

# LAST OUT - WEASELS OVER SYRIA II

August 6th, 2013.

It's been almost 2 weeks since we left H4, and boy am I glad we did. My name is Captain Dan Wilson, callsign 'Forrest', a USAF pilot with the 79th Fighter Squadron and a Wild Weasel. Chances are you already know all this but for those that don't please indulge me as I recap how I and my fellow detachment pilots came to find ourselves at RAF Akrotiri in Cyprus.

In late June a 6 aircraft detachment from our squadron was assigned to the Joint Syrian Task Force (JSTF) and deployed to H4 airbase in Jordan, our mission was to provide Wild Weasel support to Operation Cerberus North. The goal of OCN is to stabilize the screwed up failed state that Syria has become, with a major civil war raging between government forces and the breakaway Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and a violent insurgency in the east of the country by the Syrian Islamic Army (SIA). OCN has two goals, first establish no fly zones across northern Syria to prevent the Syrians bombing SDF controlled areas and second, to support the SDF and Kurdish YPG in defeating the SIA. As I write this some 6 weeks later it would be fair to say we've seen some developments.

Our campaign against the SIA started well, our detachment supported a number of missions as the JSTF struck a variety of SIA targets, including infrastructure and leadership targets. From a Weasel's perspective this was a gentle introduction to the Syrian Theater of Operations, with just a handful of SA-8s and an SA-6 troubling us...threats we made short work of.

It wasn't long though until the Syrians began attempting to violate the no fly zones. Supporting the enforcement of these zones was the primary reason for our assignment to Jordan...you see the Syrians had deployed significant air defenses along the southern no fly zone - making it difficult for JSTF aircraft to enter these locations and visually ID the intruders. Why the need for a visual ID? Well I should probably say the Russians are active in the theater and providing support to the Syrians, and of course we are not about to enforce a no fly zone on the Russians...so they get a free pass.

Our role then was to roll back the air defenses from around the no fly zone, allowing the JSTF room to operate. We were successful in this role, eliminating a number of air defense positions and playing our part in a large coordinated attack against the northern section of the Syrian IADS. This enabled the JSTF to fully enforce the no fly zones, in turn giving the SDF protection from attack by air (from the Syrians at least). This ultimately helped the SDF break out from the stalemate they were locked into around Homs and saw them rapidly push south. They were eventually stopped at the town of Yabrud, around 30 miles north of Damascus.

A new stalemate then emerged at Yabrud, one which the Syrians seemed determined to break at any cost, including the widespread bombardment of civilian areas. This led to a strong ultimatum from the JSTF to cease deliberate targeting of civilians, it was not heeded and the JSTF carried out a series of major attacks on the Syrians - striking dozens of high value targets around Damascus. The Weasels were of course heavily involved, flying into the heart of a dense SAM network around Damascus - an experience none of us is ever going to forget.

As all this was happening the SIA were being driven from their capital city of Raqqa as the SDF and YPG assault neared it's conclusion. But the SIA is an organization that seems incapable of dying, they may have been forced out of their strongholds but they began to pop up in the expansive and

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empty desert in eastern Syria. SIA fighters began to make life at H4 difficult for us, with a rocket attack on the base resulting in no casualties but certainly succeeding in making us stop and think about our security. The SIA followed this up with an attack on the Jordanian border, just north of H4. Concerned by a deteriorating security situation the decision was made to pull us out of Jordan and we were relocated to RAF Akrotiri, the Brits agreeing to squeeze us into an already crowded base that already hosted numerous JSTF nations.

And that brings us up to date and explains how I swapped a cramped tent in the desert for a modest room here in Cyprus. It's still cramped, the base is packed and we're squeezing at least four pilots into every room but I think I speak for all the det when I say it's a major step up from what we had...hell this place has shops, bars, a pool, bowling alley and even a Go Kart track. It's a long way from the austere environment we had at H4.

Since arriving at Akrotiri we've yet to fly. After 6 weeks of intensive flying we've been given a little time off to recuperate, and our aircraft maintainers have taken the opportunity to do some much needed work on our jets. We've enjoyed the time off, and made the most of the base's amenities but we are missing the flying and thus woke this morning excited and ready for the day ahead - our first mission out of Akrotiri.

We rose early, the dawn sun just beginning to light up the red tiled roof of the apartment building we'd been housed in. I was bunked with Lt. Ed 'Bug' Donovan, Lt. John 'Rotor' Spiers and Major Tom 'Tank' Porter taking up the other bunk in our room. We dressed, grabbed coffee from a small but modern kitchenette on our floor and then began the long trek over to the base ops building. On the way we ran into Captain Kevin 'Ghost' Buster, another of our detachment's pilots. We arrived together at the ops building, an ugly two story concrete structure near the airbase's control tower. Inside we reported to one of the secure briefing rooms where a group of personnel were already present and seated in the front row of the blue cushioned theater style seating. At the front of the room a wooden podium was occupied by a familiar face, our squadron CO Lt. Col Gary 'Popeye' Doyle. A large, blank projector screen stood empty behind him.

Popeye greeted us all as we entered and gestured for us to sit.

"Good morning pilots" he began in his characteristically upbeat demeanor. "I hope you've enjoyed your short break here at Akrotiri so far..." Popeye was met with a series of subtle nods, "...and I hope you're looking forward to getting back into the air today. I'm pleased to say the aircraft are looking good, as usual our ground crew have done an outstanding job getting them ready".

Gesturing at a young dark haired British man, Popeye then introduced one of Akrotiri's OMTs (Operational Meteorologist Technician) to brief us on the weather. August in Cyprus brings excellent weather, which is exactly what we've seen since arriving here 2 weeks ago. Today will be no different with temperatures around 32 degrees celsius, calm winds and scattered clouds around 6,000 feet MSL.

With the departure of the OMT Popeye invited Major Norris to speak. Norris was the air force intelligence officer assigned to our H4 detachment and had relocated with us to Akrotiri. An energetic and tall Texan, Norris always spoke with enthusiasm.

"Morning everyone" he began as he bounded to the podium, "As you know it's been almost 2 weeks since Operation Dominant Enforcer and the JSTF attacks on the Damascus area. These attacks were successful and have had an impact on the Syrian warfighting capability".

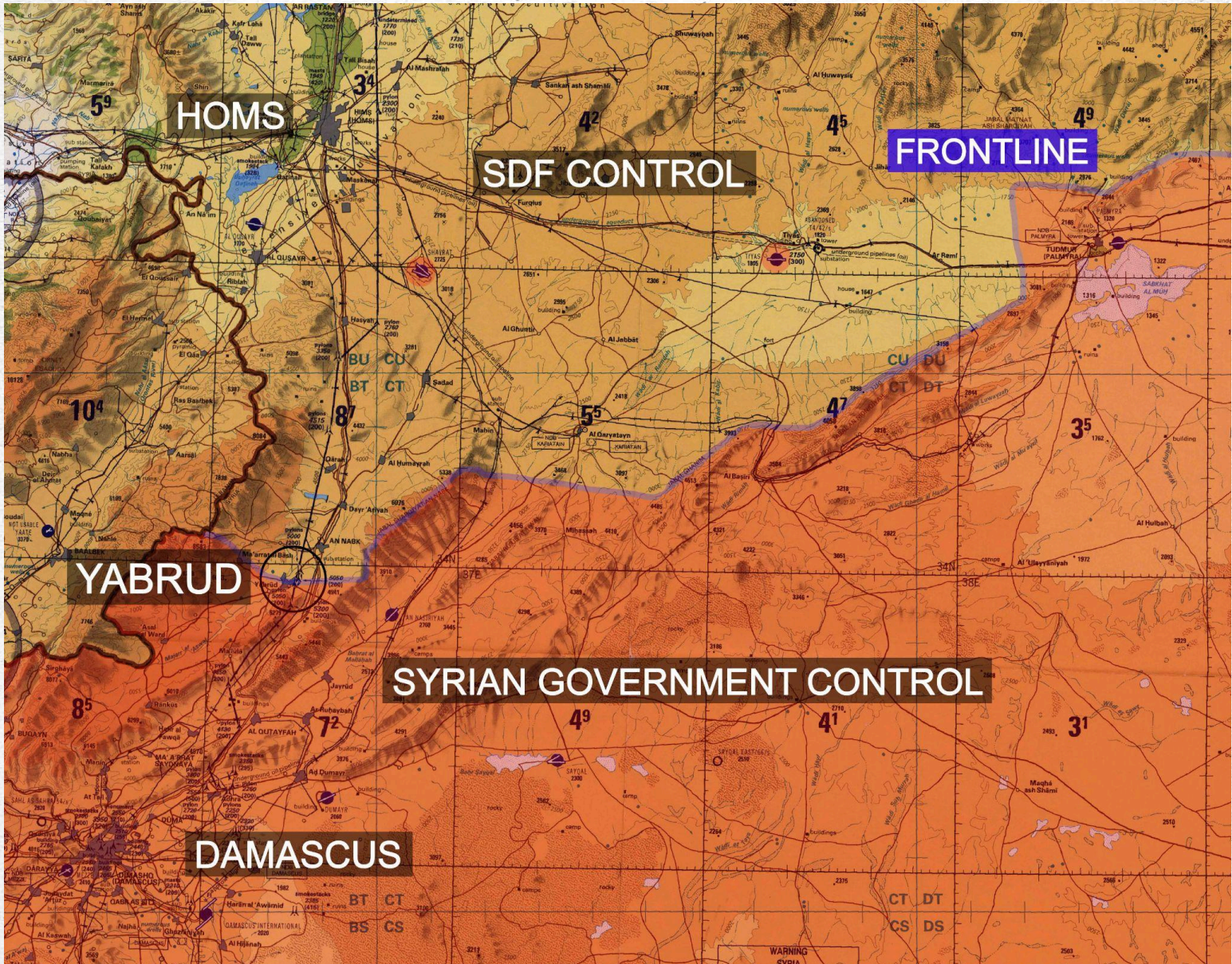
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"They were not, however, a knockout blow. The Syrian's are certainly fighting less effectively, with widespread shortages in ammunition, manpower and equipment...but they are still fighting. The frontline between the Syrians and the SDF remains pretty much where we left it, with the focal point of the fighting continuing at Yabrud".

Norris clicked a new chart onto the screen at the front of the room.

"The fighting at Yabrud shows no sign of abating, and while the Syrians might be suffering a loss of effectiveness, they're certainly trying to make up for it with an increased appetite for destruction. Assessments are that the stalemate at Yabrud looks set to continue a while longer, at great cost to both sides. Further north, Shayrat and Tiyas air bases remain under Syrian control, but are cut off and remain operationally ineffective".

"Moving south to Damascus we've seen more uprisings take place around the capital, believed to be fuelled by the ever growing discontent the local population has about the way the government is treating it's own population, especially in Sunni areas".



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Tank spoke up at this point and asked, "Major, are we still seeing the same number of defections within the SAA in addition to the uprisings?"

Norris responded, "Not that we're aware of, but the SAA has already seen very large numbers defecting to the SDF, speculation is that most of those who can or will defect have done so already...but that is just speculation at this point. We'll update you all if we get more information in the future".

"Now let's move on to the Russians..."

A collective sigh was let out across the briefing room and was met by a rue smile from Major Norris.

"I know, I know...the Russians are being a real pain in the ass out here."

"Try highly unprofessional!" Rotor exclaimed.

"More like downright dangerous!" Bug responded, "They're gonna get someone killed if they keep behaving like they have been."

Just as I was about to open my mouth, Popeye interjected and cut me off.

"Ok, ok calm down, the Major is well aware of the Russian behavior in Syria...more so than any of you I'm willing to bet, so let's cool it and let him speak".

As the room quieted down, Major Norris continued.

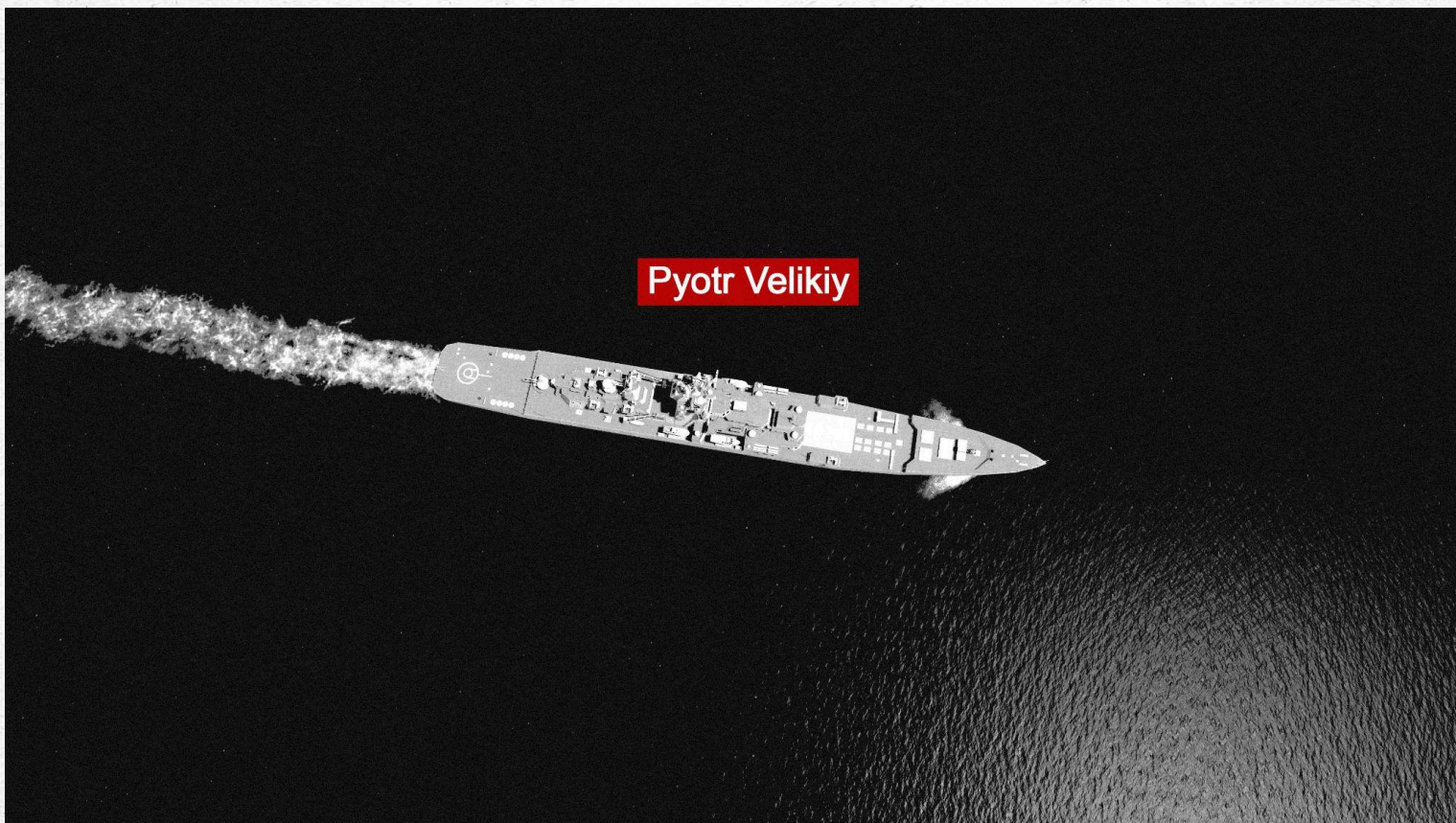
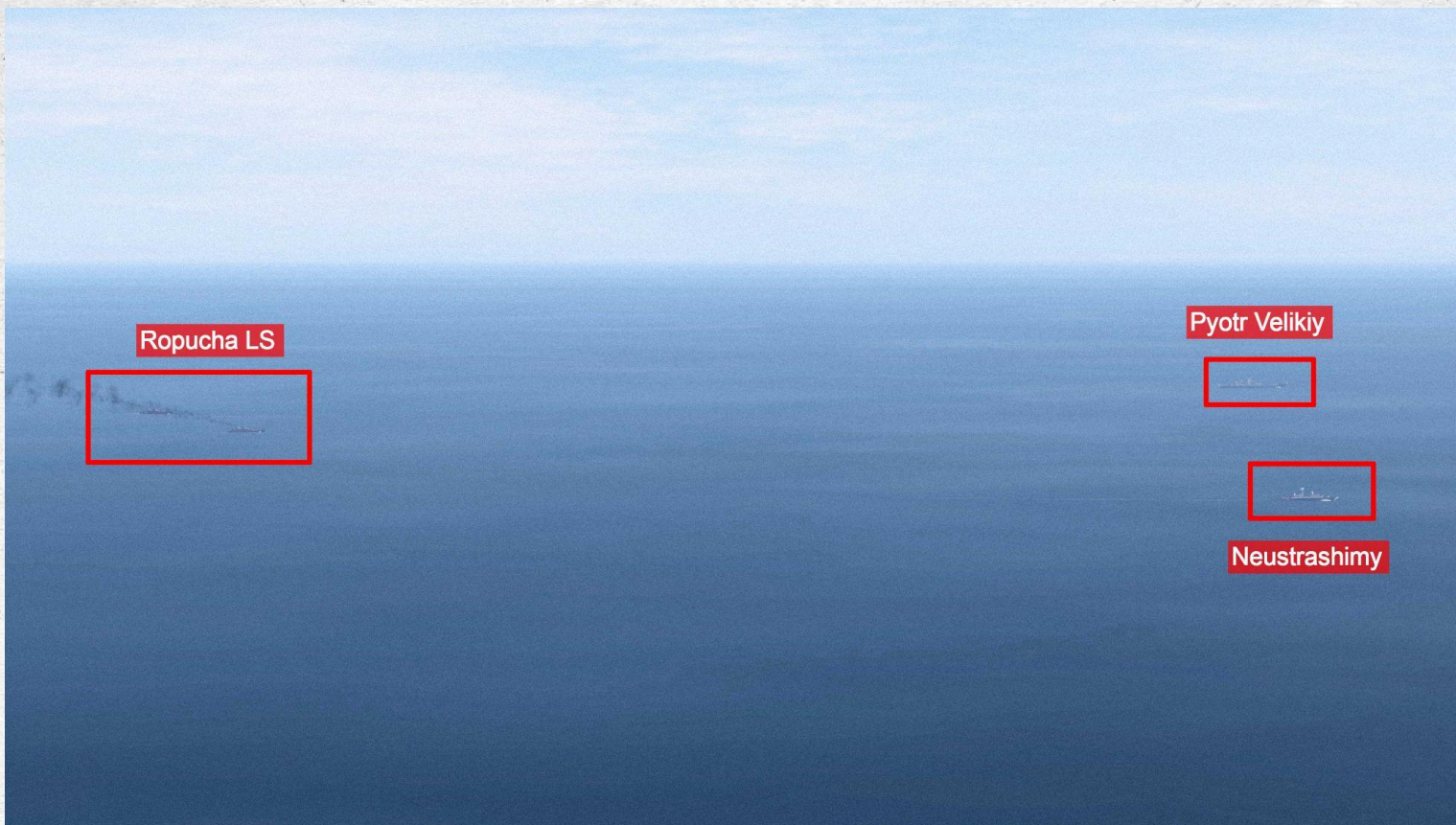
"As I was saying, Russian airstrikes against the SDF are continuing, and as you all just pointed out we are seeing a worrying number of incidents where Russian pilots are flying in an aggressive manner and harassing our aircraft in theater. No doubt looking to distract us and deter us from our mission here".

"And passing intel to the Syrians" remarked Rotor.

"Yes most probably" conceded Norris, "And I'm sure you remember that Russian AWACS is now also operating in theater as well, although their command and control abilities are not anywhere near as sophisticated as our own".

Switching the slides on the screen Norris continued, "We are also tracking a surface group from the Russian Navy, which has entered the Mediterranean and is currently around 50 nm southwest of Cyprus. This group consists of two Ropucha class landing ships, the frigate Neustrashimy and the Kirov class battlecruiser Pyotr Velikiy".

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"Sounds like they really mean business" Popeye remarked, "What's the potential cargo on the landing ships?"

Norris replied, "We're unsure of the exact cargo, but a ship like this is designed for roll on, roll off cargo so potentially dozens of armored vehicles, or possibly substantial supplies and ammo for the Syrians".

"How about mobile SAMs?" asked Ghost.

"Potentially" replied Norris, "We will monitor the ships as they dock and update you accordingly, and I'm sure I don't need to tell you this but do not approach these ships. The Russians have been quite aggressive in keeping snooping eyes away. Finally, we've also seen an increase in Russian bombers in the region, with both Bears and Blackjacks entering Syrian airspace over the last week. So in summary, Russian resolve to continue supporting Syria appears to remain very strong and they will be a significant continuing presence in Syria for the foreseeable future".

"Moving away from the Russians, the SIA are on the verge of defeat in Raqqa, with victory expected to be declared within days. However victory in Raqqa and victory over the SIA are two different things. The conventional threat from the SIA as a military force is all but spent, but as an asymmetric threat the SIA are likely to give us all headaches in theater going forwards. Reports of minor SIA attacks are widespread across eastern Syria and even in the suburbs of Damascus. These attacks are mostly confined to either small groups of dismounts with small arms or technicals. We believe the SIA are pretty much out of operational heavy equipment at this stage".

"Finally let's look at Hezbollah, they are continuing to operate drones over the Lebanese border, which we believe are continuing to support Syrian targeting of SDF movements down the Homs to Yabrud road. There are also indications of widespread Hezbollah activity in the border area, potentially a precursor to a more direct involvement by Hezbollah in the conflict".

Norris' briefing ended, and Popeye thanked him as he left the briefing room. Settling back into position behind the podium Popeye began to speak.

"Ok then let's get back to business. First a squadron update for you, I'm pleased to say our numbers here on Operation Cerberus North are being boosted. Our hosts have agreed to squeeze a couple of extra Vipers here on base so tomorrow we'll see both Boomer and Shade fly out and join us..."

A series of low groans and mutters interrupted Popeye, a stern glance down at each of us quickly silenced them.

"...as I was saying, Boomer and Shade will be joining us so I'm sure you'll all be glad of the extra support".

Bug muttered under his breath at a level low enough not to be heard by Popeye but I caught exactly what he said... "Oh man, anyone but that dick". I knew he was referring to Shade, a senior squadron figure who was not popular with almost anyone in the squadron. I gave Bug a quick dig in the ribs to silence him, this wasn't the time or place.

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Popeye continued, "Moving on to today's missions. Since Operation Dominant Enforcer the JSTF has backed off a little while we monitor the impact our strikes had on the Syrians. So the ATO has been all no fly zone patrols and recon in low threat areas, which is why we've been afforded some time off".

"Today the ATO is pretty much the same, but this time at least we're back on it. This afternoon we'll be taking up 3 separate two ships to carry out Weasel patrols of the no fly zones. Pairs will be myself and Rotor, Forrest and Bug and Tank and Ghost. Our patrols will be in support of a series of photo reconnaissance flights over the SDF and SAA frontline. The recon flights will be carried out by the detachment of French Mirage F1s stationed here at Akrotiri".

"Our role will of course be to provide protection to the Mirages should they come under SAM threat during their mission, we will also be available to provide cover against air to air threats should this be required".

"Sir, what's the current level of SAM threat?" asked Bug.

"Our Rivet Joint flights are indicating sporadic SA-6 and SA-8 indications at the forward edge of Syrian territory. All current intel points to a few surviving mobile SAMs in this region, however the Syrians appear reluctant to turn them on for long...I think they worked out what happens when they do".

"Learned the hard way," Rotor declared, grinning.

"Indeed they have," Popeye responded, "So let's make sure we remind them of those lessons should they attempt to get involved in the mission today, but don't get complacent. Intel may assess a low threat level around the FEBA, but we know from experience how many SAMs the Syrians have stashed away around Damascus...and most of them highly mobile so stay alert at all times".

"Copy boss," Rotor replied.

Popeye continued, "And remember that Palmyra airbase is still fully operational, with an active SA-6".

"Maybe one day they'll finally let us take it out", Tank commented., referring to the fact that the Syrians were using important historical ruins as cover for their forces around Palmyra.

Popeye then moved on to brief each flight plan in more detail.

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My flight will be operating under the callsign Sword 2, we will be flying the second patrol of the day, in support of the recon flight Mastiff 3.

Popeye was keen to stress that we should all be familiar with the SPINS here at Akrotiri and encouraged us to take one last look at them before we step to the jets. The Akrotiri airspace can be very busy given the proximity to major commercial air routes into Cyprus so it is really important we fully understand the procedures out here.

Upon takeoff it is vital we maintain our runway heading until we are feet wet and clear of the Akrotiri peninsula - there are obstacles both north and south of the runway heading.

As we get airborne we will contact Akrotiri Departure, who will vector us to one of Akrotiri's three navigation points; Mezus, Anane or Irefa. Upon our arrival at the relevant nav point (waypoints 1-3), Akrotiri will hand us off to the theater ABCCC 'Sentinel' for command and control. We will check in with Sentinel for a mission update before proceeding on mission to waypoint 4.

We will rendezvous with Mastiff 3 at waypoint 4, before proceeding through waypoint 5 and into the 'Silver Corridor', an authorized route into Syria through Lebanon that has been negotiated with the Lebanese Government. We must not deviate from our assigned course through the Silver Corridor as the Russian naval base at Tartus lies just 15nm north and the Lebanese have not cleared us to fly anywhere other than the designated airspace. It is also important we maintain our assigned altitude due to the potential threat from Hezbollah forces at lower levels.

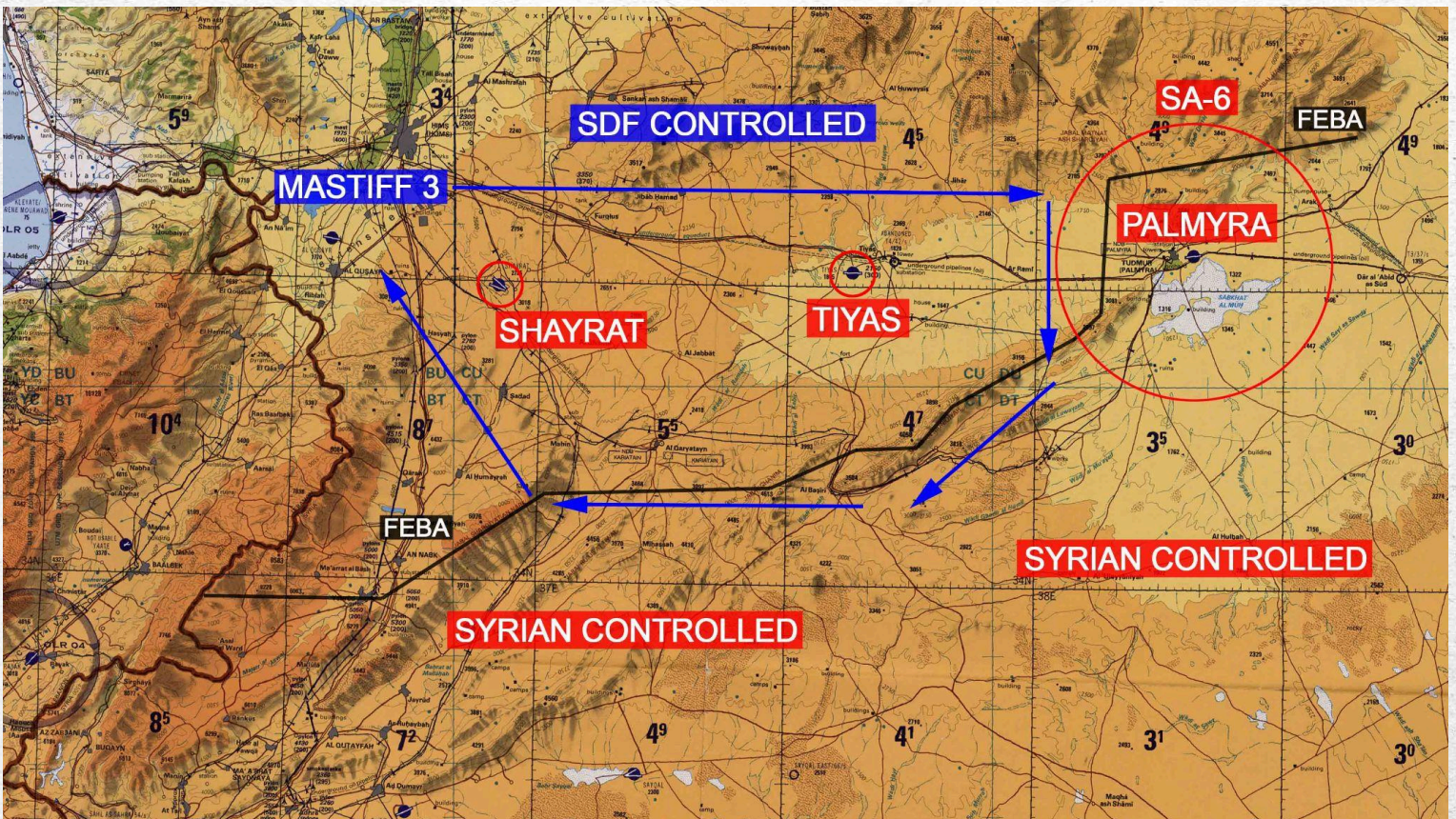
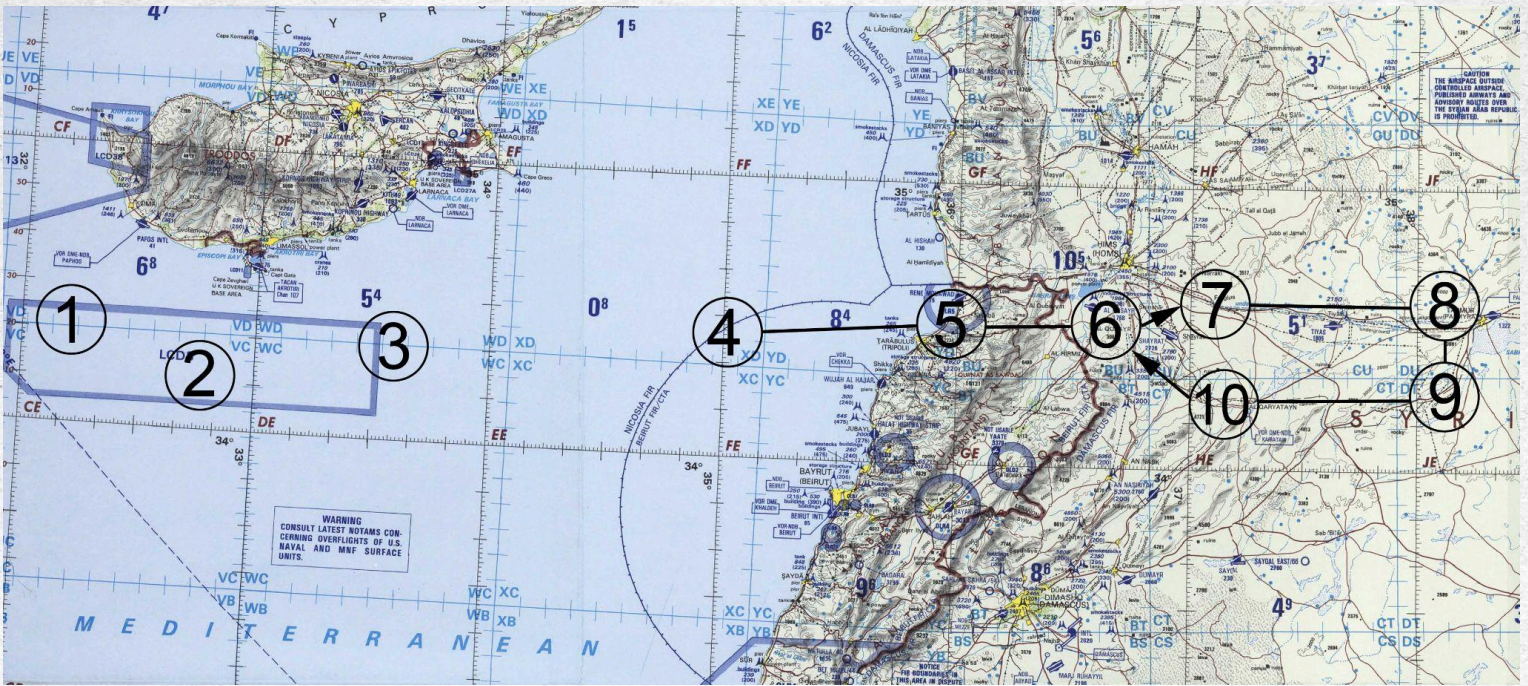
Once clear of the Silver Corridor at waypoint 6, we will fence in and begin our patrol, mirroring the route of Mastiff 3. We will track west to east from waypoints 7 to 8, before turning south for waypoint 9 while ensuring we keep clear of the SA-6 MEZ at Palmyra. We will then push back west from waypoint 9 to waypoint 10, During the east to west track Mastiff will be operating over the FEBA between the SDF and SAA and will be at their most vulnerable. At this point I should be ready to react with HARMS should they come under threat.

Once Mastiff are clear of the threat area at waypoint 10, we will contact Sentinel for clearance back into Silver and push back through waypoints 6 and 5 into the Mediterranean. Once clear of Silver we will proceed back towards Akrotiri, contacting Akrotiri Approach 50nm out from the base. Akrotiri Approach will then direct us back to either Mezus, Anane or Irefa. Once at the assigned nav point we will fly either the Mezus Star, Anane Star or Irefa Star tracks (see SPINS) to the 14nm arc from Akrotiri. We will follow the 14nm arc to the 106 radial for Akrotiri (point Star), at which point Akrotiri Approach will either instruct us to enter the traffic pattern or clear us to descend to our initial point for the assigned runway. Once at our initial point we will contact Akrotiri Tower for landing clearance, as we land we should again observe the base's procedures on minimum altitudes and restricted areas outlined in the SPINS.

Loadout today will be two HARMS for myself for SAM suppression, Bug will be carrying two GBU-38s in case we need to precisely target specific threats. We will both also be hauling AIM-120s, AIM-9Xs (available for us at last!), two external tanks and the ECM, TGP and HTS pods. Bingo from the furthest point of our flight plan is 5,500 lb.



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Popeye also had a few other important points to emphasize. Friendly SDF forces are deployed in the areas around both Shayrat and Tiyas as they press their attacks so we should avoid engaging targets at these bases to avoid the risk of hitting friendly units. There should be no significant threats present at these bases as all major SAM systems have been put out of action and only SHORAD remains.

The Mirage F1s we are escorting are from an older generation of aircraft, lacking both data link and TACAN so this will make it harder to monitor their position as we support them with our patrol. It will be important that we pay attention to our flight plan and speeds to ensure we remain in a position to assist them if required.

Palmyra airbase is a controversial target, still left untouched despite all nearby bases having been attacked heavily. This is down to two reasons; the chemical weapons bunkers located near the base, and the culturally significant ruins and UNESCO world heritage site in close proximity. Collateral damage to either are totally unacceptable to the JSTF, and so we are not currently permitted to fire on targets in this area unless there is an imminent danger to life. This means the SA-6 at Palmyra finds itself the luckiest SAM around and keeps surviving to fight another day. Should we get fired upon by this SAM we can return fire with HARMS if the situation warrants, but we should be prepared to justify our actions when we get back should that happen. But as Popeye stressed, we should not be in it's MEZ to start with and instead should be paying close attention to our position.

We ended the briefing discussing the threats. All known SAM positions in the vicinity of the no fly zone have been destroyed (except Palmyra), however there is still a threat from the ample supply of mobile SAM systems the Syrians still have stashed around the country. We should be alert to the presence of these around the frontline areas (the southern portion of Mastiff's route). These are most likely to be SA-6s or SA-8s, but we have seen SA-11s in use several times by the Syrians and we know the Russians have been attempting to resupply these so we should be prepared. As always we should expect SHORAD around Syrian bases and positions, with our experience in Syria so far telling us this will probably be a mix of low, medium and high altitude AAA, plus MANPADS, SA-9, SA-13 and SA-8. Syrian air isn't expected to get involved today, based on their usual reluctance to go head to head with us, but we should be prepared in case they change their behavior. Most likely threats are Mig-21, Mig-23 and Mig-29.

With the threat brief complete, Popeye asked for questions, and Tank spoke up.

"What about Russian involvement?" he asked, "Any guidance if they attempt to interfere with our missions?"

"Ignore them," replied Popeye, "Don't let them get in your head, they're still trying to distract us, put us off our game and at times downright intimidate us. Keep your focus on the mission and let them play their games on their own".

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With that the brief was over. As we left the briefing room, Bug, Rotor and myself discussed the reinforcements that were coming to join us.

The arrival of Lt. Glenn Robinson aka 'Boomer' was good news, he's a lively and outgoing Marine on exchange with the air force and was a lot of fun to have around...in addition to being a decent stick.

Major Eric Malik, callsign 'Shade' was another matter however. Shade has a huge ego, lacks respect for fellow pilots and despite (in our opinions) questionable talent has seemed to continue advancing his career. No one likes flying with him and we all hated the debrief with him even more as more often than not he would try and make us carry the weight for anything and everything that went wrong.

But there was nothing we could do about any of that, so we re-focused on preparing for the mission and making sure we brought Mastiff safely home again. Take off is 10:20 Zulu, 13:20 local...nice way to spend a summer's afternoon.