



Introductory

As its name implies, this is a game featuring conflict at sea between task forces (in the 1980s) rather than strategic struggles between entire fleets, scenarios deploying one or more Task Forces (surface groups) and Subrons (submarine groups) on each side. Three probably areas of maritime conflict are given, namely the Northern Approaches where North Atlantic and Norwegian Sea meet, the Eastern Mediterranean and the Western Caribbean; in addition, by ignoring land hexes the map in use can be deemed to be all-sea, the Mediterranean map (the largest) being particularly suitable for oceanic scenarios.

The theme of play is very much 'find, fix and strike'; the players secretly manoeuvre Task Forces and Subrons on their own screened-off maps, seeking to locate enemy groups while keeping their own undetected and to launch over-the-horizon attacks at a suddenly-revealed opponent. Individual ship-counters remain off-map on a concealed Group Display sheet; when groups are involved in combat - usually at the receiving end - the ships are transferred to a Tactical Display, remaining there until combat is resolved. The game emphasises the importance of naval air arms, ship-borne tactical guided missiles and submarine patrols.

Its system is quite simple once the sequence of play has been studied and practised. Scenarios are in four levels of complexity, starting with one small TF per side, then increasing TF, introducing Subrons and, finally, aircraft. Play is smooth and features much interaction between players. However *Task Force* has some notable omissions as a simulation, e.g. the near-total absence of Soviet land-based aircraft and the role of the ship-borne helicopter as a major ASW weapon. An excellent article in *Moves* 57 by Charles Kamps USN is well worth reading as it deals with making up these deficiencies - and others - and I will be referring to this later on in the article.

Game Components

The Map Two identical map-sheets are provided, displaying the three areas of sea mentioned earlier: I have found it convenient to cut the sheet into three separate, smaller maps as not only does this make the game much more manageable but it also makes it much easier to screen off the map in use. Screens are not provided and must be home-made from thin card. The maps use two hex-grids, one of normal-sized hexes and the other of 'megahexes' - groups of seven hexes, as in *Cityfight*.

Counters First come the TF/Subron counters, numbered and used to denote the position of each friendly group on one's own map. Then there are the ship counters, oblong, one for each individual ship and submarine, displaying her silhouette, name and combat factors, including flotation value, helicopter capacity and ability to jam incoming missiles.

The two chief protagonists are the US and Soviet navies. Following them comes the Royal Navy (of which more later) and then a fairly large French force. Other contingents of smaller size represent the remaining NATO navies (which are deemed to include that of Spain). Also included are a flotilla of Israeli patrol craft and units of the Mexican, Brazilian, Venezuelan and Colombian navies: the ship-count is completed by ten 'neutral' freighters to represent supply ships, troop-transport and convoys, according to the scenario being played.

Other counters depict air squadrons, commanders, missiles and a large quantity of informational counters completes the mix. A Fleet and a Tactical display are provided for each player. Last comes the rule-book - eight pages of rules, five of advanced rules, and the balance taken up by scenarios and notes.

Game-Scales and Such 25 miles/hex: 75 miles/megahex: 2 hours per turn. A Task Force consists of one or more vessels plus a commander. Scenario details will specify the number of TFs/Subrons initially deployed on each side, and the number of commanders available; this last will

determine to what extent the 'at Start' groups can be further subdivided. In all scenarios provision is made to allow submarines to operate independently, if desired.

The Game-System

Preliminaries Assuming that the game is being played without airpower, the players begin each turn by determining what Random Events (if any) will affect play; these can include weather or failures in Command Control on the part of one side or the other. That done, each player takes it in turn to perform an Action Sequence with one group until all have been actioned or passed over. The number of separate actions available to each group is decided by a die-roll and the rank of the group commander; it may be reduced by a failure in Command Control. If a group is to be moved in the turn, that takes up one Action and must be the first; thereafter all Action fall into one of two categories - Search and Combat.

Search In some earlier naval games, to carry out a search has the disadvantage of requiring the searcher to call out the areas in which his searching forces are. The method used in *Task Force* improves on this: the megahex is the search-area and the majority of search procedures permit searches of adjacent megahexes - in the case of helicopter searches, up to three megahexes away. Thus an opponent will realise only that any enemy group is somewhere within a wide area - provided that not too many searches are made by the same group in one Action Sequence, something that the die-roll is likely to ensure anyway.

Search results are determined by the Value (i.e. the likelihood of success) of the method employed, modified by a die-roll and by certain other factors which the searched-for player may be able to apply secretly, thus degrading the chances of his being found. The upshot will vary from locating the exact hex of the enemy, to locating him by megahex only, to outright failure; there is also the possibility of receiving a false report. Once the hex of an enemy group is

known, that group may be immediately attacked by the searching group or, in subsequent friendly Action Sequences, by other groups, always provided that the attacker is within range. Which brings us to:-

Combat Combat between groups will be by Missile attack, Torpedo attack or, less commonly, by Gunnery. In the first two instances the target Task Force is laid out on the Tactical Display and becomes the prey of successive waves of missiles (missile-counter moved across Display) or of submarines (individual sub counters moved on to the Display to close with and attack their targets). The defender retaliates with the appropriate defensive systems of his various ships, having taken care so to lay out his group that maximum cover is provided by area weapons; missiles can fall victim to defensive fire and to ECM, subs to long-range and close-defence ASW systems.

In real life the naval gun has lost its pre-eminence as a ship-killer and this is reflected in *Task Force*, gunnery being the form of combat least used, usually occurring when a TF is able to close with an enemy already mauled by airstrike or missiles – and even then the enemy will be able to break off the action after the first round of combat.

The Tactical Display does not envisage the line-of-battle of earlier wars: its circular form allows the defender to deploy his ships in the manner which he considers to be the most advantageous to meet a particular form of attack, with the doctrine of mutual support being employed to the utmost. Good deployment means that one is more likely to come off as walking wounded rather than as a stretcher case.

Combat results are determined by die-roll in conjunction with the defensive/offensive systems employed; there is no CRT. Surface ships receive flotation hits which will sink them once their Flotation Value is reached, or systems hits which progressively degrade all combat factors and which, in sufficient quantity, will sink them too: submarines receive flotation hits only.

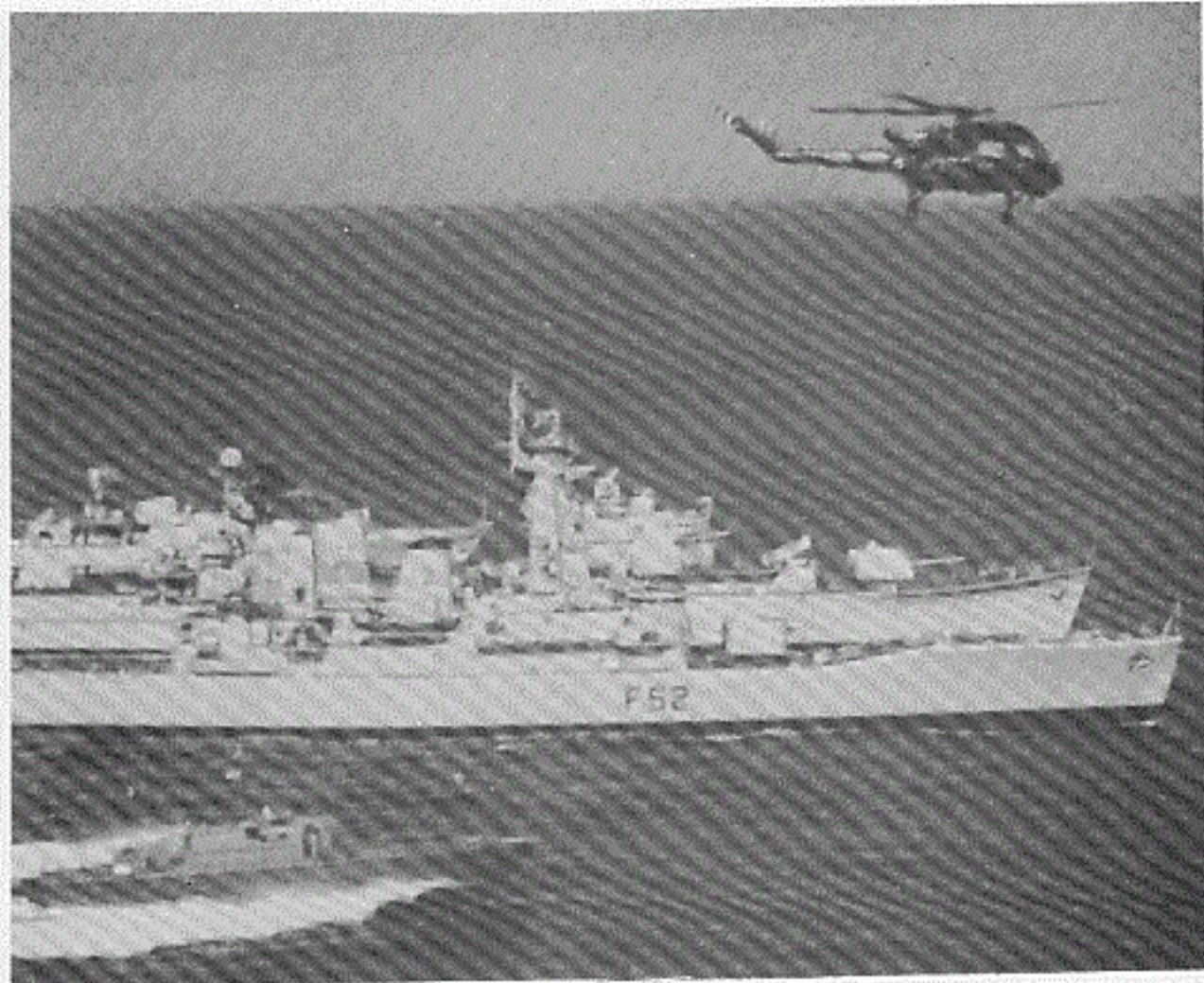
Effects of Air Operations

Scenarios on the fourth (Tournament) level of complexity add air units, flying from either carriers or on-map shore bases; most are squadrons, represented by counters, but Long Range Maritime Patrols, searching for TFs or for Subrons, are abstract. Missions are normally Recce, Strike or Combat Air Patrol, flying shotgun over friendly TFs.

The introduction of air power changes the game markedly, starting by making it much more difficult for TFs to lose themselves in the uttermost parts of the sea or, once spotted, to evade continual surveillance. It also tilts the balance very sharply in favour of the NATO player because the intervention of Soviet land-based air forces (particularly the long-range Backfire and Badger bombers, their range enhanced by their Kingfish ASM) is virtually ignored despite the fact that their appearance is a certainty in the Eastern Atlantic and in the Med. The capacity of Soviet carriers to embark fixed-wing aircraft is very limited and the land-based air arms forms "one of the three prongs of the Soviet trident of naval power; submarines, ships and shore-based air" (Isby, S&T 83). I will be returning to this question of air-'loading'.

Ships of War at Sea; the Navies

The Royal Navy No longer the world's largest navy, the 'Andrew' is nonetheless its third largest and NATO's second largest and, as a true Brit, I intend to give it something of the coverage it deserves. While *Task Force* is a US-produced game, will be bought by a larger proportion of US gamers than of those of any



other nation, and therefore devotes a large part of the counter-mix to the United States Navy, I consider that the RN is under-represented, especially when one bears in mind the scale of its commitment in the Eastern Atlantic. It should play a larger role in the Northern Approaches scenarios and have more ships. As it is, the ten ships and two submarines depicted are a cross-section (a comprehensive one, be it said) of the main classes rather than a selection from which any likely RN Task Force can be assembled. To take a few examples, Britain has twelve fleet submarines (and more building), eight Amazon frigates, nine Sheffield guided-missile destroyers (more building) and no less than twenty-five Leander frigates of various armament-types.

The ships which appear in this game are shown listed separately in the article, with some comments by myself. Most are wrongly shown as having Area ASW systems; in fact Ikara is the RN's only such weapon and its ASW 'main armament' is the anti-submarine helicopter (HAS). In his *Moves* article Charles Kamps suggests a much more realistic method of simulating the use of helicopters in the ASW role.

The United States Navy The emphasis here is on the large aircraft carrier, three of the USN's seven Atlantic Fleet flat-tops featuring in the counter-mix, backed by over twenty other major ships and five submarines. While the array is once again a cross-section of types it is a much more useful one as up to four ships of one class are available, making it much more feasible to make up balanced TFs in DIY scenarios.

The Soviet Navy Leading the line come the new Kiev class carriers *Kiev* and *Minsk*, closely followed by the through-deck cruiser *Moskva*, all well-equipped with HAS and the first two able to carry one squadron each of VTOL fighters. Then come no less than twenty-seven cruisers, destroyers and frigates and nine submarines – a reminder of the Soviet reliance of these vessels. The surface ships are characterised by powerful combat systems, reflecting Soviet ship-designers' ability to cram maximum system into a comparatively small hull.

Other Navies As already stated, the French navy has a fair slice of the counter-cake, the carrier *Foch* being supported by six ships and one submarine. The remaining NATO navies are in smaller numbers; while the Danish, West German and Norwegian fleets are heavily committed to the Baltic approaches – outwith the scope of the game – perhaps the Royal Netherlands Navy could have been given more than one destroyer and two frigates, especially as in real life the RNLN works very closely with the RN. The Italian, Greek and Turkish navies appear in the Med. scenarios only.

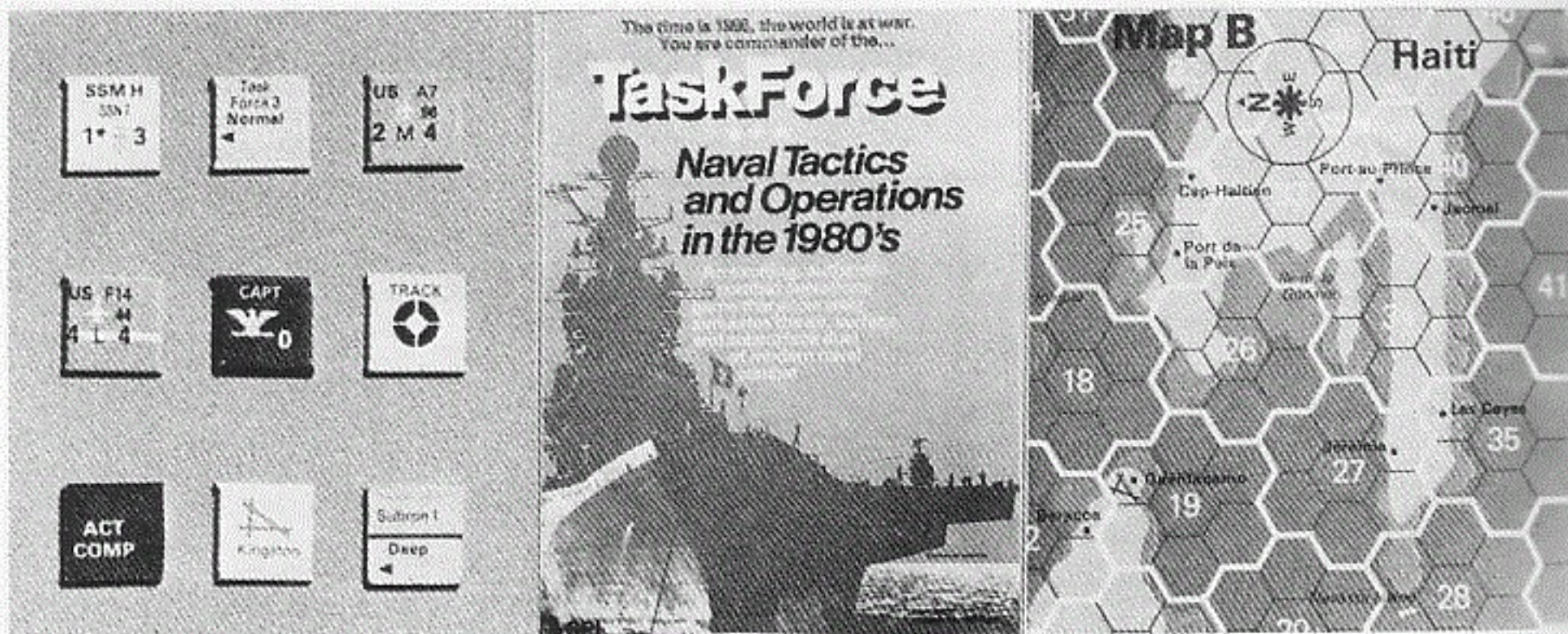
Appraisal

Task Force is a much easier game to play than it may seem on one's first opening the box. The sequence is soon mastered through the use of the basic scenarios and progress to the all-stops-out Tournament scenarios plus all optional rules is smooth and without hiccups. The various forms of combat lend themselves to solo practice and this will further speed the process of becoming familiar with the game. Playing-time is from two to six hours, dependent on the complexity of the scenario chosen; although the allotted number of turns may preage a long game in fact one side or the other usually emerges as a clear victor before the final turn.

The hidden-movement system works well and the alternate Actioning of groups by each player in turn gives the fluidity of simultaneous movement without its paperwork. There can be some tense games of maritime hide-and-seek, especially in scenarios with little or no air-power; the suspected presence of an undetected enemy group can keep players on the edges of their chairs and the process of systematic searching is both interesting and full of opportunities for bluff and second-guessing. Combat, especially airstrike or missile attack, is usually sudden, swift and decisive and the realisation that one's prime TF has become the subject of the wholly unwelcome attentions of a submarine wolf-pack produces 'that sinking feeling'. As for those dread words, "Missile attack on your Task Force in 14E!" ... Well, O my, is there no peace for pore matelots?

The Game as Reality

The box-lid spiel says that *Task Force* is an "exciting, authentic combat operations game



that accurately simulates the air, surface and sub-surface duel of modern naval combat". True or false?? Well, not wholly true, to be honest. I have already alluded to the underplaying of Soviet airpower and there are other major aspects of modern naval warfare which are conspicuously absent or which seem to have become strangely subdued. I understand that the original design was by David Isby and was strong on simulation, whereas Joe Balkoski – who is credited with design and development on the box-lid – sought to inject more playability. That he overdid this is strongly indicated by Charles Kamps' suggestions in *Moves* 57, suggestions which take the form of easily-added extras or outright substitutions, and which much improve the game at little extra cost in complexity. We will come back to Charles in a little while; in the meantime, some of the aspects of *Task Force* which aren't there.

Air Power As I have said already, Soviet land-based aircraft get very little of a look-in despite the USSR's certain potential to commit large numbers of Backfire and Badger bombers in two of the three sea-areas featured. Typical scenarios pit eleven or twelve NATO combat squadrons against three or four Soviet, the result being that, according to *Task Force*, the mighty USN will sweep the Reds from the seas in about 36 hours, probably knocking their surface ships into scrap before ever they get into missile range. While the designer stresses that this game should not be regarded as a training device, this is a bit optimistic, game or no game.

Helicopters "ASW is the primary mission of shipboard helicopters" – thus David Isby in *S&T* 83. But in the game the ability of the chopper to kill the sub is nil – absolutely NIL; it is a good medium of searching and can find a Subron for you – but, that done, the subs can surface and make faces at the chopper for all the harm that it can do them. Result – the helicopter carriers of all navies (including those of the Royal and Soviet navies, both of which rely greatly on helicopter ASW) become useful recce vehicles but totally lack their real-life role as sub hunter/killers. A very big hole, gentlemen.

ASW "The hunter-killer sub is potentially the most effective submarine killer" (Isby). With ASW factors of 2 the average submarine in *Task Force* is no more effectual than the average surface ship when it comes to the business of sinking enemy subs.

Submarines Task forces can move two hexes in one movement action. Subrons in Deep mode, regardless of methods of propulsion,

move only one. Result: not only is the nuclear-powered boat no faster than her Diesel-powered sister, but the high underwater speed of the nuclear boat – equal to that of most surface ships – is much degraded. On the other hand the Diesel boat in Shallow mode is lent wings!

SSMs The Soviet SSN-3 and SSN-12 (missile counters I and J) have real-life ranges of 120 and 250 miles respectively; in the game they come down to 1 hex (25 miles) and 2 hexes (50-odd miles). Poor old Russkies: damp powder again!

Damage "NATO warships are better able to absorb and control damage" . . . "The USN little cares how long an enemy ship floats as long as its sensors and weapons do not pose a threat. (It's a long trip back to Kronstadt for repairs)". (Isby). No bonus in the game for NATO's supposedly superior damage control training, no penalty for Soviet pack-the-hull ship design: a hit is a hit is a hit, regardless of who sustains it. They may be a quibble but now comes the fact that victory points are accrued by *sinking* ships and, in some scenarios, *only* by sinking ships. For completely crippling an enemy ship as a fighting unit one gains nothing at all, which compares oddly not only with David Isby's very valid comment but also with the fact that certain types of bombs and missiles are primarily intended to riddle and so wreck radar scanners and fire-control systems, rather than to sink the ships that carry them.

Chuck Kamps, His Mark

Chuck Kamps' article – *Super Taskforce* – is almost required reading for the would-be serious player of this game. Although extras such as new ship-types and revision of ratings on existing counters are too fiddly for idle unhandymen such as myself, his suggestions, additions and variants are well worth the little – the very little – extra trouble it takes to incorporate them into the game-system. If you don't take *Moves* I suggest that you do your best to sight a copy of *Issue* 57 and, if possible, to note the main extras given in Chuck's article. Space apart, I have no wish to pinch his work but what I can and will do is to detail the easy additions and to say a word or two about the more complicated ones.

Submarines

a. SSNs may always move two hexes, in both Deep and Shallow mode. SS may move one hex only.

b. Try upgrading some SS to SSNs in specific scenarios. In addition deem, say, half your SSNs to be *Echo IIs* with missile-rating of J8, and half to be *Charlie IIs* with 18. Such alterations would be especially relevant in the Northern Approaches scenarios. (In the game as printed the

Frunze and *Kaluga* are *Echo II* and *Charlie II* respectively; missile ratings should be altered.

Missiles

a. Target acquisition and guidance can be presumed to be available through a variety of means such as patrol aircraft and intelligence ships. Rule 32.3 (Mid-Course Guidance) is therefore in abeyance and all SSM may be fired to their maximum range at all times.

b. SSN-3 (Missile I) has a range of 5 hexes; SSN-12 (Missile J) a range of 10 hexes.

SOSUS

Placement is limited to megahexes containing only Shallow water. SOSUS searches are conducted exactly as for Subron Passive Search except that search must always centre on the megahex in which the SOSUS marker is.

Those were the quickies: for the other items I must refer you to the article, lack of space inhibiting me here. There is a revised system for helicopter search, including anti-submarine attacks by helicopters; the introduction of strong forces of missile-armed Soviet bombers from off-map bases, which gives the Soviet player a chance of getting in a mortal blow first; and provision for the armament of certain NATO squadrons with Harpoon air-to-air missiles.

Something of My Own

Damage – try this one. For every enemy ship with three or more hits at the game's end, award yourself *half* the VP score for that class of ship; round fractions up if the ship is Soviet, down if NATO. This takes note both of the ineffectiveness of crippled ships and of likely capacities for damage control and quick repair.

Conclusions

Although *Task Force* has holes in its system, most of which could have been filled up before publication, it is nonetheless a good and interesting game, combining a workable search procedure which conveys something of the wide, wide sea and which does not result in the searcher's betraying his own location, with swift, hair-raising combats depicting well the long-range strikes of modern naval warfare. Moreover the mechanics seem realistic, the aforementioned holes being due to missing concepts, not to distinction of those available, and resource to the *Moves* article will fill in most of those same holes.

What I would like to see is a *Task Force* expansion kit with revised ship-counters (including new builds) and extra rules drawn from the article. Think about it, SPI!

In the meantime we have a new and worthwhile naval game which is easy to learn, smooth to play, and challenging without being a chore.



The Royal Navy in Task Force

In this section I have provided a list of the ten surface ships and two submarines of the Royal Navy which feature in this game. Each is listed as follows:-

Type as shown on counter: name: description of actual armament in the same order as is displayed on the counter, for easy comparison: remarks which include type in RN reckoning and comments on the ship as simulated in the game. ASW and SAM systems with an asterisk are real-life area weapons.

It will be noted that several ships are 'upgraded' (eg. HMS *Fife* is classed as a cruiser in the counter-mix, whereas she is classed as a destroyer in the Navy). In fact the County class are light cruisers for all practical purposes - they are bigger than some light cruisers of the past - and the Broadsword frigates could well be described as destroyers. Indeed there is often little difference between destroyers and frigates in the present-day Royal Navy; destroyers tend to be strong on air defence, frigates on ASW, but that is the main difference nowadays.

HMS *Juno* (leander Class) is now a training ship but was previously a standard Exocet-equipped Leander; this is probably why she is depicted as such. Purists can assume her to be one of the seven other Exocet Leanders in service.

Sources consulted; 'The Royal Navy Today and Tomorrow'; Rear Admiral J.R. Hill, 1981.

'The Armed Forces of the United Kingdom'; ed. Chris Chant, 1980.

CV *Invincible*; SAM - Sea Dart*: SSM - Sea Dart (secondary role) Hel - 9xSea King HAS; Aircraft - 5xHarrier

(Invincible Class carrier; SSM capability may be overrated at C4 as only one twin launcher)

CG *Fife*; SAM - Sea Slug*: Guns - 2x4.5inch: SSM - Exocet: Hel - Wessex 3 HAS

(County Class destroyer: Sea Slug has secondary SSM role, not shown)

CG *Bristol*; ASW - Ikara*: Limbo mortar: SSM - Sea Dart*: Guns - 1x4.5inch SSM - Sea Dart (secondary role)
(Destroyer [Type 82]; only one built. Ikara underrated - see *Ajax* below)

DD *Cardiff*; ASW - Homing torpedo: SAM Sea Dart*: Guns - 1x4.5inch: SSM - Sea Dart (secondary role) Hel - Lynx HAS
(Sheffield Class destroyer [Type 42])

DD *Brazen*; ASW - Homing Torpedo: SAM - Sea Wolf: Guns - 2x40mm AA: SSM - Exocet: Hel - 2x Lynx HAS
(Broadsword Class Guided Missile frigate [Type 22] AA rating of 2 probably under-rates Sea Wolf)

DD *Active*; ASW - Homing torpedo: SAM - Sea Cat: Guns - 1x4.5inch: SSM - Exocet: Hel - Lynx HAS
(Amazon Class Guided Missile frigate [Type 21])

DD *Ajax*; ASW - Ikara*: Limbo mortar: SAM - Sea Cat: Guns - 2x40mm AA: Hel - Wasp HAS

(Leander [Ikara] Class frigate: ASW rating of 2 seems fair simulation of Ikara AS missile - but note *Bristol*: Wasp HAS not shown; Wasp is early type, but effective)

DD *Juno*; ASW - Homing torpedo: SAM - Sea Cat: Guns - 2x40mm AA: SSM - Exocet: Hel - Lynx HAS

(*Juno* is now training ship; above details are for Leander [Exocet] Class frigate)

DD *Zulu*; ASW - Limbo mortar: SAM - Sea Cat: Guns 2x4.5inch: Hel - Wasp HAS

(Tribal Class frigate [Type 81]; Entire class withdrawn from service for disposal, late 1970s)

DD *Rhyl*; ASW - Limbo mortar: SAM - Sea Cat: Guns - 2x4.5inch: Hel - Wasp HAS

(Rothesay Class frigate [modified Type 12]; *Rhyl* now in reserve; note Wasp HAS not shown)

SSN *Superb*; ASW - see Torpedoes: Torpedoes - 6 tubes. *Tigerfish* wire-guided torpedo and Mk8** conventional: SSM - Harpoon (tube-launched)

(Swiftsure Class Fleet Submarine; ASW capacity under-rated in view of *Tigerfish*)

SS *Onyx*; ASW - see Torpedoes: Torpedoes - 6 tubes for'd, 2 aft. *Tigerfish* and Mk 8**

(Oberon Class Patrol Submarine; ASW as for *Superb*)