

The church bells in the nearby Petropavlovsk just tolled 2 in the afternoon. On the Yelizevo field, they are barely audible as the sirens blare into the late summer's sky. The base is on high alert: the staff cars racing to and fro, machines whirling up to life, and the PVO men exchanging nervous glances - in their eyes, an unlikely mix of desperate confusion, stubborn determination, and boyish excitement. A sudden roar rises up, joined soon by the second, and then 6 more. The gigantic turbofan exhausts of the PVO interceptor jets surge to life, one after the other. Their echo reverbs from the artificial mounds, concealing hardened aircraft shelters and ammunition stores as they roll along the tarmac. The pilots lead their silver plated beasts to the runway, glistening in the sun like winter's first snowflakes. The radio crackles to life.

"This is flight lead to all., Keep your eyes and ears open up there, boys. This time it's for real."

Alexei hopes the static drowns out his uneasiness.

"2, understood."

"3, understood."

"4, understood."

It's 9th of September, 1989, and the cold war is about to get much warmer.

The situation

The scenario 'North Pacific shootout' boasts an interesting and rarely seen setting - a what-if flashpoint between the U.S. and Soviet forces set in the northern Pacific area, just off and over the Kamchatka peninsula, during the late cold war.

Playing the part of the Soviet forces, it quickly becomes apparent the scenario designer did not pay special attention to the briefing side of things. I especially enjoy reading the situational briefings as they, in my opinion, bring the world to life, and allow the player to immerse himself in the digital world. Setting up the odds, dabbling in political affairs, weaving in historical and cultural influences... It enhances the ensuing action and brings it into context. Not so here. The gist of the situation is "Americans keep flying over our airspace and we don't like that. If they do it again, kill them." While I suppose it's serviceable and fantasy can fill in some blanks, it's a somewhat lackluster explanation of an excuse for a potential global nuclear war. Perhaps the mission is meant to be played from the U.S. side primarily, and a more complete background setting is available for that side? In any case, we suspend our disbelief and soldier on.

Our day in the shoes of a Soviet district commander starts at 14:00, on 9th of September 1989. The mission is simple - protect the motherland against those pesky capitalist cowboys in the east (ironic how the world directions change).

Traditionally, our PVO (air defense) is bothered by the P-3 Orion ASW and intelligence gathering planes out from Naval Air Station Adak out in Alaska. There is also a squadron of F-15Cs stationed further west. Additionally, the carrier group of CV 61 USS Ranger is transiting through the area en route to the Persian Gulf. All in all, it's a pretty bad timing to spark a world war. A bulletin reads:

“Early this morning a Ministry of Fishing Industry trawler reported being overflowed by an aircraft that matches the description of an American S-3 Viking carrier based aircraft south of the Rat Island chain. This is consistent with intelligence that the USS Ranger carrier group is in the area transiting to the Persian Gulf.”

The Ministry of Fishing Industry is relentless, and so - timing or no timing - the Soviet Union must go to war.

Enemy forces

Apart from the aforementioned P-3C and F-15C presence in the Aleutian island chain, the Soviet intelligence supplies me with the following suspiciously detailed roster:

CV 61 surface group:

AOE 1 Sacramento (fleet oiler, no factor)
CG 26 Belknap
CV 61 Ranger [Forrestal Class] ()
DD 963 Spruance [VLS]
DDG 2 Charles F. Adams
FF 1052 Knox

Air

A-6E Intruder
E-2C Hawkeye Basic (the eyes of the capitalists and a prime target for our interceptors! I find the designation ‘Basic’ ironic)
EA-6B Prowler (pesky jammers!)
F-14A Tomcat (one of the leading, if not THE ultimate fighter/interceptor of the period, going to be a tough nut to crack)
S-3A Viking
SH-2F Seasprite (shipborne heli)
SH-3H Sea King (shipborne heli)

No mention of hostile submarine activity of any kind is made, but I don’t expect the intelligence to pick up on it even if there were any. Although a sub mixed in with a carrier SAG is *probably* unlikely, it always pays off to expect the unexpected from the sneaky capitalists.

Furthermore, some ground-based radar stations located on the rocky Aleutian outcrops of land may be present. Finally, the briefing specifically assures me there are no American Space-based forces expected in the AO (phew).

Friendly forces

“You have the most modern and finest aircraft available for your air defence duties.”

My forces consist of a mix of Pacific fleet, Long-range aviation and Air defense assets, joined side-by-side in comradeship against the imperialist aggressors!

Just off Petropavlovsk bay, a surface group of several cruisers are out on exercise. Although I don't know much about the Soviet ship types, they all seem competent in their stats.

Surface

Voroshilov SAG

BPK Marshal Voroshilov [BPK Kresta II [Pr.1134A Berkut A]]

EM Boevoy [EM Sovremenny I [Pr.956 Sarych]]

BPK Steregushchiy [BPK Kashin [Pr.61]]

SKR Dzerzhinskiy [SKR Krivak III [Pr.1135.1 Nerei]]

Further east and beneath the waves, out ace-in-the-hole in the shape of an advanced Shchuka-B type boat! If only we manage to locate and catch up to the Yankee fleet, they'll be in for a nasty surprise.

Submarine

K-331 [PLA-971 Akula I [Shchuka-B]]

The bulk of our forces consist of Long-range aviation and Air defense

Air

Kamenny Ruchey [Naval Bomber Base]

143 MRAD AV-MF (20 x Tu-22M-2 Backfire B) (prized assets, the heart of our strike force and likely our only chance of bringing the Americans to heel)

Klyuchi [Diversionary Airfield]

611 IAP PVO, 1 Sqn (10 x Su-27P Flanker B) (potent, modern air superiority fighters - I reckon if they get through the Phoenix screen, they can eat a Tomcat for breakfast)

Yelizovo [Interceptor & Maritime Reconnaissance Base]

317 OSAP, 1 Sqn (8 x Tu-16R Badger E)

317 OSAP, 1 Sqn (8 x Tu-16RM-1/2 Badger D)

865 IAP PVO, 1 Sqn (10 x MiG-31 Foxhound) (the Soviet counterpart to the Tomcat, its main drawback being its short missile range and reliance on SARH technology)

865 IAP PVO, 2 Sqn (10 x MiG-31 Foxhound)

865 IAP PVO, 3 Sqn (10 x MiG-31 Foxhound)

Pushchino/Sharomy [ASW Patrol Base]

182 PIS AV-MF (6 x Mi-14PS Haze C) (marine Mi-8 platform for SAR duties)

Lastly, the Petropavlovsk area benefits from stationary air defence sites located around the city's perimeter.

Mission: Defend Soviet aerospace.

The plan

How to go about it? The heart of the enemy's strength lies in their carrier group, their potent SAM defenses, capable radars and long-range Phoenix missiles. On the other hand, my forces are mostly inferior in capability to the Americans, but superior in numbers. However, I don't want to just throw fighter jets at a wall to see what sticks - sure, I have more jets than they have Phoenixes, but those planes are the property of the Soviet union! Trading 4 MiG-31s to get a fighting chance against a Tomcat is hardly a favorable bargain.

Furthermore, the scenario's briefing doesn't really specify what I should do ("If the Americans breach our airspace, kill them") - are we at a state of war? Can I afford to be offensive, or hang back instead? Surely, in real life we would just politely chase them out of the airspace again under armed escort?

For the purpose of roleplaying as well as evening the odds, I initially ready to make a stand just off Kamchatka's shores. This is a favorable, defensive posture far from the enemy carrier - stretching their response times while minimizing my own.

But what is the Americans' objective? Just to fly over here and make a nuisance out of themselves? Remember we're (probably) not at war yet. In line with my defensive strategy, I decide to pull my modest SAG back into Petropavlovsk bay - I don't want to waste them in a pointless shootout with the carrier group where they would be outgunned and outnumbered at the mercy of U.S. cruise missiles. Costly assets to lose for the thin-stretched Pacific fleet, they will serve just fine in relative safety of the Petropavlovsk bay, their onboard SAM and AA weaponry bolstering the defences of the city and the Yelizovo aerodrome - the main base of my forces in the area of operations.

Contrary to this, K-331 receives orders to comb the north Pacific in search of the USS Ranger - but hold fire and maintain an overwatch from a distance unless hostilities break out.

This scenario marks the first time I'm playing against a human opponent, thanks to musurca's IKE PBEM plugin. Although the scenario is set as a relatively simple 'here's your units, now fight it out' scene, I keep thinking of what to do that would catch my opponent by surprise and give me a fighting edge. How can I trick them? The scenario maker has placed a squadron of Long-range aviation Tu-22 Backfire bombers under my command - obviously to attack the U.S. carrier. What if, however, I don't do that? It's the obvious thing to do! Plus, my objective states nothing about decimating the enemy navy, nor inflicting any casualties, really. I should only hang back and protect the homeland's airspace. No reason to go toe-to-toe with their strongest asset! How about if the hostilities break out, I instead head over to NAS Adak and the other Aleutian bases, and pummel their flank? Surely they would not expect that. Looking at the Tu-22 loadouts, however, their AS-4 Kitchen ASMs are just that - anti-ship missiles, with no hope of engaging land targets. Fine. We're going after the damned carrier.

The principal American asset - the carrier-borne complement of F-14A Tomcats - is next on the list. With their fearsome Phoenix missiles, they can outrange pretty much anything I can throw at them, and are especially threatening for my reconnaissance and long-range bombers. Although the staff officer assures me an American carrier can surely field no more than 20 of these beasts - about half of my number - my SARH equipped interceptors will have to use subterfuge to close the distance, and strike for the heart. Once we have them in spitting range, we'll have our fighting chance.

I dispatch 2 reconnaissance Tu-16 Badger craft, one well to the north of the Aleutian island chain, the other orbiting to the south. With their loose EMCON and their electronics radiating, they should readily become visible on the Yankees' screens - a tasty high-value asset for their interceptors.

However, what they will not see (at least I sure hope not), is that each bomber will be escorted out over the ocean with several flights of Soviet union's best airmen, well to the south and east, screening the high value assets from the American fleet. With their radar equipment off, the

Americans won't see them until it's too late and they've closed the range, hopefully until a WVR engagement can develop and the Su-27s can shine in their natural habitat.

The Badger flying north of the Aleutians is a plain ruse (there is nothing north of the islands I care to uncover) - seemingly up for grabs, all alone on an exposed flank - meant to trick the Americans into committing their Tomcats to swat the bothersome fly down. It is accompanied by all 6 of my combat-ready Su-27s out of Klyuchi diversionary field. Stationed over 100nm south from the reconnaissance bomber they protect, right on a potential Tomcat intercept path, they adopt a V formation - the open end of the V aimed in the direction of the U.S. carrier group. Once the Tomcats close in, the formation will converge upon them like scissors, trapping the Americans in and bringing about the fight on our terms, with superior numbers.

The southern Badger bomber is a more practical measure - here, I plan on actually uncovering the enemy's location. However, similarly to the northern group, this asset is likewise under the shadowy protection of 8 invisible MiG-31 interceptors out of Yelizovo field, circling on a potential intercept path way out east.

My 4 remaining MiG-31s will remain as a stand-by reserve on the ground in Yelizovo, and sortie in case of an enemy attack on the field - or excessive casualties.

As I notice the time of the scenario is limited, and there will be no time later on, I decide to send out my 12 Tu-22 Backfire bombers out from the mainland in the south, just in case. Even if hostilities don't break out (cough), or I decide against striking the carrier, they will just be able to safely return. We can always declare their deployment as exercise! Their marshalling point lies well to the south of the action, on the edge of their fuel capacity, from where they will hopefully be able to strike from an unexpected angle.

15:00

After a mostly uneventful hour, as the assets slowly take off one after the other and slowly cruise onto their stations, a hysterical commissar barges into my office, a paper in hand. An unidentified plane, presumed American, has been harassing our northern listening posts and refusing to communicate. Headquarters demands an immediate intercept and destruction of the 'capitalist spy plane'! This is obviously a scripted event in the scenario, and doesn't really fit into my plans. As it is hardly a threat to worry about (probably some patrol plane with little to no offensive capability), I decide to do nothing in particular about it and focus on the big fish instead, as I politely throw the raging commissar out of the door.

As my assets fall into place, I notice the 'spyplane' had dropped from my screen - some opportunistic Sukhoi driver, passing by on the way to their station has probably seen fit to expend a missile or two on the target, since they were already in the vicinity. Either way, instead of the enigmatic 'bogie' symbol on the map screen - there's now a harmless little blob, announcing 'Lt Hernandez' has been able to leave his wrecked craft (probably an Orion), activate an emergency transmitter, and is now bobbing on the waves just off Kamchatka in his safety raft. Realizing that rescuing that poor fellow is an objective for the Americans, I dispatch a Mi-14 search and rescue mission to fish him out instead. You can be my Gary Powers anytime, Lt Hernandez! In other news, I suppose we're at war now.

Closer over to the predicted carrier force's location, I'm seeing a surge of activity. The northern Pacific is a busy place, with countless civilian trawlers and airliners crowding the sea and the sky.

Taking special care to identify each bogie as a military platform based on their radar emissions, it looks like the Americans are busy launching all they have from the carrier's deck, and heading west.

This prompts my 8 interceptors in the south to split up. Seeing a potential gap, 2 flights of 4 jets total surge eastward towards the enemy SAG on a flanking attack. The remaining 4 MiGs stand their ground and meet the advancing Americans head-on.

Before long, they're engaged! Trading missiles with the Americans, one flight manages to hold their own and down a U.S. plane while losing none of their own, before disengaging and handing off the fight to the second flight.

Further south, the two flanking MiGs turn north again, heading into the enemy's side. Emulating the 'radar trap' from the Sukhois up north, one of the flights takes the vanguard while staying dark, while the second duo hang way back and illuminate the airspace with radar waves. The gamble paid off, and the four jets now find themselves in the enemy's vulnerable flank, behind their frontline CAP! Missiles streak through the air, and before long, the kill tally stands at 1x E-2C Hawkeye, 2x F-14A Tomcat and 1x P-3C Orion downed, for zero losses of our own. Then, suddenly, a surface contact - by sheer luck, the MiGs have stumbled onto the carrier group! As they enthusiastically radio the message in and disengage, a sea of new contacts emerges from nowhere - the Americans seem to be launching new Tomcats from the carrier's deck right below the MiGs! The flight of two heroes of the Soviet union goes down in flames. Their sacrifice wasn't in vain, however, as I now have a firm point on which to vector my bombers and submarine on.

15:40

Sad news - another pair of my Foxhounds has been downed for a total of 4 losses, but they have gone down fighting, taking with them another Hawkeye, Prowler, Viking and 3 more Tomcats. Furthermore, another flight had to RTB to rearm, leaving only a last, two-ship flight to handle the carrier group. The reserves immediately go up to shore up the defences. Here's hoping the Americans fish my pilots out of the water.

In preparation for a carrier strike, another Badger goes up to paint targets for the Backfires. The Tu-22 raid itself is now nearing their rally point. All alone behind enemy lines, they rely on their speed and element of surprise to get them through this operation alone - no fighter escorts are able to keep up with these slick jets this far out above the ocean. They mimic a civilian posture with their formation, speed and altitude - hopefully, to the Americans they will appear as simple airliners until it's too late.

Worryingly, in the north the Su-27s are forced to RTB on bingo fuel, leaving their protégé all alone. To add insult to injury, they decide to do this just as they're being engaged by an enemy jet. I order disregard fuel state and fight back - else, there'll be nothing left to reach the airfield to refuel at all!

5 minutes later, the wayward Sukhois manage to splash their pursuer - a lone F-14 - and head back to Klyuchi on fumes. I order increase altitude and decrease speed to conserve the little that's left in their tanks, and hope this little tangle didn't just cost me a flight of 6 jets.

As the Americans muster airplanes for a push westwards, I fall back on my battered southern CAP closer to Kamchatka to buy more time for reinforcements to arrive from Yelizovo. Radar is reading 7+ bogeys approaching from the carrier!

Another 5 minutes pass as I watch my Sukhois in agony. Already almost out of fuel, they disregard my orders and instead of heading home to fuel up, they fumble about senselessly.

A further blunder transpires as my lone MiG-31s on southern CAP turn around and head back to the carrier, shrugging off missiles left and right....

I'm not happy with how this turn panned out at all. The out-of-fuel Sukhois up north are an embarrassing and unforced error that will cost me up to 6 airframes lost senselessly. In retrospect, I should have only ordered only a pair of them - the ones with most fuel left - to turn back and duke it out with the Tomcat. This would have ensured survival of the most, if not all of them. This way, coupled with the AI/order hiccup later on meant that casualties are certain.

Instead of turning back and fighting, the MiGs on the southern CAP station should've turned tail and ran home to stretch the U.S. resources thin - this would have opened a gap which the Backfires could exploit and deliver the lethal blow on the carrier. Instead, our reinforcements are delayed and we're accepting the fight on their terms...

Additionally I have doubts whether I should have been more resolute with the Backfire raid. I could have taken a more direct route to ensure they will be on station at the beginning of my next turn - this way, I run the risk of excessive casualties if their raid takes place on my opponent's turn. However, if timing is on our side and the Backfires arrive on station just as the Americans' current airplane surge returns back to the carrier for resupply, we stand a chance of squashing a significant portion of their air power defenseless on the Ranger's flight deck, which also offers a safer attack run - and, most importantly, exit strategy - for our bombers. But will they find the carrier? The Badgers with their long range radars are stuck behind a screen of Tomcats, unable to spot the group.

But - c'est la guerre - we soldier on. And as they say - everyone's a general after the battle's ended. The blunders of this turn are important lessons on patience and planning going forward!

Indeed, 2 of the Su-27s ran out of fuel on their approach, just off Klyuchi base. SAR assets have been immediately dispatched. Although a tragedy, I'm somewhat relieved more machines hadn't fallen prey to the logistical mismatch. Further south, my CAP station has taken a beating, with total MiG-31 losses totalling at 7 at this point. Only 3 machines are left maintaining the CAP station, while further 2 are being rearmed and refueled at Yelizovo as quickly as possible. Hopefully the freshly arrived Su-27s will refuel as soon as possible, and join the fray. However, it appears as if the U.S. fighter screen dispersed a little, and the Backfire raid is gaining steam. The bombers edge closer every minute, wary not to attract undue attention too soon. To aid them, the Badger reconnaissance birds are heading for the carrier, and the 3 remaining MiGs in the air are heading for the sole remaining American AEW asset....

17:00

The three MiGs surge forward with the objective of blinding the U.S. fleet and enabling the Backfire bombers' unobstructed access to the fleet. Unfortunately, all three fall prey to the U.S. fighter screen, but not before luring the capitalist fighters out west, clearing the path for the Tu-22s. Three Tu-16 Badger radars flicker for a moment - yes, there they are! For the first time, the entire American battlegroup is visible. The onboard tactical officer determines the likely position of CV 61 within the formation, and the targeting data is relayed to the Backfires. A salvo of 24 AS-4 Kitchen missiles streaks towards the carrier! Their onboard radar suites light up as they close the distance. One after the other fall prey to the American CIWS systems, but for a moment, it seems a few have managed to break through the defences! Have they managed to hit the carrier? How severe is the damage? Is the carrier disabled? Or, perhaps the CIWS has managed to hold off the attack after all, and the battlegroup is unaffected? There is no time for BDA - the Badgers' radars power off as they hurry back west, under the protection of SAM defences. They are sitting ducks for Ranger's Tomcat jets - if the carrier remained operational. A hundred miles to the south-east, the Tu-22 formation starts on its homeward journey as well. Meanwhile, a duo of replacement MiG-31s have finally finished rearming and are now returning to cover the bombers' egress.

17:40

A flight of F-15Cs from the Aleutian bases have caught up to the retreating Backfire bombers, and 2 Tu-22s fall victim to their missiles. I was wondering when they will show up! Vectoring in the last pair of MiG-31s for assistance, they stumble upon a duo of Tomcats, out on a stroll over the ocean blind, without their radar! The MiGs split, one continuing southward to screen the fleeing Backfires as his comrade takes on the Tomcats. There is a bright flash, as the radarless knife-fight in the skies sends one of the F-15s spiralling down towards the waves. The MiG, having expended all of its missiles, splits off and heads for home. The second MiG, however, is overwhelmed by the F-15s, and explodes in mid-air. However, in doing so, he captured the attention of American pilots long enough to give the westbound Tu-22s some breathing room. With all my fighters out of the picture or on the ground, the regional air superiority now seems to be in the hands of the Americans and their Tomcats. That said, the main objective of attacking their fleet has been completed and all my assets are now on their way home, hopefully out of reach and safe from the feared Phoenix missiles. With some luck, the U.S. Navy fliers are just as spent as our airmen - and will not pursue. Meanwhile, under the ocean's waves, K-331 has received further intelligence on the enemy fleet's whereabouts and is closing in fast. But will it be fast enough to catch the carrier group?

18:20

It seems the MiG pilot's death was not in vain, as the remaining Backfires trudge on home safely. Over the Kurils, I happen upon an unexpected sight - a squadron of 5 Backfire bombers, fully loaded with 10 AS-4 missiles has just entered the AO! I had not counted on any more bombers joining the fight - but it looks like I've overlooked these for some reason! I suppose they must have been undergoing maintenance on Kamenny Ruchey airfield at the time of the original sortie, and having completed their task have now joined in the fight. This is another beginner's mistake - I should have waited and launched all Backfires when they were ready to saturate the enemy CIWS defences. Simply 'overlooking' assets like that should not happen!! However, the situation

has now changed and with the air superiority firmly in the enemies' hands, reaching their target will prove difficult...

In 60 minutes, my remaining Sukhoi jets will have rearmed and rejoined the fight. This is my opportunity to try and smuggle the bombers in, under their cover.

19:00

As the time is running out, the turn is spent mostly by calculating the optimal balance between choosing a safe path for the remaining Backfires - and making sure they arrive on station in time to deliver their ordnance. This is a gamble, of course - but a well-placed AS-4 missile may tip the scales of the entire scenario! The Sukhoi escort will be airborne in just 10 minutes. Fingers crossed!

19:20

In the very last minutes of the scenario, the remaining 5 Tu-22s, literally over their missile launch point, were ambushed and annihilated in a quick succession by a squadron of 4+ bandits, presumably F-15Cs out from Eareckson airbase. This was a truly explosive finish, as the intercept happened in the nick of time - the radars were already energized and the Ranger task group localized - yet no missile managed to leave the rail. It was a gamble sending the bombers in, but one that could have paid off - and although in the last minutes before disaster I saw the unknown bogeys (in a suspicious formation ;)) approach, I wanted to carry out the attack in the hopes of landing that one golden hit on a Yankee carrier. In these last few hours, the Americans have changed their tactics and have mostly gone under EMCON, relying on other radar sources to guide them to their targets - this made fighting them much harder! These last shots conclude the scenario, with the casualty lists as follows:

U.S. LOSSES:

2x E-2C Hawkeye Basic
1x EA-6B Prowler ICAP II Blk 82
7x F-14A Tomcat
1x P-3C Orion Update II
1x S-3A Viking

U.S.S.R. LOSSES:

11x MiG-31 Foxhound
2x Su-27P Flanker B
7x Tu-22M-2 Backfire B

It's a costly butcher's bill, especially with the tragic loss of 7 prized Tu-22 Backfire bombers... The casualties are steep for the Soviets, which is doubly disappointing after an impressive start of the scenario. But there's a favorable side as well - no civilians were harmed in making of this AAR :)

The survival of CV 61 Ranger is a further disappointment - its destruction was fully within Soviet capabilities and had not succeeded due to poor timing and asset cooperation, which is something I have to train in the future :)

I'm surprised we haven't seen the involvement of F-15s in the scenario until almost the very end - I had expected them to play a larger role in the operation. Perhaps they played a rear-guard duty for the mission's duration, while the naval Tomcats took the brunt of the fighting with their long-range missiles.