

LAST OUT - WEASELS OVER SYRIA II

August 14th, 2013.

Well it's turning into another eventful week in Syria. Our lane SEAD mission two days ago was straightforward enough, although the extra SA-6 we encountered complicated things a little. But the mission was overshadowed by the big event of the day, that being the long anticipated attack by Hezbollah forces into SDF territory. We've still only received limited data up to now, but as our detachment reported to a morning briefing we were anticipating a full brief from Major Norris.

The walk to the briefing room was a damp one. Conditions have remained poor as the forecasted storm rolled in, the tail end of which was still causing us some discomfort.

As we entered the briefing room Popeye and Shade greeted us, Popeye's trademark joviality was somewhat reduced this morning, 'an ominous sign' noted Bug as we sat.

Once we were seated - with wet clothing still clinging to us, and small pools of water forming around our feet - Popeye invited the Akrotiri OMT to deliver the met brief. The weather tech noted with no small degree of irony that we were still feeling the after effects of the recent storm. Some stunted chuckles emerged from the room as they did so. The OMT told us the worst of the weather is expected to blow over this morning, but clouds and wind are expected to linger throughout the day, with an overcast forecast at around 15,000 feet.

After the OMT departed, Major Norris took to the podium and began to deliver his intel brief.

"Morning everyone" he began, "This is going to be a busy one, it's been quite the 48 hours in the STO. There's a lot to go through so let's start by knocking down the simple stuff. So to begin, let's look up around Raqqa. Here the SDF and YPG are reporting Raqqa as finally being cleared of SIA. Good news for sure, but as you know, the SIA are proving particularly nebulous and that is far from a knockout blow. SIA terror attacks continue around Syria, and last night we saw further attacks in both Homs and Aleppo, with some unconfirmed reports of attacks around the border with Lebanon, which as you know is already an unstable place right now. The SIA's current MO appears to be the infiltration of an area, often disguised amongst the many refugees moving across the country, before launching an attack of some kind".

"To what end?" asked Tank.

"Good question", replied Norris, "Their ultimate goal is unclear, attacks are against all sides, SDF, YPG, Syrian loyalists, JSTF. At this point we don't think there's any coordinated effort to these attacks, more likely small cells of fighters pushed out of their former eastern territory are exacting as much revenge as they can, on anyone they can. We are obviously keeping a very close eye on these activities. One last important announcement regarding the SIA - an SIA cell was stopped overnight in Turkey, they were equipped with significant weaponry, their target was unknown, but this is a concerning development".

"Oh man, now I'm really glad to be out of H4", remarked Rotor.

Norris continued, "Moving away from the SIA, the SDF are reporting the capture of Shayrat and Tiyas airbases."

"About time" commented Bug, the rest of us nodded in agreement.

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Norris carried on, "Now moving onto even more serious matters, and there's a lot to unpack here. First the Israelis, overnight we saw Israeli aircraft join the fight for the first time. The IAF hit several targets in southern Lebanon and southern Syria, they're keeping quiet about the exact targets but we believe these to be both SIA and Hezbollah. We are not yet clear if this was in response to a specific threat or for another reason".

"Now I have some other major breaking news out of Syria, and I'm not talking about Hezbollah".

That caught us all by surprise.

"This is hot off the press, and we're still receiving all the details, but it's a significant development. Late yesterday the Russians began a massive airlift operation and we have reports of numerous Russian heavy transport aircraft arriving in Syria. Some have flown straight into Damascus, some have stopped at Bassel Al Assad airport, possibly to pick up equipment that can then be moved south. As I said the details are still coming in, but our initial top line assessment is that the Russians are undertaking a mass resupply effort to the Syrians".

I spoke up, "So they might be moving those SAMs that have just been delivered by sea?".

"That's a distinct possibility" replied Norris. "It appears that the Russians have made the decision to take action to stabilize the Syrian government's deteriorating position, we will have to wait to see how this development will influence the fighting. Be aware though that JSTF air is reporting the Russian air force is aggressively policing the airspace it's using for it's transports...so keep your distance from them out there".

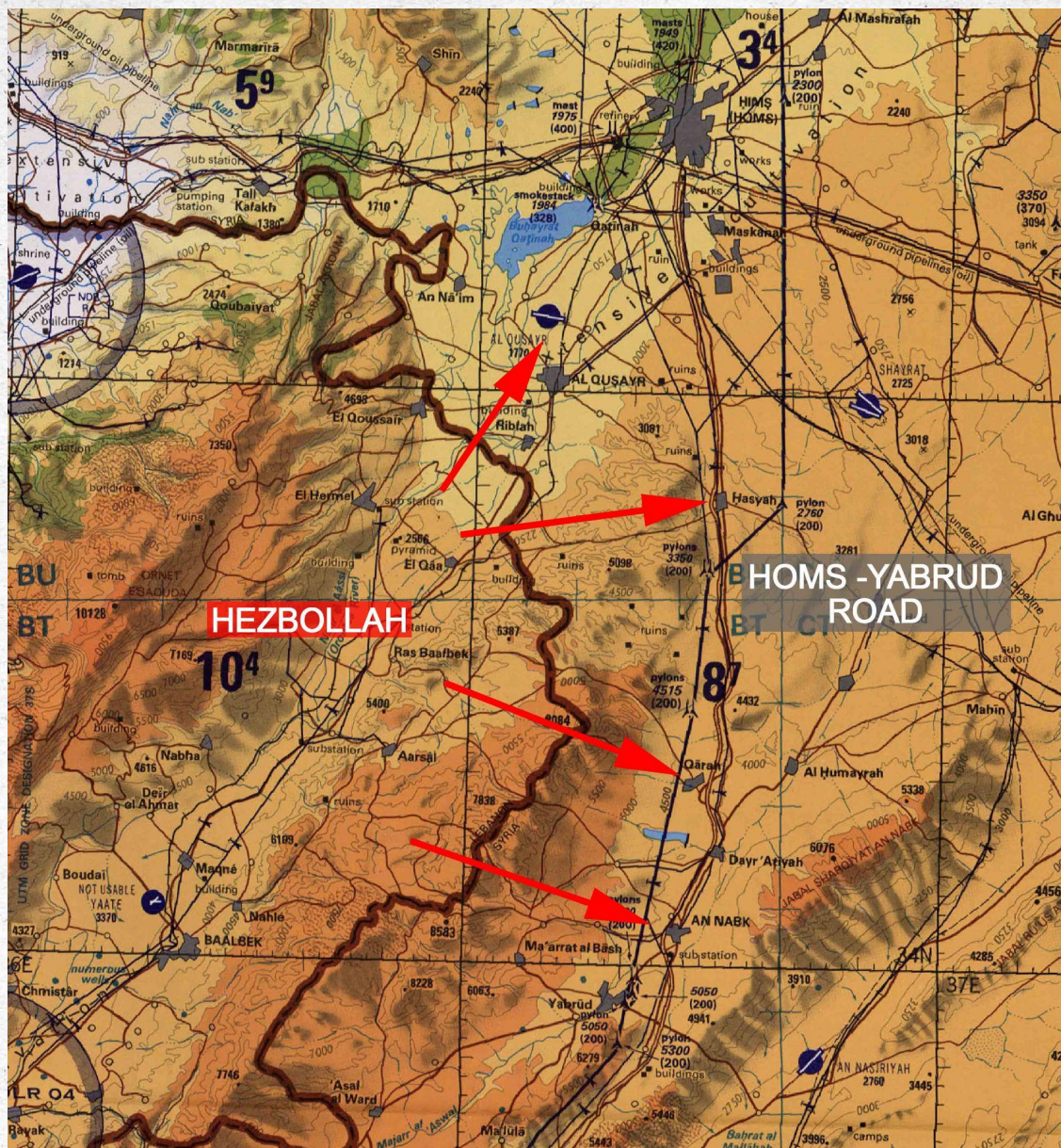
"Heed the Major's words" said Popeye, "Let's try not to start World War Three quite yet".

Norris continued, "Now if we take this latest development in conjunction with the other big news - that being Hezbollah's attack into Syria and things start to look very interesting in Syria right now. Possible coordination between the Russians and Syria? We don't know yet, but clearly the two things combined create big problems for the SDF".

"So turning to the Hezbollah attack...", Major Norris clicked a slide onto the briefing screen.

"Hezbollah fighters began moving out of the Bekaa valley and positions in the Anti-Lebanon mountains just over 24 hours ago. Covered by rocket fire from the multitude of rocket systems that Hezbollah possesses, columns of fighters supported by heavy MGs - typically on technicals - began attacking along a 30 mile front. This attack puts them straight into the SDF flank, and is focused on these areas..."

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"The Hezbollah attack appears focused on cutting the Homs to Yabrud road. Which if they are successful in, will isolate the SDF forces in the south from their supply lines to the north. They have also attacked towards the town of Al Qusayr and the adjoining airbase. If they take Al Qusayr they will have a strong base in Syria from which to mount attacks further north, possibly at Homs itself. As I said...this is a major problem for the SDF".

"While it's not for me to speak as to the operational strategy going forwards, I do feel it wise to give you a refresher in Hezbollah's capabilities. Hezbollah has been very well funded, trained and equipped over the years, by both Iran and Syria. Estimates are that they have at least 20,000 fighters available at any one time, although some regional specialists believe this number is significantly higher. They operate primarily as a light fighting force, using asymmetric tactics, although they are not afraid of a stand up fight when required, the IDF has discovered this on several occasions. Equipment wise they operate little in the way of armor, the odd IFV can be found, but you can usually expect to see trucks and pickups for transports, and technicals for heavier mounted weapons. Hezbollah's specialty though is their rockets. They contain an arsenal of over 10,000 rockets of all shapes and sizes, from Grad MLRS systems, to cruder launchers fitted to

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pick up trucks and even locally made man portable rocket tubes. In terms of air defenses, they have some capability here as well, built up over the years spent preparing for the next clash with Israel. So expect plenty of AAA, a lot of it truck mounted 23mm systems, but they also have enough 57mm AAA to cause a problem at higher altitudes. In terms of SAMs we already knew that they had some older SA-8 systems given to them by the Syrians some time ago. The presence of several SA-6 systems was also suspected, and was confirmed when they went active in support of the offensive. The number of these systems is unknown, but we don't expect them to be particularly high, probably in low single digits. And of course expect MANPADs".

At this point Boomer spoke up, "Tank and me went out to support as the attack started. We saw three different SA-6s emitting, the operators appeared well trained, showed good radar discipline and didn't just sit around waiting to eat a HARM".

"Yep, most likely trained in either Syria or Iran", replied Major Norris.

"So honor the threat" Popeye stated emphatically.

Major Norris' intel briefing was then ended, and he made way for Popeye, who began to brief our missions for the day.

"Ok then pilots listen up, we've got a busy day ahead of us. The SDF are under real pressure south of Homs, Hezbollah have them on the back foot and are at risk of pushing them back north. This would have serious consequences for the SDF forces further south. However, the word has come from up high that the JSTF will not allow this to happen, so you know what that means... airpower...and lots of it".

"The CAOC is therefore ordering an increase in the number of CAS missions flown in support of the SDF. These missions will be focusing on the area between Homs and Yabrud, where the most intense fighting is taking place. In addition to CAS, the JSTF will be carrying out interdiction in the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon, stemming the flow of Hezbollah fighters and supplies to the front line. Now as Major Norris already reminded us, Hezbollah has a number of SA-8 and SA-6 SAMs in their possession. So as you might expect, our role will be to remove these from play and create a more permissive environment for our operations".

As Popeye spoke we all listened intently, letting this news sink in. Finally Rotor spoke up.

"So we're going into Lebanon and actively targeting Hezbollah? Talk about opening a can of worms".

"Big risk of further escalation", Ghost commented.

"What about the Lebanese Government?" I asked, "Thought we had restricted airspace south of the Silver Corridor".

Popeye responded, "The Bekaa Valley and surrounding area is controlled by Hezbollah. I don't think the Lebanese Government is all that opposed to having the capabilities of Hezbollah reduced, so for the time being they've agreed to allow us access to this area. Besides, I doubt anyone gave them much choice".

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"Our mission then will be to target any Hezbollah SAM systems within the Bekaa valley and east of the Anti-Lebanon mountains. Our AOR will cover the Bekaa Valley from Al Qusayr down to Rayak, and then out east to the Homs-Yabrud MSR as far south as An Nasiriyah airbase. This area is roughly 50 miles in length and 30 miles wide, and encompasses the Anti-Lebanon mountains".

"While we are cleared to operate in the Bekaa Valley, we are not permitted to cross the Lebanon Mountains on the western edge of the valley. Everything west of here is a no fly zone...guess they don't want us buzzing Beirut just yet".

"So throughout today and tonight we will be carrying out strikes against Hezbollah SAM positions, however while on station, should any SAMs threaten a JSTF asset then you will also be required to respond. The aim by the end of the night is the elimination of Hezbollah's SAM capability".

Popeye went on to describe the assigned targets for each flight.

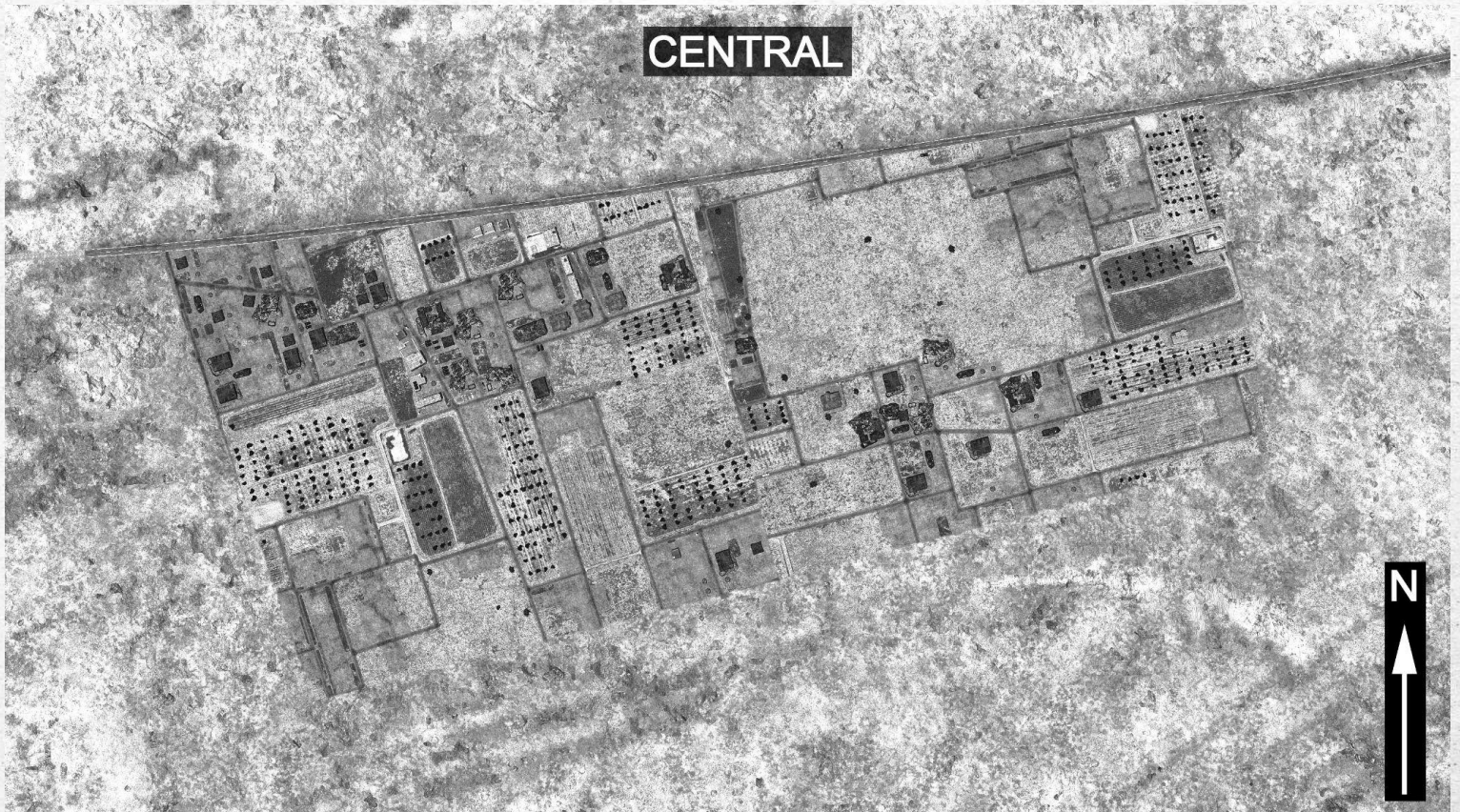
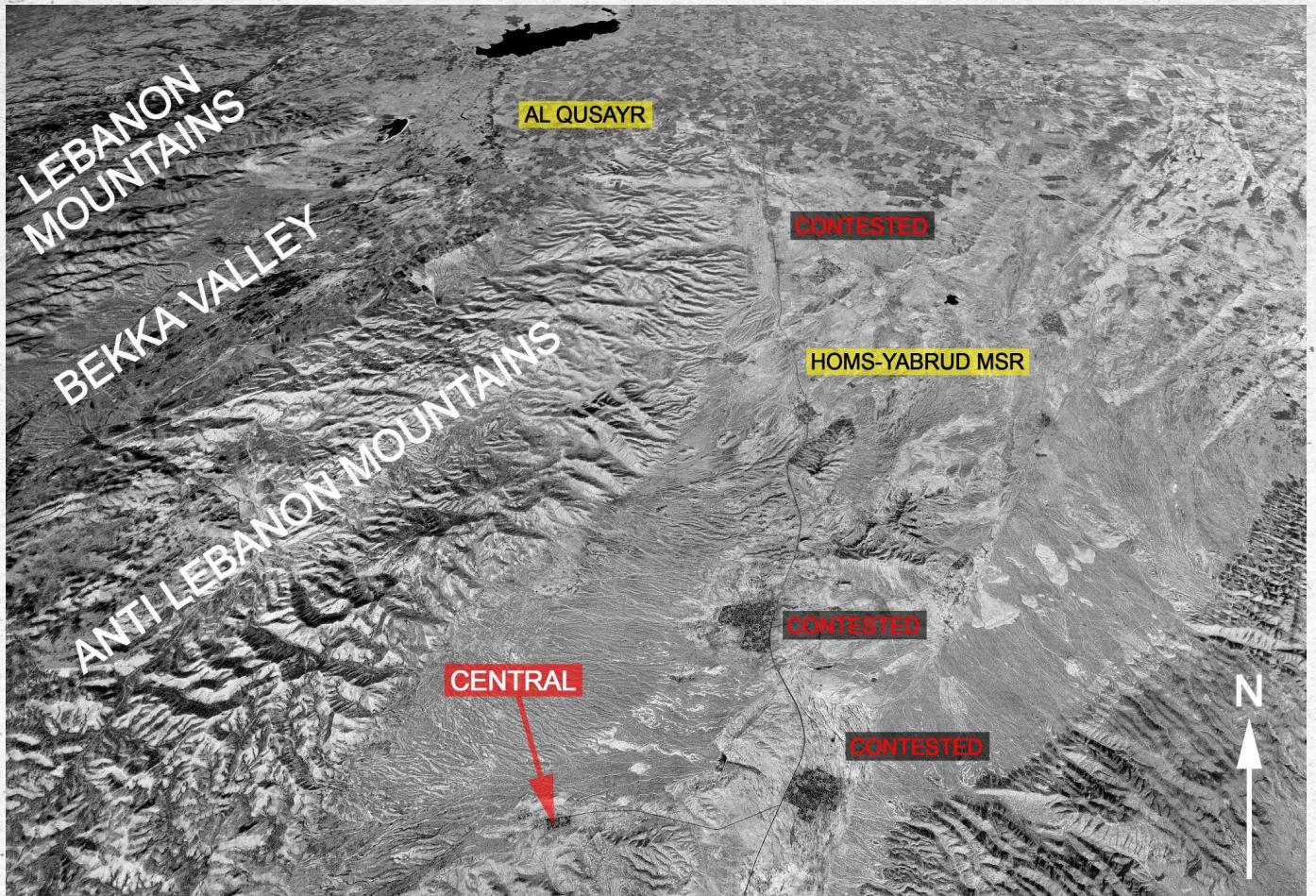
"Forrest and Bug, you will be Sword 2. Your target is an SA-6 position in this location, the village of Al Jarajir - designated Central. Central sits approximately 4 miles west of the MSR and the SA-6's MEZ covers a number of locations in which Hezbollah are currently attacking. The CAOC needs that airspace making safe so we can get CAS platforms in there".

"How sure are we on the target location sir?" I asked.

"Debriefs from some of our CAS missions have reported an SA-6 in this location, and this has been corroborated by Vacuum as well. Debriefs have described a highly disciplined team of SAM operators, showing good control of their emissions, popping up to engage us, before quickly shutting down again. At least 4 SAMs were launched from this location yesterday and the CAOC wants not just the SAM but also it's crew removed from the battlefield".

"Copy that sir" Bug replied.

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"The SA-6 is believed to be located within the village itself, we're pretty confident in that conclusion as there's nothing but desert for at least 4 miles in every direction and nowhere else to hide. We don't have any solid intel on the battery composition, but we don't expect to see large battery sizes so anticipate a radar plus one or two TELS max. As you can see in these pictures, Central is largely rubble at this point. The village has previously been fought over by the SDF and the Syrians so by now it's pretty much abandoned and you won't need to worry about collateral damage. There are however plenty of hiding places amongst all the rubble so depending on where they are stashing the radar and TELS you might need to pick your shots carefully to avoid obstructions. Destruction of the entire battery is the desired outcome".

"Once the target is destroyed, if you have fuel and weapons remaining you should check in with Vacuum to receive details of any further targets they may have for you".

"Remember that the southern end of our AOR terminates at Rayak airport and An Nasiriyah airbase. Go further south than here and you start to rub up against the Damascus SAM belt, this is not a job for today so keep north of here".

The briefing continued as Popeye discussed the targets for each of the day's missions. Once he had outlined them all each flight started to break the mission flow down into more detail.

Departing Akrotiri, me and Bug will proceed to waypoint 4 and onto the Silver Corridor at waypoint 5. Approaching Silver we will fence in, ensuring we are prepared for any SAM threats in northern Lebanon. While we should follow Sentinel's instructions for our entry altitude into Silver, we should also be aware that due to the conflict on the ground below, the minimum altitude in Silver has been set at 25,000 feet MSL. Aircraft on operations around Al Qusayr will observe a ceiling of 24,000 feet to deconflict with any aircraft transiting the Silver Corridor.

At waypoint 6 we will turn southeast to exit the Silver Corridor and push to waypoint 7. Our route will take us east of the Hezbollah/SDF frontline, ensuring we keep a safe distance from threats over the front and the Bekaa Valley and to deconflict from any JSTF CAS operations.

From waypoint 7 we will push south to our IP at waypoint 8. This is 20 miles northeast of Central and will provide a safe location from which to scout the area if needed. Once we have identified and destroyed the target, we will check in with Vacuum for new targets if we are able. When ready to RTB we should return to waypoint 6 and re-enter the Silver corridor as directed by Sentinel.

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Bingo fuel is set at 3,100 lb, which gives us 4,500 lb to use over the target area, a benefit of the shorter hop to this AOR.

I will be carrying a load out of 2 GBU-38s and 2 EO Mavericks, Bug will be equipped with 2 HARMS for SAM suppression.

As discussed, the primary threats will be Hezbollah SA-6s and SA-8s, but we should also expect 23mm and 57mm AAA in Hezbollah controlled areas. MANPADs should also be considered a potential threat whenever we are within their engagement envelope. Given the cloud cover expected today we should be alert to AAA and MANPAD threats whenever we descend beneath it to search for targets.

Although not a direct threat, the possibility of encountering Russian fighters protecting their transports is something we need to remain vigilant about.

Once the briefing ended and Bug and I had finished preparing for the mission, we emerged from the briefing room to find the rain had finally stopped. Hoping this was a good sign, and glad to not have to get wet again we stepped to the jets, takeoff is 09:35 Zulu.