**Pacific Fury #4 – I Come from a Land Down Under**

**Playtest Report by AndrewJ June 2021**

Finally had some time to catch up with a sitrep.

**SITUATION**

Well, there's a war on, and its extending into the South China Sea, and all the way down to Australia. We've been tasked to reinforce the tiny oil-wealthy state of Brunei with troops delivered by air, and assemble an assortment of ships in the region to guard its off-shore oil infrastructure. Unfortunately there's an obstacle-course of unstable island nations between most of our forces and our objectives, and rebellious hot-spots are bursting into open flames throughout the region. Indonesia is guarding its own sovereign territory throughout its vast archipelago arc, Singapore will share data but has no room for us, Malaysia is reluctantly granting the most limited of basing (2 planes only!), and the southern Philippines are a rebellious mess where nobody wants to deploy aircraft. Meanwhile, Vietnam glowers at us from across the South China Sea, and although they're not hostile, their masters the Soviets definitely are. Some of their aircraft are already in the region at Cam Ranh Bay, and rumour has it that more forces will arrive soon.

We've got a few ships together to form TG Endeavour, heading up through the Banda Sea to deliver troops to Brunei, and a wide scattering of ships in ones and twos around southern and western edges of the theatre. Nowhere do we have more than two warships ships together, and none of them are truly powerful vessels. Our air assets are composed of numerous MPA, primarily P-3s, but they're all spread out around the periphery of our AO, far from the main zone of concern. We've also got some decent F-18s, but they're far south in distant Australia, and are required to stay based at home. At least we have a few tankers for them. Other than a few Philippine F-5s, and some A-4s which will eventually fly in from New Zealand, that's about it for combat air power. Last of all, we've got one O-boat in mid archipelago, and one British SSN, complete with lamentable British torpedoes, headed north into the South China Sea. If you look up 'scattered' in the dictionary, we're it...

**THE PLAN**

There's not much of a plan we can make at this point. My various ships will thread their way through the Indonesian islands, and I will try and provide P-3 cover for them, to proof their routes in advance. With so many choke-points to pass through, we are very vulnerable to lurking subs, who can simply wait in silence, confident we will pass within range. Hopefully the Russians haven't deployed this far south.

There's almost no chance to form up into strong task groups yet, and in most cases the ships will have to proceed as they are. I decide to send HMAS Newcastle (the Australian tail-less Perry) to hurry north and reinforce TG Endeavour, rather than having her stay back to support the Westralia. Westralia will head east, to pick up a helicopter from Darwin, before turning north for her main journey. Black Rover will head south down the west side of Borneo, to clear the combat zone. HMS Spartan is ordered north to patrol just off Cam Ranh Bay, to keep a close watch on any Russian ships lurking there.

Other than that, it'll be the normal procedure for reconnaissance and patrol, until we can identify the enemy positions and attack.

**FIRST MOVE - RUSSIA vs BRUNEI OIL**

ESM from our scouts rapidly pick up the position of the expected Nanuchka NNW of Brunei, a patrolling Bear, and some far distant MiG-29 radars, while our own radar picks up a pair of very high altitude contacts loitering (radar off) over the ocean. Those are presumably MiG-25s. I send out a Philippine F-5 to try and stalk the Bear if it gets any closer, but those MiGs mean I won't be able to operate over the South China Sea, and any MPA in the region will be at risk.

That Nanuchka is a problem, since it has long range missiles and long range OTH radar, which completely outclass the Exocets on my two Bruneian missile boats. It can see me first and shoot me first, long before I could engage it. I order the one at sea to hurry back into port, where it will hide with the other two until I can deal with the Nanuchka.

The Russians don't give me time to worry about that, because suddenly there's a high-velocity high-altitude missile hurtling in from the north. Nothing I have is remotely capable of intercepting or stopping it, and it smashes and sinks a tanker in short order. Fortunately, the Bear-hunting F-5 manages to intercept and kill the Blinder afterwards, but then four more are spotted. Two head for the airfield at Rimba, coming in low and fast, but the SHORADS there manage to shoot them down with a barrage of Mistrals, while the other two head for the Philippine radar site on Palawan. My second F-5 gets one of them, but the other one launches a huge missile at the radar site, only to see it malfunction and go corkscrewing across the sky, wildly out of control. The F-5s attack that last Blinder with cannon fire, and even though they hit it a couple of times it manages to make its escape.

The attacks continue. One of the other tankers off Brunei reports that it's being torpedoed, but my MPA are all far away, and there's nothing I can do to help. Some MiG-25s come screaming in at 18,000m and 1350 knots, and sprinkle my airbase with iron bombs. They miss so badly it's a wonder they hit the ground. But then another Blinder shows up, and I have no fighters to interfere with it. For a moment it looks like it might be hunting the fleeing Black Rover, but it launches its missile at another tanker and sinks that instead.

At 15:17, Malaysian MPA relay a spotting report on three incoming ships, moving towards Brunei at 10 knots, accompanied by the Nanuchka which now seems to be escorting them. Are they light amphibs of some sort? Maybe a raid? I've got nothing that can deal with them yet. My missile boats don't dare approach because of the Nanuchka, my own light aircraft are leery of the Nanuchka's SAMs, my F-5s are all re-arming for air-to-air (and they don't want to brave the MiG-25s anyway), and everything else is occupied elsewhere. Still, the boats are hours away, so I should have time to send a Harpoon-armed P-3, right?

That's when the Nanuchka starts engaging my oil platforms with its missiles, which I had not expected, completely destroying at least one of them before turning for home. It's a painful economic blow, but it also means my own missile boats are free to attack now that the enemy's missiles are gone. They come surging out of port at flank speed, and close on the three advancing ships which turn out to be very large trawlers. They sink those with a combination of Exocets and cannon fire, before dashing back to port for reloads. A P-3 does eventually arrive from Butterworth, and harpoons the retiring Nanuchka, but it is forced to return home almost immediately for lack of fuel.

It feels like the Russians are solidly in the lead here. I've managed to kill a few Blinders, a Nanuchka, and three trawlers, but the Russians have sunk three big tankers and wrecked two oil platforms. Not a great trade!

**BRUNEI - REBELS ON THE GROUND**

There's plenty happening on the ground too. Battlefield scout helicopters are sent out from the airfield in Brunei, and they almost immediately draw SAM fire from MANPADS in the south edge of the little country. Fortunately, these are old SA-7s, and the gunners are firing at long range, so the odds of a hit are quite low. Several of them are spotted this way, including one in Malaysia itself, and ground troops close in and kill most of them using a combination of mortar fire and direct fire from the Scorpion recce tanks.

There doesn't seem to be a lot of rebel activity near the Bruneian troops, but a lot more start showing up near the British forces in the west. These seem to be mostly technicals, armed with heavy automatic weapons, and they're actually quite dangerous to any plain infantry units. They start moving east, towards the Shell installations there, but the Ghurkas manage to whittle them down, with a combination of mortar fire, helicopter attacks (AS-11s proving to have dismal accuracy), rocketing from the little SF 260 attack planes (also dismal), nicely accurate Milans, and finally a few Scorpions. (Maybe my missile boats should have helped too, but they were busily hiding from the Nanuchka at this point.)

The first of several troop reinforcements starts late in the day, with Australian forces arriving by 707. More will arrive in the next few hours, so the situation seems stable here for the moment.

**FIRST EVENING**

As the fighting in Brunei goes into an evening lull, my ships continue to advance through the archipelago. The Westralia has picked up a helicopter flown in from Darwin by now, and has turned north, but this diversion eastward has put her well behind schedule, and I have to admit the decision was a mistake. It looks like she'll be a few hours too late, even if she steams at flank speed. (Lesson - measure routes and distances before committing!)

Things seem calm most other places, as P-3s try and proof lanes in front of advancing ships. Some P-3s have deployed to Christmas Island, and most of the others are moving up to Darwin, but even so the long ranges are a problem. This is particularly true for the distant TG Endeavour, where my P-3s have shorter and shorter times on station. Sonobuoy coverage in front of those ships is spotty at best. My SS, the Onslow is doing what it can to keep ahead of the TG, snorkelling frequently, and pausing to listen, but she won't be able to maintain her position for much longer.

The most excitement is in the centre of the Sulu Strait, where the patrol boat Pangasinan suddenly notices that the civilian traffic among the islands there includes a number of fast movers, which are suddenly closing at an alarming 38 knots! The captain turns to put them on the starboard aft quarter, just within the arc of his main gun, and accelerates to a mighty 15 knot flank speed, trying to reduce the closure rate. All glasses are pointed at the approaching boats, and when the first one gets within two miles he orders his gunners to fire. The Boghammers are fast, but very fragile, and a few hits are enough to slow them down. The Pangasinan manages to tackle them one at a time, keeping out of their gun range, and then circles around to shoot up the armed dhows which are following more slowly in their wake. The engagement goes well, and the Pangasinan continues to patrol, eventually finding a second pack of Boghammers shortly after midnight. That engagement turns out to be rather riskier, since it almost runs my ship out of ammunition, and the crew retire to the Philippine naval base at Rio Hondo to reload and patch a few bullet holes.

**POLITICS AND INTELLIGENCE**

Politics never sleeps, and I soon get an interesting political choice to make. Would I like access to Indonesian airspace, removing those geographical barriers which are keeping my P-3s from reaching their patrol zones? All I have to do is bomb the East Timorese! And eat a heaping plateful of hypocrisy, of course... After all, our government has been trying to protect them from persecution for some time now. I'm given an hour to reflect and decide. While it would be very helpful to have access, I think we can scrape by without it. I tell HQ that we will try to manage without the Indonesian help.

The news from Intel is much less controversial. They've got confirmation that a major Soviet convoy, P-9417, is headed for Cam Ranh Bay. It's coming through between Taiwan and Luzon, and should reach its destination in 2 to 3 days. Clearly, we'd like to interfere with this, but it's a long way from our strike assets. HMS Spartan is ordered to accelerate its progress towards Cam Ranh Bay, and take up a patrol station 30 miles off-shore in the anticipated direction of the convoy. That will help, but pinning our hopes on one sub is much too risky a gamble. Far better to hit them some other way. The P-3 guys keep muttering to each other, and measuring the map. They're up to something, I can tell, but so far they won't say exactly what.

**INTO THE NIGHT**

Enemy air-power is still active in the night. Singaporean patrol planes report numerous ESM contacts from large formations of Vietnamese MiG-21s, at one point counting 24 of them active at one time! They seem to come and go, and we come to the conclusion that this is some sort of intermittent CAP. At first it seems absurd to have so many up, but on reflection I really don't want to push into a swarm like that, even with superior aircraft. Quantity has a quality of its own...

The loitering Bear eventually goes away shortly after dark, but another one shows up, along with fresh MiGs around 22:00 hrs. An F-5 goes up to loiter, in case the Bear comes south, but it seems to be staying north now. Instead, a May comes sniffing around, so the F-5 obligingly shoots it down instead. The Bear's turn comes later, when another F-5 gets it by swinging around from the north, nervously eyeing the MiG-29s and 25s for signs of hostile action.

The enemy fighters seem to be quiescent, so one of my P-3s from Butterworth takes advantage of the darkness to make a discrete radar-off hunt for the sub (subs?) which was operating near Brunei. The sonobuoys turn up one false target, but nothing else. Maybe the sub has gone home for reloads? In any case, the P-3 soon has to leave for fuel, and the crew is happy to go. Those MiG-25s have the potential to dash in and snap up a P-3 before there is any hope of escape, if they decide to leave their station.

Another pair of P-3s arrives from Guam, flying pure reconnaissance missions. They fly across the northern Philippines, and press on towards the west, hunting for the convoy, and at first there's no sign of it. The southern plane gets so far west that it picks up a sniff of a couple of 2-ship Vietnamese patrol groups operating off Phu Cat. They seem to be sub hunter groups, and they're not an immediate concern. The other plane finds the convoy further north than I had expected, and cheerfully radios its position back to base. Then, having waved their radars around long enough, they go radio silent and return to Guam.

Administrative moves are continuing too. More airliners are trickling in to Brunei, and dropping off troops as quickly as they can, before refuelling and heading back to Darwin. (Nobody wants to linger here, fat and helpless in the war zone.) The A-4s arrive from New Zealand, demanding to be armed immediately, only to be told that the C-130 full of munitions won't be here for at least half a day. The pilots express their frank displeasure at this boneheaded move. I should have kept the A-4s securely at home and timed them to arrive along with the C-130. The F-18s are on the move too, having hopped up to Darwin to give them a little more range in the coming day. With any luck, we can soon try and regain some of the initiative.

So, after a disk error wipes out part 2 of the AAR and all my notes, let the rewrite begin...

**QUIET DAY**

After the excitement of the Russian's opening salvoes, the next day is somewhat quieter, with assorted patrolling and advances. The rebels seem to be quiet in Brunei for the moment, and the Herc finally arrives there with the munitions for the A-4s, so they load up with an multipurpose assortment of ordnance (bombs, Mavericks, and Sidewinders). My ships keep cruising along, with the Newcastle catching up to TG Endeavour shortly before rounding the corner of North Sulawesi and heading NW. The SS Onslow has been preceding the TG, looking for subs, but she can't keep ahead of the formation any more, so she's assigned to keep patrolling here.

Intel lets us know about a suspicious LPG carrier, somewhere out west of Australia. A couple of F-18s go out for a look, and find it much closer than expected. They buzz it, and all seems normal. One of our coast-guard patrol boats is ordered out to meet the tanker, and will probably report in sometime in the evening.

The most activity is in the air, where two flights of F-18s get dragged north on a pair of tankers, hoping to catch the MiG-25s which keep pressurizing me over the South China Sea. Of course, when we get there the skies, which were full of signals from Bears and Flankers and MiGs, are completely empty! The planes press on much further NW than intended, and finally meet and kill a pair of MiG-29s, as well as an unexpected tanker, but it's a risky operation and they end up running away from packs of MiG-21s which come to investigate. They end up dumping unused missiles to increase fuel efficiency, then pick up the last dregs of gas from the two tankers, before finally meeting the third one half-way home with great relief. Overall, a bit risky, and not necessarily worth the effort.

The F-5s show how to do it more efficiently. We've taken to advance-basing one in Brunei, and it manages to pop out and whack an incautious Bear that comes too far south. Fortunately, the MiG-25s either don't spot us, or choose to ignore us, and the F-5 gets away. Another airplane from Brunei takes a moment to buzz one of the merchant ship contacts that we’ve been watching intermittently out by Swallow Reef. It turns out to be a Vietnamese frigate, not a merchant at all, and it’s presumably feeding the Soviets all sorts of spotting reports. But we’re not at war, so our forces (reluctantly) leave it alone.

**OPERATION DOLITTLE**

Shortly after noon we get more Intel on that Russian convoy, P-9417. It contains multiple large merchants, and a big RORO, packed to the gills with all manner of Soviet military nastiness. HMS Spartan is on station off Cam Ranh Bay, waiting to ambush it, but relying on one sub to stop the convoy is not a sound strategy. I’d definitely like to hit the convoy much earlier and further away than that. The trouble is, that it is so far away that our strike assets can’t reach it in effective numbers.

That’s when the grinning P-3 guys put a folder on my desk labelled ‘Operation Dolittle’. The routes are reviewed, the figures are double-checked, and it all works out. The majority of the P-3s are ordered to finish their patrols, return to base, load Harpoons, and get some rest. They will have a busy night. (Naysayers point out that this will leave us very low on ASW assets in the meantime, but the potential payoff is very high. The operation will proceed.)

**REDACTED -------Spoilers in this next section, if you have not played you should skip this bit**

*As dusk falls, the Patrol Boat Geelong is approaching the LPG tanker Berget Danuto. The ship has been cruising towards Darwin at a steady 18 knots all day, but now it’s nearly come to a stop, and the crew seems to have left in several small speedboats. As the watchkeeper looks on through his glasses, several plumes of white vapour erupt from the decks of the ship, coiling around it in a spreading cloud that obscures the vessel. The young sailor only has a moment to look to his officer with a puzzled expression, before the tanker vanishes in a cataclysmic flash that destroys it and everything around it.*

*Seismic stations in multiple nations record the effects of the blast, and WMD experts are quick to point out the catastrophic consequences if this had occurred in port. An immediate media blackout is clamped down over the event to prevent public hysteria and panic about further acts of sabotage. Dissemination of this information is on a need-to-know basis only.*

**REDACTED ----OK to resume reading**

**GO FOR DOLITTLE**

At 8:00 PM we get another Intel update on the convoy. HQ needs it destroyed before it gets to Vietnam, and they’re so serious about it that they’ve given us B-52s and tankers at Guam, and F-111s and RF-111s at Amberley, in order to do it. The trouble is, the first P-3s from Christmas Island are already lifting off to attack!

What the P-3 guys had pointed out was that if you take a P-3, load up 4 Harpoons, and throw out all the other useless stuff – the 8 torpedoes, 140 sonobuoys, racks of sonar equipment, the ASW operators, and even their chairs and snacks – you can get quite an impressive boost in fuel efficiency and range. It’s enough to fly up to the northern end of the Philippines and even get home again. Our first strike wave is composed of 8 P-3s at Darwin, 2 at Christmas Island, 2 at Butterworth, and 2 in Guam, plus two F-18s and their tankers, all lined up and ready to go for a time-on target of roughly 3:00 AM. Three more P-3s won’t be ready on time, so they’re scheduled to form a second wave three hours later.

The planners had considered delaying the attack for just one late wave, but the benefits of an attack in total darkness, delaying visual detection of incoming missiles, was judged superior to three extra planes in a dawn attack. Now, the B-52s can be added to the second wave, and their crews are hastily briefed on the ongoing operation. The F-111s, unfortunately, are too far away to participate in time. Operation Dolittle will proceed as ordered, and the first P-3s get underway on their six-and-a-half-hour journey to the target.

(Getting the partial loadouts requires a bit of editor work. Launch the plane, subtract the torpedoes and sonobuoys from the weapons screen, and then open the magazines in the base and add them back in there, to keep the accounting straight. A bit clumsy, but it works.)

**RESCUE**

At 8:30 we’re contacted by officials of the government of Papua New Guinea, requesting our assistance. Apparently, a small passenger plane has gone down in the mountains, and they’d like our assistance finding it. Why they think we’re in the rescue business, I couldn’t say, but we need to keep our allies happy, I guess. I only have three P-3s left in theatre, and the closest two of those are 1500 miles away to the south, transiting from New-Zealand to Darwin. One of them is diverted north to join the search, and one of our RF-111s is also sent to look for the downed fliers.

They participate in the hunt for the next couple of days, but nothing ever turns up. The jungle has swallowed the small plane tracelessly. (Some commentators wonder whether the plane suffered mechanical failure, or whether there was some sort of rebel activity which shot it down. So far we don’t know.)

**DISASTER**

It had to happen.

At 2:11 AM on the 16th, the captain of HMAS Westralia makes a sudden Mayday call. His vessel has been struck by a missile, and more are coming in. He makes a desperate attempt to alter course, but the action is futile, and more missiles hit, turning the Westralia into a flaming wreck and sinking her within minutes.

Westralia, full of vital supplies for the American carrier groups, had been transiting the narrow strait between Seram and Buru Islands alone. Its ‘escort’, the Newcastle, had long since dashed ahead to join TG Endeavour, when the Westralia diverted to pick up a helicopter from Darwin at the start of the operation. The finger pointing starts the moment the news reaches base. Why don’t they have P-3 cover? (They’re all off to attack the convoy, right?) Why wasn’t the strait swept in advance? (It had been, by TG Endeavour and P-3s when it passed through – but the day before.) There’s plenty of time to play the blame game… (It was a reckless decision of mine to send the Westralia out alone, trusting that what was safe yesterday was safe today. Bad idea, and a mistake which keeps biting me in multiple scenarios. Even more heartbreaking was that before I changed my mind and decided to divert for the helicopter, I had it going through a different strait, which would have avoided the issue!)

We know the missiles didn’t come from a surface ship (passing P-3s have seen nothing on radar), and the possibility of a shore-based launcher is remote, so that means a submarine. I had expected SSs or SSKs in this region, but this is probably an SSGN, either a Charlie or maybe an Echo. My other ships have been travelling radar-off, but if there are SSGNs down here I can’t do that any more. Each group of ships is ordered to turn on at least one air-search radar. So much for stealth, but stealth doesn’t help if you’re dead.

The other question is how the Westralia was spotted. It could easily have been the sub itself, but the possibility of shore-based spotters can’t be ruled out. After all, this happened in the very narrowest part of the strait. Some observers even wonder if the Indonesians are complicit in this, trying to exert pressure on our forces to join their push against the East Timorese.

**RETRIBUTION**

It’s near 3:00 AM, in the dead dark of early morning, when our P-3s converge on the location of Convoy PQ-9417. The Philippine F.27-200MAR has been tracking the convoy from a safe distance, using its powerful radar, and it vectors the P-3s and F-18s in to strike the convoy from the south-east, in its left flank.

There are 11 ships, in a 13-mile-long formation, but their radars are off, and we have no idea which ship is which. Our 14 P-3s and 2 F-18s have 60 missiles between them, and they unleash them in a broad salvo along the entire length of the convoy. The P-3s turn and leave as the missiles drop away to cruise quietly through the night. The enemy doesn’t react until the missile heads turn on, and then the entire fleet lights up, but by then its much too late. The F-18s can see dull distant flashes of light through the clouds, and the loitering F.27 starts losing contacts from the back of the formation. The missiles are getting through.

By the time ten or fifteen minutes have passed, the radar operators report that they only have two contacts left on radar, conditionally identified as a pair of cruisers, and they’ve slowed to approximately 6 knots. The F-18s, who have been refuelling, duck below the clouds and report a distant orange point of light in the direction of the convoy. Someone is burning.

The P-3s of the second wave are ordered to turn back now, and take their missile home with them. They will resume ASW patrols as soon as they can rest their crews and reload. Meanwhile, the B-52s will continue to advance, and they duly arrive at dawn, and finish off the remaining two cruisers without undue difficulty. HMS Spartan, loitering patiently off Cam Ranh Bay, is going to have a very long wait indeed.

**THE AIR OFF BRUNEI**

Once the F-18s have refuelled they aren’t ordered directly home. Instead, they’re sent to the South China Sea, where they attempt to pounce on the MiG-25s from an unexpected direction, but once again all the planes vanish as I arrive. It’s infuriating! Fortunately, this time a second pair shows up, and my pilots manage to shoot both of them down, and another tanker. Interestingly, a glimpse of the MiGs shows they’re not fighters. They’re the Wild Weasel version instead, and all this time I’ve been tiptoeing around in fear of planes which would not have been able to harm me.

Abruptly, radar operators on the ground in Brunei start calling out Vampire contacts, and my heart sinks. Has another Blinder flown in to sink another tanker? Or is an SSGN about to start destroying my oil platforms? I’ve already taken plenty of damage to the oil infrastructure, and any more could decisively limit our war objectives. Instead, as the contact courses are refined, it looks like the missiles are headed for my Bruneian airbase instead.

The ready F-5 is scrambled immediately, then the A-4s, and anything else which can fly, just to get them off the ground before the missiles can hit. Fortunately, there don’t seem to be too many of them, and the fighters manage to get them all. However, the F-18s report radar contacts on more missiles further out to sea, and it’s becoming apparent that we’re under attack by the SLCMs of a Yankee Notch. It’s probably somewhere off the coast of Vietnam, which means we don’t have a hope of finding it. The one saving grace is that the distances are so large, and the reload rate on a Yankee Notch is so slow, that we have time to fly in more F-5s from the Philippines. Between Sidewinders, cannon, fire, and the F-18s acting as off-shore radar pickets, my forces manage to intercept all the missiles, and keep both airbases safe.

Except, of course, there’s always a leaker or two, and we gradually get reports of a blast at the Shell Oil facility between the bases. The buildings are furiously aflame, and despite their best efforts the local fire-fighting units are unable to stop the conflagration. The facility burns for a day, choking the air with black smoke, until it is completely destroyed.

**TAKING STOCK**

The destruction of the convoy is excellent news, of course, but it’s almost entirely offset by the loss of the Westralia, and further damage to the oil infrastructure in Brunei. Our forces are definitely pulling ahead, and the sinking of those cruisers will give us more freedom to operate in the theatre, but the lack of supply will definitely slow down the pace of upcoming carrier operations.

The next task is to get our remaining supply ships safely to their destinations, and we can’t afford any more screwups. All it would take is one undetected sub (or, God help us, a minefield) to completely wreck the pace of future operations.

**HOMEWARD BOUND**

The next day (Feb 17) dawns with the P-3s droning steadily homeward, with light planes and light hearts, but heavy eyelids. For some of the crews, their voyage will be nearly 15 hours long. All of them make it home unmolested, and the last of them land at Darwin around 10:30 in the morning. Some of the crews draw the long straw, and get to rest, but for many of them there’s no such luck. Four short hours later they’re re-armed with ASW loadouts and heading out again to hunt for submarines.

**A DAY OF SCATTERED FIGHTING**

One development is that the returning F-18s spot what seems to be a suspicious port facility of some sort on Tawitawi Island. This is the region where all those Boghammers were operating, so the information is sent back to HQ, and a strike of F-18s with heavy LGBs is sent out to attack the port. The facilities seem to be empty when the pilots arrive, and the facilities are so dispersed and primitive that the bombs do little significant damage. Still, there’s plenty of smoke and noise, so honour is satisfied.

The F-18s split up after the attack, and use their FLIR pods to do a recce through the islands in the region, and they find another pack of Boghammers loitering in the east of the Sulu Strait. The Pangasinan has reloaded by now, and she leaves Rio Hondo and hurries to the area, where she guns down most of the Boghammers (some moving an impressive 50 knots) around mid-day. A few of the dhows move off to the south-west, which makes me wonder if they’re somehow trying to intercept TG Endeavour, which is approaching the area. After a long stern chase, the Pangasinan catches them in the late afternoon and destroys them, before moving off to police the last few drifting hulks which haven’t quite sunk yet.

Other F-18s head north, making use of the American tankers from Guam, and do sweeps and patrols throughout the region. They manage to get two more MiG-25s over the South China Sea, but the Russians are largely keeping to themselves for the moment. They also spot an AGI in the same area, shortly before dusk, and strafe it until it comes to a halt. A-4s find it the next morning, and finish it off with a brace of 500lb bombs.

The best news of the day comes at 14:40 hours, when a P-3 on a dedicated search mission reports a goblin contact in the area where the Westralia was sunk. Passive sonobuoys confirm the contact as a Charlie class SSGN, and it is soon sent to the bottom by a brace of torpedoes.

**INTO THE NIGHT**

My ships continue to push north through the warm waters towards their objectives. TG Endeavour and TG Green Rover meet and combine into one task group just south of the Sulu Strait, and then commence their passage using the western-most channel. After the Westralia fiasco I’m very concerned about subs in these choke-point areas, and P-3s struggle to maintain sonobuoy coverage ahead of my ships. The distances are so great now that they need to resort to partial torpedo loadouts, only carrying four or even two of their eight torpedoes, in order to extend their range. Some of the P-3s are sent in on Maritime Surveillance loadouts, without any ordnance at all, just so they can continue to monitor sonobuoys dropped by other aircraft.

My submarine paranoia kicks up a notch shortly after 10:00 PM, when the SS Onslow, which had been left behind to patrol the shipping lane around North Sulawesi, detects a moving contact 5 miles to her east. As the contact firms up the Onslow fires a single Mk 48, which catches and kills a loitering Tango. The Soviets are definitely guarding the chokepoints, and there are sure to be more of them around.

My fighter pilots have a little more exercise overnight, when a May shows up where the F-5s can get at it, and the F-18s manage to come to grips with two more MiG-29s, but there are no organized attacks against Brunei. Are they holding fire for the arrival of my ships?

**ARRIVAL DAY**

February 18th sees the continuation of long-range P-3 patrols, in front of advancing task groups and in the general area north of Brunei.

TG Endeavour rounds the north tip of Borneo at 16:00 hours, using the narrow passage closest to the coast. Transit lanes have been proofed by multiple passages of Bruneian missile boats, sonobuoys are in place, P-3s are loitering, helicopters are up, radar is on, and F-18s are on CAP. Lookouts tensely scan the seas in all directions, and sonar operators hunch over their scopes. Nothing happens, and the task group turns south-west, on the home stretch for Brunei.

First arrivals in Brunei actually come from the west, when the Chatham and Hall escort the Black Rover into rendezvous zone at 9:45 PM. My fears about some sort of local observer are stoked an hour later, when a fast-moving sub is detected coming towards my ships through the sonobuoy field to the north. The attending P-3 hurries over to the target, and identifies it, to everyone’s astonishment, as the Yankee Notch! It’s certainly an unorthodox move, to send a cruise missile carrier against ships, but its torpedoes are no less deadly. The P-3 drops two torpedoes on the Yankee, and they both hit, but the tough old Yankee refuses to sink, which is a problem. The P-3 only had two torpedoes, because of its light extended-range loadout. Now it’s forced to watch as the Hall sends over a helicopter to finish the job and steal the kill.

Most of the Darwin P-3s are being taken off patrol at this point, and given a chance to stand down. A few are engaged in local patrols in choke-points through the southern end of the Indonesian archipelago, but most are finally being given a chance for maintenance and rest after the extremely long flight hours in the last few days. No such luck for the three P-3s cycling through Butterworth, who have to keep patrolling off Brunei for the foreseeable future.

**FINAL DAY**

The last day sees more P-3 and F-18 patrolling, with some fighter sweeps coming within 150 miles of Cam Ranh Bay. No Soviets show up, just clouds of Vietnamese MiG-21s, which the F-18s prudently avoid. Our fighters do finally manage to provoke another engagement with the MiG-29s, bringing our total score up to 6, but that is the last of the air-to air activity.

TG Endeavour reaches Brunei with 7 hours left to go, and starts sending some ships to refuel (the Perrys are thirsty) while others remain on guard across the mouth of the bay. P-3 patrols continue, but no further subs are detected, and the bulk of our supplies (minus the lamented Westralia) seem to be secure for the arrival of the American carrier group in the days to come.