



*Fifth Fleet* is the fourth in a series of highly successful operational level modern naval wargames published by Victory Games and designed by Joe Balkoski. The first, *Sixth Fleet* used the title - but little more - of an earlier game published by sadly-defunct Simulations Publications.

*Fifth Fleet* simulates naval warfare in the Indian Ocean littoral area in the mid 1990s. The game map ranges from Massawa, Ethiopia, to Sumatra, Indonesia and Diego Garcia, and covers most of the Arabian Peninsula and south-western India as well as much of the Indian Ocean.

Game scale, as with the other *Fleet* games, is 46 nautical miles a hex, with units representing individual ships (or small groups of minor warships) squadrons of aircraft and single submarines. Each turn represents eight hours of real-time, with certain activities (the Strategic Cycle) occurring only once a day (immediately prior to the AM turn).

The map is to Victory Games' usual high standards. It is colorful and well constructed, both from the design and printing viewpoints, although the delineation of countries on the Arabian peninsula is somewhat confusing: a border line would have been useful.

The counters are also of excellent quality. A counter tray is provided, which is just as well since there are nearly 800 counters, more than half of which are markers rather than units. Despite their proliferation, some markers are always in short supply: those representing Combat Air Patrols and Task Forces. We have also found it useful to create new markers to identify Storm and Squall zones on the maps and strategic displays.

As with the other *Fleet* games *Fifth Fleet* comes with an assortment of charts and tables: combat summaries and CRTs, logistics rosters, scenarios, and two Strategic Air Displays. The latter are particularly colorful, the rest being functional but utilitarian.

*Fifth Fleet* is the fourth instalment in a maturing series of games. The designer, Joe Balkoski, has obviously received a great deal of feedback from customers, and has incorporated many suggestions. There are lots of minor changes and improvements to the game mechanics, to the charts and tables (including the various CRTs), and to the values ascribed to different types of ships and aircraft.

For those not familiar with the game, ships (generally) are rated for speed, size, surface-to-surface missile power and range, close combat power (guns, torpedoes etc), area surface-to-air missile strength, close air defence strength and anti-submarine effectiveness. Aircraft are not rated for speed but have a range and have a general-purpose air attack/defence value and a bomb strength but are otherwise similarly rated. Submarines are basically

treated as ships which lack air defence.

Units of various types have a variety of capabilities and strengths, which players must come to grips with to play the game effectively.

The turn structure allows players to move any or all of one type of unit per Action Segment. Initiative is determined randomly. Normally the players alternate, but in *Fifth Fleet* Balkoski has introduced a random variable initiative optional rule, which we tried and enjoyed, although we differ on whether we'd use it all the time.

Although the basic structure of the game is very straightforward, easy to learn (and to teach) the subtleties of the system can be maddening, and are emphasised by the random variable initiative rule. It is possible (and happened to both of us at various times) to have all three segments before your opponent has one, which can ruin your whole day. It might be interesting to add some sort of bidding system, so that players have some control over the variability (as in *World in Flames*).

Mining is very useful. It is the *only* way the US player has a decent chance of getting at the Deep-diving Soviet submarines (which are otherwise almost undetectable). Mining the major depot ports (e.g. Trincomalee, Muscat, potentially Diego Garcia) can be devastatingly effective. Correspondingly, Minesweeper units are precious and should be husbanded.

Look carefully at the Victory Point sources. If you try to get a convoy across the Indian Ocean and lose the VP value of the cargo in the attempt, then you're down the tube. It may be more sensible to go for lesser objectives which your opponent is not in such a good position to defend.

As in all the *Fleet* games, the most effective way to deal with the giant US carriers is with submarines. Virtually any of the better subs will do: even the best-defended carrier is ultimately vulnerable to a determined and sustained attack.

Bombing of ships at sea is devastating. If circumstances permit, don't hesitate. The ability to take out selected ships, especially air defence and logistics ships, is vital.

Carefully examine the logistics rosters when setting up. Quite a number of ship units (particular Indian ones) are very short-legged (only two days' effective fuel). Also have a good look at the number of submarine torpedo reloads - those with at least three boxes (and particularly those which have a low torpedo strength) may be more useful as minelayers. Even when empty they can be used as spotters and for Sea Denial (i.e. Victory Point) purposes.

Be careful with your PCs. They're real eggshells with hammers (and they turn into pumpkins - or as good as - every sixth turn if not in home port).

Close combat although superficially risky isn't necessarily if your opponent is weak and can be useful, especially by Soviets/Indians against US forces. Once the Americans' missiles have been expended, many of their ships are almost helpless. The Soviets are well-armed with guns and anti-ship torpedoes, and it shows.

The game can be played at two levels of complexity - Basic and Advanced. The Advanced Game adds Darkness and Weather, Logistics, Random events, the possibility of Tactical Nuclear Warfare and Deep Mode for submarines. In addition, there are two pages of optional rules (which we use routinely) which include increased movement for air units, high speed for some surface ships, coordinated air strikes and close combat. One optional rule is already doomed: the US "Stand-Off" ASW attacks rule (20.6) will now be inappropriate with the cancellation of the Sea Lance weapon.

*Fifth Fleet* comes with nine Basic Games scenarios and three Advanced Game scenarios. Beginners and those wanting a fast game will be attracted to the Basic Game scenarios since some can be played with just a few pieces and take only an hour or so to play. One is almost a mini-campaign game, using all three maps, but most are confined to one or two maps. The grognards (among whom we count ourselves) will head straight for the Advanced scenarios. Some people never learn!

The strategic situation in the Indian littoral is complex and dynamic. Scenarios highlight possible problems in Iran, Pakistan and India. In one, India is a Soviet ally, in another it is the main belligerent, but supported by the US. The largest scenario pits the combined forces of the US and several NATO powers, the Islamic powers and Australia, vs a coalition of the USSR, and its traditional western Arabian allies and India. It contains no less than three US aircraft carrier battlegroups, a large number of tankers, convoys and support/logistics ships, plus a French and British carrier, vs two Soviet (including the *Tbilisi* and two Indian carriers).

The game highlights the importance of logistics in modern naval warfare in general, and in this region in particular. Both sides have only a small number of bases at which they re-arm (although a larger number where they can refuel). If critical bases are destroyed, or even damaged, or rendered unsafe by mining, then it can be very awkward, to say the least. With limited resources and insatiable demands, players must think *strategically* to play effectively. They must learn the abilities of their units, integrate diverse resources and keep their eye on the strategic objective to win.

*Fifth Fleet* is well-produced, interesting, relatively easy to learn and rewarding play. If this sounds like we think it's a great game... you're right.

Nigel Brand and Denny Milosavljevic

*Fifth Fleet* is a great game, but not perfect. (Or maybe we're just dumb.) Anyway here are a few questions we couldn't find answers to which Mr Balkoski might like to respond.

**Fuel expenditure in bad weather.** The Optional Fuel Expenditure rules seem fairly clear that units which move no more than one hex during each of the AM, PM and Night Game Turns don't expend a fuel box. But what if the unit is caught in a storm (or squall)? Should it be forced to expend a fuel point, or do sailors throttle down? [We decided they seemed likely to, and therefore ruled that a unit caught in a storm (presuming it doesn't move out of the storm area and travel faster) doesn't expend a fuel box, although Denny wasn't entirely happy with this.]

**Escort.** Under the High Mission Profile part of 20.1 INTERceptor units can activate with a High Mission Profile (i.e. fly at high altitude to save fuel) and obtain a useful range boost. But if units so affected execute Bombing or SSM combat the enemy player gets a bonus. What if a fighter (INT) is escorting a bomber or strike squadron and the fighter is flying a High Mission Profile but the bomber/strike aircraft is not? [We decided that they shouldn't get penalised but Nigel wasn't entirely happy with this ruling, arguing that the bombers would be hampered by the fuel worries of their escorts.]

**SSM Combat.** We question the removal of the defender's bonus for having defensive airborne electronic warfare aircraft up (on CAP). Was this intentional or an oversight? We note that the defender's EW bonus for air-air combat remains.

**Air-air losses.** In the earlier games, INTERceptors which attack bombers (or strike aircraft with no escorts) don't suffer casualties in air-air combat. This useful little rule has apparently been dropped. Again was this intentional or an oversight?

**Cruise missiles attack intensity.** Can cruise missiles be fired as maximum or intensive attacks? Can more than one surface ship in the same group fire CMs together?

**Fast moving submarines.** Rule 9.2 (p.18) says baldly that a submarine which moves at full speed is detected if it starts its movement or enters any hex during its move that is within five hexes of an enemy surface unit or submarine. Does this include surface units or submarines which ordinarily could not detect the sub, either those with an ASW rating of less than six, or even with no ASW capacity? [We stuck with the rule interpreted literally.]

# BREAKOUT!

**Australia's Premier Games Magazine.**  
Covering all types of simulation and  
fantasy gaming.  
Now in its 9th straight year.

**Australia \$16**  
Breakout Subscriptions  
PO Box 133  
Mooroopna, VIC. 3629

**North America \$TBA**  
Game Research/Design  
PO Box 591  
Grinnell, IA.

To commence with edition No. \_\_\_\_\_

Individual Back Issues(†) \_\_\_\_\_

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

† For individual back issues write to your national office.