**Pacific Fury #1 – Bolt from the Blue**

**Playtest Report by AndrewJ April 2021**

**SITUATION**

It looks like war is breaking out in Europe, and here off the coast of Japan I am in charge of a small American carrier group gathering west of Honshu. We’re a bit spread out, and our Leahy is still hurrying to catch up after refueling. We’re being sent up through the Tsugaru Strait, to rendezvous with a tanker which is coming across the Pacific to meet us. The Russian war-machine is poised and ready in Vladivostok, 400 miles to our west, which puts us well within range of any missile-carrying bombers coming from the mainland. The area is crawling with merchantmen and fishermen, and there are a pair of Soviet tattletales (one older DD, one AGI) shadowing the carrier group. If anything happens, the enemy already know where we are.

In addition to my somewhat dispersed carrier group, I have a pair of SSNs. One old Sturgeon is N of the carrier group in mid-ocean, and a newer 688 is lurking off Vladivostok. My incoming tanker, steaming across the Pacific, is being escorted by a Knox, which should provide effective ASW screening, and its lack of air defence shouldn’t be an issue out there. There’s also a Perry (the Jarrett) up near the rendezvous zone, in case anything’s lurking in wait. The Japanese also have a series of destroyers posted along their west coast, on ASW patrols.

I do have some useful land-based air cover, in the form of F-18s down south, and F-16s up north, and the Japanese have their own air patrols along the length of the islands. I even have some F-15s in distant Okinawa, However, they’re not all on a war footing yet, nor are the ones on my carrier, and it will take a few hours before everyone is up and ready.

**PLAN**

AEW and ELINT/ESM assets and maritime surveillance assets are ordered to begin sweeping the area immediately. Most will be operating west of Japan, but one P-3 is sent east, towards our tanker group, in case some sort of disguised Soviet ship is lurking piratically in the area.

The tanker group is to tighten formation, deke 20 miles off-course to throw off any immediate pursuit or ambush, and then resume its transit towards the rendezvous area.

The Jarrett, in our patrol area east of the straits, is ordered to sweep into the mouth of the straits, before returning to guard the rendezvous area.

My 688 SSN off Vladivostok is ordered to periscope depth to provide ESM warning of air activity in the region, while the old Sturgeon SSN will do its best to stay out of trouble in mid-ocean.

The carrier group is ordered to tighten up formation and head south directly towards the Leahy at full speed, while the Leahy rushes north to meet them. The combined group will adopt a tight anti-missile formation and head for the coast, giving them more room to avoid Russian threats, and making them easier to cover with land-based air. It will then continue north along the coast as circumstances warrant.

**OPENING MOVES**

As my aircraft spread out, I start to get a better look at the overall situation. There’s plenty of activity in Russia, where surveillance and SAM radars are in evidence, along with the powerful emissions of Badger reconnaissance aircraft. Not only have the Russians got me directly from their tattletales, but they also have me on radar too. As alarming news reports flow in from Europe, and the Defcon level starts ratcheting up, I start getting more indications of Soviet air activity. More surveillance planes start showing up, jammers begin to make an appearance, and then fighters; first MiG-23s, then Su-27s, and even some MiG-31s.

I had initially hoped to keep my fighters on the ground as long as possible, but it’s becoming obvious that this won’t be an option much longer, and my first patrols start heading west. The enemy recce planes are actually closer to me than the enemy fighters, which seem to be staying inshore for the moment, and I start to wonder if my best course of action is to concentrate on them, hoping to rapidly poke the enemy’s eyes out, rather than CAP-ing over the carrier or trying to tackle the fighters. Accordingly, my first flights spread out, moving a couple hundred miles west to threaten the Badgers.

To my annoyance, an enemy Badger also turns on its radar far out to the east, coming in to have a look at my tanker group, which pretty much scotches my chance of keeping undetected and dodging any ambushes. This is actually rather worrying. I don’t think missile-carrying attackers are likely (although if one Badger is there, why not another?), but this guy could easily be cueing an SSGN, or something like that. I decide to send one of my precious ready F-16s to intercept, and the Jarrett is ordered to hurry east to meet them, to provide a modicum of air defence.

**FIRST BLOOD**

First to fire are actually the Japanese! Their destroyers manage to get contacts on a pair of probable subs in the western approaches to the Tsugaru Strait, and they start to maneuver aggressively to engage. Admiralty manages to wave them off in time, but the memo doesn’t get through to their P-3s, who sink a Tango before anyone can stop them. (Translation: I switched sides and adjusted the ROE for the destroyers’ ASW patrols, but forgot to do it for the P-3s. Ooops!)

They’re heading for the second contact, when they get ordered to wave off. I almost wish they had engaged, because now the second contact has managed to throw off its trackers, and I’m not sure exactly where it has gone. An S-3 is headed north to help out, but for the moment the contact is elusive.

**LAST MOMENTS**

Diplomatic distinctions of who fired first probably don’t matter much at this point. The recce planes seem to be moving further out to sea, the line of jammers is firming up behind them, and fighter patrols are moving out to join them. I’m getting intel reports of large formations over Vladivostok, and when my AWACS starts getting hits on formations of slow movers I can’t wait any longer. The last ready planes are scrambled from my squadrons on-shore, and a few more carrier planes launch. I’ve still got about 50% of my ready planes on-deck, but it can’t be long until I’ll need them too.

I have not yet called for assistance from the Japanese, and my hope is that I won’t need to. My carrier group is collected together and headed for shore, and maybe, just maybe, we’re going to get out of this without help.

**WAR!**

Suddenly, AWACS reports supersonic sea-skimming missiles appearing in mid-ocean. Oscar! Moments later, a second one opens fire. Two streams of missiles are headed for the carrier group, and a few more are headed for the northern Japanese destroyers, which are essentially defenceless against this particular threat.

Our response is immediate. Harpoons roar away across the waves, rapidly sinking the pair of tattletales, and my dispersed line of fighters start knocking down Badgers and recce Backfires, trying to kill as much of their long-range radar recce as possible. Enemy fighters are ignored wherever possible, and things go very well for the initial salvo, but attempts to pursue the more distant enemy are foiled by their long-ranged SAMs, and I’m forced to go diving to the deck. There are still enemy radar planes up, and I don’t think I’ll get them all.

On the carrier, the deck crews work as fast as they can, launching every fighter we have left. Half of them are directed to each of the incoming streams of missiles. They certainly won’t be able to stop them all, but my hope is that they can thin the lines enough for the SAMs to be able to stop the rest. Reports are coming in of sabotage and attacks on the mainland, but fortunately every land-based ready fighter I have is already up.

The first of the missiles is hurtling towards the Japanese. Is there any hope for them?

**NEXT MOVES**

Assuming I survive the double-Oscar attack, the question becomes what to do next. So far, the (assumed) enemy bombers do not seem to have come out to sea. Maybe, now that I have managed to knock down a number of recce planes and sink the tattletales, the enemy no longer has a reliable contact on me? That is my hope, but it may be a slender one. I’ll continue to retire towards the coast and then head north, but making the rendezvous as scheduled is entirely optional now. Hopefully there aren’t too many subs in my path. And maybe my single F-16 will get to that eastern Badger before it can summon a world of hate for my lonely tanker? We shall see!

**MISSILES INBOUND**

Is there hope for the Japanese? Alas, not for them. The massive supersonic sea-skimmers hurtle in towards the ASW ships, who only have guns to defend themselves, and my few F-16s in the region are out of position to intervene. Three of the destroyers are torn to pieces by the thundering blasts. The number of survivors is very small.

Down south, my fighters close in on the approaching missile streams, firing every missile of their own, and even resorting to cannon-fire to try and break up the attack. Three effective missiles get through from the southern attack, and eight from the northern. Fortunately, the missiles won’t arrive simultaneously. My carrier group energizes its radars, aims its launchers west, and gets ready to defend itself.

The southern missiles clear the horizon, and we start shooting, and shooting, and shooting. SAM after SAM misses completely, and I start to wonder if the ASMs are going to fly right in and sink me without being hit at all. The middle one and the tail one finally die, but the first one plunges onward, inside minimum SAM range and past the heavy guns. It’s only a final desperate Phalanx burst which finally puts it down, raining missile fragments all over the fleet. The northern missiles arrive a couple of minutes later, and this time the defence goes better. Even though there are more missiles, they all get shot down before they get to guns range.

The white-faced crews in the carrier group look at each other with dismay. They came within seconds of losing a ship, and if the missile streams had happened to arrive simultaneously, they would probably have been launching rescue helicopters now. How well will they be able to withstand a massed bomber attack?

**CENTRAL FIGHTING**

AWACS reports that the air picture looks bleak. There are swarms of modern MiG-31s, and fast MiG-25s in the air now, to go with the dangerous Su-27s and ubiquitous MiG-23s, and AWACS has contacts on at least two dozen bomber-sized aircraft orbiting over Vladivostok. My 688 SSN, lurking at periscope depth to do ESM duty off Vladivostok, detects the radars on incoming May ASW aircraft, and has to dive and clear the area before its masts are detected, which deprives me of a source of intel.

My pilots start trying to engage in the center, where a few Phoenix-carrying F-14s are able to engage the MiG-31s with some hope of success, covering the retreat of planes which had engaged the recce aircraft and missiles earlier on. For a moment they manage to open a hole in the center, but I have nothing left to exploit it with, and soon another wave of heavy fighters pours in to fill the gap.

Now lone Tu-22s start showing up, firing cruise missiles at infrastructure targets such as radars along the Japanese islands, followed by flights of three making attacks on our airbases. The Japanese fighters and SAMs make some efforts to intercept these missiles, but they’re fast and hard to hit, and many get through. Fortunately, their accuracy is not great, and the actual damage is modest. My pilots even manage to catch one or two of the bombers in the general fighting, but most return safely to base.

By this time the next wave of MiG-31s and other Russian fighters is bearing down on us, forcing me into a general retreat. The carrier group continues to run for the coast, heading for the shelter of the Japanese fighters at Komatsu, and all my support aircraft fall back at full speed towards the islands. The retreating AWACS gets a last look at the colossal swarm of bombers over Vladivostok, while my ELINT planes hurry away as best they can, hoping the Russians are more interested in shooting fighters than them. Worst of all, I’ve got a huge stack of defenceless planes in the carrier landing pattern, and MiG-31s are speeding towards them at high supersonic dash.

Fortunately, the enemy are now coming so close to Japan that the Japanese CAP (not the special action) starts moving to engage. It’s F-4s vs MiG-31s, and the results are not in the Japanese favour. Still, the brave pilots do manage to mess up the enemy formation, waste their missiles, and achieve a few kills. This lets my last remaining fighters get into the remains to kill one or two more, and that gives us the breathing space to continue landing our fighters.

**THE NORTH**

Fighting isn’t confined to the center. Up north, near the Tsugaru Strait, my S-3 arrives in the area where the other sub contact was and starts hunting. A lucky contact with an active buoy locates what turns out to be a Kilo, and a couple of Mk50s sink the stealthy sub. The S-3 then heads east to lay a line of buoys through the strait, looking for any intruders there. (Hmmm. Straits + subs = mines? Will have to remember that if the carrier gets up there.)

Japanese ASW planes are also active in the area, and one of their P-3s decides now is the perfect time to go hunting for the northern Oscar, which is half-way to Russia! This provokes an angry response from the squadron of MiG-25s loitering there, who swoop in towards the foolish plane. Executive orders are issued telling the pilot to return home immediately, and my last F-16 manages to kill the two leading MiGs with AMRAAM shots, but the rest are still in hot pursuit. Freshly launched F-16s are burnering towards them, but they probably won’t make it in time. Prospects for the P-3 are poor.

Meanwhile, another F-16 has finally arrived over the tanker group out in the Pacific, shooting down the Badger that’s been tracking my vulnerable ships. Unfortunately, he’s only got a few minutes of fuel on station, so after hunting around briefly he has to go home again. The two ships are on their own again.

**SITREP**

It’s 1345Z now, and the command staff are trying to put together a picture of the situation.

My initial fighter flights are either retreating or landing now, and are in the process of quickly re-arming. Fortunately, the next wave of fighters is already lifting off. Four fresh F-14s (2 Phoenix each) are arriving on station, four more F-18s are on the way from Iwakuni in the south, and four more F-16s from Misawa in the north. I’ve also got four F-15s flying in from Okinawa with a tanker, and four more to follow. They’ll refuel, fight, and then base out of Iwakuni for the moment. I won’t get any more carrier aircraft for over an hour, but some additional F-16s should be trickling in.

The Russian bombers don’t seem to be making a move yet. My AWACS is probing cautiously in their direction again, and getting glimpses of them over their coast. Unfortunately, there are plenty of new recce planes flying my way, and this time they’re embedded in the existing fighter screen, so I can’t be confident I’ll be able to shoot them down. If the recce planes do manage to get a good contact on me, then I expect they’ll engage. (I’m keeping my special action in reserve for these guys.)

We’ve spotted another AGI in the center, half-way to Vladivostok and well inside Russian fighter cover. There’s no way to get at it, and it doesn’t seem to be doing any harm, so it’s not a concern at the moment. There hasn’t been any sign of major fleet units yet, which is good. My 688 is creeping a little closer to Vladivostok, and may be able to intercept if something shows up. My Sturgeon has been ordered to hunt the northern Oscar, but he’s actually outclassed by the enemy, so that may turn out to be a bad decision.

Meanwhile, my carrier continues to head for Komatsu, desperate for distance from the foe. Unfortunately, this is going south-east, and I’m supposed to be going north-east to rendezvous with my tanker. Do I risk turning, or continue to safety?

Decisions must be made!

The fight continues…

**TSUGARU STRAITS**

MiG-25s are hurtling in towards the hapless Japanese P-3 as it flees east towards the straits, and F-16s from Misawa dash in on afterburner, but they’re still over 50 miles away when the MiGs reach the plane – and fly right past, ignoring it. They’re going for my S-3 which is patrolling the straits; the buggers in the P-3 have led the enemy right to me! Fortunately, the extra distance is just enough for the F-16s to make it in, and they manage to knock down the enemy before they can do any damage.

Meanwhile, the ASW aircraft in the area are starting to report submerged contacts in the straits. So far they all seem to be false, but this would be a really bad place to bump into a sub, so we keep looking for more.

**ADVANCE OF THE BOMBERS**

While the fighters slash at each other, the radar operators on the E-2s and E-3s start seeing coordinated movements among the enemy aircraft. The main bomber strike, well over 30 of them, is leaving its marshalling area over Vladivostok, and seems to be headed due east for Hokkaido. There’s also a group of eight headed further south, plus a couple of groups of five or six smaller contacts between them. They’re screened by numerous MiG-25s in the north, and MiG-31s in the center, along with a mix of Su-27s and MiG-23s.

My fighters in the center struggle against the MiG-31s, but we’re almost completely out of planes, and for the moment we can’t make any headway towards the incoming southern bombers. Backfires are still doing land attack strikes. In the south F-18s from Iwakuni almost catch them in the act, but they launch moments before the fighters arrive, and Iwakuni gets rocked by a series of impacts as the supersonic cruise missiles detonate throughout the base. Meanwhile, another heavy anti-shipping missile speeds in from somewhere in the confusion and sinks the last of the northern Japanese destroyers. (I’m glad the Jarrett, my Perry on the far side of the straits, is steaming east to meet the tanker, instead of hanging around for the bombers to arrive.)

The few planes I can scrape up keep trying to get at the bombers. Some F-16s from Misawa dive into the pack up north, which seem to be forming up off the coast of Hokkaido, and they manage to get some of the Badgers, and even a couple of Backfires, before the perpetual interference of the MiG-25s drives my pilots away again. The heavy Russian fighters pursue us south, forcing all my ASW and AEW planes to flee, until the Nike battery on Hokkaido manages to shoot them down. The last of the carrier-based F-18s and F-14s keep trying to get at the bombers in the center, and they finally get a break when some Hornets from Iwakuni distract the MiG-31s, leading them away to the south-west. That doesn’t go perfectly for the F-18s, but my other fighters manage to maul the 8 Badgers in the center, shooting some down and sending the others home with damage.

**CONFUSION AMONG THE BOMBERS**

Suddenly, we get radar reports that the small groups of half a dozen planes (now assessed to be Su-24s – possibly ARM carriers?) are turning back towards their to bases. A few minutes later a stream of contacts is seen leaving the loitering northern bombers. The Backfires are retreating without firing a shot!

The admiral decides that this is a crucial turning point. The carrier group is currently fleeing south for the shelter of the Komatsu airbase, which is only 43 miles away now. But if the Su-24s are retiring, the central bombers are gone, and the northern Backfires are already on the way home, then the threat is effectively over. The moment of decision has come. The carrier group is ordered to turn NE and head for the straits at full speed!

The problem is, the admiral has got it wrong. What he’s seeing in the north are a stream of unidentified Su-24s going home, not Backfires. The Backfires are still there. They’ve finally got the go-code, and all the Badgers and Backfires turn south to attack. The admiral is steaming directly towards them.

**CHARGE OF THE HEAVY BRIGADE**

The bombers advance, 12 Backfires on the east, and 8 Badgers on the west. The Backfires are coming right down the coast, well within range of the Nike battery, but it doesn’t shoot. It’s hurriedly reloading its heavy missiles after engaging MiG-25s earlier, but nothing is on the rails now, and the bombers fly past unmolested. The bomber crews are confident, knowing they’ve got half a dozen MiG-25s ready to guard them, and they press on southwards.

Unfortunately for them, the MiG-25s are distracted, and are chasing away the remains of my previous attacks. Four fresh F-16s arrive on afterburner from Misawa, and tear into the bombers unopposed. The carnage is fearful. Most are shot down outright, and only four survive to stagger home with wounds and gashes in their airframes.

The Badgers press on, and this time I’ve got almost nothing to oppose them. A few tired F-14s make it in with only a Sidewinder or two left, and one F-16 manages to get a couple of hits with AMRAAMs, but then the shame-faced MiG-25s get back on station, and none of my planes can get past them. The bombers survive to launch six missiles at the carrier group.

These missiles are big and fast, but unlike the missiles from the Oscars, these are high-altitude weapons, and my SAM operators can see them coming. The Leahy starts opening fire while they’re still 100 miles away, and the deliberate SAM fire gradually knocks them down. None of them make it to the group, but it takes another 19 of my SAMs to do it, and that’s an expenditure I’d rather not have made.

**THE OTHER SIDE OF JAPAN**

Things are not going so well on the other side of the islands, where the Brewton, a Knox-class frigate, is escorting the tanker USNS Pacos towards Japan. They’re all feeling a lot more confident, now that the Badger that was trailing them has been shot down, and the Brewton is sprinting and drifting ahead, banging away on its active sonar in case there are any SSs lurking in their path. That’s when a pair of anti-ship missiles erupt out of the first convergence zone in a pillar of smoke and start heading in at 600 knots.

The ready chopper scrambles immediately, dashing towards the smoke plume at full throttle, while the ASROC fires a futile BOL shot towards the enemy in the faint hope of distracting him or making him turn away. Both ships turn to port, accelerating to the tanker’s top speed, hoping to dodge the missiles somehow, but it doesn’t work. The Brewton opens fire with its main gun, and then the CIWS starts roaring, and in a hail of bullets manages to shoot down both incoming missiles.

A second pair of missiles bursts out of the ocean, and this time it looks like the enemy captain has misjudged his shot. Both missiles pass slightly ahead of the ships and fly off into the darkness, leaving us completely unscathed. The third pair follows shortly after that, but this time they’re on target, and both of them lock on to the Brewton. The main gun fires valiantly, but the silent CIWS is out of ammunition. The pilot on the Brewton’s Seasprite helicopter sees the skies light up with a horrible flash as the missiles tear the stern off their ship, and send it plunging to the seafloor.

They don’t have time to think about what’s happened, and moments later their first sonobuoys are dropping around the location of the missile launches. The contact is immediate, and the torpedo drops perfectly on the shallow contact. There’s a muffled thump, the sea heaves, and the Charlie joins the shattered Brewton on its voyage to the abyssal mud below.

A frigate for an SSGN? Probably a roughly even trade, but one I’d prefer not to make. The helicopter lands on the Pacos, which sets course for the rendezvous again. It’s a long way to go alone. There’s a P-3 already en-route to patrol ahead of the Pacos, and my Perry is ordered to go to flank speed to escort the tanker as soon as possible. Of course, that’s when someone tries to torpedo the Perry…

‘Counterfire!’ yells the captain, and a spread of two Mk46s is launched down the torpedo bearing, while the ship heels over in a maximum performance turn away from the threat. The helicopter’s leaping off the deck, and as it thunders away the Perry turns again, hoping that the enemy sub has turned away to dodge our torps, and thus lost contact. It works, and the torpedoes continue blindly on their path and away from the ship. The helicopter is on station almost immediately, and quickly picks up the sound of the SSN running north away from our shots. He can probably outrun them, but he can’t outrun the helicopter, and two torpedoes add a Victor to the ocean floor.

**ONGOING ACTIVITY**

The F-15s which set out from Kadena start arriving over Japan by this point, and soon refuel and start engaging the Su-27s, which form the majority of the enemy fighter screen now. As their patrols get forced back my pilots are able to kill a few more recce planes, which is a relief. Best progress is made in the western half of the theatre, and some of my planes even manage to work their way up the Korean coast and pick off a couple of the jammers before running away from SAMs. It doesn’t all go perfectly; one Eagle pilot confidently makes a head-on attack on a silent ESM Badger, only to find it’s an ESM Fencer. He only has time to gape briefly before the Aphid rips off his wingtip, but fortunately Aphids are small, Eagles are tough, and he manages to limp home safely.

Out at sea, the Japanese SSK Harushio has actually managed to get brief a CZ contact on the northern Oscar. (The Sturgeon, also headed for the area, doesn’t have a clue.) Unfortunately, he’s also flattened his battery, forcing him to snorkel. That’s probably what brings a May out from the safety of its SAM umbrella, so I send out a pair of F-14s, escorted by F-18s, to try and reach past nearby fighters and shoot it down. Before they can get there, however, a passing F-15 manages to sneak through a gap and snipe their kill. Go Air Force!

**LOGISTICAL ITEMS AND PLANNING**

My Eagles are going to base out of Iwakuni, for the moment, but I’m actually going to send my plane-load of AMRAAMs from Guam up to Misawa instead. The F-16s there have no more AMRAAMs in the magazines at all, so they need them more urgently than the planes at Iwakuni. The plane should arrive in about three and a half hours, so we need to be careful until then.

The carrier’s also starting to feel the pinch too. We’ve actually got plenty of Phoenixes in storage, but only 21 Sparrows left. This will start putting limits on operations if there’s another heavy strike before we can resupply.

Given the ready time for heavy bombers, I don’t expect a return visit from them before I get to the straits. (Unless they have another squadron or two which hasn’t launched yet.) The Su-24s could be a problem sooner, especially as we move closer to the straits where the distance to the mainland is shorter. The carrier group will stay reasonably close to the shore as it moves north, keeping a careful eye out for submarines. As we get to the straits the Perry will transition to the lead and try to use its mine-avoidance sonar to check for hidden hazards.

I’m also concerned by civilian traffic. My ESM operators have pointed out some anomalies in their radar transmissions, so I’ll try to stay away from ships with more powerful radars. Unfortunately, there are some right in the straits. Paranoia? Perhaps. Let’s call it ‘justifiable caution’ instead.

**BEFORE DAWN**

In the early hours of the morning, AWACS suddenly detects another vampire coming from the location of the northern Oscar. Missile alerts sound throughout the fleet, and for a baffled moment we’re left wondering if the Oscar held a few shots back, somehow reloaded (an undetected supply ship?), or if there might be a third one out there? The truth sinks in a moment later. The Oscar has detected the snorkelling Harushio and opened fire with an SS-N-16.

The startled Harushio fires a spread towards the Oscar, and turns to run, but there’s little hope, and she’s dead moments later. The nearby Sturgeon hears all the commotion, and finally detects the Oscar in the first CZ as it turns to run away from the torpedoes. Unfortunately, the torpedoes never find a target, and the Sturgeon soon loses the contact as the Oscar leaves the CZ. I’d love to go hunting here with a P-3, but it’s too close to enemy airbases and SAMs to risk.

Meanwhile, assorted air-to-air skirmishing happens over the subs and along the front, as my planes shoot down a mix of fighters, recce planes, and another May trying to hunt the subs. For a while I think I have the enemy down, but after a pause their fighters start to appear in strength again. More MiG-25s, then MiG-23s and a few Su-27s interfere with my operations, and I end up devoting significant fighter strength to eliminate these patrols.

**UNDERWATER**

My Sturgeon, having lost the contact on the evading Oscar, starts creeping slowly towards the area where it had been spotted initially. Cautiously rising into the surface duct, it detects the Oscar, back in its initial patrol zone, but still too far away to shoot. Another duck and rise puts us at about 13 miles, the very limits of the kinematic no-escape zone, so the Sturgeon fires two shots at the big SSGN.

It takes a couple of minutes for the Oscar to detect the incoming torps, and then it turns to run, which is fine for me, since that means his chances to counter-detect me are remote. But what I hadn’t considered was that the Oscar quickly drew away from me, out of direct-path detection, and vanished into the blind zone. My torps kept going in a straight line, outrunning their wire limit, so I couldn’t hear through their seeker heads either. Eventually, just before the predicted end of run, there is one faint distant boom. Was that a kill? A wound? An impact on a decoy? The Sturgeon searches the region quietly for the next few hours, but no sign of the Oscar is found.

My ASW aircraft are having fun too. A left-over VLAD sonobuoy, 90 nm behind the carrier, picks up a northbound SSN, allowing an S-3 to hurry over and put a pair of Mk50s into a Victor. Evidently, the carrier had passed nearby, and he hadn’t quite been able to make the intercept.

Good fortune also comes to my 688, the USS Buffalo, which has been hanging out over the sea-mount 70 miles south of Vladivostok, waiting for anything to come in or out of the port. Its sonar operator gradually picks up a submerged contact and classifies it as an SSGN. It’s the other Oscar, presumably headed for Vladivostok to reload! The Buffalo takes a bearing, goes into the layer, and starts creeping towards the enemy.

One thing the captain of the Buffalo does not appreciate, is that he’s under the protection of the carrier. Now that the fighters have been driven off (for the moment) F-14s have been operating out here with tanker support. Loitering outside SAM range, they’ve been using Phoenixes to reach in and kill the Mays. Two of them have been shot down in the last couple of hours (plus two earlier near the Harushio/Sturgeon), and this has probably helped the Buffalo stay alive.

An hour and a half later the Buffalo very cautiously comes up to look around, and hears nothing. At first it seems like it was a bad decision to break contact. Maybe the Oscar changed course in the meantime? But then the Oscar’s sound signature emerges, eight miles away, just over the layer. The Buffalo goes back under the layer, and fires two torpedoes. This time there’s no doubt. The Oscar tries to run but is hit and sunk in fine style. The Buffalo then turns and heads north, intending to patrol just off the edge of the continental shelf, looking for ships coming from Vladivostok.

**DAWN STRIKE**

Dawn comes with a resurgence of Soviet air activity. Multiple planes are taking off from Vladivostok, all headed directly for the carrier. Intel estimates that they are probably Fencers. Multiple scrambles happen throughout the region, with extra jammers and tankers going up, a mix of fighters launching from Misawa and the carrier, and some F-15s coming up from Iwakuni to act as a backstop.

The attack strength caps at 15, and fortunately the attack is not supported by fighters. The F-16s (confident that their magazines are full of freshly unloaded AMRAAMs) tear into the unprotected Su-24s, and eliminate them all shortly after they leave the cover of their shore-based SAMs.

**PASSAGE OF THE STRAITS**

As the carrier group approaches the straits it switches into anti-mine formation (line ahead, with the carrier second from last in the line), in case an undetected submarine or covert cargo ship has left any surprises in our path. The carrier group’s Perry, the USS Vandegrift, which is equipped with a mine-detection sonar, is sent further ahead to try and proof the route. Unfortunately, we don’t have time to test the entire passage at a cautious 5 knots, so we have to adopt a riskier ‘spot-check’ method, sprinting and drifting while the carrier group follows at a steady pace.

There’s a sudden surge of alarm when a moving goblin is detected in the rendezvous zone, but thankfully it turns out to be nothing more than fish. The transit is tense, but uneventful, and the ships make it through unscathed. (Although I’m sure Soviet spies are lining the shores, happily telephoning spotting reports back to their handlers.)

Meanwhile, the USS Jarrett has met up with the tanker Pacos, and is escorting it back to the rendezvous zone under the watchful eye of the orbiting P-3.

**ARRIVAL ON-STATION**

Once it’s clear of the straits, the carrier group proceeds to the rendezvous zone, and patrols quietly until the tanker arrives a couple of hours before the deadline.

Airbase crews are busy putting out the last of the fires, bulldozing away debris, and trying to clear away the damage from the missile strikes.

In one final act of bravado, some impertinent pilots convince the staff to let them sneak an A-6 into the enemy waters, staying below SAM cover, to put a pair of 2,000 lb LGBs into that AGI that’s been lurking 80 miles off the Soviet coast. The lone heroes (plus the four escorting F-16s, the jammer, the AWACS, the ESM plane, and the reserve tanker) carry out the attack in fine style, bringing a long and viciously fought day to a fine end.

**IMPRESSIONS**

Woo! A nice big in-your face attack, with all sorts of enemy, and not enough resources to deal with them. Intense, and very enjoyable!

You’re going to be in big trouble if you stay spread out. You’ve got to gather in tight and run like heck for shelter, and if you haven’t poked the enemy’s eyes out quickly then things could go very badly. I came within a hair of calling for the extra Japanese CAP several times (and flying them myself, not letting the AI do it). This is a very micro-friendly scenario. If you’re flying your fighters with missions or leaving your SAMs on auto, then you’re probably going to take heavy casualties.

I’m not sure how well I could have withstood the entire bomber attack. If they had all managed to focus on the carrier at the same time, I think multiple ships would have been underwater, even with the Japanese assistance. So, this is a win on a technicality. If the bombers had worked as intended this would probably have been a lot closer to a draw.

I definitely enjoyed the chance to sneak and be snuck by the subs. The twin Oscars were nasty, but the Charlie attack out of the CZ was classic! That’s why these SSGNs would have been such a game-changer, when they showed up in the seventies, compared with the risks of closing to torpedo range. It’s so rare to see it work from the AI side in Command, and it was a real pleasure to be sunk by it here. Plus having the chance to cut off subs returning home for reloads, and nearly getting ganked while running recklessly to help the tanker. What’s not to like?

Thanks again for these massive and challenging scenarios!