**Indian Ocean Fury #6 – Into the Breach**

**Playtest Report by AndrewJ May 2022**

**SITUATION**  
  
After initial fierce fighting in and around the Persian Gulf, Iranian and Soviet forces have fallen back (a little) to regroup, and we’ve been given the responsibility for dominating and protecting the Persian Gulf region. We’re expected to make a major political demonstration by bringing the Saratoga carrier group through the narrow Straits of Hormuz, into the Gulf and up to the Arabian coast. There are streams of ingoing and outgoing supertankers (particularly an outgoing convoy) which need protection along the length of the Gulf, and groups of our own logistics ships need cover as they transit the region. We’re also expected to protect Iraqi infrastructure and beat up on accessible Iranian infrastructure.  
  
Our main force is the Saratoga carrier group, and we have a number of smaller individual ships (mostly frigates and missile boats) scattered throughout the region. There are two other strong task groups in the region, on either side of the Straits of Hormuz, plus three sets of minesweepers in and around the straits, but these are not under our direct control. We also have land-based air distributed along the coast, from the Gulf of Oman to Kuwait, but these are mostly a small assortment of minor units, some NATO, and many local. The big formations have left the area, and there’s nothing at all in Iraq.  
  
Worryingly, stocks of AAMs and other PGMs are running low. There are only 18 Phoenix missiles on the carrier. Other missiles aren’t quite as bad, but heavy fighting could exhaust them rapidly. TLAMs are essentially restricted from use. We have a handful, but most are reserved for later tasks. Massive missile barrages and overwhelming combined strikes aren’t going to be possible.  
  
We don’t have a lot of information about enemy deployments. Forces in the immediate area of the Straits have reportedly taken a pounding, and major ships have presumably been sunk, but the situation in the interior is less clear. We can probably expect the bulk of their air forces to be there, but there is a lot of uncertainty about what survives, and what’s deployed at each base. Small boats may be an issue, and submarines are definitely a concern. Most of all, the threat of mines looms large. There are multiple regions on both sides of the straits which have been written off as ‘no-go’ zones, and only a small central channel, maybe 5 to 10 miles wide, is considered to be clear of mines. Traffic constraints will certainly be tight, and if they manage to sneak more mines into the central channel, then we could have severe problems.  
  
**PLAN**  
  
Operations will begin with initial reconnaissance, focusing on the Straits of Hormuz area, and surrounding defense installations. What’s on the islands of Abu Musa and Kish? What forces are in Bandar Abbas, or at Jask? Vulnerable tankers are already in the area, so we need to know soon.  
  
The outbound tankers we control in the Gulf are ordered to converge onto a common route, to minimize the risk of mine strikes and submarine surprises, and to try and catch up with the main body of our outbound convoy, which is proceeding in single file at 14 knots. The convoy gets a single frigate at the front and tail, and another (the Aliseo) is ordered to hurry over and join the escort as soon as possible.  
  
Our carrier group is ordered to tighten up and proceed towards the straits, blasting away on active sonar in the hope of pre-empting any close-in submarine surprises. The usual array of AEW, ESM, and CAP will cover the area, and ASW helicopters are sent about 30 to 40 miles ahead to hunt for more distant ambushes.  
  
We’ve got two small logistics task groups, one inbound and one outbound between Diego Garcia and the Gulf. These are ordered to bias towards the south shore of the Gulf of Oman, and to follow the same route to ease our ASW search problems. Our one SSN is assigned to patrol the south side of the mouth of the Gulf of Oman, in the area where the groups are expected to transit. We only have two P-3s, and both of them are assigned to lay sonobuoy cordons along the expected route. The outbound group has one frigate for escort, but the inbound group is completely undefended, and no other forces are available in the area. Fingers crossed…  
  
Baghdad is on our ‘to defend’ list, but we’ve got nothing in the immediate area to defend it, and there’s not even a radar in the vicinity. We’ll send a few planes up from Kuwait, 300 miles away, but we don’t have a lot to spare, given the concentration of Iranian forces near Kuwait on the Gulf.  
  
*(Some adjustments are also made to the NATO Support side. The Tripoli is operating with only a single FFG for escort, which is horribly risky, so it is ordered to immediately combine with TG Fox for more protection. All task groups are tightened up, active sonars are turned on, and SAM WRA is set down to 75%. Minesweepers are changed to line-abreast formation, and given regular patrol routes along the swept corridors, rather than relying on the AI’s random-walk method. The Western Mine Patrol zone was adjusted to the actual path of the tankers. Other than that, I left things alone.)*  
  
**BEGIN!**  
  
Operations commence, and other than the abrupt discovery of a goblin *inside* the carrier group (fortunately just fish), the reconnaissance commences as planned.  
  
The Iranians have some small patrol boats near Larak, and a bunch of large cargo vessels with strange sensor emissions operating near Hengam and Bandar Abbas. We’ve met these before *(in previous scenarios)*; Iranian ‘ship-of-the-line’ conversions, with conventional artillery batteries lined up on deck. They’re slow, and not an enormous threat, but recce shows 40 small ships at Hengam, and 60 at Larak, and swarms of that size are a definite concern!  
  
Some of our Mirages have excellent SLAR pods, and one goes zipping along the coast and islands, finding numerous AAA and small SAM detachments. The docks and runways on the island of Abu Musa are still wrecked, fortunately, but Kish Island seems operational, although we don’t see anything there except air defences. On the other side of the straits, Jask and Khereti don’t seem to have anyone home either, at least as far as a visiting S-3 can tell.  
  
One of our helicopters gets a radar contact in the north end of the Gulf, which turns out to be a small Delvar military cargo ship. Analysts wonder what it’s doing out there, alone. Maybe minelaying?  
  
Fortunately, enemy air operations seem limited so far. There are F-4s staying ‘feet dry’ along the Persian Gulf coast, a single one loitering near Bandar Abbas, and some MiG-29s further inland near Shiraz, but that’s all so far.  
  
**ANTI-SHIP OPERATIONS**  
  
The honour of the first shot goes to the frigate Aliseo, which puts a single Otomat into the closest ship-of-the-line, the Pahlavi, leaving it flooding and ablaze. One of the Dhofar patrol boats *(on the NATO Support side)* near Bandar Abbas gets into the act by moving to the north end of its zone and hitting another SOTL with two Exocets, and a third with another. An excellent start by our allies!  
  
An F-16 from Al Dhafra arrives and gets rid of two of the small patrol boats near Larak with a pair of Mavericks, and an A-6 drops a Skipper on the last one, before moving on to finish the Pahlavi. F-18s arrive from the carrier to smash the docks at Larak and Hengam with heavy Walleye munitions. There’s a very satisfying string of secondary explosions, as the weakly built little boats there are wrecked by the blast, which removes a major threat to passing shipping.  
  
The lone Delvar also gets some attention, from the beautifully named ‘Al Boom’ PGM, which comes dashing out of Kuwait to hunt it down. It will take a few hours to get in range, but when it does a single Exocet is enough to sink the little cargo ship.  
  
We also have a fine stroke of luck when, at 2038Z, one of the helicopters ahead of the carrier gets a deep contact moving at 3 knots on an active sonobuoy. The pilot turns about, dropping a Mk46 on the contact, which starts dashing away in a very un-fishlike manner. The torpedo closes, misses, swings about and reattacks, hitting and sinking an ultra-quiet Kilo. This nasty little ambush predator was right in the path of passing tankers and the carrier group, so its demise is welcome news.  
  
  
**BAGHDAD ATTACKED**  
  
As midnight approaches, two F-15s circle in the dark skies east of Baghdad, wondering if they really need to be there. Are the Iranians likely to mount any significant night raid on the city? But then, as they circle, there’s a sudden radar contact. A victim!  
  
The eager pilots turn aggressively to attack. Four planes inbound, easy meat! But the radar count keeps growing. There’s another flight. And then another. And indications of fighter radars coming in fast too. There are 24 planes coming in quiet, and over a dozen more, radars blazing. There are only two Eagles.  
  
The first plane dives in, Sparrows and AMRAAMs killing the first four Su-24s, and Sidewinders wounding another, before dashing away pursued by the howling horde of MiG-23s. This leaves the second pilot free to attack unmolested, killing five more, wounding two, and chasing another into the heart of Baghdad. Cannon-fire blazes at the target, fragments fly off the enemy plane, but bombs drop – right on Air Defence HQ!  
  
The F-15s flee on afterburner, and manage to elude the escorting MiGs, but there are no other forces left to engage the enemy. The remainder drop their bombs unopposed, smashing targets throughout the city. Furious Iraqi officials demand to know why there was no effective defence, and what will be done to prevent further attacks. Planning staff aren’t certain exactly which base the Sukhois came from, but their closest estimate has them landing around 2145Z, which means no launch before 0345Z, best case. The survivors will probably be back shortly after that time, and officials pledge that there will be more fighters ready to meet them in the morning.

**F-14 SURGE**  
  
A surge of F-14s is an awesome sight, and the blare of their powerful radars is enough to weaken the heart of the opposition even before they come into range. Top Gun-loving Americans everywhere thrill with pride at their presence! The problem is, these F-14s are Iranian…  
  
One of my recce Mirages, making an inland dash to try and get a look at the Shiraz area, seems to have triggered a major response, and swarms of Iranian F-14s start boiling up out of the area. The Mirage is already outbound supersonic, and never got close enough to be caught, but the enemy fighters start spreading out to look for other targets. We’ve only got two F-14s up in the area, both with one single Phoenix each, and they manage to kill one of the inbound fighters before they have to flee. That still leaves 11…  
  
Some head SW, towards the Bahrain/Qatar area, and most head for the Straits of Hormuz. A few of my other fighters, F-15s and Mirages, make an attempt to engage, but the range advantage of the enemy Phoenixes is overwhelming, and our pilots are forced into supersonic retreat before they can get remotely close enough to shoot back. Everything we have that can fly is evacuating the area at top speed, and an urgent call goes out to NATO support units in the straits to land their helicopters immediately. *(I had to manually switch sides to order this.)* One of the vital minesweeper helicopters doesn’t receive the message, and gets shot down, and the Iranian F-14s continue to aggressively pursue our forces across the Gulf.  
  
That’s where they meet their doom. The ships of TG Texas aren’t impressed by Phoenix missiles, and the Texas herself opens fire with SAMs and starts executing passing Iranian F-14s. Our fleeing F-15s head for Qatar, and the F-14s pursue aggressively, right into the range of the Patriot missile batteries based there. Losses are severe, and as the surviving enemy turns away fresh American F-14s arrive with more Phoenixes of their own and chase down the few survivors.  
  
**COASTAL FIGHTING**  
  
The Iranians take their revenge soon enough, and at 2130Z the Al Sharqiyah, one of the Dhofar missile boats operating in the east mouth of the straits, vanishes in a thundering torpedo explosion about 43 miles ahead of the carrier. Planes and helicopters converge on the area, but there’s no sign of the enemy sub, until a speculative torpedo drop prompts it to evade at full speed. Sonobuoy operators pick that signal up immediately, and the S-3 swings around to put another torpedo on the target. That sinks a Kilo, the second one in the area.  
  
Fighting breaks out all along the Iranian coast. F-16s and Mirages snipe the F-4s patrolling near the coast, while our Tornadoes arrive from Kuwait and hit the runways and some of the hangars on Kish Island. We had no explicit spottings of anything there (other than a Rapier SAM and some AAA), but everyone feels a lot more secure knowing no lurking surprises can pounce on us from there anymore.  
  
At 2203Z ESM operators report radar signals from Blinder bombers coming in from the direction of Kerman, and more CAP is scrambled to meet them. The supersonic intercept makes it just in time, shooting down three of the bombers and damaging another, and forcing it to turn back. A lone Phantom from Bandar Abbas makes a brave attempt to interfere with our interceptors on their return journey, but other F-18s arrive to clear it off.  
  
We have anti-shipping missiles of our own, and one of our big Puma helicopters comes sneaking into the Straits to put a pair of Exocets into one of the armed freighters. An F-18 arrives with a pair of Harpoons to add to the mess. The freighters take multiple hits, but they’re tough ships and they stay afloat, heading for the docks in Bandar Abbas as best they can.  
  
**BANDAR ABBAS**  
  
Bandar Abbas, the port, airfield, and SAM complex at the ‘elbow’ of the Straits of Hormuz, has to be eliminated if we’re to cover our forces as they transit the region. So far, we’ve seen F-4s operating from the base (albeit in small numbers), and the SAMs in the region (2 x SA-6, 1 x SA-2, numerous Rapiers) have taken potshots at passing aircraft. Perhaps it’s not a huge threat, but any launch would be so close to passing ships that reaction times would be minimal.  
  
ALARM-carrying Tornadoes arrive from Kuwait, and manage to damage the radars on the SA-2 site, although the SA-6s refuse to illuminate and get shot, and they also snipe a few local surveillance radars. That clears the way, somewhat, for F-15Es, Mirages, and other supporting aircraft to hit the area with heavy LGBs and HARMs. Multiple hits are registered on the runway, the big hangars are ablaze, the docks are gone (along with one of the freighters tying up there), the two other wounded ships-of-the-line are sunk, and one of the SA-6s finally succumbs to a volley of HARMs.  
  
And with that, Bandar Abbas is done! (Well, except for the SA-6 that’s still operating. And the runway that isn’t as damaged as we thought. And the F-4s that pop up over the next few hours to interfere. It takes a follow-on LGB strike to finally close the base some hours later…)  
  
**AIR OPERATIONS, PRE-DAWN**  
  
Our dispersed air operations continue in the morning darkness, as our recce pilots continue to scope out the defences around the Iranian airbases. Most have a brace of good SAMs and AAA, often built around a core of an SA-10, so we’re reluctant to send anyone in for a close-range look. Shiraz has an SA-5 too, which is taking an occasional long-distance shot at us, just to complicate matters.  
  
Mirages hit more of the vulnerable F-4s along the coast, but things don’t go quite as smoothly when facing the agile MiG-29s further inland, and many missiles get used for little effect. There are jammers and ELINT planes up and about in the middle of the country too, and some prowling F-18s try to catch some. They manage to get an ELINT plane, but the jamming makes it very difficult to pinpoint the jammers in the dark, and they all get away.  
  
The intrusion also prompts another F-14 swarm, even bigger than the last one, which comes streaming up out of Khatami. Our pilots know the drill: run away! But this time they’re further inland with no friendly SAMs to hide behind. With fifteen angry Tomcats spreading out, things could get grim. However, after a few minutes of running, there’s still no sign of Phoenix missiles being fired in our direction. Could it be that these F-14s don’t have any?  
  
No Phoenix? Chaaaarge! Our fighters go wheeling about back into Iran, and more scramble to come jostling in for a piece of the action. The Iranians are carrying converted HAWK SAMs, of poor effectiveness, our Sparrows are better than their Sparrows, our Sidewinders are better than their Sidewinders, and we’ve got jammers behind us. Our F-14/15/16/18s have a merry time, accounting for almost all the F-14s, plus a pair of MiG-29s and another F-4 that manage to get in the way.  
  
**DAYLIGHT IN THE GULF OF OMAN**  
  
Dawn arrives, and our forces are feeling reasonably pleased with themselves. We’ve had major victories over Iran’s best fighters, and most of the coastal bases which directly threaten our shipping have been neutralized, and although we got caught at Baghdad, we did manage to take a respectable chunk out of the strike. Time for a little more reconnaissance! Our U-2 goes off to survey the Gulf of Oman, to see if there’s anything out along the coast in that direction, with its electronic sensors picking up sniffs of Pakistani and Indian radar emissions. (Interestingly, intel has reported that India lost a Tarantul somehow, so the war there is evidently ongoing.)  
  
However, amongst the other signals, there are the characteristic emissions of the radars on a pair of Badger long-range reconnaissance aircraft. These are east of us, near India, behind all our defences. If they come west, they are perfectly poised to detect our unprotected logistical task groups heading to and from Diego Garcia, and cue enemy forces to engage them. (SSGN? Badgers with ASMs? Or a long-range Bear? And where the heck did they come from?) They can’t be ignored, and a pair of F-14s and a tanker are sent out to try and catch them.  
  
The U-2, meanwhile, decides to get a little closer to Cha Bahar, to see if anything is deployed there, and spots a couple of F-4s. They’re on the runway access points, and that means they’re launching. Uh-oh. The U-2 turns to flee, while the F-14s are redirected north to intercept on burner, and they barely manage to kill the F-4s before they can catch the U-2. Fortunately, that tanker was sent out with them, and they manage to tank before they flame out, and they resume their first interception. Both Badgers are caught and shot down, one actually overflying the tip of Pakistan en-route to a base in eastern Iran.  
  
**PERSIAN GULF**  
  
Activity’s heating up again in the Persian Gulf too. A pre-dawn recce pass with a SLAR Mirage confirmed the location of major air-defence units, and now that it’s daylight our lesser strike planes can avoid them to mount attacks on Iranian infrastructure. Kuwaiti A-4s come in low to hit four facilities just across the Iranian border, destroying them all, and spotting what seem to be MANPADs detachments along the border itself. Further south, bomb-laden Mirages do good work against coastal power plants and factories with iron bombs and LGBs.  
  
In between, about 30 and 70 miles south of Bushehr, there’s two sets of three small units deployed inland of a line of coastal hills. Initially assumed to be AAA, two in each set turn out to have SA-8 radar emissions. Normally they could be ignored, since nothing valuable seems to be in the area, except that one of the other two units has an OTH radar emitting. That means these are probably SSM units, which can eventually target our ships. Two pairs of Maverick-carrying F-16s are sent to destroy them, and they manage to do it by coming above the SA-8 ceiling, and shooting down from above.  
  
Meanwhile, our tanker convoy is proceeding east through the Gulf near Abu Dhabi, in single-file anti-mine formation, when a lookout on the trailing frigate starts yelling about a visual submarine contact eight miles directly astern! The watch officer thinks he’s nuts. How the heck would you see a periscope at 8 miles? He grabs the binoculars and his jaw drops, as he sees a sub, sail semi-awash in extremely shallow water, only a mile to the side of a tanker which is hurrying to catch the convoy.  
  
The tanker turns as fast as it can (hah!), but torpedoes are already in the water. One misses astern, and one hits the tanker in the flank, blowing a hole but barely slowing the massive vessel as it curves gradually towards Abu Dhabi. Can it escape? Heck no! The third torpedo hits the stern, knocking the engines off-line. Furious ASW helicopters are powering in from the convoy escorts, and air-dropped torpedoes hit the water, missing the seabed by inches and zooming towards the submarine, caving in the hull plating and leaving the wreck sitting on the bottom with its periscopes sticking into the air. A truly bizarre engagement.  
  
The drifting tanker, listing and on fire, calls for a tug and fireboats from Abu Dhabi, and is eventually dragged into port half a day later.  
  
**GOOD MORNING BAGHDAD!**  
  
After yesterday night’s debacle with the Su-24 attack, our fighter controllers make sure to have a tanker and four F-15s patrolling over Baghdad in case they return in the morning. Two F-15s were enough to tear a big chunk out of the first attack, so double the force should be able to handle the reduced strike size, right?  
  
The first sign of them comes at 0422Z, but they’re coming from the direction of Kermanshah, in the NE, rather than directly N like last time. First four, then another four. Hmmm…. Extra escorts? This is different, and staff start getting nervous. Our returning F-16s from the SSM strike are about to land in Kuwait, so they are vectored north towards the tankers at Baghdad, and more F-16s are scrambled with fighter loadouts to join them.  
  
The first four fighters from Kermanshaw make attacks on our F-15s, but our pilots easily outdistance the missiles, and the fighters (actually MiG-23s) turn for home. The other four planes are still a puzzle, perhaps Mirages, but then a massive stream of aircraft starts lifting off from Kermanshaw, and we’re left with no time to think. The Eagles have to attack, and they close in to find that the leading fighters are MiG-29s, dammit, whose agile missile-dodging abilities avoid shot after shot. We fight through them, killing three and damaging one, but use up far too many missiles to do it.  
  
The Eagles plunge into the oncoming stream of attackers, at least 22 of them, only to find they’re shooting Fishbeds! What a waste of missiles! But the people of Baghdad won’t care what sort of aircraft dropped the bombs, so they can’t be ignored. The Eagles use every missile they have, and swing around through the fight to engage with cannons, but while they’re fighting more planes are taking off.  
  
The list of radar calls is endless. Eight and eight from Kermanshaw, radars on. Another eight fighters from Dezful. Nine from the direction of Tabriz, maybe the Su-24s? *(Nope, Floggers.)* Twenty four more F-5s coming in radar silent from Dezful. Four more planes from Kermanshaw, and the Tabriz stream is up to twenty-one now. Make that eight from Kermanshaw, and ESM says they’re Phantoms. Eight more from Ourimeyeh, maybe Floggers. Another twelve contacts from the north with short range radars on. The scope of the attack is overwhelming.  
  
Our Kuwaiti Mirages and A-4s are scrambling. They don’t have a hope of protecting Baghdad, but they should be able to cut off attackers returning to Dezful. Meanwhile, the empty F-15s do what they can to draw off enemy fighters, to try and give the F-16s a clear shot into the endless stream of attackers. Multiple attack aircraft fall, but it’s only moments before we’re totally Winchester, and are chased out into the western desert by Phantoms, MiG-23s, and MiG-21s. Thank god for tankers!  
  
The first bombs fall on Baghdad at 0455Z (0755 local), and the battering that follows makes yesterday’s attack look like a damp firecracker. Infrastructure is hammered and destroyed by repeated crushing bomb-blasts, fires leap into the sky, sirens wail, and dense plumes of smoke are visible for dozens of miles. Humiliating and tragic video footage is broadcast throughout the Arab and Persian world, and the allies’ stock sinks lower still.  
  
Our Kuwaitis get a measure of revenge on the returning F-5s, as they head back to Dezful. Their fighter escort is distracted and delayed at Baghdad, leaving them unprotected. Our Mirage pilots do excellent work, but the guys in our A-4s can barely find the trigger, and what could have been an easy sweep turns into a lot of desperate dodging and weaving. In the end, however, the long stream of wreckage proves that the F-5s are no longer an effective force.  
  
**AFTERMATH**  
  
By 0530Z, 8:30 in the morning, it’s essentially over. Our forces have disengaged, and are returning to base, while the last few bombs are falling on Baghdad. Our pilots are claiming over 50 kills, although that is mostly the returning F-5s and assorted MiG-21-alikes. The high-end attack aircraft and fighters got away almost entirely unscathed. Twenty-six more targets, from bridges, to government buildings, to power stations, have been destroyed in Baghdad. Missile stocks in Kuwait are dwindling; there are only two AMRAAMs left in the bunker at Ahmed Al Jaber, AIM-9Ms are down to 13, and AIM-9Ps (for the A-4s) are down to 8, and no attack planes are carrying optional weapons.  
  
Staff certainly did not anticipate an attack of this scale, and preparations to meet it were inadequate. In hindsight, more aircraft might have been found, perhaps F-15s tankered in from Sheikh ISA, or F-16s from Al Dhafra, or maybe some planes from the Saratoga. It’s a long flight though, nearly two hours from the distant carrier, and the need to protect our shipping all along the Gulf ties down a lot of assets in place. This isn’t just an empty concern. During this heavy fighting the Blinders made another attack, and this time they managed to launch a missile (fortunately shot down) before being intercepted.  
  
The Saratoga is moving through the narrows of the Straits of Hormuz now. Hopefully she’ll be able to provide better cover as she moves further west.

**DAYTIME OPERATIONS**  
  
The pace of operations slows down after the massive Iranian attack on Baghdad, and the rest of the morning is spent on smaller air-to-air actions throughout the region.  
  
The Saratoga group’s passing through the narrows of the Straits of Hormuz in single file, and some of her aircraft head north to screen the group, and hunt for enemy aircraft. Patrols of F-18s head for the interior, and manage to shoot down some of the elusive Su-24 jammers and ELINT planes. Shortly before noon they detect fighter radars further north, seemingly in the middle of nowhere, and these turn out to be eight powerful Su-27s headed south. High end fighters like this can only mean one thing. Inbound strike on the Saratoga!  
  
Fighters start scrambling from the deck of the carrier, while our airborne planes hurry to intercept the strike. However, when we get there, there’s no strike! The Su-27s seem to be on a fighter sweep of some sort, and they mostly disengage after taking long-range missile shots. Our pilots manage to shoot down a few, but there’s no decisive engagement. Most of our planes return to the carrier without meeting the enemy, except for a few fighters which are dispersed to hunt down more support aircraft (more jammers, a P-3) and a lone Adnan AEW plane operating in the NE.  
  
The Saratoga group clears the narrows shortly after noon, and spreads out into fomation again, while some of her aircraft keep an eye on the situation in the north. ESM reports a Badger jammer up near the Caspian Sea, and MiG-29s and Su-27s in the Mehrabad/Tehran area. At one point we get the signals of at least eight Su-15 Flagons, but they vanish after a few minutes, making staff wonder if this is some sort of elaborate fake-out. In any case, there’s no enthusiasm for pressing an attack that far north, given our limited missile resources, so we’re content to hold our planes in reserve and monitor the situation.  
  
On the other side of Iran, our fighters operating near Baghdad start seeing patrols of MiG-29s coming up out of Kermanshah. They’re operating aggressively, which can be a problem for the less-capable Mirages we’ve been using to monitor the area, so we occasionally send F-15s too. Skirmishing generally goes in our favour, but takes many missiles for few hits, so we try to pull back our patrols to save resources.  
  
**TLAM ATTACK**  
  
ESM teams have reported that the Iranians have two main air-search radars covering the southern part of the country, one near Kerman, and one near Shiraz, and HQ authorizes a massive TLAM attack of two (2) missiles to destroy them.  
  
Their positions aren’t known precisely enough for a strike, so a SLAR Mirage is sent for a look, with an F-14 escort in case of interference. The Kerman recce is unopposed, but there are MiG-29s operating near Shiraz, so a combination of AMRAAM carrying F-16s and EA-6 jammers arrives from the south and knocks down the patrol. The Mirage sneaks in low, pops up, gets its radar fix, and zooms away down the valleys to safety.  
  
The coordinates are radioed to the SSN USS Buffalo, which fires the two TLAMs, sending each of them on carefully chosen routes down valleys which are screened from nearby air defences. The missiles vanish across the horizon, and nobody knows what’s happening, until the ESM crews suddenly cheer when the radar signals stop. As far as we can tell, the Iranians have now lost long-range radar cover over most of southern Iran and the Gulf, except for local SAM radars, and that should help our air operations proceed unopposed.  
  
The F-16s celebrate by shooting down a few more MiG-29s at Shiraz. (They find the AMRAAM/Jammer combo works very well, and repeat it again later in the evening.)  
  
**AFTERNOON**  
  
At 1230Z, our two logistical task groups pass each other in the Arabian Sea. The only escort, the HMAS Hobart, turns around and joins the northbound group, leaving southbound group to proceed alone. The single P-3 laying sonobuoys ahead of the ships is their only protection, which is a very slender defence indeed, given the unreliable nature of sonobuoy detection, but it is literally the only option available.  
  
The outbound convoy of tankers from the Gulf is passing the narrows of the Straits of Hormuz now, and at 1256Z another set of Blinder bombers is detected flying past Kerman to attack. Loitering F-14s hurry north to pounce on the bombers, only to see their vaunted long-ranged Phoenix missiles get decoyed by chaff. Muttering about wonder-weapons that aren’t, they close in and destroy the bombers with short ranged missiles instead.  
  
And, at 1316Z, bomb blasts rock Baghdad again, as a small number of Su-24s come in undetected through the afternoon haze of smoke and pound more targets. Nobody’s there to intercept them, and they escape without interference. The dull thudding sound is our ambassador hitting his head against the wall…  
  
**BAGHDAD PATROLS**  
  
Our inability to defend Baghdad is becoming the focus of attention. Militarily, the effect of the strikes is negligible. Politically, it could become crucial. Despite our miserably low missile stocks, we need to keep F-15s and tankers on station at all times, and aggressively contest the Kermanshah MiG-29s.  
  
The new patrols go up, kill two MiG-29s, and then detect four more enemy radars to the north. A new raid already? More F-15s are scrambled, and the on-station planes move to engage, finding what turns out to be four Floggers on some sort of CAP mission, but no raid. They all get shot down, but the waste of good missiles is keenly felt.  
  
The lack of long-range radar cover, and the inability to tell what the enemy contacts are, has been a significant problem. (Chasing Floggers instead of ignoring them, for instance.) Moving the Saudi AWACS north into Iraq would be ideal, but there’s no way the Saudis will allow that. However, now that the Saratoga is getting closer, we have more options. There’s no way I’m sending a vulnerable E-2 AEW plane away from the fleet, but an ES-3 loitering discretely in central Iraq is workable now.  
  
It arrives on station in an hour, and immediately starts sending useful information to the fighter controllers. There are Phantom radars up near Hamedan, MiG-23 radars near Sanandaj, and those new contacts approaching Baghdad are MiG-29s. The F-15s get two of those (more missiles gone!) and continue to patrol.  
  
**MISSILES – LACK THEREOF**  
  
The missile situation is becoming critical. We are out of Sparrow-Ms on the Saratoga, which means no more F-14 loadouts! (Even though we still have Phoenix and Sidewinder missiles for them.) An empty F-14 is sent to the mainland to ferry back a load of Sparrows from Bahrain, and let us get our planes back in operation.  
  
We’re also sending all our F-15Cs from Bahrain up to Kuwait, where they will strengthen the small number of F-15s based there. Importantly, they will also bring a full load of AMRAAMs each. Kuwait’s missile stockpile still has a modest number of Sparrows, but the AMRAAM count is at zero. Combining the newly arrived AMRAAMs with Sparrows allows more combined loadouts.  
  
**OTHER OPERATIONS**  
  
As the Saratoga calmly continues west towards the Saudi coast (with a brief brown-pants moment with a false sub contact), and our tanker convoy continues east towards the Arabian Sea, our other small ships in the Gulf start looking for other tasks. Two of them decide that the island of Abu Musa is ripe for a little naval gunfire, and they convince a night-vision equipped helicopter to join them as a spotter. The south-east tip of the island is just within range of their 76mm guns without entering minefield warning zones, and they proceed to steam back and forth there, battering a pair of inoffensive 35mm gun units into rubble. Magazines empty, they zip back to Port Rashid at flank speed, in fine high spirits.  
  
Higher command levels are also considering options for further action. The Bushehr nuclear complex, and the large airbases like Shiraz (with its SA-5) and Omidiyeh are definitely worth striking, but they are heavily defended. We probably only have enough SEAD power to break into one defended airbase, but it’s not clear where the effort would be most effective. A major naval gunfire raid on the air defences at Bushehr is an interesting thought, but it would be very risky. It might also be useful to hit the airbases which are hampering our efforts to protect Baghdad (Dezful, Kermanshah, Sanandaj, Ourimeyeh) but we know little about their defences. A hit against big bases along the Caspian might be effective too, if it could knock out a major installation, but our information on these is very limited, and the staff has to admit they are probably well defended and out of reach. (Although the SSM complex at Tehran has an ominous ring to it – political interference might demand that.)  
  
The best option seems to be to conduct additional reconnaissance before committing to a strike, so one of the SLAR Mirages is directed to survey the Baghdad-related bases, and report on the status of the defences there.  
  
**BAGHDAD NIGHTS**  
  
Shortly before midnight our pilots get an urgent ESM report of a dozen Flogger radars near Tabriz. This might be a response to our intrusions (the Mirage is in the area, and our F-15 patrol went further north than before), but it might also be a strike escort. In either case, it’s big, and we need more support. Two more flights of F-15s are scrambled from Kuwait, and dash towards Baghdad on afterburner.  
  
Meanwhile, the F-15s on station head NNE to intercept, with radars on and searching. Four more contacts appear ahead of the oncoming MiGs, travelling radar-off, and four more behind. This is a strike for certain, and if it’s anything bigger than this we’ll need more help. The last F-15 is scrambled, along with a pair of F-16s. This leaves Kuwait almost bare, so two F-18s come forward from the carrier to extra provide local cover.  
  
Our pair of Eagles meets the strike at the border, hitting the two lead Fencers, and then turning away on afterburner as the angry Floggers close in for missile shots. One Fencer turns back, but the other continues on at low altitude, while the swirling dogfight continues overhead. Our next F-15s arrive, and pitch in to the fight, hitting more of the Fencers that are coming through the confusion. Even our SLAR Mirage pitches in to the fight, trying to snipe the lead Fencer at low altitude, but he flubs his shot and misses wildly with his cannon fire. More Eagles catch the leaker, and the Floggers try to disengage after they’ve used their BVR missiles, allowing our pilots to kill the last of the strike planes. In the end, seven of the eight Fencers are shot down, and one escapes back home, while three quarters of the Flogger escort are destroyed.  
  
Finally, a (small) raid conclusively defeated!  
  
**SITUATION**  
  
There is general celebration in headquarters, as the pilots report no more inbound enemy. However, our logisticians report missile stocks are dwindling fast. Our fighters are hurrying home to see if they can reload, but there are only 8 Sparrows, 7 Sidewinders, and 13 AMRAAMs waiting for them in Kuwait.  
  
It is now 2120Z, the very small hours of the morning. The Saratoga is solidly in the center of the Persian Gulf, headed for the Saudi coast. The tanker convoy has just emerged from the Straits of Hormuz. Both logistics groups are en-route, closing on their destinations.  
  
What will the enemy do to us next?

**INITIAL RECCE RESULTS**  
  
The SLAR Mirage needs some help prying a pair of F-4s off its tail while returning to base (more missiles gone!), but it brings back some interesting information. The radar pass showed only 1 HAWK missile battery at Dezful. There don’t appear to be any defensive units at Kermanshaw, Sanandaj, or Mahedan. So, this entire flank is essentially undefended, and could be attacked if needed. But do we need to? Activity seems to be falling off here, and it may be a waste of scarce munitions. HQ remains indecisive, and elects to wait.  
  
**SKIRMISHING AND SMALL RAIDS**  
  
The darkness hides a series of small actions. Some Floggers are spotted and ignored up north. Carrier planes snipe at the MiG-29s around Shiraz, using EA-6 jammers to ensure we get the first shot. The ‘MiG-29s’ CAPing Omidyeh turn out to actually be F-5s, and get picked on for their temerity. A lone Su-27 comes wandering down from Tehran, almost all the way to Shiraz, but then heads home again. Radar crews watch all this blearily, and try to stay alert.  
  
Shortly after midnight, the start of another strike is spotted moving in on Baghdad: six Flogger radars near Tabriz! The Baghdad patrol tops up its fuel and advances north to meet them, while backup scrambles out of Kuwait to back them up. It turns out to be a small affair, with four Fencers preceding the Floggers. Our fighters have to shoot down two Flogger CAP on the way in, but then they manage to get all four attackers and four of the escorts before the others turn back.  
  
A second raid happens just before dawn, and it looks bigger. We can see Fishbeds taking off from Sanandaj, F-5s out of Dezhful, and F-4s out of Hamedan. Once again the on-station fighters move to intercept, while others scramble from Kuwait and burner north, and the Mirages try and repeat their ‘cut-off’ maneuver at Dezful. However, when our F-16s shoot down the incoming Fishbeds who are in the lead, the entire attack breaks up and returns to base! *(Analysis of radio chatter later shows that there were very few actual bomb-carrying planes in the strike, and once those were destroyed the entire mission was aborted.)* Our F-16s claim nine of the leading Fishbeds, but the Mirages only get two of the F-5s before they duck back into the SAM cover around their base, and we try to avoid the F-4s entirely to save missiles.  
  
In fact, missile stocks are so low that we have to start sending F-16s down to Sheikh Isa airbase, since there aren’t any Sidewinders left at their normal base in Kuwait.  
  
**BOMBARD BUSHEHR**  
  
Our patrol boats in the north are feeling a bit left out of the action, so they are pressed into action as light shore bombardment units, and sent to engage the air defences at Bushehr. The Al Boom and the Istiqlal arrive and open up with light 76mm shell fire, causing minor damage to the I-HAWK battery and the SA-11, and shooting up two surveillance radars and an AAA gun with their lighter weapons. Magazines exhausted, they go dashing away to Kuwait before anything else can respond.  
  
The PGM Mubarraz arrives around dawn, knocks some more pieces off the HAWK battery, which resolutely refuses to die, and heads back to the UAE. It’s not until the two Saudi FFLs arrive later in the morning that the three main SAM batteries are finally destroyed. Just for fun, they also head a little further north and start lobbing 81mm mortar shells into the naval base’s fuel-tank farm. Splinters pierce the tanks, wreck some piping and valves, and start a couple of small fires, but it looks worse than it is, and local repair crews soon have the situation well in hand.  
  
**MORE RECCE**  
  
The Saratoga arrives on station off Saudi Arabia in the early morning (which is why they lent us those frigates), only to find that planning staff still haven’t decided what to do. They’re leaning towards an attack on Shiraz, but are still reluctant to commit. When all else fails, more recce!  
  
This time the recce is in the center. Another of the SLAR Mirages and the U-2 (with strong escort) are sent out to have a look at Omidyeh and Shiraz, and the country just this side of the Khatami – Kerman – Zahedan line. Omidyeh and Shiraz both turn out to be formidably defended: one or two SA-10s, multiple I-HAWKS, SA-11s, SA-6s, and Rapiers, plus plenty of AAA, of course. Attackable, yes, but at very high cost in PGMs.  
  
One oddity that is spotted is a small unit of six vehicles, about 15 miles north of the end of the gulf, in the direction of Omidyeh. It seems undefended, so a flight of Kuwaiti Skyhawks go scooting out to bomb it, and they send back a startled report that these are SCUDs! With their usual lousy aim they only manage to hit a few of them, and it takes a second flight to finish off the rest of the launchers. Radar analysts also spot another similar unit out in the countryside up near Khatami. A couple of Jaguars are sent out to hit it with cluster bombs, which they do so efficiently that they can bring half their bombs home with them.  
  
**THE LAST SKUNK**  
  
At 0416Z, the P-3 conducting ASW patrols in front of the southbound logistics group suddenly gets a radar contact on a large surface ship, about 190 miles SE of our ships, headed SW at 15 knots. On its current course, it will pass about 60 mile in front of our ships. That’s uncomfortably close, given our essentially defenceless condition.  
  
Our ships are ordered to slow down and change to a parallel course, while the P-3 comes sneaking in at low altitude for an optical look at the target. It turns out to be a large Iranian merchant ship, and that means it has Iranian radios, and could cause all sorts of trouble if it spots us and calls its friends. A flight of two Mirages from Al Dhafra is ordered south to meet a tanker and head for the ship, which they sink in efficient fashion by dropping a series of one ton laser guided bombs on it. Once that’s out of the way, our task group resumes course.  
  
**SHIPS ON STATION**  
  
By 0930Z, shortly after local noon, our ships are all reporting that they have reached their objective zones. The southern logistics group is on course for Diego Garcia, and the northern logistics group is loitering on station in the Gulf of Oman. Our convoy reports that it is rounding the eastern cape of Oman, and is on-course towards France via the Red Sea and the Suez Canal. The Saratoga group is on station off the coast of Saudi Arabia, and lesser patrol boats are accompanying the tanker traffic which remains in the Gulf.  
  
At this point, staff recommend postponing any major attacks. It’s not clear that emptying our magazines on one target will provide a critical advantage, when our future objectives are unclear. Therefore, fighter patrols are maintained, but many of the other aircrew are allowed to stand down. The enemy seems to feel the same way, and they continue to patrol in the vicinity of Tehran, but no further strikes are launched in our direction.  
  
And with that, at 2000Z the operation comes to an end. Many thanks for writing another excellent scenario.

**IMPRESSIONS**  
  
This was a very interesting scenario, with all sorts of conflicting constraints and responsibilities, and I enjoyed it a lot. With so many interesting things happening, it was very difficult to resist the temptation to take complete control of the NATO Support side too. I found myself being pulled in two directions, trying to simultaneously cover ships out south-east in the Arabian Sea, and Baghdad to the north-west, 1300 miles away. How much do I want to weaken the very exposed center to strengthen the ends? The missile shortage was definitely affecting operations by mid-game, and I found myself pulling missiles off strike planes, and shuffling aircraft around to try and get proper loadouts. In some cases, I had to stop picking on enemy CAP and support aircraft, in order to preserve missiles to repel possible attacks, and I was even reluctant to engage strike escorts.  
  
In the second half of the game, I found myself in the oddly indecisive situation of having enough attack power for one effective heavy strike, but no clear indication of where it would be best to use it. Pick one central airbase and wallop it? Spread out and attack peripheral bases? Bounce the rubble at Bushehr or Bandar Abbas? None of them seemed to have a major impact on the military objectives, and any of those might be a waste if something else critical were to come up. An interesting conundrum!  
  
The mega-swarms of F-14s were certainly alarming, with nothing to do but run for it from the Phoenixes. It’s nasty when they belong to the enemy. If I hadn’t switched sides and manually sent the NATO Support ASW helicopters home, I would have lost a significant number of them to that attack.  
  
The air strikes on Baghdad certainly put me on my heels, but that’s all right. It makes for a much more engaging scenario when there are setbacks to overcome. I could certainly have done a better job of the defence there – deploying ESM planes for early warning (I completely forgot the C160 was nearby), having a more carefully arranged series of fighters and tankers on CAP, or trying some early recce. The failed interceptions were a blow to the ego, but that’s a worthwhile lesson sometimes, and the points from safe ship arrivals made up for the deficit.