

## Admiral of the Fleet Fight Night

By Brandon Musler

Back in August (2021), at Games Plus of Mt Prospect (near Chicago), I had the opportunity to act as the GM for an early play-test session of Tsushima exploring a fascinating new naval rules set, ADMIRAL OF THE FLEET (“AotF”) (<http://seekrieg.com/AOTF-IntroPage.htm>). AotF was designed to play out *surface fleet actions* during the age of the battleship (1880-1945.) Nothing that floats under or flies over the ocean need apply; nor did they in 1905.

Another way of looking at AotF is that it is decades in the making of the love-child of Rich Sartore and Jack Joyner, names you may recognize from their earlier rivet-counting efforts, SEEKREIG (“SK”) 4 and 5. And while AotF does undeniably share DNA with those worthies, it is distinctly not your father’s (or even your “funny” uncle’s) SEEKRIEG 6.

As I familiarized myself with these fast-play rules a number of obvious differences jumped out. First, instead of a 118-page rule book used to play SK – exclusive of the myriad of charts, tables, ship forms and encyclopedic data annexes – all I had at my disposal was a ~10 page *precis*...a dozen charts on one sheet of paper, a list of damage effects, and the individual ship logs for the Japanese and Russian fleets. Was I missing something?

On the other hand, there were also two decks of (what appeared to be) deluxe playing cards – something I’d never previously encountered in naval miniatures wargaming. They turned out to be AotF’s prime innovation – the “signal decks,” (one for each fleet.) The flag graphics depicted on each card (70 per deck) add an appealing period aesthetic. It is their text however that makes it possible to address “the 10,000’ admiral” syndrome-- that being the combination of flawless communications and command omniscience which permeates almost all naval miniatures. Table talk is permitted but basically, all orders must be passed by a fleet admiral who “signals” subordinate commands (divisions, detachments, or independent flotillas) by employing the card deck (example cards: #110 – Port, #137 – 24 Knots #148 – Discontinue Engagement, #154 – Line Abreast, #161 – Attack the Enemy Rear, etc.) By the way, the flags on card #161 were part of an ambiguous signal sent by HMS Lion’s infamous flag-lieutenant, Lt. Cmdr. Ralph Seymour, during the Battle of Dogger Bank which robbed Beattie of a decisive victory. It’s that sort of detail that makes a naval nerd’s spine tingle...because it cleverly simulates a command control challenge inherent in prosecuting any fleet action – the fog of war. No wonder then that naval scholar John Brooks, (*Dreadnought Gunnery and the Battle of Jutland*), wrote the Forward to these rules!



Alas, due to time constraints, I missed the opportunity during this particular session to introduce the signal decks. As things transpired, setting up the game (there are ~45 ships even without the Russian fleet train and auxiliaries) and teaching the basic mechanics were all I could handle on this fast moving night. Also (as always) the players arrived with disparate backgrounds and agendas:

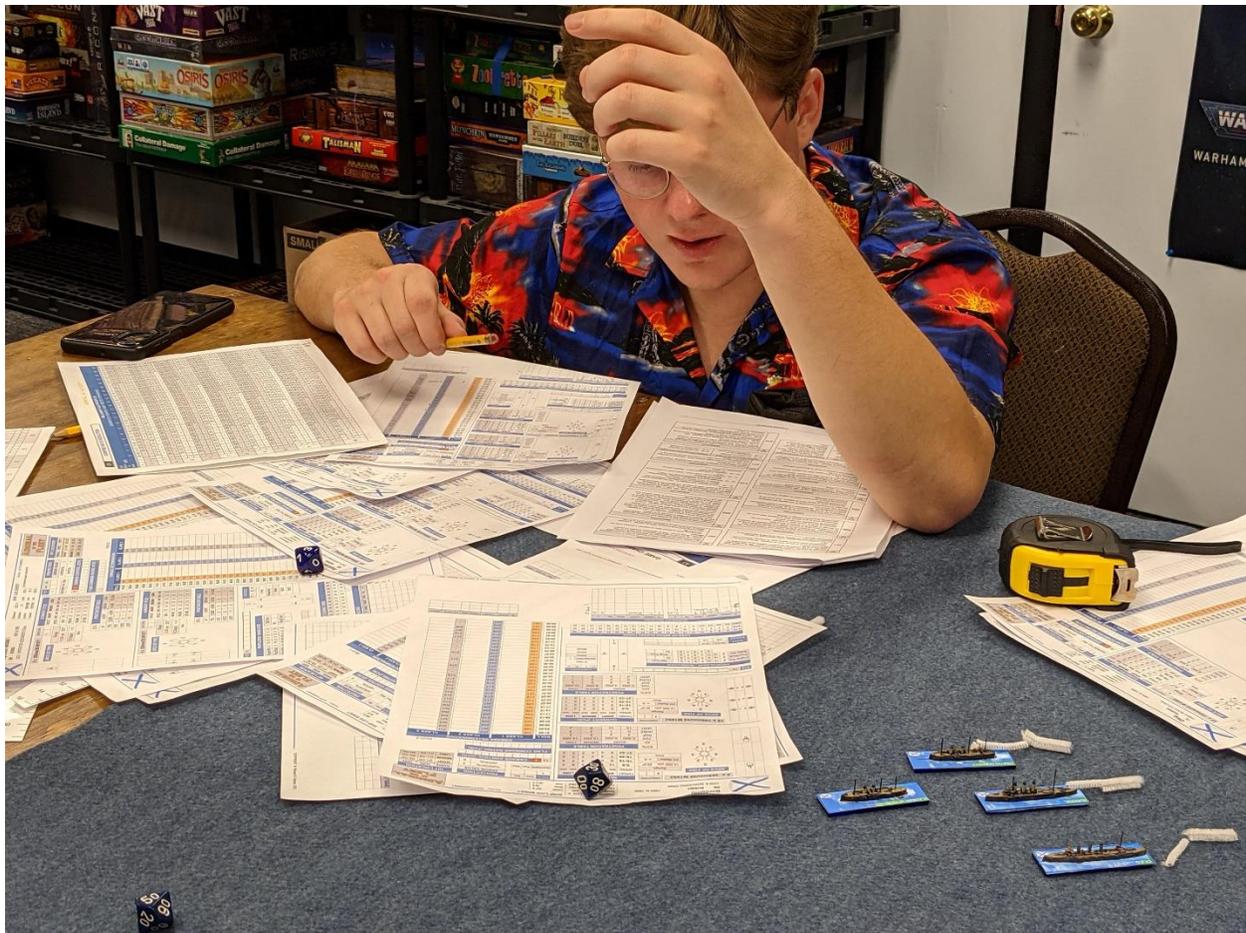
#### Team Togo

1. Kevin -- Boomer, enjoys naval games; especially RJW. Commanded IJN 3<sup>rd</sup> Div.
2. Matt -- Millennial, plays naval games enthusiastically. Commanded 2<sup>nd</sup> Division.
3. Tom -- GenX, not partial to naval games. Commanded 1<sup>st</sup> Division.



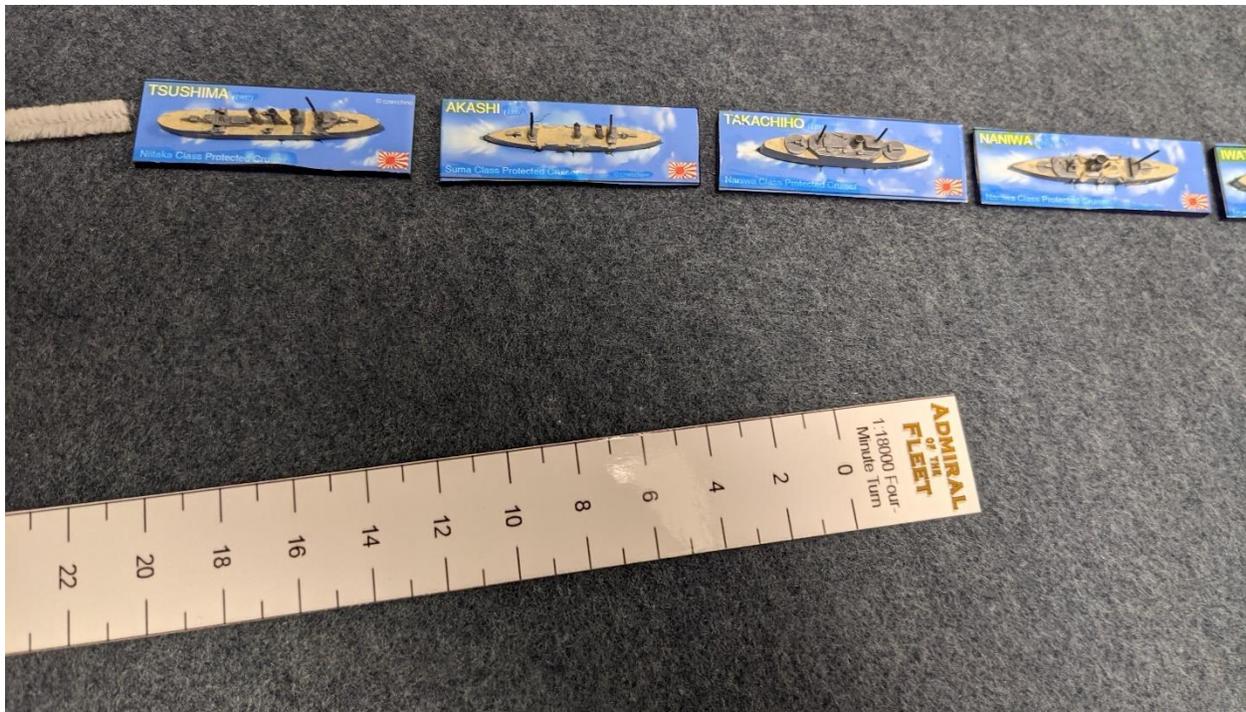
### The Czar's Sacrificial Lambs

1. Alex – Millennial, prior naval experience was one game he played w/me earlier. Commanded 1<sup>st</sup> Div, plus 5 cruisers. Busier than a one-armed paper hanger.
2. Craig -- Boomer, well conversant with nautical concepts & conventions. 2<sup>nd</sup> & 3<sup>rd</sup> Div.



Generally speaking, they displayed a *curiously* detached attitude maybe due to Friday night traffic or perhaps because I had warned them this might be a more complex naval game than they were accustomed to playing. Tom wanted to rush through the rules. After analyzing the ships logs, he engaged his cell phone. Likewise, Matt adjourned to order take-out. Alex arrived late and didn't receive any real verbal explanation whatsoever. Kevin and Craig, OTOH, listened and asked encouraging questions. Still, I feared the play-test was headed straight for the rocks.

Naturally the command of Russia' 1<sup>st</sup> Division (*battleships Suvarov, Aleksandr III, Borodino and Ore*) the most central and vigorously involved formation, fell to Alex – our late arrival. No sooner had he found a seat then his ships were beset by most of Togo's fleet – or so it seemed. Those familiar with Tsushima will understand why (and if you aren't the map explains it) the IJN main battle line, led by Tom's 1<sup>st</sup> Division (*battleships Mikasa, Shikishima, Fuji and Asahi,*) closed the range with alacrity while Kevin maneuvered his twin pairs of cruisers to engage Alex's CLs, (*Izumrud and Jemtchug*). Eventually, even Matt's forces (the tail end Charlies of the IJN battleline,) managed to cross broadside before Alex's beleaguered battleships to strike them a significant blow.



As far as the play by play goes *Suvarov*, Alex's flagship, proved incapable of hitting the broad side of a barn...or *Mikasa*. Togo's flagship took advantage of this ineptitude, laying waste to her opposite number. *Suvarov* lost both of her main turrets as well as 6" secondary guns while hits to her engine and boiler rooms cut her original speed by half. Indeed, only second-in-line *Aleksandr III* managed to lay a glove on *Mikasa*, only to have the latter's stout armor defeat the impacts.



The Japanese battleships did not have everything to "go their own way" though. *Shikishima* suffered serious damage courtesy of the *Borodino*. She was rendered toothless through the destruction of her entire main battery, not to mention suffering a fluke hit that snapped a propeller shaft, sapping precious speed. Finally, Alex's last in line -- battleship *Orel* -- staggered

*Chitose*, one of Kevin's heavy cruisers, with 305mm shells that penetrated her stern turret and disabled a bow torpedo tube. In the sparring between light cruisers, Kevin's *Niikata* managed to set Alex's *Izumrud* ablaze as well as destroy a boiler room plus two turrets.

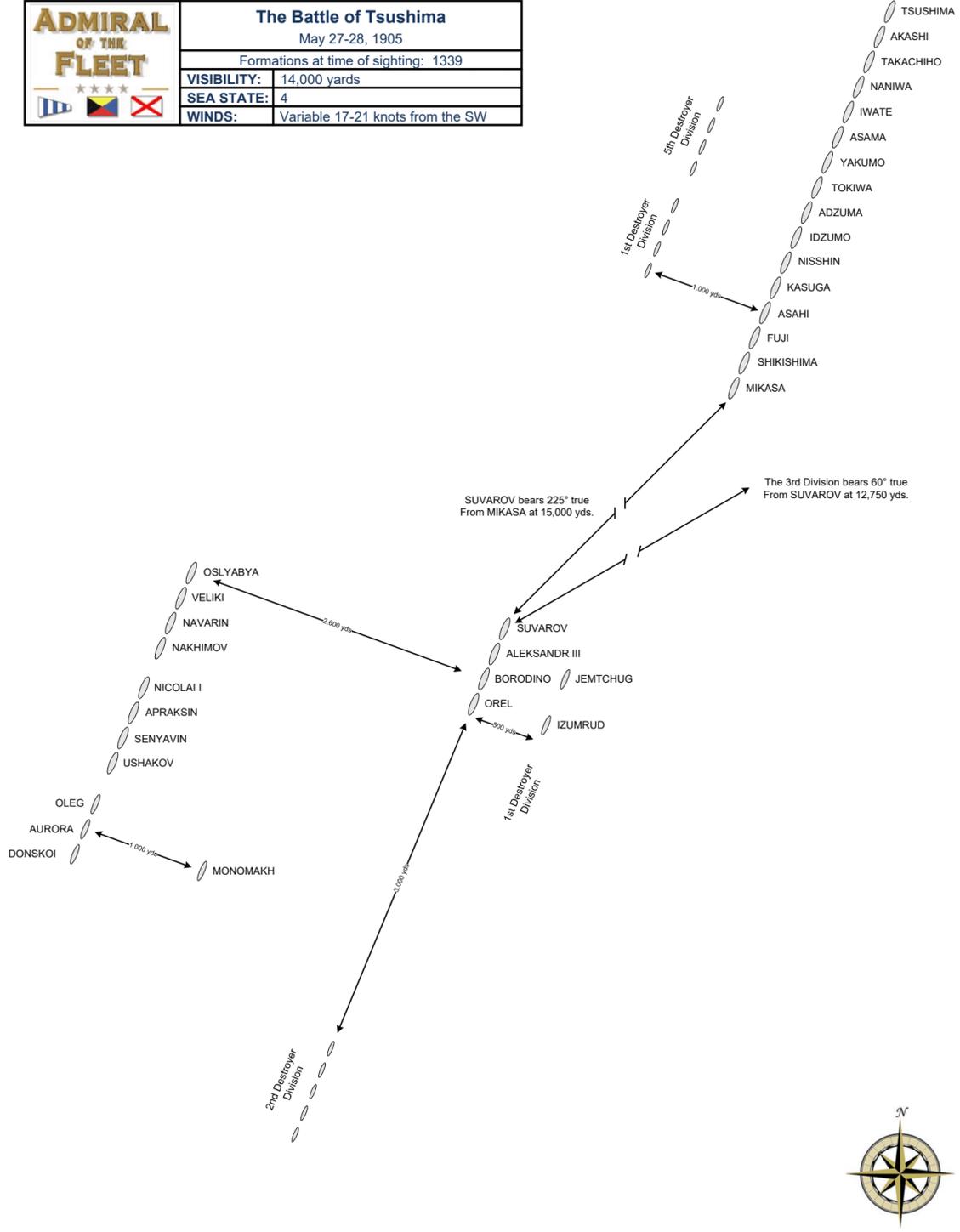


Since this was a play test my concerns lay not with tactics or results *per se* but with how a player like Alex – who had hardly been briefed – would respond to the workload. He was being called upon, far more than either of his allies or adversaries had, to track the damage to multiple ships simultaneously, not to mention returning fire in a target rich environment.

This inspired an interesting debate over which player should be rolling which results/outcomes. When a salvo lands on target, there is a two-phase resolution. Phase one registers hit locations. Then, if the shells can penetrate that armor phase two tracks the “damage effects” (DEs) of detonations inside the ship. (After which there is a percentile die roll to simulate things like fire spreading and progressive flooding.) Prior to the game, I suggested that since this was a playtest, the attacker would roll the DEs and read the consequences aloud, but in future games the player whose ship was damaged would roll and record the result privately to enhance FOW. During the debrief Alex said that he liked the inherent interplay between players when the attacker rolled the DEs. Kevin felt that it just slowed the game down and the targeted player should roll in secret. Perhaps this was inevitable given their relative experience. Kevin's ships did not suffer much and this wasn't his first fleet action. On the other hand, Alex's battleships and cruisers were both heavily hit...and he was playing in only his second naval wargame.

The players had a bevy of useful suggestions related to things like terminology employed on the game charts, layout of the ship logs, and rules clarifications (issues related to ship acceleration/deceleration as a result of an “emergency” turn, for example.) To general agreement, Kevin (who wrote/published the JAGDPANZER tank miniatures rules,) stated that he thought the damage procedures were the strongest aspect of the system and he particularly LIKED the progressive flow of the Damage Effects—a comment that occurred in the notable absence of subsurface detonations.

<b>ADMIRAL OF THE FLEET</b> 	<b>The Battle of Tsushima</b>	
	May 27-28, 1905	
	Formations at time of sighting: 1339	
	<b>VISIBILITY:</b>	14,000 yards
	<b>SEA STATE:</b>	4
<b>WINDS:</b>	Variable 17-21 knots from the SW	



That made me regret deleting the destroyers and torpedo boats from the order of battle. Given the perspicacity of their post-game comments I would very much have liked to garner feedback on what I consider the second most innovative aspect of AotF, that being its torpedo rules. Space precludes my explaining the mechanics now but suffice it to say they are the best I've seen in 35+ years of naval gaming. In my defense however, we only had five players, none of whom had any prior experience with the SEEKRIEG family of rules, so the winnowing felt necessary.

### *In Conclusion*

After the malaise I observed while explaining the rules, the players' insightful dissection afterward marked this as a very successful playtest. Cell phones, takeout food and traffic did nothing to inhibit the players from learning the core Aotf game. There were questions, of course, but generally speaking no problems occurred in picking up the mechanics and determining appropriate tactics. And by the end of the (shortish, 3+ hours of actual playing) session, most of the participants, (especially Alex, Matt and Kevin) were juiced and asking for more. Since this playtest, ADMIRAL OF THE FLEET has made its official debut in September 2021 at Florida's Hurricon Convention incorporating the feedback they volunteered.