**Northern Fury #40 – Tongs**

**Playtest Report by AndrewJ Feb 2020**

One mostly empty weekend coming up, therefore...

**SITUATION**

After weeks of fighting, we're pressing the fight to the Soviets now, aiming to move north and cut off the flow of their troops and supplies through northern Norway. To do this, we've been given control of a mighty carrier group, with two full CVNs, three powerful Aegis cruisers plus a Leahy, and a pleasing number of frigates and destroyers. With so many SAMs around I'd almost welcome a large bomber raid! (Almost, mind you...) We've also got three modern SSNs at sea, an SSK along the shore, and useful MPA support from Nimrods and P-3s in re-captured Iceland and Kinloss. The one thing we haven't been given is missiles. TLAMs are non-existent, and Phoenixes, and AMRAAMs are in very short supply.

The Soviet surface fleet is essentially out of commission, barring a possible patrol boat or two, but their submarines are still a very credible threat. Their long-ranged bomber force took horrible casualties in earlier fighting, and I suspect it won't make a significant appearance now. Intel reports indicate that their fighters in the region are primarily MiG-23s, with some Flankers, Foxbats, and very capable MiG-31s to leaven the mix. Their SAMs are as vicious and nasty and plentiful as ever. My targets are series of command and transportation infrastructure facilities, some of which are exceptionally well hardened. Enemy-held airbases and SAM sites are entirely secondary to these objectives.

**PLAN**

My carrier group will make a slight turn to port, and continue north, paralleling the Norwegian coast while remaining well out to sea. We could close some, and still remain within our mission guidelines, but I don't see any advantage to it. My attack planes have good long ranges, and I think distance is still my friend.

My MPA are currently deployed on a series of four missions which cover most of the Norway-Greenland gap, but that leaves the carrier group exposed as it continues north, where it will be dependent on its own ASW assets. This makes me uncomfortable, and one group of American P-3s (with their excellent VLAD sonobuoys) is assigned to patrol a zone covering the carrier's path. The other MPA are ordered to spread out and stretch a little further to cover the gap. Hopefully there won't be major groups of transiting subs to catch, because the coverage will be very thin.

Enemy air cover from the MiG-23s doesn't concern me greatly, and I'm confident that I can handle them and the MiG-25s with a combination of Sparrows and jammers. The Su-27s and MiG-31s are a different story, and my dwindling supply of Phoenixes will be reserved for them. Hopefully it will be enough. A Mig-31 popping up into a brace of A-6s could be ruinous. I'm tempted to push my ELINT and AWACS out ahead, but I'll have to be careful, because long-ranged supersonic dashes by Foxbats and Foxhounds could be very dangerous to exposed units.

I'm definitely worried about hitting my targets with short-ranged weapons, in what is likely to be a very dangerous SAM environment. I don't have my normal swarm of TLAMs to soak up the missiles in advance, and I have to deliver LGB attacks from an altitude that will make me plainly obvious. I think I will need to make a first strike at the outer, softer targets (docks, tunnels, and minelaying), hopefully assess and stress the local defences somewhat, and then revisit the heavily hardened command and logistics bunkers with my full force. Past experience has shown that those will need repeated hits from heavy weapons to make any impression on them at all.

Well, let's see what happens!

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SIR! Permission to make munitions expenditure report, SIR!

Expenditure of Alpha-India-Mike-Fife-Fower-Charlie Phoenix air to air missiles: 41 rounds.

* Nineteen MiG-31 Foxhound destroyed, SIR!
* Three Su-27 Flanker destroyed, SIR!

Respectfully suggest Su-27 engagement was at a tactically critical time. Report will be updated after second strike wave is completed.

Request signoff, SIR!

(This board really needs a good salute emoji)

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**INITIAL RECONAISSANCE AND PROBES**

**Towards Bodo**

As my AWACS and ELINT planes spread out and arrive on station they start reporting numerous MiG-23s patrolling over the mainland, usually staying 15 to 20 miles inland, over the outer airbases (Bodo, Andoya, and Tromso). There’s also a flight of Flankers up over Bardufoss in the center, and three jammer patrols, and a Mainstay lurking further inland over northern Norway. It looks like our target area is heavily defended on the northern side, but Bodo is far enough south of it that there seems to be a gap there.

The CAG evaluates the situation, and decides to send a sweep of F-18s in the general direction of Bodo and our target, to try and provoke a response. The first thing they learn is that Bodo’s got Su-27s, not just the MiG-23s intelligence reported, and they’re covered by an SA-10 too. The Flankers come out to fight, and three are shot down, but the patrolling Floggers refuse to come out of their SAM cover, giving us the hairy Russian finger as they orbit in safety.

**Up North**

Meanwhile, my northern assets start reporting Badger jammers over the ocean north of Norway, along with MiG-31 radars half-way to Svaalbard. Is this a signal that the Russians are going to be forming up a bomber strike after all? A flight of F-14s is diverted north, finding and killing a Badger, before bumping into four Foxhounds, killing two of them, and then running away. AWACs starts reporting other large aircraft in the area, heading west into the passage between Svalbard and Greenland. Whatever the Soviets are up to, they’re devoting some significant assets to it.

Operating on the general principle that if the enemy thinks it’s worth doing, then we think it’s worth breaking, more flights of F-14s are sent north, with S-3 tankers to help them along. This leads to a series of engagements with MiG-31s, Tu-22 recce planes, and Badger jammers. My pilots start taking to heading far north, radar off and out of enemy radar cover, and trying to pick on the Badgers as they get to their furthest points. This can have its downside, as one F-14 finds out when it turns on its radar to Sparrow an approaching Badger, and finds there’s a pair of angry MiGs another 30 miles behind it…

I start to wonder if I really need to be up here at all. Am I maybe bumping into the edges of the Russian strategic bastion defences? If that’s true, then I don’t need to worry about attack from this direction. After several hours the air activity seems to taper off just before dawn, and I discontinue the patrols for the moment.

**Back down South**

Plenty has been happening in the south during the northern fighting.

As my fighter sweeps move about, into and towards our target area, and up along the coast, they start getting a better look at the defences. There’s at least one SA-10 covering the target zone, plus a surveillance radar that generally goes with an SA-11 (not counting the one covering Andoya), and when the SA-10 starts pitching missiles at me, it becomes clear that they’re alert and angry.

My strike planes are mostly loaded with penetrator weapons at the moment, but the two hardened targets are the ones that are closest to the SAMs, and I don’t think I can get there safely. I could probably get at the softer transportation targets in the south, but I don’t want to waste my limited supply of penetrator warheads on them. Therefore, a decision is made to stand down the strike and re-arm. The A-6s will load up with LGBs using conventional Mk84 warheads, for maximum destructive effect on docks and roads. The F-18s will almost entirely load up with HARMs, to tackle the SAMs, and a few SLAMs and Mavericks will be brought along for contingency targets. This re-org will take another six hours, which puts the strike launch time at approximately 03:00 hrs local.

As the reloading commences, more fighter sweeps along the coast get a few MiG-23s, but then a pair of MiG-31s pops up out of Bardufoss, which is the general signal to run away and holler for the F-14s. The Foxhounds are on a high-Mach afterburner charge, and plotting their courses shows they’re headed straight for two of my AEW planes, who immediately start diverting everyone to their defence. Phoenix shots manage to cut the corner, and the Foxhounds are downed before they can get into range.

More probes towards Bardufoss prompt several more sets of MiG-31s to come out, as well as some isolated MiG-25s, repeatedly pushing me back, and preventing me from getting at the MiG-23s which are annoyingly provocative near Andoya. I usually manage to kill the big MiGs, but the occasional appearance of Su-27s from Bardufoss is a tougher target, and they often get away safely, scraping me off on their SAM defences as they retire. (I suppose I should have let them come further out to sea.)

The Soviets are also making some noise at sea, where the Boston briefly picks up a distant CZ target, but loses it almost immediately. About an hour later the Boston hears it again. It’s very deep, and its moved about thirty knots (assuming it went in a straight line), and is already south of the Boston, headed in the general direction of the carrier group. This is probably an Alfa, and there’s no way the Boston can catch it, so the Boston comes to periscope depth, sticks up a mast, and calls the P-3s. When the P-3s arrive, they confirm that it’s an Alfa dashing at a full 42 knots (they can nearly hear it in the airplane), but it’s too deep for their torpedoes. They finally have to call in a Nimrod, which manages to get a hit after the third head-on BOL drop. At those depths, one hit is enough, and the little sub makes the long dive to the ocean floor.

**FIRST ATTACK 03:00 HRS LOCAL**

There’s some more air-to-air fighting along the coast, but by the small hours of the morning most of my planes are on their way back to the carrier.

**Inbound**

The strike begins launching shortly after 03:00 local, and it’s massive, taking all my strike aircraft and most of my fighters and jammers. Leading fighters start skirmishing with the enemy, holding off a succession of MiG-23s that start pouring out of Bodo in the south, while the main strike angles in towards the transport targets. It looks like most of the Foxbats and Foxhounds from Bardufoss are already dead, thank heavens, but some of the Su-27s are still active. Two come charging in at my stream of HARM-carrying F-18s, forcing my Tomcat pilots to brave the wrath of the CNO and engage them with Phoenixes, downing them before they can engage.

As the F-18s approach they fire some exploratory HARM shots at the surveillance radar near the SA-10, and then things really start to happen. Not only does the SA-10 open fire at my approaching planes, it turns out there isn’t just one SA-11 in the area, there are actually three of them, and one of them is close enough to cover the dock targets. The Hornets fire the bulk of their HARMs at the SA-10, then a salvo of six at the closest SA-11, and a couple more at the other batteries. The closest battery dies, as does the surveillance radar, the SA-10 is wounded, losing both its radars, and the other two SA-11s are left largely intact.

While my A-6s close in on their targets, a pair of MiG-23 leakers from Bodo force them to briefly haul off from the road targets, until some F-18s can dash in and shoot them down. After that, the strikes proceed in fine form, as the 2,000 lb LGBs smash the piers and collapse the road tunnels, and the A-6s turn for home at low altitude. Moments later a pair of F-18s with Mavericks and night vision pods pass down the length of the ferry channel, looking for local defences, before the next set of A-6s fly in and lay a string of mines in the water.

Now that the major SAM defences are down, some A-6s press further north to fire SLAMs at the radio mast and telephone exchange, while F-18s fire SLAMs at the two SA-11s, hoping to eliminate them while most of their missiles have been used. The communications targets are completely destroyed and the SAMs take hits, but they aren’t entirely eliminated. It turns out there are more point defence SAMs down there than I had spotted, and it takes some risky Maverick shots to get rid of the second SA-11.

In all the commotion, some of my F-18s push through to the eastern edge of the mountains, and head north, savaging the unarmed Su-24s and MiG-25s on jammer and ELINT duty. For a moment it looks like they might have a clear path to the Mainstay that’s been lurking in the background, but then ESM picks up MiG-25 fighter radars launching out of Banak ahead of them, and they prudently decide to turn around. (Back on deck the CAG congratulates them on their initiative, and asks, oh, by the way, did you realize you were violating the territorial integrity of the neutral state of Sweden? The shamefaced pilots admit they missed that small detail, blaming the fading border lines on their map, and volunteer for internment in the land of striking blonde women. The CAG is not impressed…)

**Outbound**

Once the strike aircraft are finished, they head back for the carrier, but the heavy fighter screen remains in the area to pick on targets of opportunity. They still can’t get at most of the northern CAP, in its protective SAM umbrella, but some planes do try and come out to intercept, and my pilots use their numerical superiority to good advantage. Some of the MiG-23s seem to have chaff made of ground horseshoes and pixie-dust (one decoys 7 Sparrows), but numbers tell in the end.

Once the skies look clear, the fighters turn for home, and by 06:00 local they are back on the carrier and making their reports.

**NEXT STEPS**

The strike successfully destroyed its targets, but it also revealed an imposing number of SAM systems in the area.

I need to get at the two hardened bunker targets to the east of Evenes airbase, but there’s an SA-10 and an SA-12 and something medium ranged (SA-6? SA-4?) only 15 to 20 miles to the north, so high-altitude approaches are out of the question. HARM barrages might do the trick, but I’ve already used a large number of them. Going in low seems to be the natural alternative, following the fjord right to the targets, but that would take me past the two SA-8s and the SA-15 (and the wounded SA-11) that were found at Evenes. Who knows what we didn’t find?

The planners plan while the ordnance guys reload, and the pilots try and grab some rest. The next strike starts at noon.

**SECOND STRIKE, 12:00 HRS local**

Re-arming continued for the rest of the morning, while AWACS units continued to monitor the ongoing Soviet CAPs flying over the occupied Norwegian airbases. No further activity was detected over the north ocean, and there were no signs of additional Soviet submarines. At this point there didn't seem to be any particular need to advance closer to the Russian bomber airbases, so half an hour before noon the carrier group reversed course, to parallel the Norwegian coast in a southerly direction, retracing the route it had already travelled.

**Inbound**

The strike procedure was similar to the last one, although the total quantity of escorting fighters was reduced. Strikers were divided into two main groups; A-6s with LGBs to attack the headquarters, and F-18s with LGBs to attack the SSM storage facility. HARM-carrying aircraft were prepared for two major salvoes against the SA-10 and SA-12 which had previously been spotted north of Evenes, and aircraft with SLAMs and Mavericks were tasked to perform follow-up strikes against damaged air defences after the HARM strike.

The mission went reasonably smoothly. Like before, the biggest challenge was from the defenders at Bardufoss, who sortied a pair of Su-27s to engage the incoming raid. This time the F-14s didn't hesitate, and engaged them quickly with Phoenixes, getting a lamentable 1 kill for 4 shots, before F-18s with AMRAAMs finished off the last defender. The remaining MiG-23s in the area had little chance in the face of NATO fighter superiority, and quickly fell to AMRAAMs and Sparrows. HARM barrages stunned first the SA-10, then the SA-12, allowing the bombers to streak in low over the mountains (swinging wide to the SE around the defences at Evenes) and destroy their hardened targets, while my remaining attackers worked over the crippled air defences from the safety of high altitude.

**Outbound**

As my attack planes turned to head for home, the SEAD forces reported that they still had a modest number of HARMs and SLAMs left, so they were diverted towards Andoya. That outlying coastal airbase, guarded by SA-11s, had definitely been an obstacle to my freedom of movement. The SLAMs were fired along the spine of the island, popping over the hills at the same time as the HARMs arrived, and they managed to kill both SA-11s there, as well as a pair of short-ranged missile batteries.

After that, the attack force withdrew, heading back to the carrier in a large stream. A few MiG-23s tried to intercept (out of Andoya, no less), but loitering fighters on 'backstop' missions were able to cut them off before they could do any damage. By 15:30 hours local the strike was back on the carriers, standing down and reloading for general purpose duties.

**ENDGAME**

No further offensive activities were undertaken until the end of the scenario. Soviet CAP continued to fly over their airbases (albeit in reduced numbers in Andoya and Bardufoss), but no further activity was detected north of Norway, or at sea.

I expended 45 Phoenixes for 23 kills, which is a reasonable 50% kill rate, and I still have 87 Phoenixes left in the fleet. Most of them are on aircraft, and have taken at least one ride through the smash-and-bash of a carrier landing, so reliability can't be great. AMRAAMs are comfortable at 125, and Sparrow-Ps are over 200, although Sparrow-Ms are down to 78. I should be able to hold my own against the damaged Soviet airpower in the region.

All my assigned targets were hit and destroyed, but ground-attack weapons stockpiles are diminishing. I've used over half of my HARMs and SLAMs, and my stockpile of large penetrator warheads (BLU-109s) is also down by half. Some cross-leveling between the carriers would be needed to even things out. In this condition, the two carriers could mount one more heavy alpha strike, but after that they will be most suitable for medium-duty support work, until they can be resupplied.

Thanks for another very enjoyable scenario.

**THOUGHTS ON THE SCENARIO**

The scenario ran smoothly for me, and the situation and objectives were clear and well defined. It was interesting to try and probe at the enemy's defences, and figure out where things were. I find that the 'exploration' phase of the game is often the most thought-provoking and engaging. I think if a player rushes in immediately here, using the loadouts they start with, they could get into some trouble if they try to push deeply into SAM and CAP zones to get at those hardened targets in the interior. Taking the time for some reconnaissance, eating away at the better enemy fighters, and reloading for large HARM salvoes certainly paid off for me.

I definitely thought the Russians were up to something in the North, with all those jammers, recce planes, and MiGs north of Norway, so that diverted some of my resources. What are they actually doing? Is it actually the edge of the SSBN bastion? I never did meet the Akula, since I didn't send the carriers that far north, and my SSK sailed up along the coast towards Andoya, so it left the Tango behind and never spotted it either. Similarly, I never found the two enemy cargo ships anchored off northern Norway. What role are they supposed to play? Lures?

I realized after the game that I could have used my TALDs better. I fired a couple at SAM sites late in the game, and, as expected, the enemy ignored them. However, it did prompt some MiGs to try and investigate them. Maybe I could have used them earlier, to draw CAP flights out from their SAM cover in the Andoya and Bodo area? I'll have to try that next time.

The Phoenix limitation was definitely fun to play, and several times I found myself getting into risky situations because I didn’t want to pull the trigger on a million-dollar missile. Production rate increased to 40 per month, you say. Wow…