SSN-589 USS SCORPION DOWN

A Free Role Playing Game

by Jaap de Goede

It is late in May 1968, in the middle of the Cold War and the Vietnam conflict. Far out in the Atlantic, Nuclear Attack Sub Scorpion breaks all radio contact. Then, for reasons unknown, the vessel sinks to critical depth. Its hull cracks. 99 men and women are lost. What happened?

You are captain, crew and VIP guests on board, starting twenty-four hours earlier. Will you learn what went wrong? Can you change history, and save their lives?

SSN-589 DOWN is a role playing game written for the 24-hour RPG competition of May-June 2012. It's fast paced, cooperative and competitive at the same time, and best with three players or more. All you'll further need is these rules, a deck of playing cards, a different pawn for each player, and a coin.

You should use the map and timetable on pages 23 – 24 as a board, and preferably make a bigger one if none is provided within due to 24-hour time design constraint.

The Setting
(Read this to all your players).

USS Scorpion (SSN-589) is a US Navy nuclear attack sub. On board are 99 men, and possibly a few women on secret duty. The Scorpion has a S5W Nuclear reactor providing electricity for its propulsion and life systems, and two special Mark 45 torpedoes with nuclear warheads. USS Scorpion's mission is to patrol the Atlantic and be ready to knock out Soviet subs before these launch missiles with nuclear payload onto the USA.

It is now 1968, in the middle of the Cold War, and the machine is about ten years old. Long overdue for an overhaul, the SSN-589 again had to leave the Norfolk shipyards early to stay vigilant as ever. Unfortunately that also means that the Emergency Main Ballast Tank blow system (EMBT) does not work. In the event that the Scorpion has to resurface rapidly, all crew will have to scramble for potentially frozen hand valves everywhere, and hope they are fast enough to blow the tanks and avoid sinking. That this means that the SUBSAFE program is not really that safe anymore has not escaped the crew. They are unhappy, morale is low, and at least two sailors have managed to be relieved from duty on the Scorpion in the past months. Now, just a few hours ago two more men departed the ship at Rota, Spain – officially for health reasons, but that could just be a ruse. The rest of the crew now continue back again, coursing to Norfolk USA.

Preparing for Play

You are now the captain and crew of the SSN-589.

Choosing Roles

Shuffle the deck of cards, and deal each player one card face down, and one card face up. The face down card represents the secret motive of your role, do not share it with others. The face up card reveals your role in the game. The one with the highest card is the captain - in case of ties: diamonds before hearts before clubs before spades. The captain is named Francis Slattery. The others determine their role as follows:

highest card - captain - can command anyone on the ship, except a traitor or VIP

Diamonds   - officer - can command all but traitors, captain and VIP, can operate bridge

Hearts   - crew - is only one that can personally repair machinery and sabotaged stuff

Clubs   - scientist - is only one that can rescue wounded people and can down UFOs

Spades   - VIP   - cannot be commanded by anyone and can down UFOs

To give your role a bit extra color, pick one of the roles below, belonging to your role card's class. If you play your role especially well, others may grant you bonus cards during the game.

Captain: Francis Slattery

Officer: 1st Officer Kirk Riker
Officer: Communications Officer William Uhuru
Officer: Chief of the Watch (Ballast Officer) Kim Sulu
Officer: Chief Navigator Nimoy Spock

VIP: CIA Agent Fritz Leiter, Special Operations
VIP: UK Diplomat **Lara Keeton**, Russia Expert
VIP: NSA Agent Emma Peel

Scientist: Doc "Bones" McCoy, ship's doctor
Scientist: Prof. Sigourney Jane Ripley, alien expert
Scientist: Doctor Thomas Baker, sonic screw specialist
Scientist: Doctor Werner von Oppenheimer, nuclear expert

Crew: Rick Scott, machinist
Crew: "Casey" Segal, cook
Crew: Kyle Reese, weapons specialist
Crew: Dick Drake, security

The Secret Motive

The first face down card you were dealt is your secret motive for this game. Do not reveal it to others, and keep it face down beneath your role card. Despite that this is also a cooperative game (all will lose if the SSN-589 sinks, so you all fight to avoid that), you can also win the game if you fulfill your secret motive. These motives and win conditions are as follows:

Diamonds

- your mission is to bring in a downed UFO, in utmost secrecy. To locate it, you must get the UFO story track to five cards, and then command the ship to Norfolk safely. You may need a scientist on board to do this, or else you have to force the aliens to board the Scorpion by pushing the UFO story to five or more.

Hearts

- you are a Soviet spy. You must get the Soviet story track to five and then surface the Scorpion to let it be boarded by Soviets from an enemy sub. The secrets will then be stolen - and the crew perhaps captured, before the Scorpion is sunk off - or embezzled by the Soviets!

Clubs

- you want to prove to High Command of SUBLANT that SUBSAFE should again be SUBSAFE, and therefor you may let the Failure story track rise to five. That will give you enough political ammunition to show that action must be taken at the highest level. If you get back alive.

Spades

- your morale has sunken so low that you are ready to cause fatalities, even your own, to stop having to work on this ship. If the Amok story track reaches 5 or higher, you know that the entire Scorpion crew will be relieved from duty, and placed on other ships. If you manage that, you win.

Course and Location of the Ship

Currently, the SSN-589 is on course for Norfolk. Put the coin on the first space of the "Norfolk Course" track. Then let each player pick a pawn, and place it on the bridge space of the map.

Use pages 23-24, or draw your own!

Playing the Game

Now that all players are set, the game proceeds in rounds. Each round, each player must either take a card, or play one from his or her hand and start a scene. *If the player cannot take a card, nor start a scene, because both stack and hand have run out, the game ends.* In that case SSN-589 suddenly has a mysterious failure and sinks with all crew aboard. *Then all players lose.*

So, the trick is to get the Scorpion back before that happens!

Taking a card

You can take a card from the stock, and put it in your playing hand. Your role card and secret motive card should stay on the table and are not part of your hand. Higher cards, and perhaps cards of a suit that suits you are better to have.

When you take a card during your turn in the round, an hour just passes, and you may move the coin one space on the current course track. Phew! All is well for now. However, players may only do this once in a row. If their turn comes up again, and all other players in between also only took a card, a scene is forced. Then take a card from the top of the stock, and play it as a scene. The suit of this card now forces the story line it belongs to.

Opening a Scene

To open a scene, you play a card from your hand – or straight from the stock, and by its suit you determine to which story line the scene belongs. The number of cards in the story line determine which particular scene in that story line will happen.

Once a scene is opened, all players play out the scene until the scene is closed again. The one who opened the scene leads the scene. He (or she) now lays down the problem of the scene, and the other players may first react. If there is trouble determining who can act first, the players may act in turn in their normal sequence. Players who are on location always act before those who are in another location, and the leading player of the scene always acts last. Otherwise those who want to act can act first.

The problem of a scene will have to be faced, or otherwise it will escalate. To face a problem you will have to tell how you plan on doing it. The player who leads must decide if your measures might work. If there is any chance, the leader then plays a card for the problem, and the acting player plays one for his (or her) actions to face it. Cards may be played straight from the stock, or from your hand. You must choose to play from your hand before you know what the card in the stock is.
The higher card played will win.

If the problem wins, the problem escalates. Add one card to the story track you're in. Your problem becomes a bigger problem.

If you win, the problem is fixed. For now. If no other player wants to act anymore, the scene may be closed and the journey resumed.

When however another player does want to do something, he (or she) may. Should these actions give rise to another conflict, you should resolve the conflict in the same way as a "problem" above. Except that now the "problem" is the action of a player.

Again, once all problems and conflicts are resolved, the scene may be closed and a normal round resumed.

Making the Story Flow

Sometimes, you'll notice that the cards or a story line push you to a situation that doesn't make sense. For example, you might receive a mission directive while the radio is broken. It's your task as a leading player in a scene to make sense of this. Maybe the mission directive was kept in an envelope only to be opened at a certain time, for example. You have to make the story flow!

"Amazing!" Cards

During the game, you are supposed to be in your role and give color to the story. Any wisecrack, mime, personal story or other action in role will do. If you think that *another player* plays very well, by either moving you emotionally, or making you laugh out loud, you should take a card from the stock and give it to him or her. You may only give one of these for a scene (or until the next scene), and only if no other player has given such a card to the same player in the same scene. So theoretically, each player could get one such card for each scene. The receiving player, the one who did some amazing role playing, may add the card to his or her hand.

Moving around on the Sub

Whether or not you are able to take prompt action may depend on your location in the ship. There are four main areas where you may be. You may always move to confront a problem, or meet another player, but it may cost you precious time. Players already in the area of a problem or conflict may always act first, and then others may move one area to come closer.

Special Mission Directives and Win Conditions

During the game, the crew of the SSN-589 may get special mission directives. These directives include locating Soviet subs, having to knock out a Soviet sub, having to recover a UFO, and going radio silent. As a captain, you have to keep to these directives no matter what, until one of the story tracks has reached 4 or higher. After that, you may change course with due reason as you see fit. You may still have to deal with escalating problems on the way before you reach your safe destination.

If you manage to receive a safe destination (whether Norfolk, Spain or a rescue ship), you win the game as a group.

As a captain you may choose to renege, or as another role you may also renege and force the captain (or the sub, if you're an officer and can steer the boat) to take another route. However, unless any story track also reached four or higher, you will lose personally even if you reach a safe destination. Being captured by the Soviets or abducted by aliens could be considered a draw.

Special Actions

During the game, you may think of many actions to take. It is always the task of the leading player to determine what will happen, and if actions are possible. However, sometimes players may feel a conflict arises, as the leading player may turn out to be a spy or traitor. In that case, regard all actions as possible, but each step of the way play cards to decide who decides what happens. Yes, this burns precious cards and may sink the USS Scorpion before you slug it out as players, but then that's a chance you'll have to take.

You may always discuss (in role) what to do, and what course of action to take together.

Below follows a list with actions you might take during a scene.

Changing Course   – this is only an option for the captain, or else for a reneging officer. You must be on the bridge to do this.

Moving – outside of scenes you may move one space through the ship for each turn. Within scenes too, as described above.

Locking Doors – you may lock the doors on one side of the space you are in to keep others out. To lock the other side too, is another action.

Forcing a Locked door w Explosives – to force a door open you may use explosives. Resolve as normal, drawing a card for the door first, and then plying one for the explosives. If the door fails it's open. If it wins, the Fatal story track moves two cards forward, because, you shouldn't use explosives on a sub!

Knocking Someone Out – you have to be in the same room as your victim to do this.

Threatening with a weapon (Drawing a Gun) – you may draw a gun and threaten. Whether another player will then do your will is up to them. Crew not directly represented by players will meekly follow until commanded to fight back.

Firing and killing with a Gun – what it says, if you win the card draw, you kill your player opponent. You'd better have a good reason! Crew not directly played by a player is just shot, but other crew will thereafter start to shoot back.

Sabotaging Machinery – if you succeed, move the Fatal story forward by a card. You may also play a Clubs card to reach the same goal and say it just happened. To sabotage a machine by being there, you must be in its location.

Repairing Machinery - if you succeed, you may remove one card from the Fatal story track. If you fail however, you move it one forward. To repair a machine you must be in its location. Only normal crew can attempt to repair machinery. Officers may command others to do so.

Sabotaging the Reactor Core - to sabotage the reactor core, you will first have to remove the safeties, and remove the people guarding those safeties. After you have done that, and possibly locked yourself in, you may make the foolish attempt to sabotage the core. Once you did that, the Fatal story will move to position 6, until it moves up to seven for any reason and the ship explodes, or - until you get whatever you want and you can start pushing the risk back by attempting to cool the core down.

Sabotaging a Mark 45 Torpedo - sabotaging a nuclear torpedo may seem easier, as you only have to remove the guard before you can try this. However, once you sabotaged it you might wonder why. Repairing it or losing it through a tube may be smarter.

Saving a life of reviving someone - if someone is shot, and you are a scientist, then you may attempt to revive him or her before he dies. Do a successful attempt to save a life!

Capturing and Tying Up someone – as it says. Most people will resist – except when at gunpoint.

Escaping Bonds – as it says. Prepare to fight once you're loose.

Surfacing the Sub – you have to be on the bridge to do this. Once Fatal story has reached 5 or higher, you cannot resurface until the valves are repaired and the story is down to 4 or less. Only the captain may command this from elsewhere, and then the bridge crew must be able to comply.

Diving Deeper – you have to do on the bridge to do this. Or be the captain commanding. When diving you cannot be boarded, and you avoid enemy torpedoes or UFO attack.

Going Silent – this must be commanded from the bridge, or effected from the machine room. Going silent is a sure way to stop Soviet subs and UFOs from finding you, and thus you may halt these story tracks if they are 4 or less. Neither track may move up or be escalated while you are silent and deep. However, you must stay in place on your course track until you restarted the engines.

Restarting the Engines – you must either be crew and be in the engine room to do this, or command it as officer or captain from the bridge. Once engines run again, UFO and Soviet stories may escalate again.

Torpedoing Soviet of UFO – to torpedo another vessel or UFO you must first load a torpedo in the torpedo room, or command one to be loaded from the bridge (only officers and captains can do this). Then you can fire – and see if you hit. If you hit a Soviet, you effectively cause World War III, unless you knock out all enemy subs.

Forcing a conflict to deescalate – you may try to outrun a UFO or Soviet sub, or try to defuse an upcoming mutiny. To do this, convince the leading player, and play your cards! If you succeed, the story track loses a card and goes a step down. If you fail, it escalates yet one further!

Forcing Soviet or UFO to Surface – to force a Soviet or UFO to the surface, you must first maneuver into position 4 of the Soviet or UFO story track (respectively). Or else you must have fired a torpedo in warning in stage 3 or 5 of the same tracks. After that, you may communicate from the bridge to the Soviet sub or UFO that they must move up. Only Soviet spies, officers and the captain may force up a Soviet sub. Only VIPs and Scientists may force up a UFO.

Recovering UFO – if you're surfaced, and so is the UFO, you may pick it up. You need the cooperation of crew and captain to do this.

Boarding Soviet Sub – If you're on the surface, and so is

the Soviet, you may board it. If others allow you to do
so.

Letting Soviets Board - if the Soviet and you are both
surfaced, the Soviets will board you on level 4 and higher
of the Soviet story track.

Sending out an SOS - is only possible if you have a
working radio and a reason to do so. Once you successfully
sent out an SOS, you may instead of going to Norfolk or
Spain set course to the rescue ship. This may be a shorter
route to ultimate safety!

Commanding others to do anything - the captain can command
everyone, except VIPs and reneging players. Officers can
command anyone except VIPs, reneging players and the
captain.

Anything else - including going to sleep and making out,
you may think of anything that makes sense. You'll have to
make it up, and the leading player of the scene needs to
decide if it works out. Other players involved may also
join in the fun, naturally.

UFO Story Track (Diamonds)

1. You receive a special mission directive: UFO's have been sighted near your route. You must observe and if possible capture one. Set course to Sargasso, and keep circling there until this story track reaches position 4. The story will not escalate further yet.
2. Blips on the radar and sonar indicate an unknown presence. It maneuvers into attack position. Failure to deal with situation to ease it will escalate.
3. More blips appear, and maneuver around the sub. They are cornering the SSN-589. Failure to deal with situation to ease it will escalate.
4. Your instruments definitely see a UFO now. It moves fast and blocks the SSN-589. Failure to deal with situation to ease it will escalate.
5. The UFO fires a kind of tractor beam. Many instruments on the SSN-589 go blank.
   A player with the secret directive to take the UFO may now act. Failure to deal with situation to ease it will escalate.
6. The UFO forces the SSN-589 to surface. Once surfaced, the aliens will confront the crew.
7. **The UFO abducts a number of the crew, and then sinks the SSN-589. You lose!**

Soviet Story Track (Hearts)

1. You receive a special mission directive. Soviet subs have been sighted near your route. You must intercept them and make sure they do not fire missiles on the USA. Set course to Sargasso and keep circling there until this story track reaches position 4. The story will not escalate further yet.
2. Blips on the radar and sonar indicate an unknown presence. It maneuvers into attack position. Failure to deal with situation to ease it will escalate.
3. More blips appear, and maneuver around the sub. They are cornering the SSN-589. Failure to deal with situation to ease it will escalate.
4. You definitely see a Soviet Nuclear Sub now. It moves fast and blocks the SSN-589. Failure to deal with situation to ease it will escalate.
5. The Soviet Sub fires a torpedo, as a warning. If a Soviet spy is on the SSN-589 he may attempt to surface now and play the SSN-589 into enemy hands.
6. The Soviet Sub forces the SSN-589 to surface. A boarding party will follow. If the SSN-589 tries to escape by diving deeper, the Soviet sub will fire torpedoes to kill.
7. The Soviets either board or torpedo the SSN-589 and then sink it. You lose!

Amok Story Track (Spades)

1. A crew member is taken into sick bay with wounds from a fight. Morale is obviously bad. The situation will not escalate further yet.
2. A fight occurs in the living quarters. Unless eased the situation will escalate.
3. A fight occurs in the machine room. Unless eased the situation will escalate.
4. Weapons are used in a fight in the living quarters. At least one crew member is wounded before the players are alerted. Unless stopped the situation will escalate.
5. Armed crew enter the bridge to occupy it in an attempted mutiny. Unless stopped the situation will escalate. Choose a role from the list as a leader of this revolution. Those with a secret motive in spades may now use this momentum to their own end.
6. Weapons and explosives are used in a massive shootout as officers attempt to break the mutiny.
7. **The weapons used in the full scale mutiny damage the hull and machinery. SSN-589 goes down. You lose!**

Failure Story Tack (Clubs)

1. Radio failure. No contact with SUBLANT or base possible. The story will not escalate of itself yet, but a failed repair attempt will do so.
2. Short circuit causes fire in sail. Failure to deal with it will escalate.
3. Freon leak in refrigerators causes failures in Machine room. Failure to deal with it will escalate.
4. EMBT failure causes valves to be stuck, failure to deal with this will escalate. If dealt with it, resurfacing will be impossible until repaired.
5. Fires in torpedo room, perhaps due to failing batteries. Failure to deal with this will escalate.
6. Nuclear warning. Either a Mark 45 torpedo warhead, or the S5W Nuclear reactor overheat. Failure to deal with situation to ease it will escalate.
7. **The warhead or reactor melt down. The SSN-589 sinks. You lose and have failed to stop a Nuclear disaster too!**
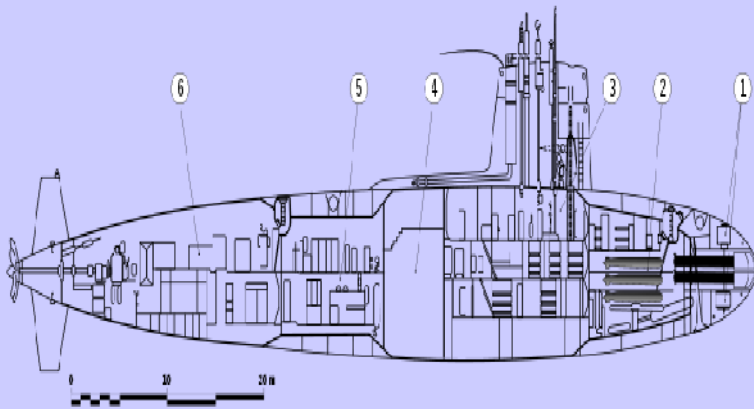
SSN-589 SHIP LOCATIONS:

1   Sonar
2   Torpedo Tubes
3   Bridge
3b   below the Bridge: Living Quarters
4   S5W Reactor
5   Nuclear Control Room, Auxiliary
6   Machine Room

Which gives seven potential locations to be in.

Art courtesy Polish Wikipedia.

SIMPLE COURSE TABLE:

NORFOLK	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	8	9	10	11	12	13	safe

SARGASSO	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

branch to Norfolk 7 or back to 1

SPAIN	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	8	9	10	safe			

RESCUE SHIP	1	2	3	4	safe

Design Notes to the 24-hour version

I'm now quickly wrapping up, as my time is almost up. I'll try and fix the map so that there is a playable version. Might fail to do that in time. A minimal map is already included above.

This time, I followed a somewhat different path to building the game, because I wanted an entirely new mechanic. This took up most of my time, as I wanted to make sure it would work, would be fun, and it would also work as a role playing game. I play-tested and play-tested, on my own, as design is a solitary business, and now think that I have it (mostly) right.

Naturally, a balance may still have to be found for all games, and maybe that's not quite right. That will only show on prolonged play-testing, for which I now have no time.

For those who are wondering, the SSN-589 was for real, and did sink in 1968 in the Atlantic, about 400 nautical miles away from the Azores, near Sargasso Sea. A search was conducted three days before she was officially declared missing, and she did have a mission to look out for enemy subs. The captain did have the name as given. The ship did really need a long overdue overhaul, and morale was pretty bad. And also, Sargasso is near the Bermuda triangle.

Nobody knows for sure what happened, though a malfunction is a most likely explanation. Theories also exist about a confrontation with a Soviet sub, after which the incident was snubbed to prevent World War III.

Layout of the game now remains simple, alas, but so it is. Playability before layout!

Proud to say that my last test game was actually exciting, even if I played all three player roles myself. The SSN-589 got boarded by the Soviets, due to a treasonous spy on board! The others faced the problem of trying to stop the Soviets, and die in the attempt as cards were running out, or else let them go with the secrets.

So, I hope you'll test it too. I'll use a later moment to perfect it, so that you may download it from www.darkdungeon2.com.

Cheers,

Jaap de Goede, June 26 2012