

CLASH OF THE TITANS (H2/3)

By **Dimitris V. Dranidis**

Ragnar Emsoy's latest magnum opus is, perhaps, one of the most illustrative examples of why so many people are so passionately involved with the entire Harpoon series. It is also one of the largest and most complex scenarios ever crafted for Harpoon 2/3, rubbing shoulders with the upcoming "Mayhem" and Klaus Behrmann's usual monster-size creations.

It is now Day 14 of the Third World War. Four US carrier battle groups have managed to safely enter the Norwegian Sea and are making their final preparations for the first of a series of air strikes against Soviet-occupied bases in northern Norway. In response to NATO's move, several Backfire and Badger regiments from the Soviet Strategic Aviation have been pulled from the Central Front (to SACEUR's secret relief) and hurriedly redeployed from the central front to AV-MF bases on the Kola Peninsula. The stage is now set for a classic Cold War naval encounter.

Although the scenario concept is something we've seen quite a few times before (the *CVBG-vs.-Northern Fleet air/sub* theme being an all-time favourite amongst Harpoon designers), Ragnar deserves full credit for breaking new ground in several ways.

First of all, Clash of the Titans (COT) is not a stand-alone slugfest scenario but rather a continuation of a previously established storyline – that of a Third World War suddenly erupting in Central Europe in the fall of 1985. COT follows-up the previously released scenario "Entering the Norwegian Sea" and takes place a full two weeks into this bloody conflict, and that shows in what is brought to the table: both sides have already lost many of their centrepiece assets and are now bringing forward reinforcements, second-rate replacements or their last strategic reserves in a last attempt to overwhelm their adversary. The fight has been going on all around them; aircraft are down for maintenance pushing back the sortie schedules, ships steam with their fuel tanks and magazine stocks depleted to some extent or another and land bases rush to resupply their ammo stocks just to be able to sustain air operations for that extra bit longer. This stands in stark contrast to most similar scenarios in which we have the cream of the crop from both sides in a shiny, "Day One" fresh-from-the-factory form with all systems online and everyone ready to fight at their prime. It constitutes an altogether more realistic depiction of actual wartime operations.

Furthermore, the detail and research effort put into the construction of the scenario is evident once one goes behind the scenes to take a more detailed look at the OOBs of both sides, as well as the pre-designed missions that essentially dictate the AI behaviour. Ragnar has taken an extraordinary amount of time in ensuring that the AI-controlled adversary Soviet forces act in a manner consistent with Soviet doctrine and tactics, and has consulted many new sources on the subject. This includes references like Milan Vego's excellent book "Soviet Naval Tactics" as well as other established editions like Conway's. The result is a virtual Soviet adversary that is sure to give even the most battle-hardened Pooners a good run for their money.

Additionally, COT is one of the first scenarios to be designed with the custom loadout times in mind. This revolutionary new feature, a first for any computer version of Harpoon, is already supported by the DB-2000, will very soon be available as a simulation option for Harpoon 3 and will permanently transform the way serious Pooners plan and conduct air operations. No longer will every aircraft have a standard 30-min turn-around time. Attack sorties in particular may take many hours to prepare, as time must be allowed for detailed briefing, aircraft preparation & maintenance, fuel and weapons loading etc. The end result is a vastly reduced number of available aircraft sorties for a given scenario duration. This of course means that the player can no longer hope to defeat the enemy by simple repetitive attrition of the defences (particularly when playing with aircraft logistics disabled). Instead, air operations and air strikes in particular will have to be carefully managed and coordinated in order to achieve the objective of the sortie with the minimum possible use of assets. Ragnar designed the scenario around the new loadout times and, since currently they cannot be enforced by the game engine, he recommends that the players take the time to familiarise with them and manually enforce them on themselves. Of course this is only a temporary measure that will soon be a moot point once custom loadout times are enabled by the game engine itself.

As a player experience, the scenario is nothing short of massive & overwhelming. Simply coordinating the actions of four different carrier air-wings is a chore in itself, let alone managing the ships. Some users will no doubt opt to gather their 4 carriers together in a single group to ease the control of air ops and also increase mutual cover; however, higher concentration leads to greater vulnerability to nuclear strikes and simplifies targeting for the enemy forces. Users might initially get the impression that their concentrated airpower is little short of invincible – after all, we are talking about nearly a hundred mighty F-14 fighter-interceptors and dozens of attack aircraft, plus lots of vital support platforms including AWACS and jammer aircraft. However, the realities of prolonged wartime operations in such a dangerous neighbourhood are quick to kick-in: many aircraft are down for maintenance, some of them for only a limited time, others for so long that they are out of the scenario duration altogether. Ammunition stocks have been recently filled-up by the fleet UNREP-train but are still quite finite. A portion of the fighters have to be kept airborne at all times in a protective arc ahead of the group, as a means of quick-reaction against the inevitable AV-MF raid. Some others should be kept on the catapults ready to launch to reinforce the airborne pickets once the raid alarm rings for

real. That leaves a much smaller number available for offensive counter-air operations, so picking the right fights will be essential in order to preserve your forces. Soviet defences are thick and multi-layered; apart from the numerous fighter screens, the SAM concentrations near the targets pose a significant threat. The SEAD assets on the carriers will definitely need to see a good deal of action before the main strikers move in.

Compounding the difficulty of the mission are the quite tight time limits imposed. In many Harpoon scenarios the time limits are either non-existent or too relaxed; the player can take his time in planning and wait until “everything is perfect” to begin his attacks, or maybe wait for the enemy attacks, deal with them with all his forces in place, and then launch his own raids in full force without fear of further counterstrikes. This is definitely not one of those scenarios. You take your time, you lose – it’s that simple. The main targets have to be hit as fast as possible; there is at best only one chance for a return raid on each of the two target groups. And throughout the offensive operations the player has to keep an eye (and standby forces) for the enemy bomber raid. This again is a deliberate modelling of real-life timing constraints on any NATO group that would endeavour to fight and survive on the Norwegian Sea.

This is not to say that the scenario is unwinnable. As Mike Mykytyn demonstrates in his detailed AAR (below), it is quite possible to succeed – if careful planning and forethought is applied. COT is sure to provide a challenging refreshing experience for many experienced harpooners tired of the same old “bomb them until they glow” paradigm of numerous similar scenarios. Combining meticulous background research, a killer programmed-AI, a massive and detailed OOB, the innovation of more realistic turn-around times and an overall “dark” feeling of urgency and danger thanks to the timing restraints, Clash of the Titans easily qualifies as one of the classic scenarios for H2/3.

CLASH OF THE TITANS – AN AFTER-ACTION REPORT

By Michael Mykytyn

I was apprehensive as this scenario hit my mailbox. Ragnar had been discussing this scenario with us for a while and I knew he had done a good job with it. I had already had the joy of the scenarios that precede this one in relevance, theme and sequence (*Fighting Withdrawal*, *Parthian Shot* and *Entering the Norwegian Sea*) and had a general idea of what I was in for. So, being ready to carry on the war as I had left it and thinking I had the master plan, the scenario was a go.

The set up was fairly simple as I had four CVBG groups (flagged by America, Forestall, JFK, and Eisenhower) some ASW groups (one group flagged by Ark Royal and the other straight ASW SAG) and a series of SAM traps set by destroyers and cruisers of the time. My assigned targets were the captured Norwegian airfields of Bodo, Evenes, Andoya and Bardufoss. I expected that all of these would be heavily defended by surface to air missiles of all types of the time, I could expect some serious CAP to be flying over my targets and that I could expect at least one good counterattack of some sorts (my guess at the time was an antishipping missile attack launched via bomber as the prior scenario in the battleset had dealt with the submarine threat).

Feeling that I had a grasp of the situation, I began to put my overall plan together. Seeing that I had 2 major strikes to orchestrate (each strike would focus on two airbases at a time), while having to fend off a major counterattack and having a relatively short time to accomplish everything, it wasn't an easy task. My initial plan was to launch a first wave consisting of aircraft paired from the two carriers in the North toward the northern target (Andoya) and aircraft paired from the two carriers in the South toward the southern target (Bodo). I knew I had to conduct another raid, so I tasked about 3/4ths of the ready strike aircraft to the missions (expecting to at least return a quarter of the first raid to conduct the second large strike on the remaining targets). Using the mission editor, I created strike missions which included all packages (AAW, SEAD and strike) in large groups. This would soon prove a disaster, but more on that later. My plan was to conduct the strikes, recover, fend off against any attack during or after recovery and then launch a similar strike with the remnants of the first raid as well as the unassigned aircraft I had in my hangars. With a solid plan in hand and a bit of confidence, the scenario was launched.

My first strikes where a disaster and ultimately ended up with me restarting the scenario. My first wave left the deck; this consisted of LGB-armed Intruders for strike, Shrike and HARM-armed Corsairs for SEAD, Prowlers for Jamming and very few Tomcats for escort. I had Tomcat's up on CAP already screening the carrier groups and decided to surge them forward ahead of the groups to engage air contacts that my Hawkeyes had been reporting on. My aircraft numbers were something like thirty or forty aircraft tasked on each target. I cranked the time compression up and let my attackers go. Soon after my Tomcats began getting into strike range of the defending aircraft which turned out to be a mix of Foxbats, Flagons, Fishbeds and Floggers. As my missiles left the rails the worries started. They were the "A" variant of the Phoenix that was not designed to deal with the smaller targets I was dealing with. I scored better than what I expected but still not enough to guarantee safety. As I moved into Sparrow range (and the Soviets' missile range) I detected more Soviet AC leaving the deck. My Sparrows found more targets but so did the Soviets. My forward screen being somewhat depleted, I tasked them back home, in fear of not having enough AC to engage the coming storm. All I had in the air now was several small groups of escorting Tomcats with the same missile compliment and some EW defense from my Prowlers. My strike groups got in range several minutes later and ground targets began cropping up. My Tomcat's fought valiantly against the enemy fighters and managed to widdle them down but a number of leakers got through, tearing up my formations until they ran out of weapons. As my already battered groups went feet dry, the nature of the ground contacts became apparent: SA-8s and SA-11s began filling the air. My SEAD had some success but at a horrible price. My strike AC moved into range only to be chopped up quickly. It was a disaster. Something like 60 or 70 AC destroyed for only a couple of ground targets hit. Given that a follow-up would be required on these first targets and I had very little strike aircraft left on the deck, it was time to put up the white flag and rethink this. It's nice to have a great tactical plan, but it's the operational stuff that can bury you. Lesson learned and time for some heavy thinking.

After several days of thinking it through and the help of some of the guys at the MIRC chat room (thanks Chuck) I started working through some of the operational issues that torched me on the first go. I reorganized how I was going to conduct the strikes (even put it to paper, which I hadn't done in years). I would now surge more Tomcats and launch my strike groups as smaller separate specialized groups (Jamming, SEAD, Escort, and Strike), with careful timing as to when they would arrive. I also planned to employ a little recon with some various extra aircraft I had around the decks (notably the Skywarriors off the CVs for ESM and Harriers off Ark Royal for eyeballs). This would turn out to be a success for this first mission and ultimately success in the scenario. Here's the story.

Attempt two started with a bang as my fighter screen crashed into Soviet interceptors out of Norway. Missiles were exchanged again but I had enough up to do a sufficient job. This allowed my escorting Tomcats to have enough firepower to engage the enemy interceptors streaming off the deck with great effectiveness, clearing the way for the strike groups. My Skywarriors began detecting surface to air missiles and my Harriers were able to identify a few before my SEAD units began engaging. This was still a hairy affair as the SA-11, SA-6 and SA-8 mobile SAMS are deadly. Attrition was heavy but I managed to destroy all the assigned targets at these air bases, which was my objective.

Losses up to the end of this raid are as follows:

NATO Losses: 11 Tomcats, 20 Intruders, 4 Prowlers, 13 Corsairs

Soviet Losses: 64 Floggers, 16 Flagons, 7 Fobats, 8 Fishbeds, 9 SA-8B, 1 HQ SA-11, 1 HQ SA-8, 4 SA-11, 6 Revetments, 2 Ammo Dumps, 1 HQ SA-6, 16 Curls, and 4 Bear-D's.

As my remaining aircraft began to stream back to home base, I began to get very nervous as I felt something big was coming in my direction. I had just destroyed four Bear-Ds, which meant that were looking for something. I began launching Tomcats and setting up as strong as a screen I could make minus any escorts I would need for my final wave. I was quickly rewarded as the right side of my screen began to fill with large formations of aircraft. I'm not just talking about a large stream of AC (you know, the typical straight-line attack) but a large wave evenly dispersed north to south on my tactical map. This was the multi regimental attack I'd read about in Red Storm Rising and other such books. I can honestly say for a second I was scared, call it "being in the zone" but I hadn't dealt with an attack like this in Harpoon before. Recomposing myself and looking at each clump of contacts I noticed several slower large contacts as well some small contacts in high-speed bands. This meant bombers as well as escorting fighters. Given that I hadn't detected them as soon as I expected, I assumed jamming as well. I quickly tasked my launched Tomcats to engage at high speed. I also made sure my picket ships were at passive until the "right" moment. I felt confident and ready for action; however, Ragnar was not done with me yet. As soon as my Tomcats were well on their way, I began to get a similar picture coming from the North! I was weakly screened from that direction but did manage to get a couple of Tomcat groups in that direction. It was now a matter of time and speed. Who would reach whom first and would years of technological development designed specifically to deal with this threat work? It did but not as well as expected.

The Northern-arrayed Regiments arrived in position to attack first and unleashed their attack at my northern carriers. I managed to pick a couple aircraft off but not enough to be effective. Missiles left the rails of these quickly (looking closer at some of these northern groups they were not slower bombers but Backfires which began strikes on my pickets). The Regiments to the east of me paid a horrible price but were able to unleash hordes of missile in the direction of my Southern carriers. This was not good. Picture if you will, being completely surrounded by incoming supersonic SSMs. Time seemed to pass slowly as I watched my remaining aircraft try to engage them. Missiles left the launchers of my escorts in large streams to some great effect, but it still wasn't enough. My short-range defenses engaged as well but it was still not enough. I had already begun launching strike aircraft in a desperate attempt to preserve them, to keep them in the air until the storm settled and then land them on the surviving decks. I flinched as the yellow stars of ASHM detonations began filling my formations. This was not going to be good and it wasn't.

Losses up to the end of the Soviet Regimental Raid are as follows:

NATO Losses: 46 Tomcats, 20 Intruders, 38 Intruders, 8 Seaking, 8 Prowlers, 35 Corsairs, 4 Hawkeyes, 6

Seasprites, 4 Skywarriors, 20 Vikings, 2 Virginias, 1 J Daniels, 2 Farraguts, 2 Underwoods, 1 Charles F Adams, 1 Spruance and finally....JFK and Eisenhower

Soviet Losses: 112 Floggers, 16 Flagons, 22 Fobats, 9 Fishbeds, 4 Bear D, 4 Badger D, 4 Badger J, 47 Badger G's and 4 Backfire D's, + all the mentioned in the prior loss statement.

Soviet SSM fired: 48 Sandbox's, 88 Kitchens, and 102 Kelts (yikes!)

The Soviets had dealt me their blow and now it was time to see how bad the damage was. Fortunately I still had enough to move on. I still had two carriers (which now absolutely had to receive no further damage to prevent a total loss of the scenario) and it looked like I had enough just enough combat power to complete the scenario. So this was very good however, I had no margin of error. The last strikes had to be done right, and I was intent on making sure they were (given the loss of Ike and JFK). This is why these of the Second Strike Fleet were sent north and I was going to finish what was started. I had a quick scare, as a torpedo contact appeared near one of my remaining AAW picket ships. I fired an ASROC and a torpedo in return, but had no intention of losing that asset so I ran it west with no further contact experienced.

Looking over what I had left, which was a hodgepodge of aircraft off the four carriers, I began to devise my final strike plan. This was complicated due to the heavy losses, a strange aircraft mix and a short timetable. After a quick pen-and-paper session I crafted the final wave to generally work as the first albeit with a strange order of battle. I felt the Soviets had been worn down as well, but I wasn't going in blind. I again committed Harriers and Skywarriors to recon work that would be conducted along with the fighter surge, well ahead of the strike group. My plan was ready and once again my strike aircraft left the decks.

This was a very successful strike with all things considered, and it led to a scenario victory. My fighter screen swarmed the beach knocking what relatively few Soviet aircraft were left defending. My recon began its work only to find something that would shake my confidence a bit, SA-4s. This was not good but I still had a lot of SEAD assets to work with. So my fingers quickly danced across the keyboard as I unassigned the missions I had scripted, and went to

manual control of most aircraft. As my first SEAD began crossing the beach they began releasing Shrikes at anything that came up. They were successful thanks to the Prowlers I had kept close, and the path seemed clear for my strike groups to complete their target list. They did successfully and I was rewarded with victory. It was a great thing ☺

Total Scenario Losses and Expenditures:

NATO:

Losses: 47 Tomcats, 8 Sea King USN, 38 Intruders, 8 Prowlers, 49 Corsairs, 5 Hawkeyes, 20 Vikings, 4 Skywarriors, 2 Virginias, 2 Underwoods, 1 Spruance, JFK, IKE, 1 J. Daniels, 2 Farraguts, 1 Charles F. Adams, and 6 Seasprites.

Expenditures: 354 Phoenixes, 126 Sparrow IIIs, 36 Sidewinders, 145 SM-2ER Blk I, 34 Sea Dart Mod I, 65 SM-2MR Blk II, 11 SM-1MR Blk V, 7 Seasparrow, 7 SM-1MR Blk IV, 25 GBU-10, 46 Shrike, 27 Harm, 19 MK 82, 16 Mk 84, 8 Walleyes, 4 GBU-12, lots of guns of all types.

Soviets:

Losses: 112 Floggers, 53 Flagons, 23 Foxbats, 24 Fishbeds, 16 Curl, 7 Cubs, 4 Bears, 4 Badger J's, 4 Badger D's, 47 Badger G's, 4 Backfire B's, 9 SA-8, 4 SA-11, 8 SA-6A, 1 SA-4, 1 SA-8 HQ, 1 SA-6 HQ, SA-11 HQ, 4 Ammo Dumps, 10 Revetments, and 2 Hangars.

Expenditures:

33 Acrid D, 33 Acrid C, 31 Aphid, 10 Anab A, 12 Anab B, 49 Apex D, 48 Apex C, 87 Gadfly, 50 Gainful, 113 Gecko, 15 Grail, 48 Ganef, 43 Ganef, 48 Sandbox, 88 Kitchen, 102 Kelts, 2 Uset-80 and numerous guns of all sorts.

Final Assessment of this Scenario:

From a player's perspective, this is perhaps one of the most exciting scenarios I've played in a long time. There has been a long line of excellent Kola strike based scenarios in the past. However, this one seemed to up the bar. To witness a multi-regimental bomber raid materialize all around you was exciting and horrific. It kind of brought back the feeling you got reading through Red Storm Rising for the first time, or better yet when you cranked up the first version of Harpoon you ever owned and that first vampire appeared on your screen.

The strikes modeled in the game were excellent. All targets were heavily and intelligently defended. You knew what was there, but also understood that you may not be able to escape without loss which is wonderful in the sense of it forcing you to sit down and figure out the best way to pull it off with minimal loss. I still question myself – is there something more or different I could have done to do it better? That speaks a lot for a scenario and why it will stay on my hard drive for some time to come.

From a scenario writer's perspective, this was an education in the art. First of all, Ragnar's research was impeccable. His order of battle was accurate, challenging and offered a great glimpse at what that battle would be about. His use of the AI was amazing. I definitely wanted to know how he pulled off the Backfire raid. Looking in the editor I was shocked by the amount of planning it must have taken to get it right. All courses were manually laid for the bombers, which meant that he had to figure out the timings of literally every aircraft in the raid. I was humbled and realized his dedication to getting it right and giving the players the best model of what it is about. It is nice to be taken to school once in awhile ☺.

This is truly a great scenario. There are other scenarios out there that others will surely point to as being "the Kola Experience." However, this is the evolution of things. The players work with the game and build on past experience and new research. This is surely a product of that process and one that you all should take a look at, if you can take it ☺.