**Pacific Fury #6 – Priorities**

**Playtest Report by AndrewJ Oct 2021**

**SITUATION**  
  
Well, the war in the Pacific is well and truly underway, and we’re assigned to get a convoy from Borneo up to Hong Kong, and use an American carrier group to protect it and stomp all over Cam Ranh Bay. That wasn’t going to be a problem, until they decided to take the carrier away... Now we’ve got three and a half days to shepherd our convoy up north towards Hong Kong, with whatever resources we can scrape together from Australia and the shaky regional alliance. Fortunately, the carrier group has promised us one over-the-shoulder shot at Cam Ranh Bay as they hurry away. Just enough to really piss off the Vietnamese before they leave!  
  
Our convoy is in two pieces, one on each side of northern Borneo, with a few modest escorts each. There are two more ships waiting to join the convoy in Manila, and a few escorts on independent operations amongst the islands. We’ve also got three subs: an older British and US SSN up north, and an Australian O-boat closing on Cam Ranh Bay. None are high-end, but they can still be useful. The carrier group is powerful, of course, but it’s soon going to move away on its own business. Hopefully it will provide some incidental cover and support as it moves north.  
  
Other than the mighty carrier air wing, our air power rests on the shoulders of the Australian F-111s and F-18s. They’re good planes, but very far away, and the political situation prevents us from forward-basing them where they could provide closer support to the theatre. We have a significant number of lesser jets (mostly A-4s and F-5s) and MPA scattered throughout the island arc around the South China and Java seas. There’s also a set of B-52s lounging on Guam, but like their carrier-borne brothers, they’ll only condescend to grant us one strike before getting on with other business.  
  
The Russians are dug in at Cam Ranh Bay, presumably with plenty of good fighters behind modern air defences. They probably don’t have any surface ships capable of interfering, but their subs are still operating in the area, and if they have any long-ranged missile-carrying bombers they could be a real threat to our convoys. The problem is that they are embedded in the Vietnamese, who are going to resent any intrusion we make. Wall-to-wall flak, and swarms of lesser fighters and patrol boats are the order of the day from them. They probably can’t do too much to our distant shipping, but raids on our nearest airbases may be a possibility, and staff are speculating about whether the Russians have given them some newer aircraft to augment their MiG-21s.  
  
Then there’s China, ostensibly neutral, but possibly with sympathies leaning more to the east than the west. Our Hong-Kong destination is right on her shores, so we have no conceivable way to hide the incoming convoy if she wants to share her sensor data with the enemy. Deconflicting our operations from hers (particularly in the case of ID-ing subs in the convoy path) may be a real problem. (Indeed, some staff officers are grumbling about the need to send anything to Hong Kong at all. What is actually needed there, or gained from the effort?)  
  
  
**PLAN**  
  
With all this in mind, initial orders are issued.  
  
The main body of the convoy (BR-HK-01) will head NNE along the coast of Borneo and Palawan, staying as far from the enemy as possible and taking advantage of what shore-based air cover we have, before turning NNW at Antonio Bautista AB and heading directly for Hong Kong. (If the Endeavour wasn’t soo sloow we’d stick to the coast longer. Plus, our weak and feeble convoy is actually *preceding* the carrier group, rather than being protected by it. It feels rather like guarding our fists with our face!)  
  
The second part of the convoy (DW-HK-01) is to head north, threading its way through the islands towards Manila. Two of the independent escorts will join it en-route, before gathering the two cargo ships at Manila, and then proceeding to Hong Kong.

Map

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Staff are planning two initial strikes on Cam Ranh Bay. The first shortly before dawn, will concentrate on SEAD and the runways. For this, the Australian F-111s, half their F-18s, and a number of tankers are ordered to load and fly to Singapore. From there they will make a combined pre-dawn attack with the carrier air wing before returning to Australia.  
  
The second strike, mid-morning, will concentrate on lesser air defences, runways, and hangars. Mostly composed of smaller local attack aircraft, it will be covered by the other half of the Australian F-18s, this time coming from Christmas Island. The bomb-armed B-52s are also ordered to participate in this attack, provided the SAM and fighter situation is safe enough to allow it. The Vietnamese are expected to be up in force by this point, so their fighters will be a hazard.  
  
Subsequent attacks will follow as necessary, to deal with less time critical items like the Cam Ranh Bay docks, and any Vietnamese activity which threatens our operations. Unfortunately, we’re somewhat PGM-limited, particularly in the case of Australian LGBs, so iron bombing may be the rule for later strikes.  
  
**INITIAL RECONNAISSANCE**  
  
Operations get underway, as formations shake out and MPA get underway to hunt for the enemy. There’s no initial concern, apart from a few biologicals in the path of some of the American subs, but we start to pick up traces of enemy activity as our aircraft work their way into the South China Sea. They’re careful to stay outside the limits of Vietnamese radar cover for the moment, and after a few hours of work the intel group are confident enough to provide a basic summary to the command staff.  
  
Soviet air activity is focused around Cam Ranh Bay. It looks like they’re maintaining a 4-plane CAP of MiG-29s offshore of the base, and we’re getting radar emissions from an ASW Bear and May which seem to be working along the coast (staying safely inside the cover of coastal radar, and well away from our ships). The Vietnamese also have aircraft up, and we’re seeing radar emissions from at least three flights of MiG-21s distributed along the coast, near Cam Ranh Bay, Phu Cat, and Tan Son Nhat.  
  
Maritime radar reconnaissance has reported ship contacts all along the Vietnamese coast, but they mostly seem to be single vessels, and we haven’t spotted any large task groups yet. Some of them (particularly those near the southern coast) have low-power air-search radars on, and form a porous radar picket line, which may be a consideration in later operations.  
  
P-3s operating near China have detected a Luda DDG at sea near our convoys’ expected approach path, and one of their MPA patrolling 200 miles SSE of Hong Kong, with its powerful radar on. There’s going to be no hiding our incoming ships from that! If they choose to share the information with the Soviets, then the final day of the convoy approach could get quite exciting. (Especially if the Russians have dispersed bombers somewhere other than Cam Ranh Bay. Hmmm…)  
  
At 0830Z, two of our Malaysian F-5s deliberately probe the Vietnamese defenses, entering radar cover from the south. The nearest pair of MiG-21s flies over to intercept, forming up on our wing, and escorting us in a professional manner, and following us far out to sea, much further than I had hoped. Screening against far-ranging fighters will be important once the fight kicks off. It looks like they’re the newest model too, which probably means they haven’t kept all their good fighters at their home bases in the north.  
  
**NEXT STEPS**  
  
Amidst the reconnaissance, ground crews are working steadily to load up aircraft for the upcoming Cam Ranh Bay strikes, and the first of the tankers are starting to shuttle into the theatre from distant Guam. Australian F-111s and F-18s will soon be lifting off to move to forward bases in Singapore, and the initial stages of the operation will be underway.

**DEPLOYMENTS**  
  
Our two convoys continue heading north, as lightly loaded P-3s lay sonobuoy fields along their routes of advance. So far, they’ve found little activity, only a couple of biologicals, but it’s becoming apparent that the most distant planes (those based in Learmonth) are going to have a lot of difficulty maintaining any useful on-station time as the convoys get further away. These planes may need to be rebased north to Darwin to have any hope of contributing in the next few days.  
  
At 1000Z our Australian aircraft start moving up to their forward strike bases. The F-111s can fly directly to Singapore, but the F-18s need tanker help to reach their destinations. Half of them are sent to Singapore with AAM loadouts, where they will provide fighter cover for the first strike. The other half are sent to Christmas Island, with a mix of LGBs and AAMs, where they will ready for the second strike.  
  
The Indonesians get underway at 1400Z, moving a mix of F-5s and A-4s up to the island airbase at Ranai, and more A-4s up to Nadim. Most of these aircraft are loaded with AAMs, rather than bombs, and the hope is that they will be able to provide a useful fighter screen against any disorganized Vietnamese aircraft that are pursuing our retiring strike aircraft. (Staff are also mindful that Ranai itself is vulnerable to attack, particularly by Vietnamese Su-22s, so this forward deployment is not entirely without risk.)  
  
**ENEMY ACTIVITY**  
  
Our Australian SS, the Onslow, has been cruising towards Cam Ranh Bay at periscope depth, quietly relaying ESM reports about ongoing air activity back to HQ, and has generally been unmolested. However, as she gets closer to the coast it looks like the Soviet MPA may be getting hits on her position. A passing May gets close enough to be spotted optically, prompting a dive under the layer and a change of course, and a couple of hours later the same thing happens with a Bear. Malaysian F-5s have been loitering outside of radar cover from time to time, hoping to catch one of the MPA if they get too far from the coast, but it never quite works out. Whenever the F-5s are there, the Bears are far away, and our patrolling has no effect.  
  
Our own MPA and ELINT aircraft start picking up more signs of activity too. Around 1330Z they report indications of MiG-25 radars, and around 1430Z they get a few hits from Mi-14 ASW helicopters too. (Routine patrols, or hunting the Onslow?) They also report that two of the ships near Cam Ranh Bay are Petya light ASW frigates. The Onslow could be sent to hunt them, but they don’t seem to be on the critical path for anything, so staff decides to bypass them for the moment. Meanwhile, it looks like a MiG-25 radar may be sniffing towards the recce P-3, so the radar is switched off, and our plane changes course and skulks away into the darkness. Fortunately, the MiG-25 elects not to pursue.  
  
The Onslow continues westwards, occasionally putting up her masts, but contacts with helicopter radars prevent her from making continuous passage by snorkel. At 1750Z she puts up her scopes for another check and whoops, there’s a Petya only a few miles away, completely quiet and undetectable. Fortunately, she doesn’t notice us, the scopes are lowered, and the Onslow keeps moving towards the mouth of Cam Ranh Bay.  
  
**F-14 SWEEP**  
  
As the clock ticks down, slow-moving support aircraft (tankers, ESM, AEW) start launching and heading towards their duty stations to be ready for the fight. Then, at 1930Z, all eight of our F-14s (plus a TALD-carrying F-18 and an EA-6) launch and hurry towards Cam Ranh Bay. Their mission is to make a heavy fighter sweep, engage the modern Russian fighters, and then rush back to the carrier for a quick turnaround. In theory, this will let us safely deal with most of the good enemy fighters before our actual strike arrives on the scene, and still leave us time to fly a second sortie before we have to give the fighters back.  
  
Our fighters pause a moment to refuel from Bruneian KC-130s, and then plunge forward into the fight, trying to make the most of their Phoenix range advantage. They manage to kill a decent number of the MiG-29s, but the MiG-25s remain frustratingly elusive, and it’s clear that we’re not going to get a clean sweep of all the advanced fighters. The Vietnamese join the fight, and continuous streams of nimble little MiG-21s keep flowing in from adjacent airbases on afterburner dash. Although they’re operating at a profound missile disadvantage, they’re still enough to force my planes out of optimal position and onto the defensive again and again.  
  
As the fight pushes closer to the coast, we get indications of multiple warships in the waters east of Cam Ranh Bay, including at least one (a Grisha) with useful SAMs. Our TALD-carrying F-18 manages to get a radar sweep of them, and radios the data back home as he retires. (Interestingly, his TALDs do manage to distract some fighters, which is not often the case.) We’re also detecting emissions from multiple fire-control radars on the ground, presumably AAA sites, and then a much nastier signal as an SA-10 opens fire on my leading fighters. A dive to the deck manages to avoid those, and our F-14s fall back away from the coast.  
  
As the last of our F-14s retire, the RIOs totting up claims for a dozen Fulcrums and three Foxbats, there are still advanced enemy fighters in the air. The EA-6 is reporting radars from at least four more Fulcrums and another Foxbat. It looks like our main strike, guarded by the Australian F-18s, will have to fight their way in…

The attack continues…  
  
**CAM RANH BAY – AIRBASE STRIKE**  
  
Our strike is coming from two directions; an SEAD wave composed mostly of HARM and SLAM-carrying F-18s coming from the carrier, and an anti-runway wave composed of LGB-carrying F-111s flying in from Singapore. They’re supported by a small strike of TLAMs and ALCMs, which are hooking around through the hills to arrive from the west. These are targeted at the static Vietnamese radar and SAM sites in the area (SA-2s and SA-3s). I don’t expect very many, if any, of these to actually reach their targets, but they should prompt the enemy to turn on their SAM radars, allowing my HARMs to engage them effectively. *(Although Command allows you to launch cruise missiles at anything you want, any time you want, ALCMs actually had to be pre-targeted before being loaded, a process which takes hours. Therefore, I wrote out a target list at the start of the scenario, and I am only firing based on information available at that time.)*  
  
The SEAD F-18s press forward into the fight, and fortunately they’re self-escorting, with a pair of Sparrows and Sidewinders each. It’s a mess, with planes going in all directions, but between our 20+ American F-18s and the dozen Australian escort F-18s, we’ve got a powerful fighter force. The Russian fighters are staring into the glare of our jammers, and they get knocked down as they attempt to engage, and the constant flow of the MiG-21s gets pushed back for the moment.  
  
A two-wave barrage of HARMs gets fired towards the airbase defences, and most get shot down by the comprehensive combination of SAMs and AAA. They manage to mangle the SA-10 (crucial!), and knock down two SA-11 launchers and one SA-15 launcher, but that’s all. The SLAMs arrive next, and they too get roughly handled by the AAA, but they manage to kill a few more of the SAMs, and then the ALCMs arrive (late), smashing the two SA-2s and the SA-3 emplaced around the airbase. The TLAMs targeted at the SA-2 up the coast at Nha Trang are neatly downed by guardian Shilkas.  
  
Now it’s the turn of the F-111s, roaring in over the water from the east, pulling up, and pickling a pair of 2000 lb LGBs at the runways and taxiways. One jet gets smashed out of the air by a SAM, another gets an engine blown out, and a third is riddled by fragments from a near miss, but the majority of the SAMs can’t fire as their crews rush to reload. Bomb impacts ripple across the airfield, cratering the runways and closing the base (for now).  
  
Meanwhile, the F-18s are doing a desperate dance in a ring around the airbase, trying to stay away from the surviving SAMs, pry a cloud of furious Vietnamese MiGs away from the F-111s, and intercept fresh launches from nearby airbases. The SA-2 to the north keeps flinging shots into the area, the Grisha just offshore is a damned pest, with its SA-N-4s interfering with any attempt to evade low, and the MiG-21s keep coming. Four F-111s with small LGBs drop just under the clouds, and do their best to eliminate the lesser SAMs (particularly the remaining SA-11s) while they’re still reloading. The BDA RF-111, however, gets waved off. There’s no way I’m sending it into that AAA storm, and we’ll just have to rely on the designator tapes from the bombers.  
  
**DISENGAGE**  
  
The F-111s disengage, falling back to their tankers before making the long journey home to Australia, and the American F-18s soon follow suit, retiring to their carrier in a confused gaggle. Nobody’s told the Vietnamese that it’s over, and a stream of fighters come dashing after them. Fortunately, four Australian F-18s have been held in reserve, and the other planes fall back through their position while the rearguard fends off the charge. Then they too turn for their tankers, and the long trip back home to Tindal.  
  
Shortly afterwards, two American P-3s arrive on the scene, almost an hour later than hoped. Carrying nothing but Harpoons, they engage the scattering of Russian and Vietnamese ships near Cam Ranh Bay, sinking a Tarantul, three Petyas, and that infernal Grisha, before turning back to Christmas Island and eventually ferrying to Learmonth. The Onslow is still sailing into the area, but now most of her targets have been sunk. She Harpoons a Turya, and continues to approach the mouth of Cam Ranh Bay.  
  
**CAM RANH BAY – NAVAL BASE STRIKE**  
  
The second wave of attacks is already underway, with slow-moving bomb-laden B-52s forming up and heading in from Guam, and by 2330Z the second half of the Australian F-18s are taking off from Christmas Island. As they fly north to refuel, they are joined by Maverick-carrying A-4s from Singapore and the New Zealanders out of Brunei.  
  
An F-14 sweep (only three of the F-14s made it back in time to quick turnaround) draws little response from the Cam Ranh Bay area, although the Nha Trang SA-2 is still feisty, so the pilots head north towards Phu Cat. They kill some more MiG-21s there, while reserving their Phoenixes in case something Russian pops up from an adjacent airbase.  
  
The A-4s are the first to strike, heading in from the south-west and engaging the last SAM and the AAA that’s defending the dock area. Their Mavericks let them engage from above the SHORADS and MANPADs envelope, and they manage to eliminate the SAM and most of the nearby AAA. The F-18s then come in with heavy LGBs, destroying many of the southern piers plus the last heavy AAA site in the area. (They also spot a large merchant ship maneuvering in the harbour, and radio that back to HQ.)  
  
This leaves the area open for the B-52s, who fly into the harbour at 0300Z, only 2000m up in clear daylight, with jammers blaring to supress the distant SA-2. They fly along the waterfront, south to north, and get to work moonscaping the area, dropping long strings of bombs along the docks. The dockyards become a chaos of smoke, flames, and explosions, with bombs wrecking buildings, smashing cranes, destroying some of the piers, and leaving others damaged or in flames.

A picture containing text

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The destruction is impressive, but in terms of specific piers destroyed, the F-18s with LGBs were actually more efficient per plane.  
  
**OUTBOUND**  
  
The B-52s turn for home, knowing they can easily get back to Guam without any tanker assistance, and the F-18s head south to scrounge up fuel from KC-130s and half-empty KC-135s, before going back to Tindal in Australia.  
  
Most of the F-18s had actually been loaded with AAMs for escort duty, but since there wasn’t any fighter activity near Cam Ranh Bay they’re still fresh and ready for battle. The pilots are ordered to sweep south-west along the Vietnamese coast, where they find numerous coastal vessels, and provoke some gun-armed F-5As (essentially MiG-17s) to challenge them from Bien Hao and Vung Tao (which is evidently not just a helibase). This ends poorly for the F-5As.  
  
It turns out there are fighters on Co Ong island too, but these are better-armed MiG-21s, which are more of a problem, particularly as my pilots have already used a bunch of missiles swatting MiG-17s. Still, they manage to shoot down several, and then prudently hurry out of radar range before the others can come to grips. They’d love to stay and fight, they really would, but they’ve got such a long way to fly, and the sitter charges extra if your late, and it’s a school day tomorrow, so they have to be going…  
  
**NAVAL ACTIVITY**  
  
The glamorous action may be at Cam Ranh Bay, but our convoys are still continuing their valuable duty, headed north protected by intermittent P-3 patrols. The Soviets remind us that there’s a reason for those patrols when the carrier group escorts get an active sonar contact mid-morning, only 4 miles from the Burke DD. It may be just a fish, but at that range you can’t take chances, and an immediate ASROC shot prompts the contact to run at very un-fishlike speed. There’s a brief run, a thump, and breakup noises. *(This, it turns out, was a Charlie! Why it didn’t fire on us sooner, I have no idea. It might have been very nasty for the leading escorts in the ASW screen.)*  
  
Our own subs continue their patrols. HMS Spartan has reached Hong Kong, finding nothing there, and is slowly working back south through the shallow waters towards our convoys. USS Hawkbill, which was checking for subs in the straits north of Luzon, is now headed SW to patrol the expected route of our eastern convoy. The Onslow puts a Harpoon into an AGI near Cam Ranh Bay, and continues on to patrol the mouth of the harbour. There’s a merchant ship in there, but it’s too shallow to go in submerged, so the Onslow eventually leaves, re-acquires the smouldering AGI in the late afternoon, and sinks it with a torpedo. Meanwhile, the Sydney, freed from its duties escorting the replenishing group, is hurrying to catch up with our western convoy, where it will join it as an air-defence unit.  
  
**COALITION AIR POWER**  
  
The heavy hitting may be done by the Australians and Americans, but the lesser members of the coalition are making their contribution too. Our MPA detect one of the ancient American warships which were captured by the Vietnamese, and it’s well outside the protective range of Vietnamese air cover, so the Indonesian F-5s on Ranai decide to have a go at it. The result is a complete whiff – bombs all over the place, and a little cannon damage to the superstructure – but what can you expect from cadets? Malaysian A-4s have another try later in the day, and their more experienced pilots sink it quickly with well-placed 1,000 lb bombs. They also find another Soviet AGI further north, and also outside air cover, and it gets sunk in the same fashion.  
  
Singapore contributes by sending a few of its F-16s to visit Co Ong island. The first call brings out some MiG-21s to fight, but the second visit prompts no activity, so the F-16s overfly the southern tip of Vietnam to probe the defences. It looks like there are F-5As deployed at Ca Mau and Rach Gia, as well as some MiG-21s at Binh Thuy, so the Vietnamese have definitely dispersed their fighters from their normal home bases. The F-16s withdraw after a few shots, but this provokes some of the F-5As to come flying out and search for them outside of their radar cover. The Malaysian F-5s at Butterworth think this is a great opportunity, and they manage to sneak up on some of them just after dark and engage from behind, scoring some tidy kills.  
  
**INTO THE NIGHT**  
  
HQ’s been wondering whether any strike aircraft were based at Co Ong island, and now that the fighters there seem to be down, an RF-111 is sent to overfly it in the dark. The plane comes sneaking in at lowest altitude, and then bumps up and goes dashing across the airfield at supersonic speeds, confident it can take the enemy by surprise. The Shilkas there aren’t impressed, and a burst of cannon-fire tears a series of ragged holes along the fuselage, wrecking the IR line-scanner, before the plane can vanish into the night. The crew eventually gets the plane back to Singapore, while the diplomats debate whether RF-111s are considered ‘unarmed’ or not. At any rate, the crew reports that they didn’t see any strike aircraft before their camera was wrecked, so the base is probably not a threat.  
  
By 1400Z (9pm local) the Sydney has caught up with convoy BR-HK-01, and joined the formation. Fifteen minutes later, the carrier group picks up another submarine contact on active sonar, 70 miles NNW of Antonio Bautista airport. Helicopters pounce on the contact, sinking what turns out to be a Kilo. Our convoy went through that area about five hours earlier, and the Sydney went dashing through a little over two hours ago. Neither saw any sign of the sub. Evidently, we’ve been having lucky escapes all around.  
  
**SITUATION SUMMARY**  
  
After a day and a half of intense activity, a review shows the situation seems to be moving in our favour.  
  
The heavy SAM defences around Cam Ranh Bay are down, some of the better SHORADS have been hit, and the AAA is still completely intact. The runways there have been cratered, and there has been no sign of Soviet air activity since the attack. We have made no effort to hit the hangars or other infrastructure, so there are presumably numerous Soviet aircraft trapped on the ground. Our analysts suspect most of the MiG-29s were destroyed in air-to-air combat, but that still leaves multiple MiG-25s unaccounted for, and we have seen no sign of the Blinders, which are a missile danger to our convoy.  
  
The defences near the Cam Ranh Bay port are heavily degraded, although MANPADs are presumably still in the area, and many of the piers and naval facilities have been wrecked. The destruction is not complete, with somewhere between a half and a third of the piers still being intact to one degree or another.  
  
Vietnamese fighter losses have been enormous. Despite their brave attempts to fight the intruders, our advantage in front-aspect missiles is huge, and they rarely survive to the merge. There has been no recent activity from the bases near Cam Ranh Bay, nor from Co Ong island, and there have been some losses to units based in the southern half of the country. However, fighter patrols are still very active in the northern half of the country, and we have made no attacks on airbase infrastructure. This means their force of Su-22 strike aircraft should be completely intact.  
  
The Soviets have lost two subs to the forces of the carrier group, but we can be confident there are more out there. It is getting more difficult to provide P-3 cover for our north-bound convoys, which keep getting further and further from the home bases, and we’re soon going to have the complication of deciding whether sub contacts are neutral Chinese or hostile Soviets.  
  
**PLANS**  
  
There will be no flights by our Australian strike aircraft tonight. The aircraft have flown nearly 5,000 miles in the last day and a half. The crews must rest, and the aircraft must be serviced. The current plan is for the F-111s to make a daylight attack with GBU-15s tomorrow, to finish off the docks and try and destroy some of the grounded aircraft. Now that all our tankers are in-theatre, this will be a straight-in attack, without stops en-route. Some of our F-18s will support, but there is an interesting constraint. We’ve run out of Sidewinders! Six of our F-18s are currently in reserve because we can’t fill the loadouts. We’re also very low on spare Sparrows. Perhaps Uncle Sam can spare a cupful of missiles for their neighbours?  
  
The coalition planes could conceivably attack the Vietnamese mainland, but I’m reluctant to send them in. The lack of ARMs or long-ranged PGMs (other than a handful of Mavericks remaining) means they would likely suffer heavily in their attempts to bomb any airbases. For the moment, the intention is to continue to provoke and attrite any patrolling aircraft, and possibly to bomb some of the coastal shipping.  
  
The one other option that’s being floated is an attack on Phang Rang, in an attempt to neutralize the Su-22s that are supposedly based there. If we still had the carrier we definitely would, but without it it’s a much riskier proposition. Some staff are studying the possibility, but at the moment it’s not regarded as a high-odds opportunity. Where should our priorities lie?

Here’s the next update.  
  
**RECCE RUN**  
  
The question of Phang Rang continues to gnaw at the planning staff, and a request is made to send a U-2 to have a look at the region. If the go decision is made now, the U-2 will just have the time to make the transit from Guam and still arrive in the dark. One complication is that there are low clouds in the region (or low from a U-2’s perspective – a 6000 m ceiling) which will force the plane to come unusually low during the recce run. Still, it’s probably our best bet for area surveillance, so the plan is approved, and the U-2 gets underway.  
  
By 2045Z the U-2 is approaching the limits of Vietnamese radar cover, meeting up with a flight of three tankers and all six of Singapore’s F-16s, which are here to escort the vulnerable recce plane. The formation heads west towards Phang Rang, and as the U-2 dips below the clouds it starts getting a good look at forces in the region. Radar and IR sensors pinpoint the location of the numerous air defence units around Cam Ranh Bay, as well as spotting some aircraft parked on external tarmac spaces there.  
  
And at Phang Rang? Nothing. Nothing at all. The entire airbase is devoid of aircraft. According to intel reports there is a regiment of forty Su-22s down there, but we don’t see a trace of them. Are they all indoors, inside hangars or under weather shelters? It’s possible. Have they dispersed to other bases? That’s possible too. The U-2 presses on over the coastline, finally turning back when it’s only a few miles from the base. As it refuels and heads for home our staff is no wiser than before.  
  
The Vietnamese didn’t scramble any aircraft to intercept the recce plane, and now that it’s out of danger the F-16s are released to do some hunting. They head north towards Phu Cat, where ESM has reported numerous signals from MiG-21 radars. The defenders here are far more aggressive, challenging the F-16s with multiple flights of interceptors, but the F-16s have frontal aspect missiles, and the MiG-21s do not. Over a dozen MiG-21s are claimed for no losses to the F-16s, and the jubilant pilots head home in high spirits.  
  
**MORNING MOVEMENTS**  
  
It’s a lightly cloudy morning in Australia when our well-rested pilots begin taking off at 8:00AM local, and 45 minutes later the Cam Ranh Bay follow-up strike is fully airborne. The attack package is made of all our undamaged F-111s (most with GBU-15s, some with small LGBs), four F-18s with small LGBs, and four F-18 escorts, and they’ll be tanking multiple times en-route as they head directly for Cam Ranh Bay.  
  
While that’s getting underway, some of our Malaysian A-4s are sent to hunt coastal shipping around south Vietnam, with a tanker and some of our F-5s loitering in support. They go skimming in low, beneath the radar and just over the waves, and find that what they’re targeting are large junks. Some of these get ignored, but three of them have air search radars, and those get strafed and bombed until they are sunk. Yes, these are almost certainly Vietnamese military radar pickets, but staff still wonder if they’ll be accused of targeting civilians. Some Vietnamese F-5As belatedly come hunting, but our planes are long gone before they arrive.  
  
Meanwhile, our convoys continue heading for Hong Kong. By 220130Z the two merchants waiting in Manila have joined up with our eastern convoy and settled into place. All escorts and cargo vessels are present and in position now, and the convoys are on direct NNW courses for Hong Kong. There’s no leeway for turning or zigzagging now, and any obstacles in our path will have to be faced head-on. Our two SSNs are patrolling ahead of the convoys, while P-3s (some with 2, 1, or even no torpedoes) struggle to lay and monitor sonobuoys at the extreme ends of their patrol range. There’s little else to do except hope for clear passage.  
  
**CAM RANH BAY FOLLOW-UP**  
  
The incoming Australian strike completes its transit and tanking, and at 0406Z it turns west and heads in to attack. There’s no intention of descending into the AAA and SHORADS envelope, and the PGM attack can be delivered in complete safety. Nonetheless, it’s not easy to bomb through the storm of flak and missiles, and the Vietnamese manage to down an annoying proportion of the incoming weapons. All the same, the docks and hangars are rocked by bomb blasts, and a gratifying number of secondary explosions are reported from the hangars, including the delightful sight of the unmistakable tail section of a Blinder being blown clean out of the hangar doors.  
  
Post-strike damage assessments report the complete destruction of eight hangars, damage to several more, plus several other avgas and base facilities wrecked. The last of the piers (many still smouldering from the previous strike) are also bombed and destroyed. In terms of aircraft, the tally eventually includes a full set of ASW aircraft (Bear, May, Haze), six assorted Foxbats, and six Blinders. The destruction of those is a particular relief to those responsible for defence of our convoys.  
  
The Cam Ranh Bay base is not completely destroyed; there are still MiG-25 and MiG-29 fighters visible on some of the open tarmac spaces, and there may be a few in the remaining hangars too. However, in practical terms there are probably no useful assets there anymore, and the heavy AAA and SHORADS defences make further PGM attacks here unprofitable. (If I had any PGMs left, that is…)  
  
Meanwhile, the pilots settle in for the long flight home to Australia, hoping their tankers will be ready to meet them en-route.  
  
**PHANG RANG?**  
  
The more staff consider Phang Rang, the less they like it. We still don’t know if the Su-22s are actually down there or not, but if they are they constitute a threat to our convoys. We’ll soon be entering Chinese MPA radar cover, and if they share that data with the Vietnamese then lightly loaded Fitters might barely have the range to make an attack. (Actually, coastal airbases further north are slightly better positioned.) They could also have a go at our nearest island airbase. There must be something we can do. Long-ranged iron-bombing by our coalition partners? Low odds, to be sure, but maybe better than nothing. Out come the rulers and protractors, and a warning order is sent out to our friends, just in case.  
  
Over the course of the morning, several flights of F-5s try bombing the area, dribbling 500 lb bombs in from 3500m, to stay above the ceiling of 130mm AAA. Bombs scatter across the airbase, but they don’t manage to hit anything of value. In one case a flight of MiG-21s pops up out of the base, to the consternation of the F-5s who only have rear-aspect missiles, so there are definitely some planes hidden down there. In the early afternoon a ragged swarm of A-4s and F-5s heads out from Singapore and Malaysia, this time carrying a mix of Mavericks and bombs, and they finally start getting hits. Mavericks punch holes in the hangars, and bomb bursts scatter dust and fragments all along the line of weather shelters. But secondary explosions? None… Other than a couple of planes which pop over to Cam Ranh Bay to put spare Mavericks into some parked fighters, the raid is a bust.  
  
Vietnamese resistance is minimal. A few F-5As come in from the south-west, nearly getting into the A-4s, but the pair of escorting F-16s manage to dash in and intercept them before they can do any damage. Some MiG-21s also come calling from Bien Hoa, but their luck isn’t any better.  
  
**AT SEA**  
  
The Onslow has been patrolling the mouth of Cam Ranh Bay for a day now, wondering if any Soviet subs would come calling or if the merchant would come out, but there’s been no sign of activity so far. In the early afternoon she’s ordered to head north, towards an area where passing MPA have been reporting warship radars. As far as we can tell they are more ASW frigates and old American ships, but it’s still worth removing them, if only to prevent their use as radar pickets. All going well, she should reach the area during the small hours of the night.  
  
Meanwhile, the convoys continue to advance into the gathering dusk, with a few P-3s struggling to stay on station ahead of them. They’re about 400 miles south of Hong Kong now, and they have one day and five hours left to go. If everything works out right they should just be able to make it.

**FINDING FITTERS**  
  
The question of the missing Fitters continues to trouble the staff, so another ‘below-the-clouds’ U-2 flight is requested to help with the hunt. Possibilities include that the Fitters were dispersed north, where they would be the most threat to our convoy, or south, where they might engage in attacks on coalition airbases. There is far too much fighter activity to send the U-2 north at low altitude, so it is ordered to reconnoiter the airbases in southern Vietnam. If nothing else, we can determine where the Fitters aren’t.  
  
By 1615Z the U-2 is approaching the edge of Vietnamese radar cover, and once again we have the Singaporean F-16s there to escort it. We’ve also got some Malaysian F-5s waiting nearby, tankers are on hand, and the E-2 has been brought further north to provide radar cover over southern Vietnam. As our planes move in, the Vietnamese decide they resent the intrusion, and we start seeing planes scrambling from numerous airbases. Over the course of the next hour, Tan Son Nhat, Rach Gia, Ca Mau, and Vung Tau all contribute F-5As, while Bin Thuy and Bien Hao donate MiG-21s. What seemed like a good idea is looking pretty questionable now!  
  
Fortunately, the Vietnamese fighters don’t all arrive at once, and the F-16s manage to fend off most of the intruders while the U-2 gets a glimpse into the three south-most bases. A few fighters are spotted on the ground, but there’s no sign of the Fitters. The U-2 turns for home and heads for the stratosphere, leaving the enemy fighters far below, while our F-5s and their (completely different) F-5s struggle to come to grips with each other. The F-16s (one with a series of new ventilation holes, courtesy of a MiG-21) are now completely out of missiles, and it’s a nervous time before our planes finally make it out to sea and beyond radar cover. F-16 missile consumption has been so high that we’re now trucking in missiles from other Singaporean bases in order to cross-level stocks and allow them to reload when they get home.  
  
**221700Z: FITTERS FOUND!**  
  
The first person to spot the Fitters turns out to be a young lookout on HMS Chatham, the western-most escort on convoy BR-HK-01. He yells a warning to his watch officer, and moments later radars start lighting up throughout the little fleet. There’s eight of them, coming in fast and low, and headed just north of the convoy. We’ve been trying to keep F-5 fighter patrols up over the convoy, but have only managed intermittent cover, and of course they’re not here now. The convoy is on its own.  
  
Hobart, Newcastle, and Sydney all have Standard missiles of one type or another, and they open fire as soon as they can, while the frigate Lekir, which has been hunting subs ahead of the main body of the convoy, turns and dashes back towards the fleet at flank speed. It looks like the Fitters are converging on the lone frigate, and the lead planes open fire with small missiles while they are still several miles out. Our SAMs plunge into the attacker stream, cutting down some, and forcing others to evade wildly. The Lekir is firing its guns for all it’s worth, while enemy missiles, deprived of guidance, veer off course and pass by. More planes, more SAMs, more missiles, until one smashes into the stern of the Lekir, wrecking the helipad, destroying the helicopter, and causing fires and flooding.  
  
Of the eight Fitters which attacked, six have been shot down, and the other two have evaded. If a regiment is 40 planes, that means there’s only another four attacks to go! Based on their exit course, they’re probably based at Da Nang, or maybe Phu Cat, and they must be at the very extreme edge of their range. *(Database range for an AS-10 loadout: 445 miles. Distance to Da Nang: 442 miles! We’re also wondering how a day-only fighter is spotting blacked out ships at 1:00 AM under clouds…)*  
  
More F-5s are on the way to the convoy, but they’re just out of range when the next wave of attackers is spotted. It’s another wave of eight, and this time they’re going for the main body of the convoy. Our Standard missiles open fire again, but the Fitters are firing from further out than before, and we only manage to shoot down four of them. The incoming weapons *(ARMs, actually)* bore in remorselessly, until HMS Chatham distinguishes herself by using her double Seawolf system to knock them down. There are brief shouts of exultation from the bridge crew, until they see the Lekir, burning and listing, falling back through the convoy. This is not over yet.  
  
**ADJUSTMENTS**  
  
The Lekir is not sunk, but her loss as an effective unit is a heavy blow. She had the best active sonar system in the convoy, and the commodore was counting on her to clear the path in front of the vulnerable merchants. She’d been cruising ahead, pausing briefly to turn on her sonar, and then turning it off and moving on again. Her sonar still works, but she can’t maintain convoy speed anymore, and so far her damage control efforts have not been able to stop the flooding or put out the fire. We really don’t have anyone to put in her place, unless I want to pull HMS Chatham out of close defence position. HMS Spartan is operating somewhere ahead of the convoy, and we’ll have to hope she can clear the path instead.  
  
Meanwhile, efforts are made to improve the air cover near the convoys. A pair of F-18s take off from Tindal, to make the long journey to the convoy under the wing of a 707 tanker, and six more F-18s and two KC-135s are sent to Guam. They will operate from Anderson Airbase, which is 500 miles closer to the convoys than Tindal is, and attempt to provide better cover from there. The New Zealand A-4s based in Brunei are hurried north with a C-130 tanker, and by 2030Z they have set up a patrol line to the west of the convoy. They’ll hold that as long as they can, and then start alternating with the F-18s. Philippine F-5s will also continue to support, but they can’t refuel so their time on station will be quite limited.  
  
The Onslow also makes an adjustment, and takes a measure of revenge, when she Harpoons another Petya operating up north along the coast. There’s also one of the ancient patrol frigates there, but the Onslow’s only got one Harpoon left, so she reserves that, and continues to close to torpedo range.  
  
**WHODUNNIT?**  
  
So how did the Fitters find the convoy? Although there’s the possibility that we were heard by a Russian sub, our own P-3s and subs have seen no trace of one, and it’s more probable that the Chinese MPA (of which there seem to be two patrolling in the area) passed on the data.  
  
If China’s passing on data, there is also the probability that they’ll let Vietnamese aircraft through their airspace, particularly over Hainan or the Leizhou Peninsula. That could conceivably allow the northern Fitter regiment to have a shot at the convoy as it closes the final miles on Kong Kong. We’re probably out of range of bomb-laden Fitters (none attacked in the hours after the initial strikes, which is grounds for optimism), but more missile attacks are quite possible.  
  
Two hundred and seventy-five miles to go. Fingers crossed…

And now, the final episode…  
  
**A NEW DAY**  
  
The Onslow starts the morning right, finally catching up with one of the old patrol frigates captured by the Vietnamese in the 70s, and sinking it with a well-placed Mk48. There’re indications of another pair of Petyas patrolling further up the coast, so she heads in that direction to continue her cleanup operations.  
  
My aircraft settle in for a day of local patrolling, and excruciating long-ranged flights. The Kiwi A-4s and the F-18s (now from Anderson on Guam) set up barrier patrols to the west of our convoys, on missions that can take twelve hours or more, while lightly loaded P-3s continue to plant sonobuoys ahead of the convoys. I’m not planning any major strikes today. Lucrative targets are few, and we should probably save our remaining PGMs for significant operations in the future. Other than some offshore CAP, the pilots are glad to rest.  
  
**SUBS!**  
  
Mid -morning we suddenly get two goblin contacts within moments of each other. One detection is by sonobuoy, 25 miles WSW of our western convoy, but the other is by Hobart’s passive sonar, right in front of the convoy! Ready SH-70s are scrambled to rush towards the contacts, but even before they get there they’ve already been identified as SSs of some sort. The only question is, whose?  
  
The close sub is passing west to east at eight knots about five miles in front of the convoy, and soon there are passive sonobuoys dropping into the water right in her path. The contact goes right under them, nearly scraping her sides on the dangling transducers, but the sonar operators still can’t tell exactly what she is. The contact angles a few degrees southwards, still crossing on an ESE course, and slows to 5 knots. Is she listening to the convoy? Wouldn’t a Russian have turned towards us and fired by now?  
  
“Torpedoes!” yells the sonar operator, leaning towards his scope and listening intently. They don’t sound like he expected, and they’re much slower too. “Sir, I think they’re Chinese?!” The helicopter swings around towards the contact, dropping two torpedoes on the hostile target. Their seeker heads acquire the target within moments, and its props churn the water as it attempts to accelerate. “Definitely a Ming-class, sir!” Two hits follow moments later, and then a descending train of breakup noises.  
  
There’s silence in the cockpit for a minute. “Are we at war with China, sir?”  
  
“I don’t know.”  
  
The slow-moving Chinese torpedoes are still cruising towards the convoy, but they seem to be angled to the east. Our leading warships dodge left and right, easily clearing the danger area, and the commodore orders a turn to port for the convoy, allowing the weapons to pass blindly by.  
  
Meanwhile, there’s the other sub to consider. The second helicopter and a P-3 arrive and begin dropping passive buoys on her, but they can’t get a positive ID here either, just like the first contact. This time it doesn’t matter. If it’s Russian, it needs to be sunk. If it’s Chinese, well, they’re shooting already, and it needs to be sunk. Three torpedoes later the contact (a Tango, it turns out) is destroyed.  
  
*(The Chinese opening fire was actually a hiccup with the ROE, and not intentional, but it made for a very dramatic WTF moment in play, so I’ve left it in here.)*  
  
**LEKIR**  
  
Late in the morning we get an encouraging radio message from the damaged frigate Lekir. The fire is out, and they’re making progress on the flooding too. Two hours later we get another message, confirming that they’ve got the patch in place, it seems to be holding, and they are pumping out the list. The Lekir’s 70 miles behind the convoy, and can only do 9 knots, but her weapons systems are functional, and most of her sensors (including the sonar) still work. If the enemy don’t focus on her she should be able to make it to Hong Kong.

Map

Description automatically generated

**SUBS – AGAIN!**  
  
At 0750Z all the sonar operators in the leading warships of our western convoy jerk bolt upright, and start yelling about incoming torpedoes. This time there’s no sign of the sub in advance, just the sudden screaming of high velocity propellors driving torpedoes in at 50 knots.  
  
This guy’s Russian for sure, and quick-reaction helicopters start scrambling throughout the convoy, and dashing towards the probable launch point on full military power. Our leading warships counterfire with Mk46s as they turn left and right to try and dash out of the way of the incoming torps. There’s no hope of outrunning the long-endurance Russian torps, not at this range, and our only hope is to get out of the seeker cone.  
  
The straining helicopters rush to the launch point, dumping sonobuoys as they go, and they’ve soon got a hard active sonar contact. There’s no hesitation, and our torpedoes are in the water as soon as possible. The Victor III has a brief moment to try and run, but that doesn’t work, and he’s down and imploding within moments. That only leaves his torpedoes…  
  
Chatham dodges left and gets clear, Newcastle dodges right, and gets clear, but that leaves Hobart in the middle. The torps seem to have settled down into a clump of two headed 146º, and another one about three miles away headed about 135º. Their seeker cones are oscillating side to side a bit, but mostly point forward, and that might leave a small gap. Hobart plunges forward at flank speed, combing between the two groups of torps, and passing beyond into the safe open sea. The commodore has called for another hard-to-port turn for the convoy, and all the merchants are headed WSW at flank speed. The big torpedoes pass about two miles behind them, and rumble off into the distance.  
  
Are there more subs out there? The helicopters form up into a line abreast and lay a dense active sonobuoy field in front of the convoy, but nothing turns up. Once their buoys are gone, they hurry back to their ships to reload as quickly as possible, while they calmly discuss how the heck the subs keep getting past our SSNs, which are supposedly sanitizing the area ahead of the convoys.  
  
**FINAL MOVEMENT**  
  
The convoys continue to advance, and as night draws on the Onslow, over by Vietnam, closes in on the next set of Petyas. A Harpoon shot fails, due to a missile malfunction, so the Onslow torpedoes them both over the next half hour. She then sets course for the strait between Hainan and the Vietnamese coast, to see if anything is happening there.  
  
Then, at 1235Z on the 23rd, the convoys start to arrive in the quiet night waters of the Hong Kong destination zone. As the escorts break off to form a protective cordon, the merchants line up and head in towards the final harbour and their assigned berths.  
  
The trip has been a success. Other than the unfortunate Lekir, which is still over 100 miles away from dock, all the convoy ships have made it in to port safely. The sailors probably have a day or two to relax, in relatively safe waters, but where will they be sent next?  
  
Thanks very much for writing another big scenario for us.

**Play Impressions**  
  
The player’s in an interesting situation here, and I found I had to do a lot of planning to assure myself that I had enough tankers on hand to get the main strikes, particularly the Australians, in and out again at a specific time. It’s certainly an interesting puzzle, especially when all the basing limitations are added to the mix. (A detailed mission planner would shine for this one.) The second day’s strikes were easier to manage, once all the tankers were based in-theatre, and I no longer had to bring big escorts to cope with fighter swarms. Getting P-3 cover took a lot of work, particularly in the late game, when I had to manually unload torpedoes and even some of my sonobuoys over and over again, in order to cover the distant convoys.  
  
I found Cam Ranh Bay to be surprisingly resilient. Yes, I did manage to shut it down with my heavy strike, but I never did manage to completely suppress the air defences, and once my HARM-carrying SEAD planes and jammers were gone, I was very reluctant to press down into the SHORADS envelope. I suppose a concentrated day-strike with all my coalition partners’ Mavericks might have broken the air defence down further, but I doubt I had enough to completely eliminate all of it. So, although Cam Ranh got knocked down, I’m not sure if I’d have been able to keep it down long-term with the carrier gone. Which makes for a much more interesting scenario then a clean sweep of the entire base.  
  
I found myself biasing towards air defence with my lesser forces, and initially most of them were loaded with AAMs, instead of air-to ground ordnance. I was quite worried about large Vietnamese counterattacks and interceptions, and visualized swarms of Fitters and Fishbeds closing on my most forward bases, or chasing my retiring strikes. I suppose if I’d measured a bit more carefully I’d have realized that threat wasn’t quite as plausible as I’d thought.  
  
I definitely fumbled my convoy air-cover. I pretty much knew that the Fitters weren’t at Phang Rang any more, and I’d correctly measured that the coastal airbases were just on the very edge of their range to hit the convoy, but late-game laziness and wishful thinking lead me to judge that ‘just barely in’ meant ‘probably out’. I’d also identified the risk of being ID-ed by Chinese MPA. Still, I did nothing significant to address these dangers, other than sending occasional F-5 patrols. There should have been persistent CAP west of the convoy – no excuses!  
  
I made a few tweaks to the initial setup of the CVBG and replen group, turning on a couple of the better active sonars, and pulling in to a slightly tighter and more defensible formation (particularly the replen group), but other than that I left them alone. The sonars worked well, picking up two subs, and I manually interfered to fire ASROC at one of them, rather than leaving it to the ASW patrols. (Couldn’t resist!)  
  
I was never quite sure about the status of Vietnam. Were we only supposed to be targeting her assets in the immediate context of the strike on Cam Ranh Bay? Or were we supposed to be launching a general offensive against her military assets throughout the region? I aggressively went after her military ships, bases where I thought anti-shipping strike aircraft might be, and any aircraft which came up to challenge these operations, but generally left her other infrastructure alone. Too much flak for too little gain!  
  
The schedule of Zulu-time events in the scenario briefing was very helpful, thanks for that.