

PLAYING THE RED SIDE

Handling effectively Eastern-block forces in Harpoon

By Steve Mills

Perhaps it's just me being perverse (*Ed. You aren't – wait till you meet some others*), but I have always tended to play Harpoon Classic and then Harpoon 2 and 3 from the Soviet/Russian or whatever side. I think originally this was because I had hoped to be able to play head-to-head and everyone needs an opponent. As it looks increasingly certain that H2H play will soon become a reality in Harpoon 3, this seemed an appropriate article.

This isn't intended as a "definite guide to OPFOR handling" per se, but rather how I prefer to play. There are some strong differences in the game if you are not on the NATO side.

1. Protect your Forces

Specifically, you need your available assets to remain available.

That is by no means assured: A number of scenarios start with NATO assets conveniently within Tomahawk or Harpoon range. Being ready helps. I use ECM assuming I have them, a confused picture in my view helps the Soviet side more than it helps NATO.

I also check the speed settings of the naval units, submarines in particular are best set to creep, at least initially. Missile patrol boats are often safest at a fairly high speed by contrast. They have limited defences, but have the speed to avoid the search area for many missiles if they get lucky. Missile boats have a great deal of fun dashing about at speed anyway.

Submarines in many scenarios regrettably seem to adhere to the following rule: the value of the unit is in direct proportion to how fast the speed is set to. Oscar SSGNs in particular often run around at flank. I have nothing against subs using high speeds on occasion, however there is no point doing it as the scenario starts up. One surprisingly important area is to check the depth around the sub. It's pretty easy to blunder into an area of shallow water.



I also like to establish combat air patrols as fast as possible. These should be ideally arrayed along the expected axis of the main threat. It is generally useful to task the long-ranged assets (e.g. Flanker and Foxhound) to attrite the defences of a target area. If, for example, you are attempting a landing on Iceland, some sort of CAP over Iceland itself helps.

It doesn't always matter whether you gain air superiority, parity may suffice. Often the main threat to your forces is from the air, reduce that threat and you are already ahead of the game. There isn't actually a vast amount you can do to stop Tomahawk attacks if they start within range. The best bet is to sink the launching ships before they can get there. If they do start in range you already have problems. The only upside is that you get some idea of the bearing and range to the launching units once they are sighted. It is often best to simply scramble all aircraft with a useful loadout and assume the worst case scenario.

If you expect to be overwhelmed on the air front then its best to avoid the 1/3rd rule on CAP missions, just scramble everything and see if you can cause any damage. This is often best done with obsolete aircraft anyway, being brutal you can afford to lose them.

2. Locate the Enemy

This can be one of the more difficult tasks for you. In general terms, relatively few OPFOR aircraft carry really good surface search radars, the Tu-95RT Bear-D and Ka-25RT Hormone-B being noticeable exceptions. Many other maritime patrol aircraft carry a radar sufficient for locating a submarine periscope, but not for a long range search.¹

I find when playing the Russian side I spend a lot of time watching and classifying ESM contacts. Under most circumstances you do not want to be actively searching with a recon aircraft until the attack is ready, or you have been detected. You should not expect an aircraft with its radar switched on to have a long life expectancy. The detection phase is probably the most difficult part of the game, and is often played very badly by the computer. I don't

¹ *Ed. The use of satellite information is of course encouraged, where available.*



bother too much with attacking from many different directions etc, but it is worth using reconnaissance from many different directions and altitudes. Tu-95/142 Bear variants in particular are useful for this, having extreme range and reasonable speed.

Submarines are useful once you know where roughly a fleet is, especially as they stand a decent chance of tracking & classifying contacts. They are able to do this effectively even if they are out of position for any attack (for instance if they are behind the contacts). Using the periscope is not to be underestimated either, as long as its for a very brief sweep and then you clear the area.

3. The Attack

In my personal opinion, there are only a few attack methods that are useful from the Red side. If you want to sink a defended target then you either need the long range heavyweight cruise missiles, or you need a submarine attack. All other attacks are much weaker by comparison.

At its simplest, the chances of surviving to launch a good attack diminish the closer you need to get to the target. This is the same problem you encounter with the reconnaissance phase. Any missile that requires you to get within 100 nautical miles, and any radar that requires you to get within 100 nautical miles will often be more of a liability than anything useful. This is also tends to hold true for surface forces. Manouvering for a shot with SS-N-22s for example is often counter-productive.

Submarine forces on the other hand can get close enough to scare an opponent. They have the benefit of being hard to detect. They are also reasonably able to classify contacts as they close with them. The main difficulty is getting into a position to make the attack. I don't think there is any foolproof way to make a submarine attack. I usually use deep and creep in towards where I think the ships are heading. I think the only way to guarantee an effective attack is to have many subs spread over the path of the enemy. This is an area where the Red side makes up a bit of ground in many scenarios. You will typically have a good number of obsolete units at your disposal.

Try attacking a convoy with outdated aircraft or ships and it's likely to be an exercise in futility. Now try it with a Foxtrot. Even a noisy submarine is useful at creep. It's still a useful scout even if its sonar means you have to use the periscope, and all carry a useful attack load if you can get close enough. The tactics you use for a submarine attack aren't really any different to those you'd use if say playing NATO. However, in using obsolete submarines there is a small variation. Diesel subs in particular are not to be underestimated.



For a cruise missile attack, I don't tend to spend any time working out how many missiles I need to target at each ship. I much prefer to target all at the carrier if there is one there. If not I pretty much assume around 4 missiles per target depending how many I have available. If you know you have plenty of missiles and have been unable to classify the targets you can always hold back some. You usually know which are the AAW cruiser types as they'll be the first targets firing: these can then be targeted on a second wave. Often you do not have time to carry out anything more complex. If you launch all at the carrier, you often find there is some collateral damage from missiles that sought out a neighboring target.

BOL attacks are pretty much a last resort. Having said that, they can help reveal where a target is, assuming you have follow up forces. The opportunity to fire on targets you have a good contact with is usually brief, I prefer not to worry overly about allocating as a result. It's often more crucial just to get enough missiles in the air so that the defences get overwhelmed. You will generally only know how successful your attack was when you are in a position to launch the next one. Again I find the heavy-hitting missiles (and torpedoes) to be particularly useful as they give you some idea of damage assessment. Even then you will have often lost contact with the missiles or the target before you are able to register hits.

Apart from those main attacks, it's just a question of being inventive with whatever is left over. Without wishing to denigrate the remaining forces, I find most are not viable in an attack on a CVBG or a defended convoy. Aircraft that only carry bombs etc or are short range are at least able to attack any airbases nearby.

I'd be interested in hearing from anyone else who predominantly plays as the Russians....

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