

# FIRST IN - WEASELS OVER SYRIA

19th July, 2013

Our mission to protect the B-1 strike was three days ago. Just three days - yet things in Syria have evolved again in that short time as the conflict between the Syrian government forces and the SDF continues to escalate, and threatens to suck the JSTF even further in. In addition to this we had a close call yesterday at H4 when a limited rocket attack was launched at the base. The rockets landed in the open desert and no-one was hurt. We believe the attack originated from somewhere in southeast Syria, but who fired them has not yet been established.

This topic was still dominating our conversations as we entered the H4 briefing room early this morning. Taking our seats we fell quiet and listened as Captain Johnson briefed the weather. He didn't have much to say and there have been no changes to the recent fine weather. Calm winds, clear skies and high temperatures are set to continue a little longer it seems.

After Captain Johnson had left Major Norris stepped up to deliver his intel brief. He had a lot to say.

First the Major addressed yesterday's rocket attack on H4. It is still not clear who carried out this attack. The rockets used were Russian built, but given both the SIA and the Syrians use Russian made equipment this doesn't confirm anything. Neither does the attack origin, the projected launch point being in southeastern Syria, in an area contested by both the SIA and SAA. However the Major did acknowledge concerns that whoever was behind the attack created a problem. If the SIA are in striking range of targets in Jordan this will create a major issue for both the Jordanians and ourselves. If the SAA are beginning to strike targets within Jordan then this will be another dangerous escalation. It was also acknowledged that the presence of our detachment is a likely reason for the attack, by now it's an open secret that we're operating out of H4.

Away from the border the fighting at Yabrud continues, and continues to suck in resources from both the Syrians and the SDF. The JSTF strikes in support of the SDF at Yabrud have continued, with limited success. The Syrians have proven resourceful at finding ways to attack Yabrud, including the use of barrel bombs dropped from helicopters, and longer range rockets out of Damascus. The JSTF ultimatum to cease attacks on Yabrud has come and gone, resulting in a large strike on An Nasiriyah airbase 2 days ago. Norris then revealed that the JSTF has identified a Syrian SCUD site being prepared at Khalkhalah airbase, this is the target of a JSTF mission underway as we speak. Interestingly this attack was allowed to use Israeli airspace to enter Syria, if this will result in ramifications in the region remains to be seen.

In the north of Syria, the SDF and SIA continue with costly, close quarters fighting in Raqqa, this battle of attrition is expected to drag on for some time yet.

The Russians continue to harass JSTF aircraft in theater, we have seen this several times ourselves as the Russians loiter near the border, ready to pay us close attention as we cross into Syria, and no doubt making sure the Syrians are well aware that the Weasels are entering the country. Russian air strikes have also resumed, although in limited fashion so far, with SDF targets near Yabrud and on the Homs road being targets.

Finally Norris mentioned Hezbollah again, with reports that they are fielding UAVS high above the Lebanese border. It is believed these drones are providing ISR to the Syrian forces, and may be providing targeting for air strikes and bombardments.

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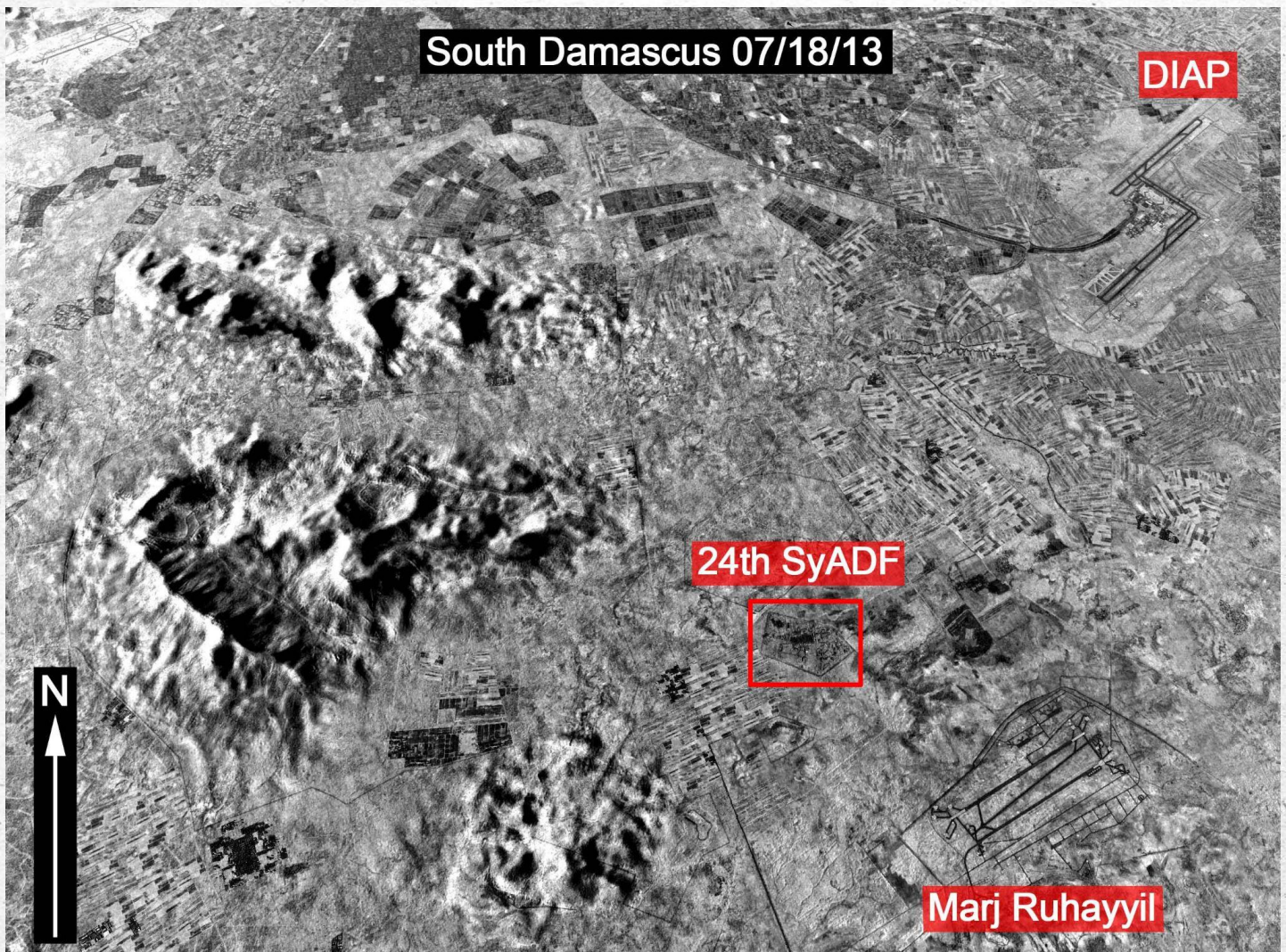
Norris concluded his briefing and the Major departed, making way for Popeye to begin briefing today's mission.

Popeye began, "Ok pilots, listen up. As Major Norris said, the Syrian government has not heeded the JSTF's warnings to stop attacks on civilian areas. In response to this the JSTF has begun a series of escalating retaliatory strikes to either bring the Syrians in line, or if need be, cripple it's ability to fight".

"Needless to say, we will be playing a vital role in these strikes. Our mission today will be essential in enabling the JSTF to penetrate deeper into the airspace surrounding Damascus, and will pave the way for the next set of major strikes".

"Our target is the 24th Syrian Air Defense Brigade HQ and the attached sector operations center for the south of Syria. The target is located in an underground bunker, at a facility 10 miles south of Damascus. Marj Ruhayyil airbase lies 2 miles to the southeast of the target and Damascus International Airport 6 miles to the northeast".

You could have heard a pin drop as we all absorbed this news...this was in severely contested airspace.

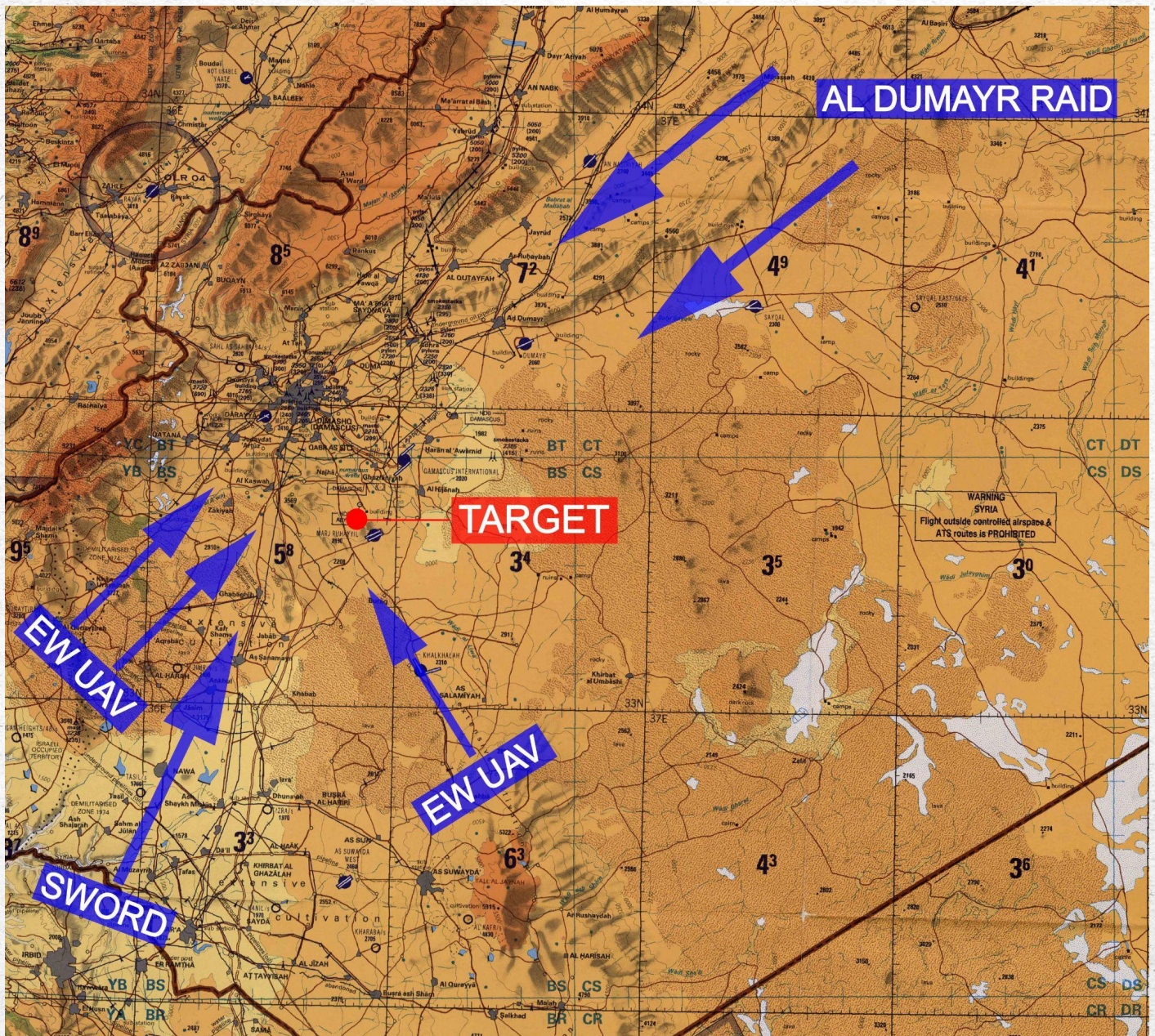


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"Now I know what you're all thinking, this is going downtown and then some. This will be very dangerous airspace, however we do have some aces up our sleeve".

"At 15:25 Zulu a large diversionary raid will begin on Al Dumayr airbase, 13 miles northeast of Damascus, this will hopefully draw the attention of the numerous SAM sites protecting Damascus. As this begins the UAVs we've been sitting on here at H4 will finally be put into play. These are old Predator UAVs, but they contain some major modifications and have been repurposed for electronic warfare. The Preds will push towards Damascus and sit in the areas with the densest threats and carry out a *stand-in jam*. As you know this form of jamming can be highly effective and should buy us enough time to push in and destroy the targets before the Syrian's manage to ID and take out the jammers. A supporting, stand-off jam from Spartan's Growlers will also be carried out simultaneously."

"As all this plays out, we will slip in un-noticed from the south, jumping over the Jordanian border near Irbid".

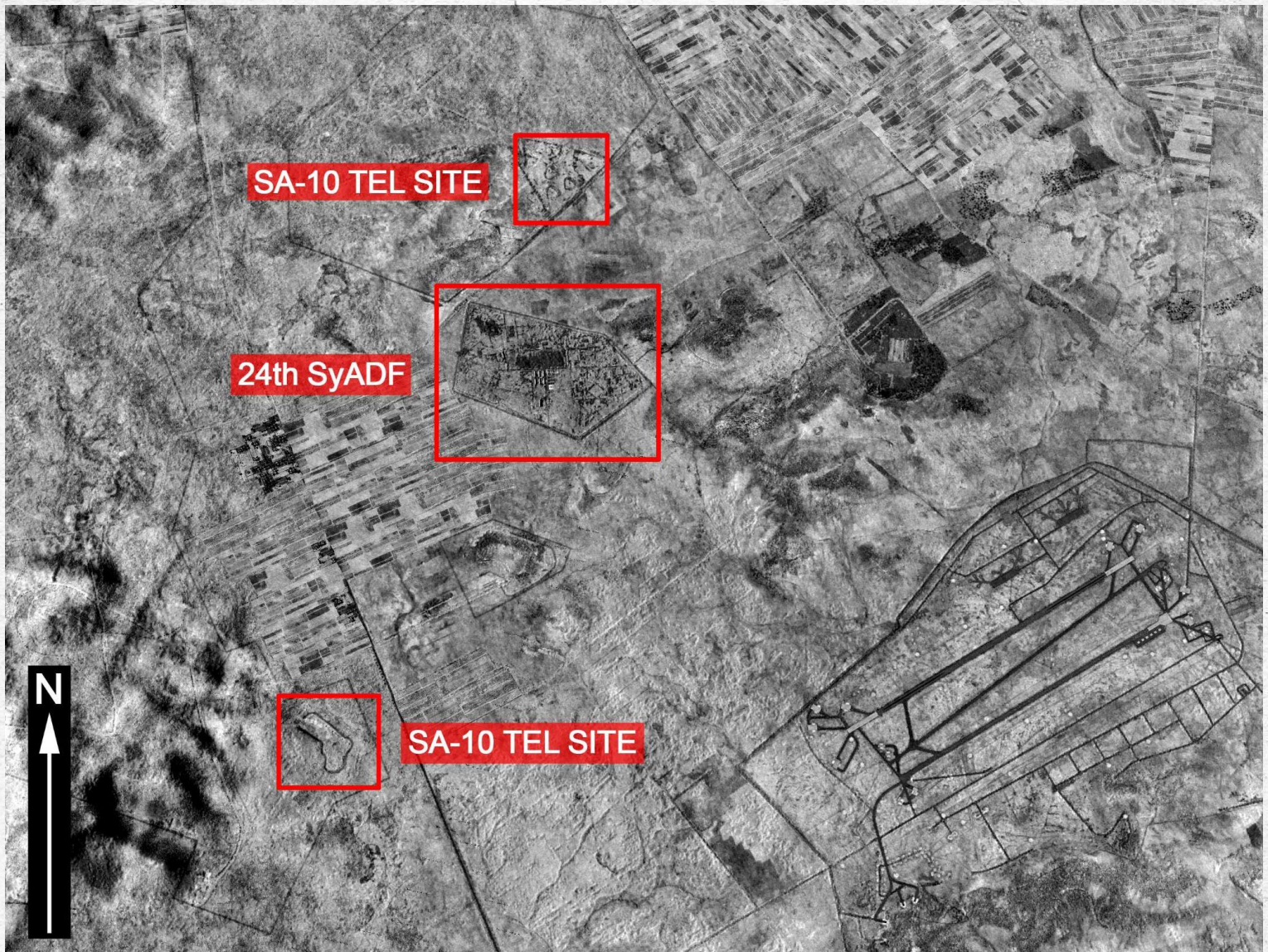


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"We will once again be operating as a 6 pack of Weasels, with three flights of two. Rotor will be with me as Sword 1, Forrest and Bug are Sword 2, Tank and Ghost - Sword 3. Forrest and Bug will be the strikers on this one, my flight will suppress the SA-10s in the target area ahead of them, Tank's flight will be holding back ready with their HARMs to suppress pop up threats at Sword 2's request".

"The target is the Sector Operations Centre, in an underground complex at this facility..."

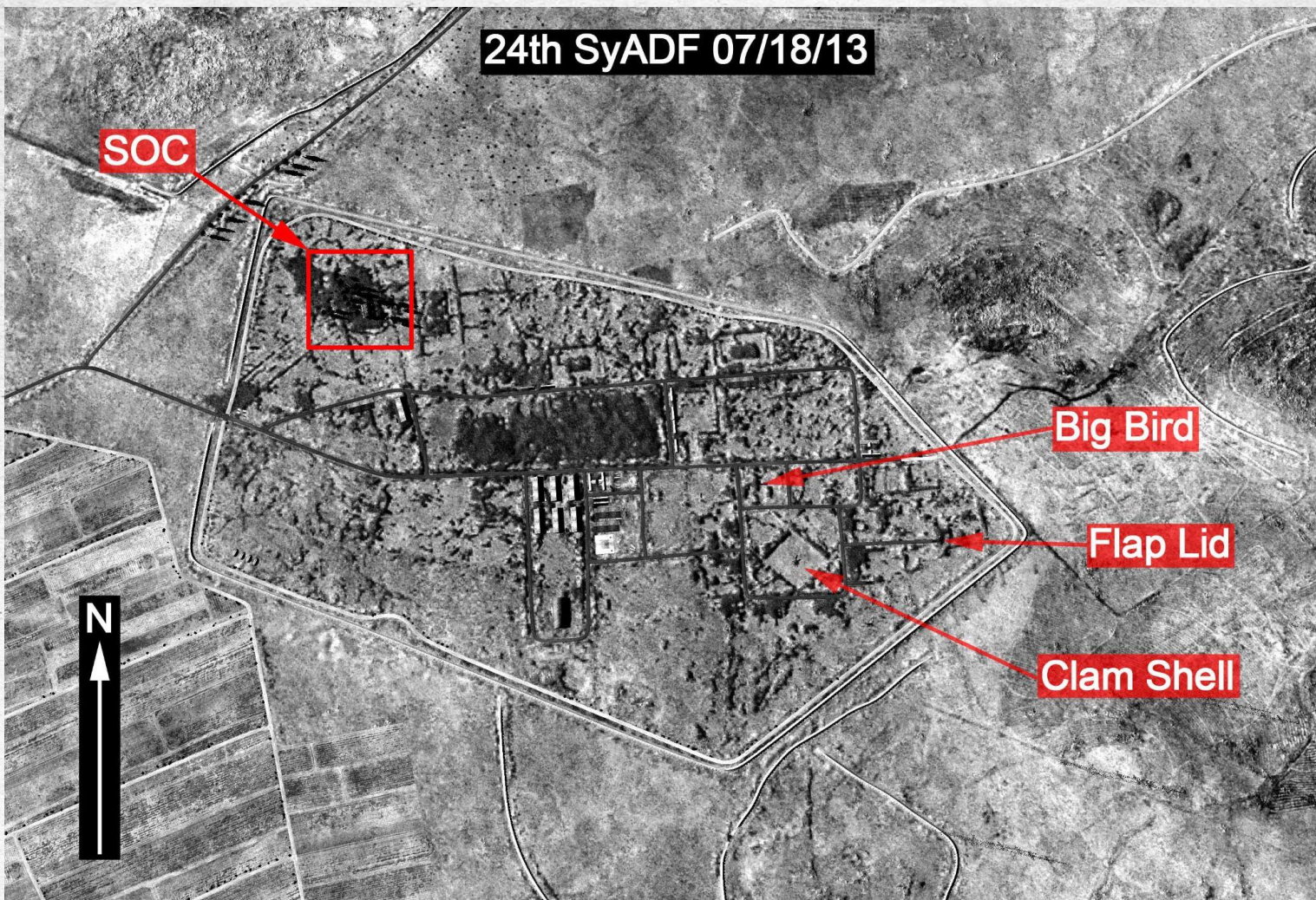
Popeye brought a new slide up on the screen at the front of the room:



"The target site is the 24th SyADF HQ, which houses an SA-10 battery, note it's two TEL positions located north and south of the facility. These radars along with the SA-10 at DIAP will be suppressed by my flight".

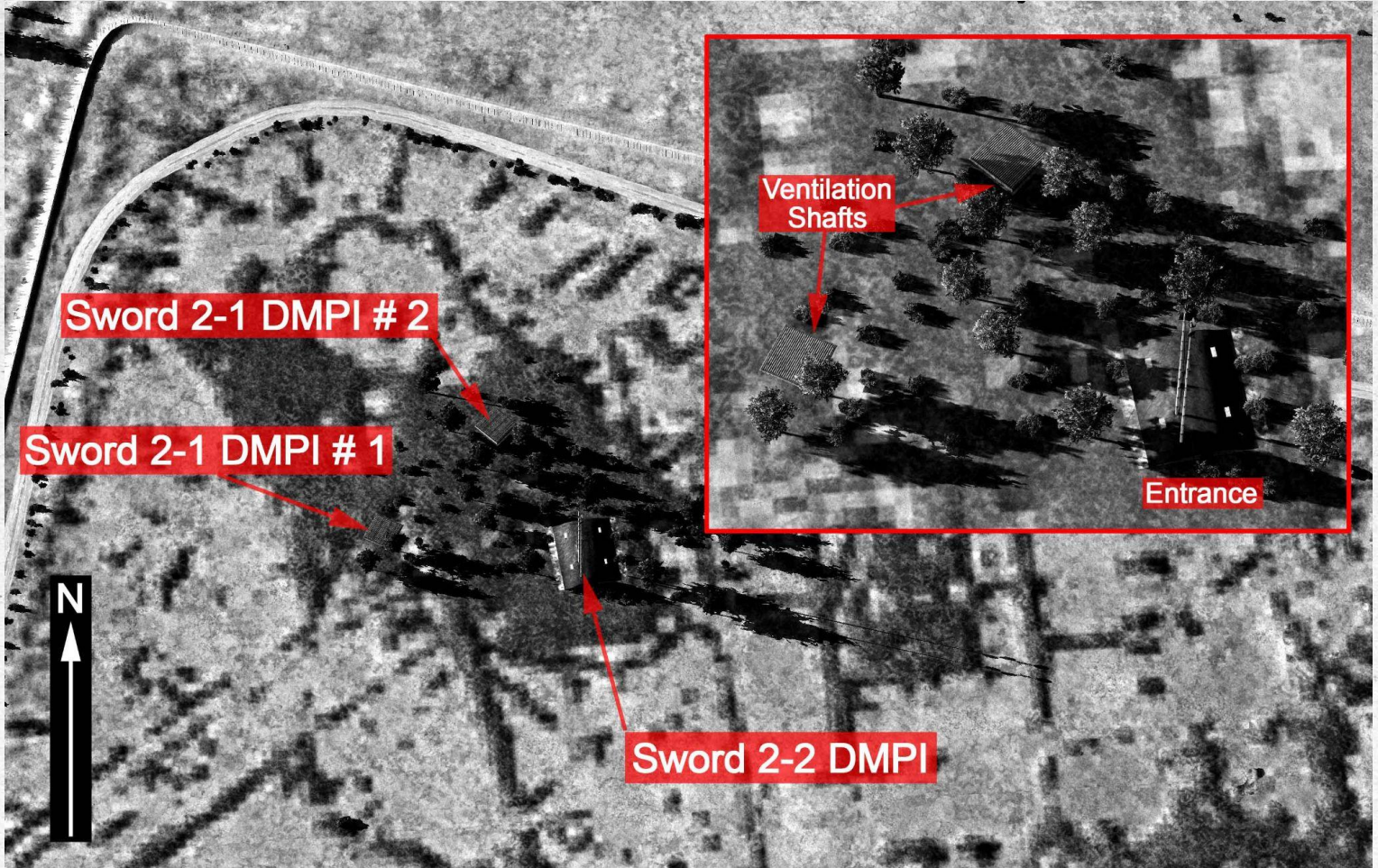
"The Sector Operations Center itself is located in the northwest corner of this facility".

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“The SOC is mostly located underground, however there are several vulnerable points that you will be targeting. Sword 2-2 will hit the bunker entrance, Sword 2-1 will target either of these ventilation shafts, located around 80m west and northwest of the entrance”.

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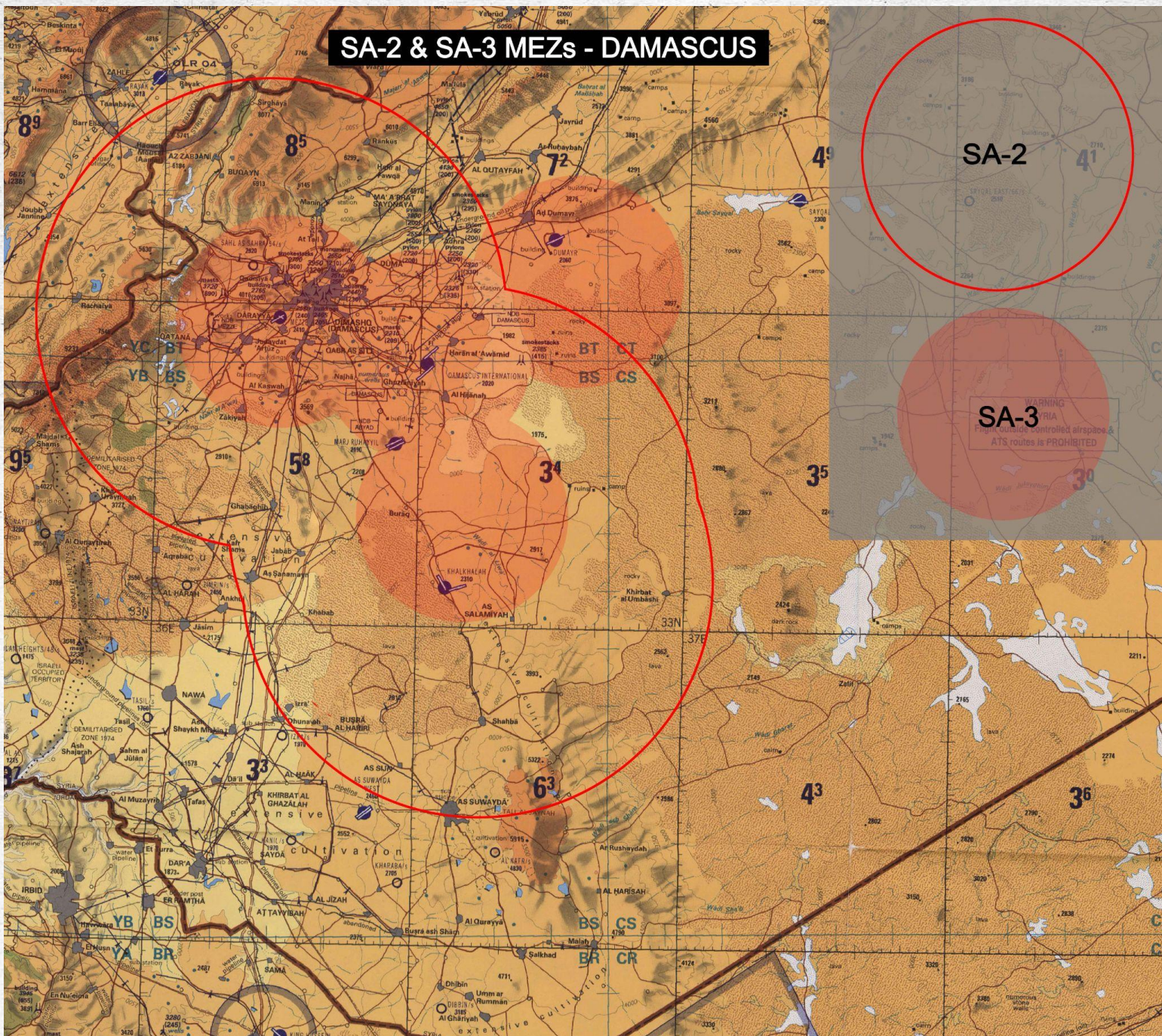
"Given the precision needed for the target, as well as the very unstable electronic environment that might cause issues with the JDAM's GPS signal - you will be utilizing GBU-24s...so make sure you've refreshed your memory on their functionality. Forrest you will only need to hit one of the ventilation shafts, I recommend going with tail fuzing and putting both bombs into one target, but I'll leave the final decision up to you".

"The threat environment will be very dense, this is why we're taking such extreme electronic measures. Within 25 miles of Damascus are at least 18 SAM sites, these are a mix of SA-2, 3, 6, 10 and 11".

Popeye brought up a series of charts highlighting SAM coverage. It was sobering viewing.

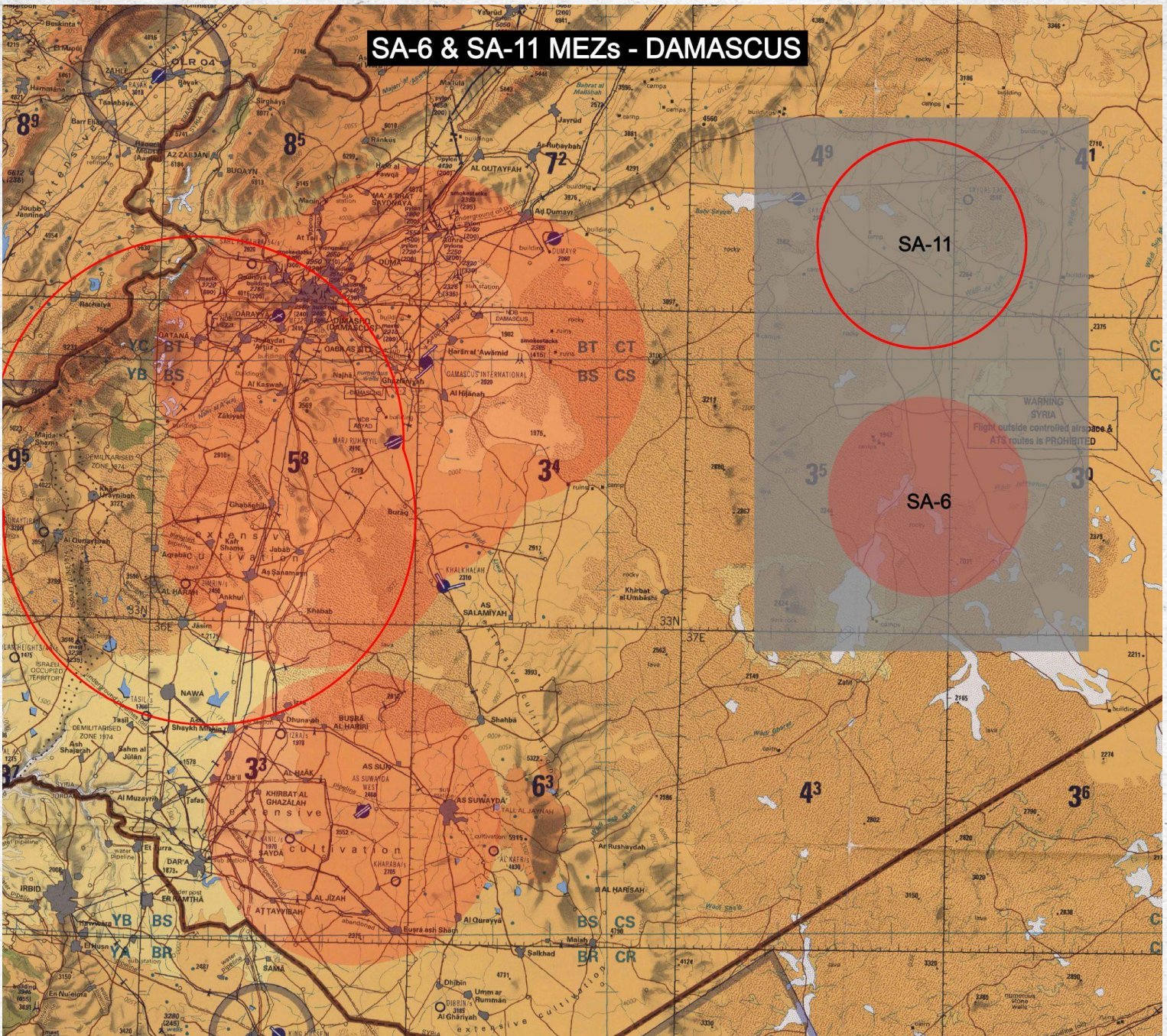
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## SA-2 & SA-3 MEZs - DAMASCUS



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## SA-6 & SA-11 MEZs - DAMASCUS



Having laid out the mission overview, Popeye started to brief the detailed mission flow. Departing H4 we will rendezvous the flight at waypoint 1. From here we will climb to angels 25 and proceed west along our flight plan, following the border through to waypoint 4. This route is designed to mimic the CAPs flown by the Jordanian F-16s and will hopefully deceive the Russians and Syrians as to our activity.

We should arrive at waypoint 4 at 15:25 Zulu, which is when the diversionary raid on Al Dumayr will begin. Pushing from waypoint 4 before this time will not work out well.

Once we push from waypoint 4 Sword 1 will begin by suppressing the SA-10s as they come online in response to the attack at Al Dumayr. Sword 3 will set up in an orbit just south of waypoint 5, ready to suppress threats as directed by myself.



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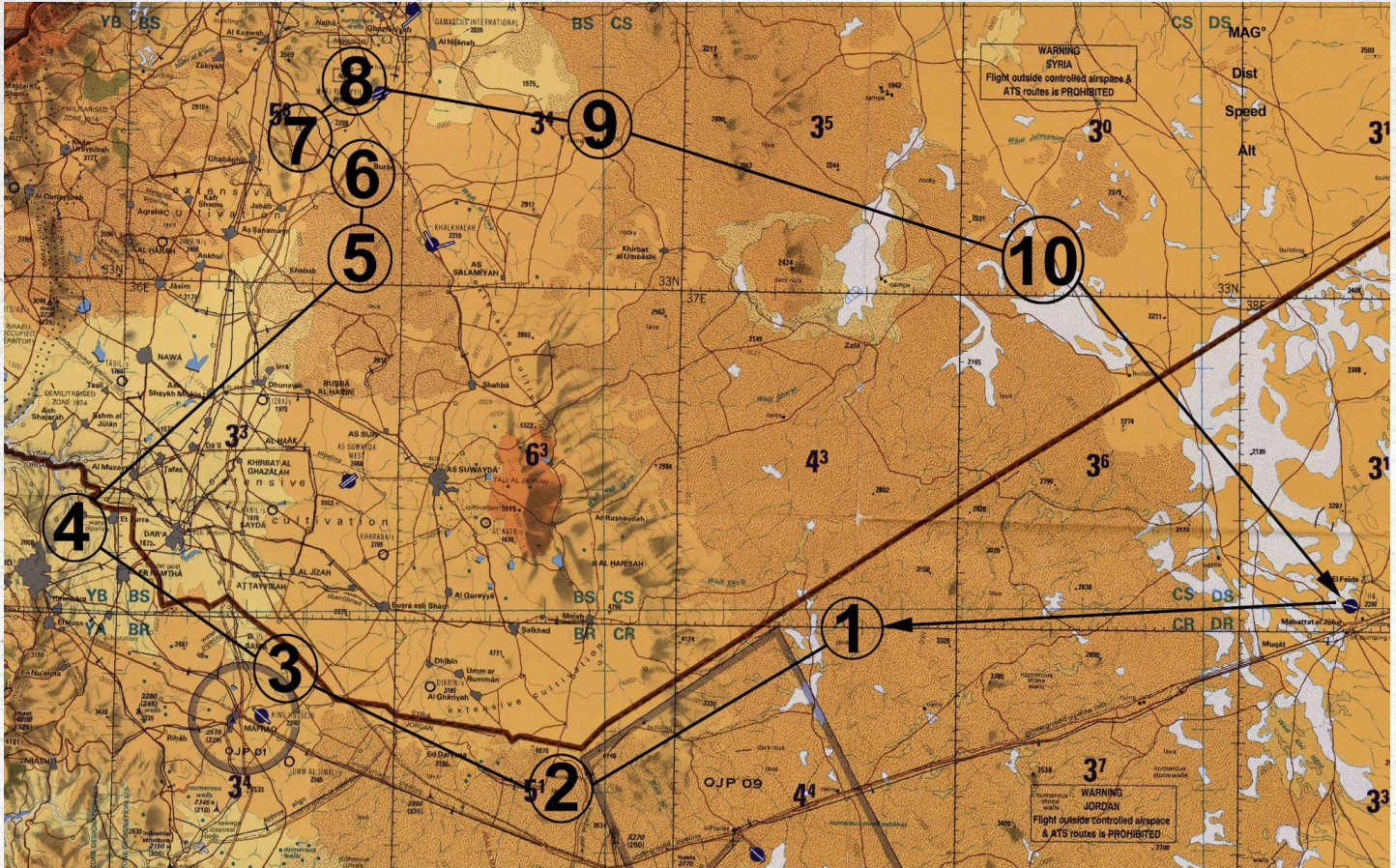
We will ingress towards the target through waypoints 5 and 6 to our IP at waypoint 7. This route has been chosen to direct us away from the two SA-11 batteries southwest of Damascus, but will bring us a lot closer to the SA-2 and SA-3 sites around Khalkhalah airbase. The fuel burn for the route has been planned to allow for a low level ingress, but Popeye stressed we were free to ingress at higher altitudes if we felt the threat environment allowed it. While being low will help mask us from any SAM threats, it is expected there will be a lot of AAA threats down at lower altitudes, and we will still need to pop up close to the target to acquire the target points. A higher altitude approach will allow us greater standoff attack capability with our GBU-24s, but of course a greater bomb fall time means more time flying predictably in full view of the Syrian air defenses while lasing the target. I've got a decision to make here.

Once we hit the IP, we will turn into the target and make our bombing runs. Bug will turn onto the target at his IP while I will extend 3 miles further to my IP to deconflict from Bug before turning back into the target on a heading of 045. By attacking from two directions in a short window of time we hope to surprise and confuse the SHORAD systems below us, but leaving too long a gap between attacks or making more than one pass on the target will not be advisable. Our targets are located at waypoint 8. Popeye recommended I drop a pair of bombs into either of my targets, with tail fuzing to make sure I get penetration into the bunker complex. Dropping as a pair will only give me one shot to get it right, however it has been made very clear that making a second pass will be very dangerous.

Once we have struck our targets we will egress the target area via waypoint 9 and return to H4. There will be no tanker support available again on this mission, however the fuel plan is generous, even allowing for a low level ingress. We have 4000 lb available to burn over the target, which gives us a bingo of 4050 lb, allowing for a high burn on our egress route in case we need to plug in the burners to leave in a hurry or at low level.

Loadout will be 2 GBU-24s for both me and Bug, with the rest of the det carrying 2 HARMS apiece.

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The bullseye for this mission will be set on Damascus International airport.

The briefing ended as ever on the threat briefing. As already mentioned the SAM threat around Damascus is extremely high, with every SAM type in the Syrian inventory being in play. In addition to the SAM positions briefed to us we can expect SA-8, 9, 13, 15 and 18 in proximity to any Syrian military locations. An SA-15 at Marj Ruhayill airbase provides point defense for our target, we should also expect AAA of every type around Damascus, including ZSU-23-4.

The danger posed to us around Damascus should not be underestimated. However the effective application of electronic attack will greatly aid us. The stand-in jam will provide protection by saturating the Syrian radars with noise, but they won't last forever. The drones - callsigns Trojan 1 through Trojan 4 - will be positioned at key positions around the Damascus MEZ (positions marked on my kneeboard), but the UAVs will be extremely vulnerable if identified and easily shot out the sky. So it will be a case of *when* not *if* we lose their support, and we should be ready to adjust our strategy in response to the loss of any jamming cover. Spartan's stand-off jam will also support us here, but as always we need to be conscious of our proximity to SAM sites as they will burn through jamming at closer ranges. The vul window for the attack is 20 minutes, between 15:25 and 15:45 Zulu, the expected flight time from waypoint 4 to the target is 8 minutes.

Intel believes we will face a low air to air threat during this operation as the overwhelming firepower of our strike force will quickly overpower anything the Syrians can send at us. It is a far more effective Syrian strategy to preserve their aircraft and rely on their dense SAM defense belt to

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engage the attackers unhindered by friendly fire risks. For this reason, along with not giving away our intentions to attack from the south, we will be self escorting on this mission.

Popeye then concluded the briefing. Each pair of pilots left the briefing deep in discussion about their role in the coming mission. Our role will be a real challenge and Bug and I spent the next few hours pouring over maps, charts and briefing material, committing every terrain detail, target feature and SAM position to memory.

We know the size of the challenge facing us, yet we remain confident in our abilities and training and we'll get the job done.