

# FIRST IN - WEASELS OVER SYRIA

26th June, 2013.

Today our detachment made its combat debut in Operation Cerberus North, defending JSTF aircraft from SIA SAM systems as they attacked targets in eastern Syria. My flight was first up, protecting a strike package as it attacked SIA oil facilities south of the city of Dayr az Zawr. This was followed up by Popeye and Tank, both leading flights to protect strikes around Raqqa and A-10s providing CAS to the YPG as they advanced on SIA positions. These initial strikes were next followed up by several waves of Navy and Marine aircraft, these follow-on strikes were protected by the Navy's own SEAD efforts, no doubt benefiting from our hard earned gains!

Once safely back at H4 after completing our missions, we completed a thorough debrief and handed our tapes over to our intel specialists. The SA-6 that Bug picked up egressing from the target area was spotted by both Popeye's and Tank's flights and was of particular interest to the intel section.

With the debrief completed I hit the mess for an early evening meal, before returning to our briefing room to brief another mission set for early tomorrow morning. Entering the briefing room I could feel the energy in the room, with the detachment's pilots still buzzing from an afternoon on the front line of our air campaign. As I settled into my seat, Popeye began.

"Ok men, I hope you enjoyed your first trip to Syria today and used it to get any doubts about your ability to perform in combat out of your systems. For most of you it was the first time you have been shot at for real, I'm pretty sure it won't be your last. The ATO has come through with another set of missions for us tomorrow, but before we get to that we'll take care of the usual business first". Popeye gestured for Captain Johnson to begin the met brief.

Johnson told us the weather will worsen tomorrow with the poor weather blowing in from the Med continuing. We are expecting heavier cloud cover, with broken clouds between 11,000 and 14,000 feet and at around 23,000 feet. The winds will pick up to an estimated 7 knots at ground level and up to 35 knots at altitude. There is also a chance of rain, unusual for this time of year but not unheard of, so says Captain Johnson anyway.

Once Johnson had departed, Major Norris returned to deliver our intel brief. Norris informed us that the Syrian feints at the no fly zone continue as the Syrians attempt to draw us into range of their SAM systems south of no fly Sierra. The Syrian reinforcement of their air defenses also continues and intel's assessment is that there are more SA-11 batteries enroute to Syria, courtesy of the Russians. The Russians also continue to hit SDF targets around Homs but have also been supporting Syrian ground forces in east Syria as they battle the SIA northeast of Palmyra.

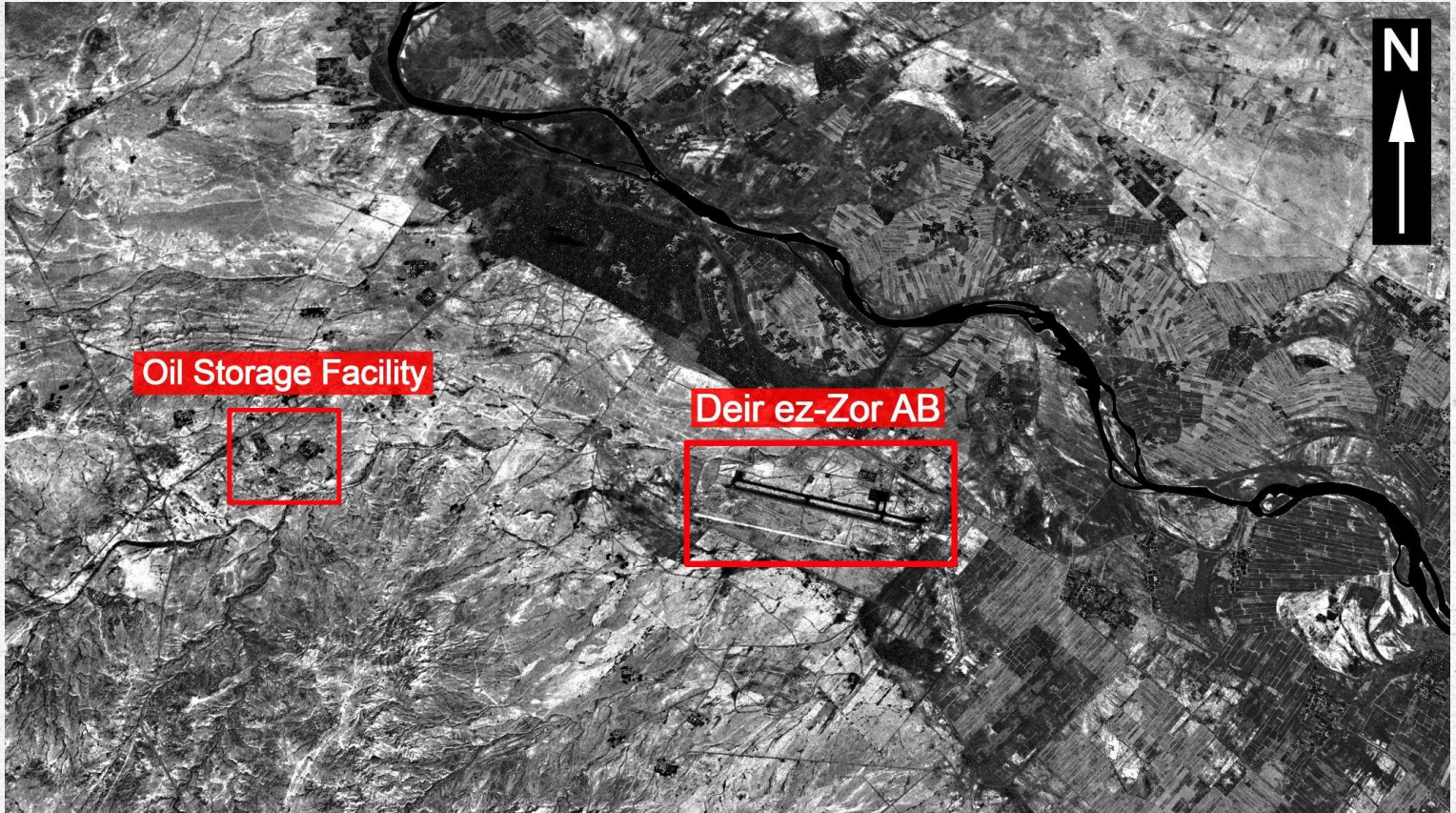
Turning to the SIA, Norris told us they took heavy hits today, with battle damage assessments following the combined waves of strike packages across the day showing a heavy toll on SIA oil infrastructure and on key political and economic targets in Raqqa. Addressing the SIA air defenses Norris confirmed that the SIA do indeed have active SA-8s - we gave him some stick for that 'revelation' - and more importantly do have them in an operational condition. Their operators aren't as poor as we hoped either, being at least smart enough to know to turn their radars off if they saw the telltale smoke plume from a HARM launch. Norris also confirmed the Fire Can radars around Deir ez-Zor airbase have been put out of action. Finally Norris corroborated reports of an SA-6 radar in eastern Syria, this was picked up by the Rivet Joint monitoring SAM activity in Syria, backing up the emissions picked up on our RWR gear. It seems the SIA do indeed have an SA-6. There was no further information on the SIA ability to effectively operate an SA-6, nor if they

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had sufficient stock of missiles to pose a threat to us.

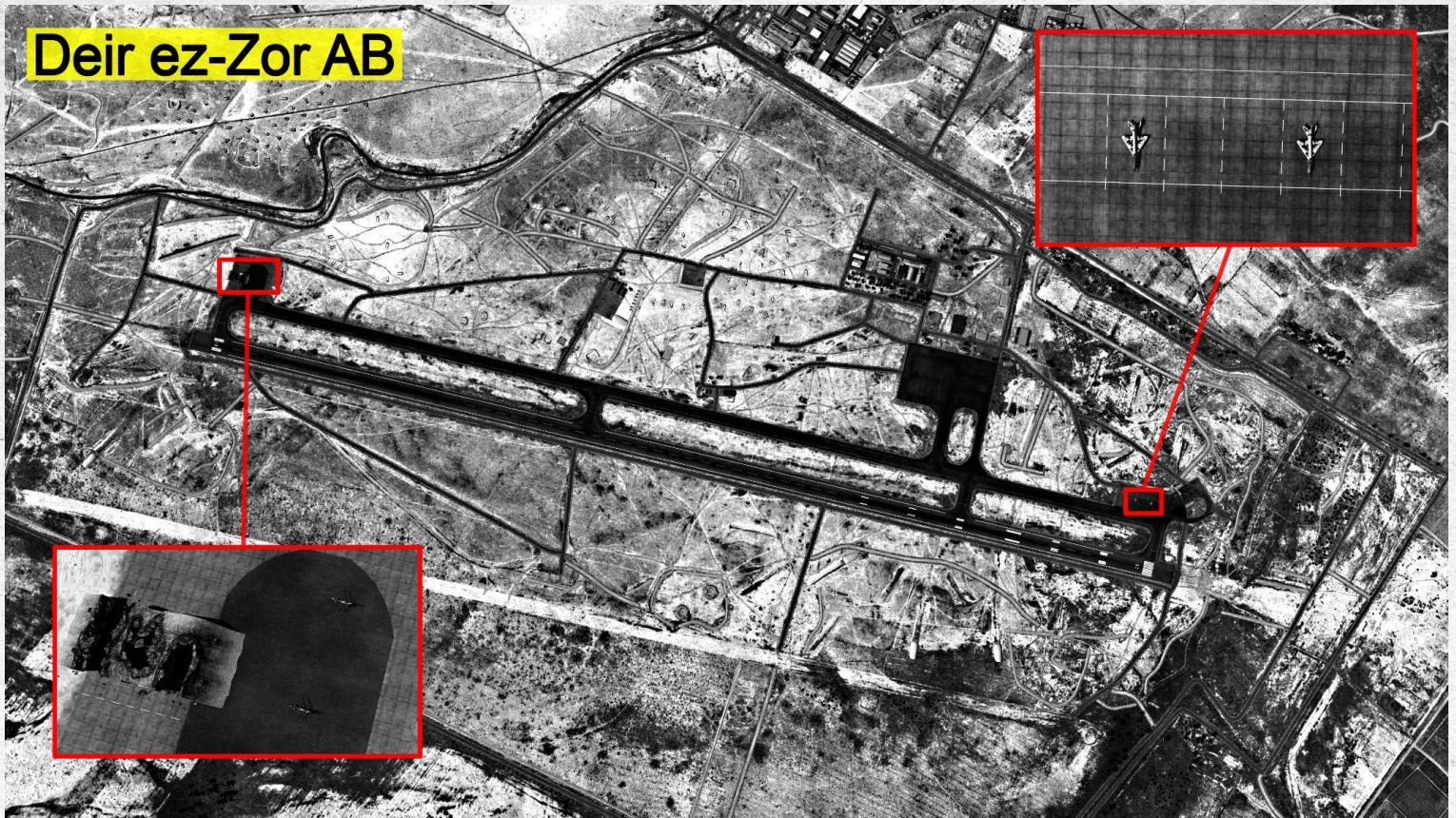
Once Norris had completed his briefing and departed, Popeye began to brief tomorrow's mission.

"Tomorrow we will be supporting a strike package attacking a pair of SIA targets in eastern Syria. The first target is Deir ez-Zor airbase, the second is an oil storage facility 4 miles west of this air base".



"The airbase is a hub of SIA activity in this area and is home to a lot of equipment, including at least two M1 tanks, a lot of ammo and not least a pair of Gazelle helicopters and three Mig-21s. Now we have no idea if any of the aircraft are operational, we think probably not otherwise we would have expected to see them airborne by now but the SIA could have the technical know how within it's ranks to operate and maintain this equipment, and as such it's about time it was taken off the board for good".

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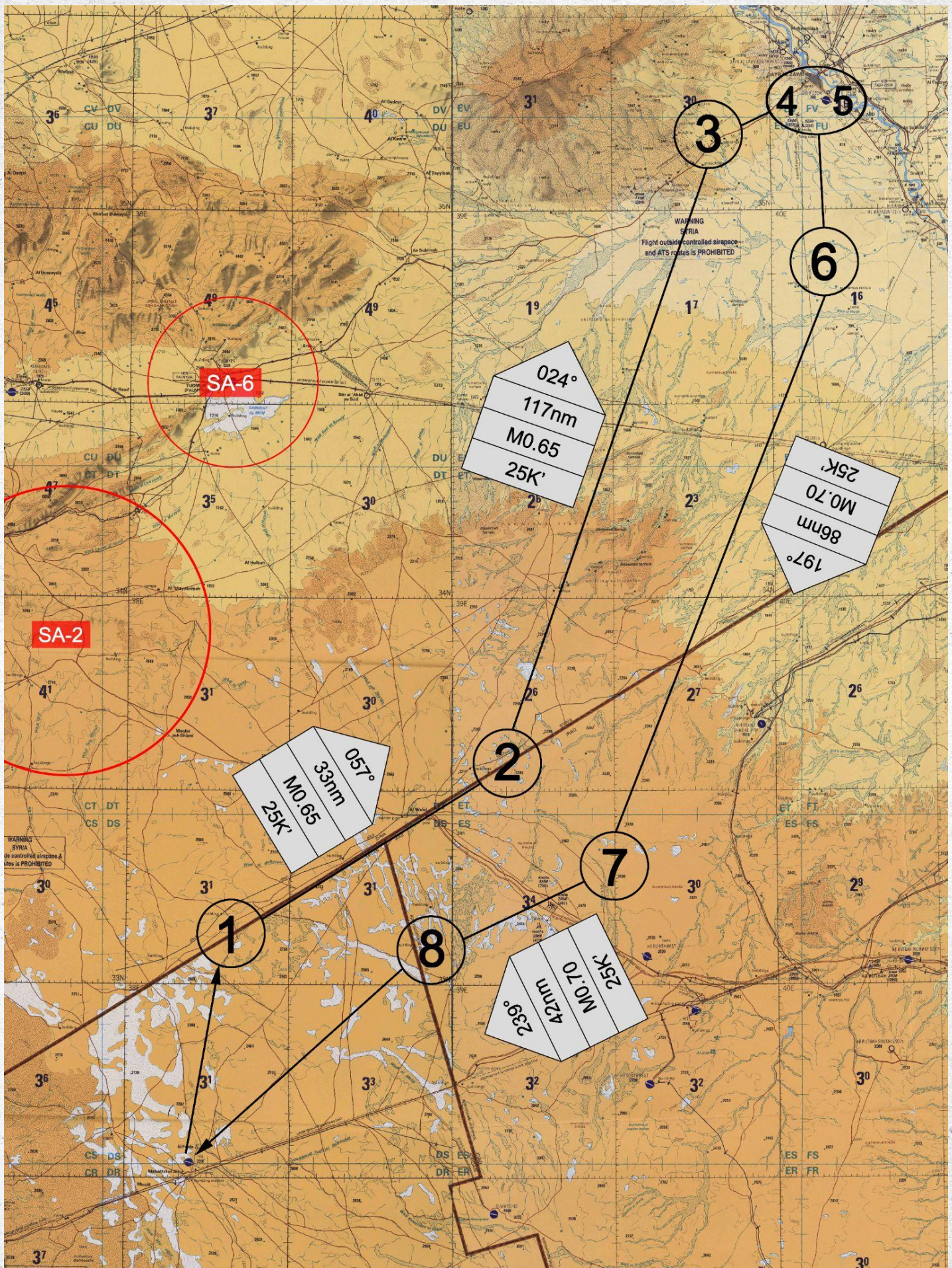
"Our mission of course will be to sanitize the area of SAMs ahead of the strike package, remain on station while the package delivers it's weapons and ensure their safe egress from the target area. The strike package consists of eight Strike Eagles - call signs Hammer 1 and Hammer 2 - who will be targeting the airbase, and a four ship of F-16s - Outlaw 3 - who will be hitting the oil facility. TOT for both packages is 03:30 Zulu, 06:30 local".

"We will be operating as a four ship tomorrow. I will be paired with Ghost as Sword 1, Forrest you will be paired with Rotor as Sword 2. Each pair will contain one HARM shooter and one aircraft armed with Mavericks and GBU-38s".

Popeye went on to outline the mission flow. Departing H4CA as pairs we will rendezvous the flight at waypoint 1. The route into Syria will be the same as we used in our previous mission, skirting along the Syrian border until clear of threats and then turning north and proceeding to waypoint 3. Waypoint 3 will act as our IP, west of today's target area. Once in the target area we will assess the active threats and engage as necessary, once again working to provoke the air defenses into action if needed. Once the package has attacked and cleared it's targets (located at waypoints 4 and 5) we will egress to the south and rendezvous the flight at our rally point - waypoint 6 - before returning to H4 via waypoints 7 and 8.

Shell will again be available for AAR on our egress route should we require it. Bingo fuel from the target area is 3,500 lb. Within my element Rotor will be carrying the HARMs and I will again be carrying a mix of Mavericks and GBU-38s.

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Popeye moved on to the threat systems we may see in today's operating area. While the KS-19 batteries still exist, they no longer have their Fire Can radars and should be a much lower threat as a result. The oil fields south of today's targets still contain significant amounts of AAA, in the form of S-60 and ZU-23. We should also expect AAA in the vicinity of both targets.

The primary SAM threat will be SA-8s, with at least two being detected in the vicinity of the targets by Vacuum. MANPADS or SA-9 should be anticipated as serious threats at lower altitudes, which given the cloud cover we may find ourselves at if the situation dictates.

We should also be prepared for the possibility of an SA-6 in the area, although a fix on its position has not been established yet. The SA-6 is highly mobile and most likely the SIA are moving it regularly. Should the SIA have a full SA-6 battery available to them and operators capable of utilizing it then this system poses a significantly greater threat than the SA-8s, with an engagement range up to 15nm. The SA-6 doesn't have the low level vulnerabilities that the SA-8 does, but due to its semi-active radar homing missiles can only engage a single target at a time, making it vulnerable to saturation tactics.

The briefing ended soon after, but we stayed for several more hours going over the threat details, studying our route and target area. Eventually we drifted away from the briefing room and returned to our tents where we attempted to salvage what sleep we could. We won't get long, we step to the jets at 04:45 local, take off will be one hour later.