, so hopefully those haven't been ID-ed yet.)

Unfortunately, I'm not well placed to retaliate. Harpoons are outranged by SS-N-22s, and since my closest task group is racing out to sea to join its comrade it is out of range of the shore and can't shoot back. The two escorts with the minesweepers are in range, and they do open fire, but many of their missiles are shot down by enemy fighters. The few that do arrive find their targets have moved, and they wander off uselessly along the fjords and into the hills. The main benefit is that a number of planes spend their time chasing down these missiles, which helps ease the pressure on my task groups. It's not until some of my attack planes arrive later on that I'm able to bomb a few of the patrol boats, unfortunately long after they've fired their missiles.

By the time the two task groups have merged in tight formation, and the patrol boat missile attack has tapered off, my SAM stockpiles are dangerously low. All my ships (with the exception of one of the older Seawolf ships) are down to single digit quantities, many are at five or less, and some are completely out. The task group tightens up and moves in, but if there are more missile attacks (particularly from the north, where I have little recce, and am blind) then I will probably be forced to pull back and abandon the bombardment plan. A couple of shore based missile batteries could do significant damage at this point. For the moment, my ships press on. (The main thing that has saved me so far is geography. The missile boats were spread along a long coast, so their missiles arrived over time, instead of being a concentrated salvo which would have wrecked me.)

Over land, the situation is better. The surveillance radar at Sogndal succumbs to close-range HARM shots from a pair of F-16s sneaking along a valley, and the advancing fighters deal with a small number of Mig-23s that come up to contest the situation. As the advance continues, my fighters start engaging Russian fighters from the Trondheim area, gradually pushing them back. The SA-20 in the Trondheim area starts interfering, forcing my planes down into the valleys to hide, which hampers my ability to fight, but gives me a valuable indicator of where it is located. (Very close to an SBS dropoff zone!) A wave of fresh Mig-23s out of Orland drives off my Jaguars and F-5s, which had been harassing the Russian missile boats, before the last of my fighters force them away in turn, and for a moment there are only a few enemy planes on my radar.

Seizing the lull in the enemy's air activity, my attackers head for the ground and close in towards the SA-20, which seems to be pausing (possibly reloading) for the moment. That's when an SA-8 lights up in my path, along with a second SA-20 across the water from Trondheim, and then the first SA-20 opens fire again. I salvo my GBUs and most of my HARMs at the closer SA-20, only to see half of the HARMs change course and go streaking towards the further battery, while Weasels and F-16s try to deal with the SA-8s (plural, dammit) using Mavericks. Two SA-11s reveal themselves to get into the fight too. The one off to the NNW isn't such a big deal, but the one that opens up at my 5 o'clock definitely gets my attention, as it wrecks a pair of my valuable F-15Es who had to climb to release their GBUs. When the confusion finally ends, and the survivors are on the deck and headed for home again, the score is 1 SA-20 and 2 SA-8 batteries destroyed, and one SA-20 battery (the far one) seriously damaged and not emitting. This is much better than I had anticipated, and I am hopeful about the upcoming dawn strike. However, it completely reinforces my decision to stay out of the low-altitude air defence environment with conventional ordnance. If I'd gone in with iron bombs this would have been a disaster.

As the attackers proceed home the Soviets sortie another 8 planes from Orland (4 Flankers, 4 Floggers), and I have to divert my English F-15s to deal with them. The pair of EA-6s lurking behind the F-15s lets them engage safely without being fired upon first, but they use up all their missiles in the process, so they won't be able to cover my ships or guard the Tornados as they make Alarm attacks. Then another four Floggers sortie from each of the southern airbases as my strike is returning, but fortunately the F-4s and Tornados on patrol there are able to deal with them before they get too far.

At the moment there are no Russian fighters aloft over the sea, and some of my helicopters are headed out at wavetop level to check out a convergence zone Goblin contact to the north. Hopefully there'll be no interference, otherwise they'll be cut down in short order.

**NEXT...**

Based on what I've seen so far, my probable course of action is as follows.

Land based stand-off attackers will recover and re-arm, preparatory to the dawn strike. Land based fighters will recover and re-arm. Small patrols will be kept up, but no major sorties until dawn, unless there is a Soviet surge. Land based attack planes with conventional ordnance will continue to harass outlying Russian patrol boats. I'll try a reconnaissance of the Orland / Vaernes area with an IR equipped F-16, but the odds of success are low.

Task Group Virginia (all my surface ships not directly with the carriers) will advance on the coast in tight formation to bombard Orland, first making Harpoon attacks on the numerous patrol craft in the Orland area in an attempt to clear them out before the minesweepers arrive. (If they don't, the sweepers will be defenceless, and easily destroyed.) Carrier based fighters (Harriers) will cover the task group as best they can, bearing in mind that Harriers play poorly with supersonic fighters. If they're challenged by any significant force they will lose.

Minesweepers will clear channel for the bombardment route (assuming the patrol boats in the area are taken care of), allowing TG Virginia to bombard Orland and then retire. The helicopter insertion of special forces will proceed during this time, assuming I can clear the air defences off the landing zone.

Tankers will preposition for the dawn strike. The dawn strike will concentrate on Orland (primary) and Vaernes (secondary) airfields, targeting runways with GBUs.

Lets see what happens!

The Charge of the Light Brigade continues!

As the planes from the evening attack return to base, air-to-air skirmishing continues in the north near Orland, and my retiring fighters and newly arriving Harriers continue to hold their own. A Tornado strike with ALARM manages to severely damage another SA-11 south of Orland, as well as getting a look at other air defences in the area, before retiring in good order.

The advancing task group starts engaging the patrol boats in the Orland area with Harpoons, and it takes a fair bit of pounding to get rid of them, because they're close up against the Orland air defences, which manage to shoot down a good number of the incoming missiles. This is an expensive way to kill patrol boats, but it serves a double task of depleting the Orland air defences, which will be helpful when the dawn raid comes. Two Tarantuls coming down from the north are also dealt with in a similar way.

My decision to split the minesweepers into two groups turns out well - for the Russians. A ship in the outer coastal group suddenly vanishes in a thundering underwater explosion, with no sign of where it came from. Torpedo! The others start to run, but they have no idea which direction the attack came from, and a second ship explodes some minutes later. The others keep running blindly, certain they're about to die, but what actually happens is that the sub exhausts its batteries trying to catch up, and then sticks up its snorkel and gets detected on radar. ASW helicopters hurry in from the task group, keeping as low as possible, and sink the sub. Then, as they are turning to proof the path of the surviving minesweepers, they get a MAD hit on a second sub in the same area, and sink that too. Full of their success, they then proceed to lay sonobuoys in the expected path of the task group, and that's when the Mig-31s launch out of Orland only a few miles away. The Harriers try to interfere, but the result is predictable. Total score is two enemy subs and one Mig destroyed, at the cost of two minesweepers and two ASW helicopters. Let's call it a tie.

The southern minesweeper group coming through the channel doesn't have it easy either. The lead sweeper runs over a rising mine without detecting it, and is destroyed. Shortly afterwards the patrol boat escort detects a torpedo in the water, and turns to flee, but the torpedo hunts down and strikes one of the minesweeping ROVs instead. Turning to investigate, the patrol boat finds no sub, and another attempt by a brave ASW helicopter finds nothing before it is forced to flee from more fighters coming out of Orland. I'm not certain this was a sub at all, and it may have been the Soviet version of the CAPTOR mine.

The oncoming fighters from Orland cause another fighter engagement, this time with Mig-23s, and the Harriers do well against these, taking down four for no losses. I can't do this indefinitely, because the carriers are running out of AMRAAMs now, and I'm starting to load Sidewinders only. One thing which is helping is the oncoming task group, which has all its radars and jammers on at full power, allowing the Harriers to hide in the jamming cloud while the enemy's SARH missiles break lock. Of course, this means I've got a huge electronic 'here I am' signature hanging over the task group, but that's okay because my mission is to have the Russians firmly focused on our presence. I have also ordered the task group to turn on their lights, fire flares, and play Celine Dion really loud over the speakers. If that doesn't provoke a Russian reaction nothing will.

Watching the crawling progress of the minesweepers, who have so far only succeeded in finding mines by hitting them, I am very concerned about getting the task group safely into the bombardment zone through the minefield. I don't think I'll have the time to do it. However, there may be another way in. I can head east to the coast north of Orland, and then south along the coast to the area where the enemy patrol boats were operating. Presumably they weren't operating in a minefield (unless it's set for deep draft only), so I think it should be safe. The leading frigate will be very nervous. This will put me very close to the coast, so hopefully there aren't any tanks laagered on the beach. Perhaps I'll turn off the music as I sneak by.

In other news, SOF insertion has proceeded successfully, and the helicopters are returning to the task group. F-16 recce patrols with IR pods have tried to get a better look into the Vaernes area, but are getting shot at by SAMs and have to keep ducking away into the valleys, so they have little new information (although they did manage to strafe a radar). More to follow as the situation develops.

EDIT: I'm starting to get really nervous about Bodo and Vaernes. I had a flock of Su-27s come from the direction of Bodo early on, but what else is up there? Is a flight of Su-24's about to descend on my task group as it reaches the coast? And why haven't I seen anything else from Vaernes lately? I'm pretty sure Mig-29s and Su-27s are based there, but they've been quiet of late. Suddenly, my task group looks like it's in a very precarious situation (especially now that my Harrier CAP is depleted). I'm going to send up a tanker and a flight of Eagles to act as a long night-guard. I wanted them for the dawn raid, but I think they'd better get up there now.

EDIT 2: Just shot down an Su-24 jammer which had been orbiting E of Vaernes. It's replacement lifted off from Bodo. There're definitely Su-24s up there. Now I really want those Eagles over the TG.

The mission is complete, and units are currently returning to base.

The naval bombardment worked well, and no mines were encountered on the way through the Russian patrol boat area (although the area is infested with marine life and other false targets). The task group moved into line ahead with frigates leading (to limit the chance of mine strikes), and proceeded to blast away like ships of the line, destroying air defence units and exposed aircraft, and shelling the hangars. Having completed the shelling the task group turned about in good Jutland fashion and retraced its exact route out towards the carriers, escorting the surviving minesweepers that it picked up on the way out.

One more snorkelling sub was spotted far to the north by radar, and a pair of ASW helicopters dealt with it without difficulty.

With Orland neutralized as a defensive unit, the dawn strike was able to concentrate on Vaernes instead. No Russian aircraft were launched to defend the base. A large number of my ARM-carrying planes were able to overwhelm the defences, and then GBUs were used to systematically destroy the runways and taxiways and other high value targets like the hangars. After that Jaguars, Harriers, and Buccaneers were able to work over the defenceless airfields with 1,000 lb bombs.

The feared strike from Bodo never materialized, and the exhausted task group can now head home to rest and restock.

This was an interesting scenario with many different things to do. Thanks for putting it together for us. It has certainly taught me that I don't like minefields, and clearing a modern minefield is something that can't be done easily on the fly. Very slow, very methodical...