**Indian Ocean Fury #3 – Socotra Scramble**

**AAR by fitzpatv, July 2023**

As war breaks out, the Soviets and their regional allies (Yemen, Ethiopia, Eritrea and Sudan) have closed the Bab-al-Mandeb strait at the Southern entrance to the Red Sea, thereby interfering with passage towards and from the Suez Canal. USS Nimitz is urgently needed to reinforce NATO in the Mediterranean, but is currently in the approaches to the Gulf of Aden and has to get through the Red Sea in the next few days. Guarding the E end of the Gulf of Aden is the Soviet base on the ‘waterless isle of Socotra’ (as it was first described to me), which has to be neutralised en route, along with another base on Dahlak Island in the Southern Red Sea and as many Warsaw Pact-aligned forces as possible. You can only play the NATO side.

Nimitz is escorted by the cruiser Worden, the destroyers John Paul Jones and Briscoe and the frigate Stephen W Groves. She has a large air group, but no AMRAAMs (just Phoenixes and Sparrows) and a limited range of strike munitions.

Moving to rendezvous with Nimitz is a task group comprising the cruisers Wainwright and Gettysburg and the destroyer Leftwich. These units have seen action in the disastrous affray in the Persian Gulf and are consequently out of TLAMs and Harpoons, but still have adequate SAMs and some choppers.

To the S of Nimitz is the oiler Cimarron, escorted by the frigate McClusky. These ships are meant to support the carrier on her way to the Med. Also nearby is the SSN Columbus.

To the N in Oman, NATO has some F-15s, F-16s, tankers and other support aircraft. There are also a couple of B-1 Lancers with inappropriate short-range, low-altitude munitions and a large squadron of bomb-armed Omani Jaguars.

At Djibouti, perilously close to the Bab-al-Mandeb, the French destroyer Jean de Vienne is guarding eight minesweepers with a tender and some remotely-operated vehicles. The French base is protected by a squadron of Mirages and some SAMs and also has a selection of ASW Breguets and choppers.

Finally, the British have the frigate Lancaster on ASW duty in the Red Sea and some US Eagles, Falcons and tankers will be available after about a day for one strike mission before being returned to duty in the Med.

Ranged against this, the Soviets have based some Fencers, Fulcrums and Floggers at Socotra and more at Sana’a in Yemen. The former base has some decent SAMs, including a Grumble site, but the latter relies on Yemeni-crewed Guidelines and Goas. A number of Osa PCFGs are known to be based at Socotra’s port of Mori. Several Soviet subs are at sea, precise whereabouts unknown.

Yemen has a sizeable air force, consisting in the main of MiG-21s, Tigers and Fitter strike planes, spread across a number of bases, which are warded by more Guidelines and Goas. They also have a swarm of small naval craft in position to block the straits, which are heavily mined. Along the Arabian shore, there are numerous Styx and 152mm artillery batteries, SAMs and AA guns, making a transit a highly-dangerous business.

Further NW, Ethiopia fields a couple of squadrons of Tiger and Flogger H attack planes, plus more Fishbeds. They have shelved their differences with the Eritreans, who contribute a squadron of captured MiG-21s.

Last line of defence for the Pact is Sudan, which has more Fishbed and Flogger H units and maybe some light naval craft. Ethiopia, Eritrea and Sudan also have their share of handed-down SA-2 and SA-3 systems at their bases.

15/2/94 01:00Z (04:00L): The briefing suggests that you waste no time and get straight to business, so I made immediate plans to strike at Socotra while seeking to link the Nimitz and Gettysburg groups and place Cimarron in their wake. The considerable distance to the escape zone in the Southern Red Sea (N of Dahlak Island) enforced a rapid speed of 25 knots for the first two groups, with Cimarron moving as best she could at 18.

I unleashed a TLAM barrage at Socotra’s airbase and Mori, supported by Omani-based Strike Eagles with Paveways and HARM-toting F-16s. Some Tomcats from Nimitz flew escort and duelled with Fulcrums and Floggers over the island. As I’d feared, the once-mighty Phoenix is now a very tricky weapon to use and tends to overshoot the target or lose lock, so the only casualty here was a Fencer F (3VP for Soviet planes, one for all other enemy). Nevertheless, the onslaught overwhelmed the Russian defences, closed the runway (5VP), wrecked a pier (sinking four Osas for 1VP each) and wrote-off most of the SAMs and radars. I was actually given 15VP for the runway instead of 5 due to the multiple awards bug seen in other scenarios. Then again, 5 wasn’t very generous, given the importance of the target.

02:00Z: A follow-up wave of 6 TLAMs finished off the naval base and accounted for no less than 20 more Osas. They could reflect on the old adage that ‘dulce et decorum est pro patria mori’! I was pretty glad that this lot never got to sea and that the resident Fencers would stay grounded. Socotra was neutralised.

03:00Z: Given the fate of the Osas and my experiences in Mozambique Madness, I deemed it wise to launch all of the minesweepers at Djibouti to prevent them being lost if the pier was destroyed.

07:00Z: After a lull, USS Columbus launched a TLAM strike and closed the runway at the Easternmost Yemeni base at Ataq, grounding some Fitters and Fishbeds for the duration. Again, I was given 10VP instead of 5.

08:00Z: The enemy mounted a heavy strike on Djibouti, initially with swarms of Yemeni Fitters and Tigers from Aden and both Yemeni and Ethiopian MiG-21s. The French had eight Mirages and some SAMs to oppose them. Two Mirages were lost, but this phase was essentially a turkey shoot, with 12 Fitters, 16 Tigers and 15 Fishbeds knocked out of the sky. French Magic and Super missiles have become more useful now that air combat is a closer-ranged affair and they tend to be more reliable than more ‘advanced’ American weapons. However, the Yemeni and Ethiopian aircraft were just (unnecessarily) running interference for a stand-off strike by Fencers from Sana’a, escorted by Fulcrums and Floggers. Kazoo missiles sank the Jean de Vienne for a severe 50VP (ten times the Socotra runway for a second-line destroyer), the two minesweepers (5VP each) and tender (nil) that had been at sea at the start and also battered the empty harbour facilities, destroying one pier and severely damaging the others. Not much I could have done to prevent this, but the minesweepers I’d launched in-play were off the AI’s radar and were not attacked.

This is another scenario which uses the Downed Pilot script. In this case, I had two Frenchmen to rescue close to Djibouti at the end of the strike, so I sent-out my sole Alouette SAR chopper. Perhaps because this is one of Bart’s earliest scenarios, the script just doesn’t work and it proved impossible to pick-up the pilots. On the other hand, the bug also meant that I lost no points for the planes and, since (with my usual luck) every single aircraft I lost in the game generated a Downed Pilot, I lost no points at all.

10:00Z: I was informed that the Lancers at Thumrait, Oman, were due to be recalled to the States for nuclear deterrence duty, so I had to use them or lose them. As they had 1nm-ranged bombs that had to be dropped from 2,000’ or less, using them would have been suicide, so I was happy to release them.

Columbus continued the Day of the TLAM, taking advantage of the enemy planes abandoning CAP to support the Djibouti strike to close the runway (10VP awarded, should have been 5).

12:00Z: Top priority now was to deal with the piers at the four Yemeni bases around the straits to prevent swarms of small craft contesting our passage later. For proof of concept, I fired an initial pair at the three piers at Murad, wrecking two and destroying 5 dhows (2VP each) and 10 other craft (one each).

Some Yemeni MiGs chose that moment to raid Djibouti. It did them no good and cost them three planes to CAP and SAMs.

14:00Z: A follow-up TLAM strike destroyed all of the remaining piers, eliminating 11 dhows and 66 other craft for a nice haul of points. At +183, it was still a Minor Defeat.

15:00Z: By now, I could risk having a Sentry from Oman close enough to monitor activity at all Yemeni bases. In this way, I learned that there were still Soviet aircraft operating from Sana’a. Looking more closely at the photo recon, I realised that the base had a runway-grade taxiway as well as a runway!.

17:00Z: I launched 10 more TLAMs at the taxiway. To distract the defenders, a Mirage took-off from Djibouti, engaged and destroyed a Yemeni Tiger and two MiG-21s. This drew the Fulcrums away from Sana’a. As the TLAMs closed, two more Mirages engaged. The first made a mess of tackling two Fishbeds, downing one but taking damage. His wingman disposed of the other MiG and a Tiger before both got clear. Despite all this effort, two Russian fighters were still in the right place to shoot down the lead pair of TLAMs. Thankfully, they then went RTB and the other eight missiles duly closed the taxiway (10VP awarded), also catching two Fulcrums and a Flogger taking-off or landing. This made the score Average at +205. We were down to one TLAM, but it had to be done to ground the Fencers and other Russian aircraft.

By now, Nimitz and Gettysburg had rendezvoused and were N of Socotra, heading W at 25 knots.

18:00Z: With the French now taking a more aggressive posture, a Mirage downed two more Yemeni MiG-21s. A recon Mirage scouted the straits and located three batteries of 152mm guns and a half-dozen Styx sites, plus multiple batteries of AA guns. Two more Fishbeds arrived and were dealt-with by the escort.

21:00Z: After a long series of combats near the straits, the French bled the Yemeni Fishbed CAP from Aden to death. The Soviets also lost a Fulcrum, which had to ditch.

22:00Z: The Lancers left Thumrait. Meanwhile, the strike planes from Cairo were now available for their one-off mission. The best bet seemed to be to target a string of four Square Tie surface search radars which spanned the Red Sea at the latitude of Dahlak Island, while also attacking the facilities on the latter. To do this, we had 4 Eagles escorting 4 attack F-15s, 2 F-16s with Mavericks, 4 more with HARMs and four supporting tankers. Shepherding this lot down the 1,100nm of the Red Sea while keeping out of sight of enemy radar needed attention.

23:00Z: While doing this, I had two false sub contacts to deal-with. One, near HMS Lancaster, was one of those infuriating False Contacts that can’t be resolved with the available technology. In the end, I left it in the hands of a nearby Saudi (AI-controlled) frigate and cleared the area.

I also attacked the Bab-al-Mandeb defences with two Gazelle choppers from Djibouti. These destroyed a battery of 152mm guns with their HOT anti-tank missiles, but one was jaw-droppingly downed by an SA-2f Guideline while flying at 200’ ASL, which was surely impossible...

16/2/94 01:00Z: The strike from Cairo went in. It turned-out that the Square Ties did not have any associated Styx batteries (just a unit of 152mm guns). All the radars were destroyed (no VP) but the artillery had a charmed life with malfunctioning missiles and escaped with a mauling. Numerous MiG-21s of uncertain nationality scrambled from the Dahlak base and managed to take advantage of the chaotic situation to down an F-16 and damage two F-15s. The Dahlak runway was closed (5VP) and 11 enemy aircraft (6 Farmers, 3 MiG-21s and 2 Colts) were destroyed on the ground and in the air. AMRAAMs were hopeless, repeatedly overflying their targets due to lofting and I had issues with aircraft trying to break-off to refuel as they commenced their attack runs, despite taking care to fuel them from the tankers before sending them in. All I could do was suspend permission to refuel until the attacks were complete. The lost F-16 apart, all other aircraft got safely back to Egypt.

02:00Z: Twelve Yemeni Fitters launched from Aden and went for the task force. In short, CAP downed 11 and the escapee was intercepted and terminated by a Mirage. This masks a chaotic affray in which Phoenixes were again a waste of space, most kills being made at close quarters with Sparrows and Sidewinders. Infuriatingly, Tomcats told to Auto Engage Fitters would, contrary to instructions, soar to 36,000’ at the AI’s whim when the enemy were skimming the wavetops – there are so many hidden settings in the game these days that it can be a nightmare for the player.

04:00Z: Thumrait mounted a tanker-supported strike against the Bab-al-Mandeb defences, with the French supplying recon and an abortive Mirage strike sortie (double malfunction). One F-16 was lost because the AI had it RTB over the SAMs at Aden while I wasn’t looking (this was to prove a constant hazard and I wonder whether it was a deliberate design feature). An F-15 was knocked-down by a Guideline. However, all radars and SAMs at the straits were neutralised with HARMs, while the Eagles’ Paveways wrought havoc and destroyed all of the Styx batteries. One artillery battery was crippled but, along with its companion, it still needed to be eliminated before the waiting minesweepers could close-in.

05:00Z: A four-plane strike from Nimitz finished the damaged 152mm battery and cluster-bombed some AA guns, but the second battery was saved by a malfunctioning CBU-59. A Hornet was hit by AA, lost comms and inevitably and mindlessly flew over Aden, inviting SAMs until its luck ran out.

06:00Z: A Gazelle finished-off the artillery and two Hornets then cluster-bombed the remaining AA on Mayyun island to make life safer for ASW planes and minesweeping choppers.

I then sent-in the minesweepers and a Sea Dragon chopper. Immediately, everything headed for the Gulf of Guinea as a bug reared its head. Investigation showed that the minesweeping mission’s reference points had been wiped for some reason. Reinstating them in the editor temporarily resolved the issue, but it kept recurring at intervals. This made minesweeping a trial, especially as units move around randomly instead of targeting known mines in an organised fashion. Manually steering them does no good, as the AI just overrules you. I also lost the Sea Dragon (easily the most effective asset due to its mobility) to a mine detonation and had to send-in a replacement. The ROVs launched from the German minesweeper Passau were a complete waste of space. Nonetheless, mines were gradually found and removed.

08:00Z: The Yemenis mounted a strike from their remaining viable base at Hodeida (NW of the straits), with a dozen Fitters escorted by the same number of Fishbeds. Instead of going for the task force, they prudently went after the minesweepers. With Nimitz still too far away to mount a permanent CAP, the French were left to hold the fort until the Tomcats could arrive. Two Mirages were lost for 6 Fitters and 6 Fishbeds (some downed by the US carrier fighters at the end) and the minesweeper Lobelia was bombed and sunk. The Sea Dragon had some anxious moments before getting clear. Overall, it could have been worse, though Hodeida was stil capable of another strike.

09:00Z: A lone Sudanese patrol boat approached the NW end of the straits and was bombed and sunk by an F-18.

12:00Z: After much tedious, frustrating minesweeping, the mission reference points bug began recurring every few seconds. No sooner had I reset the reference points and re-assigned units to the mission then the problem would repeat itself. I might have been able to get the task force through, following a course blazed by the minesweeper Milazzo, but I couldn’t count on it. Without being able to execute minesweeping reliably, it was an unacceptable risk. I didn’t need the hassle and quit.

I was on +263 (Average) and would probably have won if I’d avoided being crippled by the minefield. The enemy were down to maybe three squadrons of Ethiopian and Sudanese strike planes, the remaining Fitters at Hodeida and probably some subs. I hadn’t used a single SAM from the task force and had plenty of CAP and ASW planes available, with enough time to get past the Dahlak Island region to the escape zone. I still have the save file and might finish it anyway, but this seemed a good time to post the AAR.

Overall, it is a good scenario in many ways, despite the lengthy interludes imposed by the distances involved, but it is buggy and the minesweeping issues spoiled it for me.

Once I’d gotten over my irritation with the minesweeping issues, I finished the scenario. Did the best I could running minesweeping manually, then accepted the risk to the task force.

13:00Z: Thumrait mounted an attack on Socotra. Using Paveways meant getting into SAM range and this cost me two F-15s, but two Guidelines and a Goa were disabled and 18 Soviet aircraft destroyed on the ground.

14:00Z: A Mirage intercepted and downed a Badger recon plane over Ethiopia.

15:00Z: A few planes flew from Nimitz to reduce two Eritrean Goa sites at Assab, which had the potential to cramp our exit from the straits. A pair of F-18s with AGM-84s only damaged the SAMs from a safe distance and they would not illuminate for a waiting HARM plane. I felt forced to send-in an F-18 with CBU-59s. This successfully approached and hit both sites, but lucklessly failed to destroy either fire control radar and was shot down on a 26% chance on the way out. At least this allowed the HARM plane to pounce and finish the job. Meanwhile, another Badger was destroyed over Ethiopia.

17:00Z: A third Badger went the way of the other two. The surviving Mirage pilots were amassing quite a score, albeit against limited opposition.

18:00Z: The task force entered the Bab-al-Mandeb. Despite every precaution, including minesweepers running ahead of the high-value units, three escorts struck undetected mines (Nimitz was at the back). Groves and Leftwich sustained only minor damage, but John Paul Jones suffered flooding and her speed dropped to 22 knots, trailing the CVN. It took a while to bring things under control and she sustained 12% damage overall.

19:00Z: Just as the fleet cleared the mined area, Hodeida launched a strike and, pre-occupied with the mines, I only realised when the ships started firing SAMs. Thankfully, the Fitters and Fishbeds went Engaged Defensive in the face of the barrage, or they might have been able to close to bombing range. As it was, they had some extraordinary luck, with strings of misses by SAMs on 60-70% odds, but were eventually wiped-out at considerable expenditure of ordnance.

Twelve Ethiopian Tigers then approached from their base at Mekele. This time, I was ready and CAP, helped by the Mirages, intercepted them before they got anywhere near the task force, the result being a one-sided turkey shoot. We even managed to get some Phoenixes on target. At +350, the score was still Average.

20:00Z: Things took a serious turn for the worse when a Kilo succeeded in ambushing and sinking the Leahy-class cruiser Worden. This cost 100VP and even the destruction of the enemy sub by ASROC for 20 was little consolation. Perhaps I should have slowed-down going through the straits, but I’d had French Breguets combing the area ever since the Yemeni SAMs had been neutralised and the task force had mounted an ASW surge for good measure (we found a lot of biological and false contacts). As with the mines, our efforts proved insufficient.

17/2/94 01:00Z: Despite annoying issues caused by shoals in the Red Sea, a change of formation from column to wedge and the erratic Pathfinder software, the task force made good progress into deeper water with no further sign of the enemy, beyond a fourth and last Badger that was picked-off by a Tomcat.

07:00Z: Nimitz reached the Objective Area for 200VP. There was no award for Gettysburg doing the same. A score of +473 was still only Average.

08:00Z: Two Hornets hit Dahlak Island with AGM-84s and destroyed five aircraft on the ground.

Two more AGM-84 planes and a HARM F-18 struck Sana’a, hitting two Fencers, smashing two radars and damaging a Gainful site.

Cimarron and McClusky, escorted by Columbus, reached the approaches to the straits, but they were not going to be able to reach the Objective Area in time, so I left them there rather than risk more mine incidents.

09:00Z: Three Strike Eagles from Thumrait paid another visit to Socotra. They began by finishing-off a Grizzly site that had caused problems last time despite having no fire control radar (this took three shots with Paveways due to malfunctions). With the danger removed, the other two F-15s could relax and a dozen missiles took-out 28 more enemy aircraft, moving the score on to +500 and a Minor Victory. I was, however, aware that I’d lost 13 aircraft for maybe 65VP that I’d not been fined due to the Downed Pilot bug (I would have rescued at least two pilots). I’d also been given 25VP too many for closing runways so, in truth, I still needed another 80-90 points to win.

The escorting HARM F-16 went to scout the Yemeni base at Al-Ghaydah, near the Omani border and was startled to encounter a Fencer E that had re-based there. An AMRAAM was spoofed on a 12% chance, another missed on 85% and I had to make the kill with a Sidewinder.

10:00Z: An F-18 finished-off the damaged 152mm battery on Dahlak Island with bombs, not that it scored any points.

11:00Z: Omani Jaguars destroyed a Flogger that had re-based to Al-Ghaydah on the ground and also wrecked the nearby radar site.

An F-18 eliminated two Sudanese Square Tie coast defence radars and covered our last TLAM as it destroyed a hangar at Port Sudan, rubbing-out six Flogger H attack planes. The HARM plane then detected a radar inland and, stretching its fuel, disposed of that as well.

14:00Z: Not without a lot of frustration, two Tomcat sorties penetrated deep into Sudanese airspace and clobbered a pair of MiG-21s patrolling over the Nile Valley.

15:00Z: A four-plane AGM-84 strike wreaked havoc at Port Sudan, writing-off 20 parked MiG-21s and taking the score to +600. Tomcats picked-off two more over the Nile.

16:00Z: A lone F-15 with our last Paveways made another visit to Socotra and wrote-off another 18 enemy aircraft. I was glad I’d prevented that lot from getting airborne early-on!

17:00Z: Shot down two more Sudanese Fishbeds to take the score to +650 and a theoretical Major Victory before winding-down the clock. Deducting the points I shouldn’t have had, the final total was really about +560 and a Minor Victory. While just about all of the stated scenario objectives had been achieved, the loss of the Worden and Jean de Vienne was deemed to have detracted from this.

NATO lost a cruiser, second-line destroyer, 3 minesweepers, a tender, 5 ROVs, 4 fighters, 7 atatck planes and two choppers, plus four ground elements.

The Warsaw Pact and allies lost 24 PCFGs, an SSK, 93 smaller craft, 190 fighters, 90 attack planes, 17 support aircraft, 16 Styx, 24 artillery, 39 SAM, 15 radar and 43 other ground elements. We swept 38 mines and detonated 14, some of the latter deliberately, as it was the only way the minesweepers could manage it.

The next scenario in the series, Gate of Tears, looks like another marathon, but there are Chains of War and NFZ matters to tackle first.