

Of Great Ships and Captains

"Big ships" in the STAR FRONTIERS® game, Part 2

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In the last issue of POLYHEDRON™ Newszine, some of the basics of starting a Big Ship campaign in a Star Frontiers® game were described.

The *referee* and players must decide what sort of Big Ship the group will be using; campaigns based upon military, merchant, and scouting missions will each require a different type of ship, each having different type of ship, each having different abilities, crew sizes, and so forth.

As the cover of this issue points out, having a Big Ship is no guarantee that star-faring characters will be invincible. The bigger the ship, the harder it crashes. A careful and dedicated crew (and referee) will keep their ship flying for many sessions of play.

Details, details

The first hurdle to overcome in running a Big Ship campaign (after you've chosen which ship to use) is to map out the ship's interior. Eventually someone will want to know where the staterooms are, what the bridge looks like, how far away the lifeboats are from the cafeteria, and where the bathrooms are. A large amount of graph paper and patience is required to get this job done.

Numerous ship maps are scattered throughout the STAR FRONTIERS game rules, and it only takes a few minutes of study to get a feel for how the mapping system works. Based on 2-meter squares, the maps detail the interiors of various smaller ships used by the UPF Spacefleet (such as the assault scout and frigate). The notes on designing deck plans given in the Campaign Book (p. 23) are required reading for this sort of work.

If you like extra detail, 1-meter squares can be used, This is extra-nice in figuring out exactly where everyone is standing in melee, and those who like filling in details of crew seating, equipment appearance, and so forth may prefer the enlarged scale.

Some of the most commonly seen areas on starship maps are given below. Players and referees may use this as a checklist to determine what parts of the Big Ship they're using need to be included in the maps. Most of the areas named are self-explanatory.

- **Bridge** (main bridge and emergency bridge) including pilot's, co-pilot's, astrogator's, and communications stations;
- **Computer Room**, possibly with computerized library;
- **Engineering section**, including spare parts storage, main and emergency power systems, maintenance shafts to engines, spacesuit storage lockers, backup engineering systems, emergency life support systems, workpods, machine and electronics shops, and tools and equipment storage;
- **Gunnery decks**, including firing controls for main ship's guns and defense systems, major man-portable weapons storage, weapons maintenance rooms and repair shops, ammunitions storage, and armored (military) spacesuit storage;
- **Crew quarters**, with rec center, galley, food storage, life-support system, offices, small weapons storage, and other areas required by the ship's crew (like bathrooms);
- **Passenger decks**, with accommodations similar to those on the crew deck (only more expansive and probably more expensive as well);
- **Cargo decks**, including freight handling machinery, major airlocks, cargo space, security station, and cargo handling "arms" (for deep-space work); and,
- **Other areas**: observation domes, airlocks, passenger and crew lifeboats, robot storage areas, hydroponics areas, freight and crew elevators running throughout ship, and internal defense points (heavy weapon mounts for repelling boarders).

A partial layout of a frigate is given in the Campaign Book which displays some of the above areas rather nicely. Other ship maps in the STAR FRONTIERS books are also helpful.

Aside from the internal maps of the ship, the referee should generate ship's papers similar to those found in SFKH1, *Dramune Run* (p. 13, Ship Log for the *Gullwind*). Various expenses involved in running the Big Ship should be carefully detailed. How much does refueling cost? How often should maintenance be performed? How much are crew salaries?

One last thought about designing your ship. If you choose a ship type that's been previously described in the rules (such as the frigate, which is detailed below), don't worry about whether your ship design is going to be "official". Given the wide variations between the different types of frigates in the rules, one supposes that different races and different shipbuilding contractors have different ideas of how to build the same starships. After all, a Volkswagen Beetle, a Corvette Stingray, and a Lincoln Continental were all designed with four wheels and the ability to get you from one place to another at 55 mph; no one said all cars had to look alike.

Player characters & crewmen

Most crew positions on a starship are self-explanatory. Everyone knows what a pilot or gunnery officer does. The problem comes in figuring out exactly which crew positions

aboardship should be filled. If you have a Big Ship with a crew of 400, you may have trouble deciding how many cooks and internal security personnel will be needed.

If there was an easy answer to this, it would be included here in this article. The TRAVELLER® game system has some helpful comments and rules of thumb for crewing major warships in Book 5, *High Guard*, that are certainly worth reading. For the most part, you will be on your own in building crew positions for the player characters to fill. Note that there is no reason why players cannot each control a number of separate characters on the ship, though a good supply of referee-controlled NPCs is recommended for ease of play.

If you have access to a local library, you might try to discover what sorts of crews major ships like aircraft carriers, submarines, and destroyers have on them. This could be very helpful in laying out starship crew positions.

Some of the most commonly used crew positions on a starship are given below, with a few brief notes on each.

- **Captain**, who is often the ship's main pilot;
- **Executive officer**, a lieutenant who handles matters when the captain is absent and performs some of the captain's paperwork;
- **Pilot or helmsman** (often several pilots, copilots, and backup pilots are kept aboardship, all of officer grade and usually lieutenants);
- **Gunnery officers**, usually junior lieutenants (each officer is specialized in one form of weapons or defense system, such as rockets or energy weapons);
- **Chief medical officer/surgeon** and any medical assistants required;
- **Astrogator/navigator**, a lieutenant who operates the guidance and stellar location systems and (to a lesser extent) the detection/radar equipment;
- **Communications/detection officer** and crewmen;
- **Chief engineer** (usually a lieutenant) and engineering crewmen, responsible for the ship's power and propulsion systems, life support, damage control, and other engineering systems;
- **Computer officers** (on larger ships with big computer systems);
- **Maintenance and repair crewmen**;
- **Boarding party personnel, shipboard marines, internal security forces**, and other armed military personnel, usually commanded by a junior lieutenant (other personnel, such as squad leaders, a first sergeant, and platoon sergeants are optional); and,
- **Other personnel** as needed (robot techs, food service and agricultural specialists, scientists, passenger stewards, etc.)

In the *Warriors of White Light* adventure, some additional notes on the crewing of the smaller starships (frigates and assault scouts) are given. Enlisted ranks are referred to under the general title of Midshipmen, though other ranks and titles may be adopted if the referee desires. Other space navies aside from the Clarion Royal Marines would probably have new designations for officers and crew.

Opponents & adventures

Designing adventures for a Big Ship campaign should not be overly difficult. The ship can often play a background role in getting players from one planet to another so they can take part in "regular" sorts of adventures in which PCs seem to immerse themselves so regularly. The Big Ship shouldn't always have to serve as the group's taxicab, however.

In military campaigns, life aboard a large warship could be played out in detail. Obviously there is a lot of boring time even in a major war, but there are certain moments when danger might creep up on the characters as well.

Adventures occurring aboardship would include saboteur and spy activity (especially in anti-pirate and Sathar campaigns), boarding actions, and crew mutinies. It must be strongly stated that crew mutinies should be VERY rare. The United States Navy has never had a large mutiny, though several times small numbers of crewmen, dissatisfied with their lot and often mistreated by their officers, have rebelled. Criminal activities among crewmen involved in drug dealing, loan sharking, gambling, and other pursuits might prove to be long-standing problems that characters will have trouble laying to rest.

Special passengers bring their own troubles, as crewmen try to protect alien ambassadors, locate terrorist-implanted bombs, deal with hijackers and stowaways, or take on disaster victims from shipwrecks or wartime activities. Animals in cargo bays can escape by accident or on purpose. Pets brought aboardship might prove to have thief-like talents.

Players should be able to develop other shipboard adventures that keep things rolling in the game. Of course, there are adventures that keep things rolling outside the ship as well. Major space battles can be played out with the PCs' ship involved, using the Knight Hawks rules, though everyone should be forewarned that the fastest way to totally wreck a starship is to get into a shooting war with another ship. Diplomacy, trickery, and careful tactical planning should be explored beforehand to eliminate the chances of having the Big Ship become a **BFLH** (Big Floating Lifeless Hulk).

The referee should keep the first rule of managing a Big Ship campaign in mind: *avoid destroying the ship*. This doesn't mean that if the player characters decide to dive the ship into a local star that they should get away with it. But the referee should avoid putting the ship itself in critical danger of being destroyed, especially early in the campaign. The *threat* of having the ship be destroyed is one thing, but doing it is another.

A good case in point was a campaign I participated in a few years ago, in which the players controlled a *Leviathan*-class merchant ship in a TRAVELLER game. Within a month of gaming, the ship had sustained extreme internal damage from fighting and was in danger of being gunned apart by hostile starships. This was not conducive to a secure feeling on the players' part. It may happen that more than one ship bites the

Asteroid of Doom before the players and referee figure out how to keep the ship alive longer.

BUT - if it happens that the player characters wind up stranded on an alien planet with their Big Ship crashed and seriously damaged, all is not lost. There are repair crews and construction firms willing to put the ship into working order again, for a hefty price. The shuttle-type starship on the cover, though it obviously isn't going anywhere for a while, could be salvaged, carried back to a spaceport or well-equipped industrial center, and sent back into space only a little worse for the wear.

Frigates in general

One example of a Big Ship that could be adopted into campaign play is the frigate. A frigate is comfortably small and manageable for a beginning Big Ship group, though it's still of respectable size. The crew size is more than adequate, and lots of NPCs can fill out the crew roster and serve as replacement player characters if the originals die or retire.

Despite last issue's promise of a view of the *Pini Pedikord* ("the terror of the spacelanes"), deck plans for a sample frigate will have to wait until a later date. However, some basic information can be culled from the various STAR FRONTIERS game books, deduced from the above, and invented on the spot. Any group interested in creating a campaign based around a different Big Ship should follow the same procedure: look up every scrap of information you can find on that ship type, add implied material, and then fill in the gaps with your imagination.

Frigates are the smallest major warships in common use. Built around a size 5 hull, frigates are well-armed and fast. They are most often used by planetary navies, marines, and militias, interstellar navies (such as Spacefleet), and captured or "junked" frigates might be employed by pirates or private concerns. In the STAR FRONTIERS game, frigates form the mainstay of the UPF fleet.

Because of their speed and firepower, frigates are often sent on high-speed patrols and pirate suppression, anti-smuggling, or blockade assignments. They work well with smaller craft such as fighters and assault scouts, lending firepower support when necessary and serving as "headquarters" ships for small military operations.

Frigates are equipped with high-quality detection gear. Interplanetary radar, high-powered cameras, energy sensors, and hull skin sensors allow the ship's crew to monitor activity in, on, or around the ship at any time. Normal radio and subspace radio systems are installed, along with a videocom system for "face-to-face" communications and a white-noise broadcaster of normal size for use in combat. A standard intercom system is installed for communication between crewmen in different parts of the ship.

Frigates are heavily armed when compared to smaller ships like assault scouts and fighters, and they have a variety of weapons systems that may be used during combat. Some weapons systems may be replaced by others, as noted below.

One large laser cannon (range: 100,000 km) is set on the bow in a fixed mount that only allows the cannon to fire forward. A laser beam battery is mounted to one side of the ship, consisting of a cluster of small laser cannons set in a rotating turret with an unlimited field of fire. (The frigate may be rotated to allow the laser battery to reach targets initially on the other side of the ship from the battery.) The laser battery has a 90,000 km range. Both types of laser weapons have their "punching power" reduced by great distances.

Frigates also commonly carry two nuclear missiles called "torpedos", which are used as ship-to-ship weapons with homing devices. Each torpedo has a fission-drive engine to send it to its target. Torpedos can sometimes be used for space-to-ground attacks against planetary fortresses, military bases, missile silos, spaceports, etc.

Four rocker batteries are mounted on the hull as well. Each battery may fire a cluster of small and extremely fast missiles propelled by fusion drives. No homing systems are placed on these missiles because of their extremely fast movement; targets cannot dodge them.

Some weapons may be exchanged for others. The two torpedos may be eliminated and replaced by another four rocket batteries or by another laser beam battery; other combinations of these systems are possible (such as exchanging the four rockets for a laser beam battery, etc.)

Frigates have a good array of defenses, too. A reflective surface may be applied to the hull to defend against laser attacks. A masking screen device good for two uses is installed (complete with water tanks), and four interceptor missiles useful against incoming missiles and torpedos are carried as well. The entire masking screen system may be replaced by installing another interceptor missile, or a smaller masking screen system good for only one use could be installed with on decoy system. A large masking screen system good for two uses could, of course, be broken down into two smaller one-shot systems.

For a "small" starship, a frigate packs a nice wallop. A long-playing military campaign could be developed with little trouble around a UPF frigate or a similar ship in a planetary navy, of the solar system it hails from has a large number of planets to visit.

Deck plans, a crew roster, and more information on running a frigate in a Big Ship campaign will wing their way to you in a future issue of POLYHEDRON™ Newszine.