THE LONELY SEA AND THE SKY

SPL's Task Force - a Profile

Introduction
As its name implies, this is a game featuring conflict at sea between task forces (as in the 1860s) 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 in the map, the map is used to be all-sea, the Mediterranean map (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 on a suddenly-revealed opponent Individual ship-counters 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 emphasizes the importance of naval air arms, submarine 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 Task Force, then increasing to two TFS, introducing Subrons and finally aircraft. Play is smooth and features much interaction between players. However Task Force has some notable emissions as a simulation, e.g. the near-total absence of Soviet land-based aircraft and the role of the ship-born helicopter as a major ASW weapon. An excellent article in Movers 57 by Charles Kemp is well worth reading as it deals with making up these deficiencies and others, and 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 convenient to cut the sheets 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 normalised 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, ones for each individual ship and submarine, displaying its silhouette, name and combat factors, including flotilla 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 detailed in the notes). Also included are a fleet 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-transporters and convoys, according to the scenario being played.

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

Game-Scales and Such A 25 miles/hour. 28 miles/ megahex: 2/3 miles per turn. A Task Force consists of one or more vessels plus a Task Force 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 them; these include weather or failures in Command Control on the part of one side or the other. That said, each player then in turn to perform an Action Sequence with one group until all have been activated 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 an 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 searchers to call out the areas in which the searching force 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 realize 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, when the Force player may be able to apply secretly, thus degrading the chances of his being found. The ship will vary from locating the exact box of the enemy, to locating him by megahex only, to cut-off 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 Gunfire. 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 submarine counter 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 cut out his group that maximum cover is provided by area weapons. If this fails, our fall back to distant fire and ECM, able to long-range and close-defense ASW systems.

In real life, the naval gun has lost its pre-eminence as a stopper and this is reflected in Task Forces, gunfire 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 format favours the defender to deploy his ships in the manner which he considers to be the most advantageous to meet the 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 offensive/defensive system employed; there is no GRT. Surface ships receive flotation hits which will sink them once their Flotation Value is exceeded. All systems hit with progressive damage to 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 Land Range, Maritime Patrol, searching for TFs or for Subs, are abstract. Missions are normally Recce, Strike or Combat Air Patrol, flying shotguns over friendly TFs.

The introduction of air power changes the game markedly, starting by making much more difficult for TFs to lose themselves in the undersea part of the sea or, once spotted, 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 Kincash ASW) is virtually ignored despite the fact that their appearance is a certainty in the Eastern Atlantic and the Med. The capacity of Soviet carriers to embark fixed-wing aircraft is very limited and the land-based air force forms one of the three prongs of the Soviet trident of naval power: submarines, ships and shore-based air (Isby, S&F '83). I will be returning to this question of air/landing.

Ships of War at Sea: the Navies

The Royal Navy. No longer the world's largest navy, the Andrew's in the 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, it 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 when one begins a game of the scale of its commitment in the Eastern Atlantic that 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, I hope) of the main classes rather than a selection from which an 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 frigate 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, the RN's only such weapon and its ASW 'main armament' is the anti-submarine helicopter, in Aircraft. In his Moves article, Charles Kemp 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 flattops featuring in the counter-mix, backed over twenty other major ships and 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 each class are available, making it much more feasible to make balanced TFs in DIY scenarios.

The Soviet Navy. Leading the line come the new Kirov class carriers Kirov and Minsk, closely followed by the through-deck cruiser Moskva, all well-equipped with HAs and the first two able to carry one squadrons each of VTOI fighters. Then come no less than twenty seven frigates, 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 into a comparatively small hull.

Other Navies. As already stated, the French Navy has a fair slice of the counter-cake, the carrier Fouj 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 -- or 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 ENSN 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 easier mastered through the use of the basic scenarios and progress to all-stops-cut 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 preclude 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 cases of marine hide-and-seek, especially in scenarios with little or so air power; the suspected presence of an undetected enemy group can keep players on the edges of their ships and the process of systematic searching is both interesting and full of opportunities for bluff and second-guessing. Combat, especially air-strike or missile attack, is usually sudden, swift and decisive and the realization that one's prime TF has become the subject of the widely unwelcome attentions of a submarine wolf-pack produces that sinking feeling. As for those dread words, 'Missile attack on your Task Force in H17... Well, Omy, is there no peace for poor marlachts?'

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 underlying tactics of Soviet warfare 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 Balcocki - who credited with design and development on the book's side - sought to inject more playability. That he succeeded is strongly indicated by Charles Kemps' suggestions in Moves, which suggest the form of easily-added extra or outright additions, and which much improves the game at little extra cost and complexity. We will come back to Charles in a little while; in the meantime, some of the aspects of Task Force that aren't there.

Air Power As I have said before, Soviet land-based aircraft are not little of a look in the design. The US Navy's plan to combat large numbers of Backfire and Badger bombers in two of the three areas featured. Typical scenarios pit eleven or twelve NATO combat squadrons against three or four Soviet, but the result being that, according to Task Force, the mighty USN will sweep the Red from the seas in about 12 hours, probably knocking their surface ships into scrap before ever they get 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 is in S&T 83. But in the same game the ability of the chopper to kill the gray is null and primarily 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 can be done. The 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 vessels 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 effective than the average surface ship when it comes to the business of sinking enemy ships.

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 its Diesel-powered sister, but the high underwater speed of the nuclear boat - given to that of most surface ships - is much degraded. On the other hand the Diesel boat in Shallow mode is quite as fast. SSMs. The Soviet SSN-3 and SSN-12 (missile carriers I and II) have real-life ranges of 120 and 230 miles, respectively; in the game they come down to 1 hex (28 miles) and 2 hex (34-mile), respectively. Poor old Ussots; dump powder again!

Damage "NATO warships are better able to absorb and control damage..." The USN likes how long an enemy ship floats as long as its armor 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 supposed superior damage control training, so it cannot be that NATO pack-the-bulk ship designs thing a hit is a hit is a hit, regardless of who sustained. They may be a quibble but now comes the fact that victory points are scored by sinking ships, and, in some scenarios, only by sinking ships. For completely crippled ships go ashore as fighting unit, one unit going across all, which compares oddly not only with David Isby's very valid comment but also with the fact that those bombs of torpedoes and missiles are primarily intended to nuke and so wreck radar screens and fire-control systems, rather than to sink the ships that carry them.

Chuck Kemps, Big Mark Chuck Kemps' article - Super Task Force - 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 little models or, for myself, his suggestions additions and variations are well worth the little - the very little - extra trouble it takes to incorporate them into the game system. If you don't take Move's 4 I suggest that you do your best to sight a copy of Lea 67 and, if possible, note the main extras given in Chuck's article. Space apart, I have no wish to nitpick his work, but to wish him well and to deal it the easy additions and to say a word or two about the more complex ones.

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

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

Franks and Kajiga are Echo II and Charlie II respectively; missile ratings should be altered.

Missiles Target acquisition and guidance can be assumed to be available through a variety of means such as patrol aircraft and intelligence. Rule 2.2 (Mid-Course Guidance) is therefore inabeyance and all SSNs may be fired to their maximum range at all times.

In Clover 3 (Missile) has a range of 5 hexes; SSN-12 (Missile) a range of 10 hexes.

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

These were the markers 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-near bases, which give the Soviet player a chance of getting a mega blow first, and provision for the ambush 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 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 the likely capabilities for damage control and quick repair.

Conclusions Although Task Force has holes in it, system, most of which could have been filled up before publication, it is nonetheless a good and interesting game, convincing a worthwhile search procedure which conveys something of the wide, wide sea and which does not result in the researcher's betraying his own location, with swift, hair-raising combats depicting well the long-range strike of modern naval warfare. Moreover, the map is well drawn, realistic, the aforementioned holes being due to missing concepts, not to distinction of those available, and resource to the Move article will fill in most of these 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 Broadwater 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 (Isander 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.
CV Invincible; SAM - Sea Dart*; SSM - Sea Dart (secondary role)
Hel - 6x Sea King HAS; Aircraft - Sea Harrier (Invisicle Class carrier; SSM capability may be overrated at C4 as only one twin launcher)
CG Fire; SAM - Sea Sting*; Guns - 2x1.5 inch SSM - Exocet Hel - Wessex 6 HAS
(County Class destroyer: Sea Sting has secondary SSM role, not shown)

CG Bristol; ASW - Ikarus; Limbo mortar; SSM - Sea Dart*; Guns - 4x1.5 inch SSM - Sea Dart (secondary role)
_Destroyer (Type 82): only one built: Ikarus underrated - see Ajax below._

DD Cardiff; ASW - Morison torpedo: SAM Sea Dart*; Guns - 4x1.5 inch SSM - Sea Dart (secondary role) Hel - Lynx HAS
Sheffield Class destroyer (Type 45)

DD Brazen; ASW - Morison Torpedo: SAM - Sea Wolf; Guns - 4x40mm AA; SSM - Exocet; Hel - 2x Lynx HAS
(Broadwater Class Guided Missile frigate (Type 22) AA rating of 3 probably under-rated Sea Wolf)

DD Active; ASW - Morison torpedo: SAM - Sea Cat; Guns - 4x1.5 inch SSM - Exocet; Hel - Lynx HAS
(Amazon Class Guided Missile frigate (Type 21))

DD Ajax; ASW - Akara*; Limbo mortar; SAM - Sea Cat; Guns - 2x40mm AA; SSM - Exocet; Hel - Lynx HAS

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

DD Juno; ASW - Morison 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 - 4x1.5 inch; Hel - Wasp HAS
(Perilla Class frigate (Type 81); Entire class withdrawn from service for disposal, late 1970s)

DD Rhyll; ASW - Limbo mortar; SAM - Sea Cat; Guns - 4x1.5 inch; Hel - Wasp HAS
(Rodway Class frigate (modified Type 81); Rhyll in reserve; note Wasp HAS not shown)

SS Superb; ASW - see Torpedoes; Torpedoes - 6 tubes; Telstar fire-guided torpedoes and Mk5 conventional SSM - Harpoon (tube-launched)
(Swiftsure Class Fleet Submarine; ASW capacity under-rated in view of Tegurita)

SS Oxynx; ASW - see Torpedoes; Torpedoes - 5 tubes for'd, 2 ast. Tegurita and Mk5**
(Oberon Class Patrol Submarine; ASW as for Superb)