

LAST OUT - WEASELS OVER SYRIA II

August 20th, 2013.

It's been several days since our Bekaa Valley SAM hunt, which saw our detachment chasing down Hezbollah and Syrian SAM systems within the confines of the valley. We seem to be spending an increasing amount of time in this area at the moment, combating the threat that both Hezbollah and the SAA currently pose to the SDF. Part of the problem here is that the Syrians have started moving into the valley in force, using it as a way of opening a new front against the SDF, and supplementing the already formidable Hezbollah strength in this area. Even more concerning is the recent information that we now believe there are Russian private military companies operating in Syria and Lebanon, supporting Hezbollah and SAA attacks. An SDF unit supported by US special forces was attacked several days ago by what is now understood to be a Russian PMC force. For their part the Russians deny having any ground forces in that area, apparently using the PMC's 'private' status to distance themselves from any responsibility. But they're not fooling anyone and in reality this just means we're free to attack them from the air if needed...guess it sucks to be in a Russian PMC.

It's been a quiet day today at Akrotiri, with no mission scheduled for any of our Weasels. The weather has been fine and so a group of us made the most of our day off by heading to the beaches around the Akrotiri peninsula. While there we watched with interest the arrival of a Royal Navy frigate off the coast and the subsequent helicopter flights ferrying personnel over to the base. This was joined later by a second Frigate which docked at the port facility south of the base, bringing a large group of sailors ashore. I'm guessing things on base might be lively tonight.

There'll be no time to enjoy Akrotiri's nightlife for us however as we have orders to prepare for a mission tomorrow morning and so we arrived for a briefing late in the afternoon, Popeye welcomed us and invited us to sit, and as we did so we received our met briefing for tomorrow.

The weather for the day ahead looks excellent, with the blue sky we've seen today likely to be interrupted only by a few scattered clouds around 8,000 feet. The wind however will pick up slightly from what we've experienced the last few days, with south easterly winds in the 10-15 knot range expected at ground level for most of the day.

Once the Akrotiri OMT had departed Major Norris stepped to the front of the briefing room to deliver his intel update. He had plenty to talk to us about.

Beginning with the Bekaa Valley the Major painted a bleak picture, but one which we were by now quite familiar with. The Hezbollah attacks on the SDF continue, as do JSTF efforts to interdict their forces in the valley on the way to the front line. We were told Hezbollah may have a very large number of fighters available, and this is certainly turning out to be the case. As we already know, the Syrians are using the Bekaa Valley to move large numbers of troops and equipment north, contributing to making the Bekaa a very heavily militarized area currently. If allowed to move unhindered these Syrian forces could be the deciding factor in breaking through the SDF lines.

Norris continued to outline the significant impact the Russian resupply has had on the Syrian warfighting capability. This is especially evident in fuel and ammunition supplies, and the Syrians are currently the most mobile they've been in some time. Unfortunately this also applies to their air defense units so it looks like we'll continue to be busy for the foreseeable future.

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To counter the Syrian and Hezbollah threat in the Bekaa, the JSTF has been carrying out extensive air strikes in the area. Norris told us our efforts in hunting down the Bekaa SAMs had greatly assisted here, and Popeye also let us know that we'd had some praise from the CAOC to this effect as well. It's always nice to be appreciated. However Major Norris then told us that the Syrians had deployed a new SA-10 battery in the Bekaa Valley, which was then promptly taken out by a package led by Marine Hornets. I could sense my fellow squadron mates squirming in their seats at that news, but being professionals they all kept quiet...at least while Major Norris was still present.

Uninterrupted, Norris continued, and told us about an increase in SyAAF activity, it's likely that once again the increased fuel supply may be helping here. But the Major also speculated that as the Syrians have an opportunity to significantly influence the war with success in the northern Bekaa, they may be more motivated to risk their limited aerial resources in support of this. My senses were again alerted to a change in mood of my colleagues, who no doubt would all give almost anything to score a rare air to air victory.

Moving on to the Russians, Norris informed us that the Russian air force remains active and in an agitated state given their recent encounters with the Israelis. The Russian bombing campaign on the SDF also appears to have kicked up another gear, with an increase in Russian bombing sorties the past few days - especially out east towards Palmyra and beyond. Norris then took great care to outline the need for a cautious approach with the Russians...there are many potential flashpoints in the region at the moment - the Russians and Israelis, the chance of the Russians hitting US troops on the ground, the chance of us hitting Russians on the ground. Seems there is a lot of concern at the higher levels right now that we're creeping towards a serious incident, but this cautious approach didn't go down all that well with us at the squadron level - it's fair to say that we feel if we show weakness to the Russians they'll take advantage of it.

There was no further information on SIA activity, they seem quiet for now. But as Norris pointed out, quiet isn't necessarily good. It was confirmed to us during the briefing however that the two Royal Navy frigates that arrived today were here to assist with coastal patrol duties, clearly we're still worried about the SIA coming at us in small boats.

Major Norris then moved onto the final part of his briefing and he had news of another interesting development in the ever evolving situation in the middle east. Enter the dragon - here come the Chinese. Seriously you can't make this stuff up, now we've got the Chinese to worry about as well. Norris showed us photos of a Chinese flotilla transiting the Suez and entering the Mediterranean two days ago. This consisted of 1 destroyer, the Guangzhou and two frigates, the Wuhu and the Yancheng. The Chinese are most likely here to fly the flag for their ambitions of expansion into Africa and the Middle East...or as Rotor put it "they see us all out here having fun and wanted to join in". But whatever their intentions or interests, the Chinese are not a direct threat to our operations, they are however another complication we need to be aware of and need to keep an eye on.

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With his briefing complete, Norris departed and Popeye took his position at the front of the room.

"Ok then pilots, let's get to it. As Major Norris said, the JSTF are carrying out a large number of attacks on Syrian and Hezbollah targets in order to support the SDF positions along the Homs - Yabrud frontline. We've done an excellent job so far of enabling this mission, but as I'm sure you expected, there's still a way to go yet".

With a wry smile Popeye continued, "The problem is Syria just doesn't seem to run out of SAMs, the Russian resupply looks like it's helping here, in addition to any newly delivered SAMs we believe the Syrians have been able to bring systems out of storage now they have the fuel and ammo to operate them. This latest SA-10 deployment in the Bekaa is good evidence of this".

"Boss what the hell was that all about?" interjected Rotor. "Why are the marines going after SA-10s while we're sitting back at Akrotiri?"

"I know Rotor, I know," replied Popeye. "I got wind of that mission ahead of time and fought to get us involved...but for whatever reason it went to a package out of Incirlik. But I'm sure you'll get plenty of chances for more big targets soon enough, it's not like things are quieting down out here".

"Must have just missed it last time we went to the Bekaa" I mused.

"Just as well" replied Boomer, "Wouldn't have liked to tackle it without electronic attack after the Growlers stiffed us".

Gesturing for us all to quiet down, Popeye took control of the briefing once again.

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"All of this means there is still a strong concentration of SAMs around Damascus, especially north of the city where the Syrians are protecting their ground forces pushing on towards the SDF at Yabrud. This brings us to our missions for tomorrow."

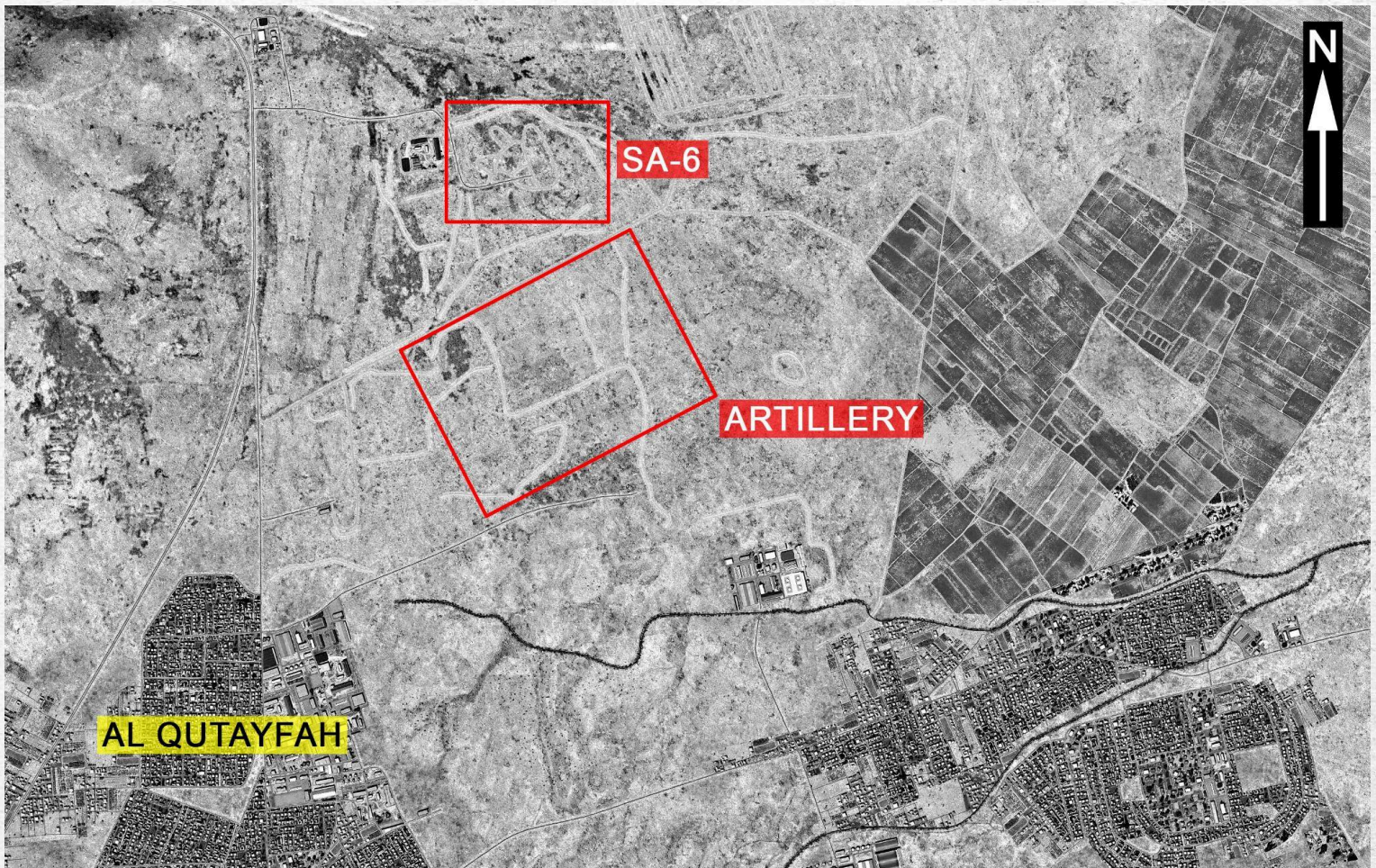
"We will be covering four separate vuls tomorrow, protecting our strike aircraft as they attack SAA forces involved in the battle for Yabrud. We will keep the pressure up throughout the day, and the intention is that by the end of the day we will have put a major dent in the Syrian air defenses in this sector".

"Each flight will be supported by a pair of Navy Growlers..."

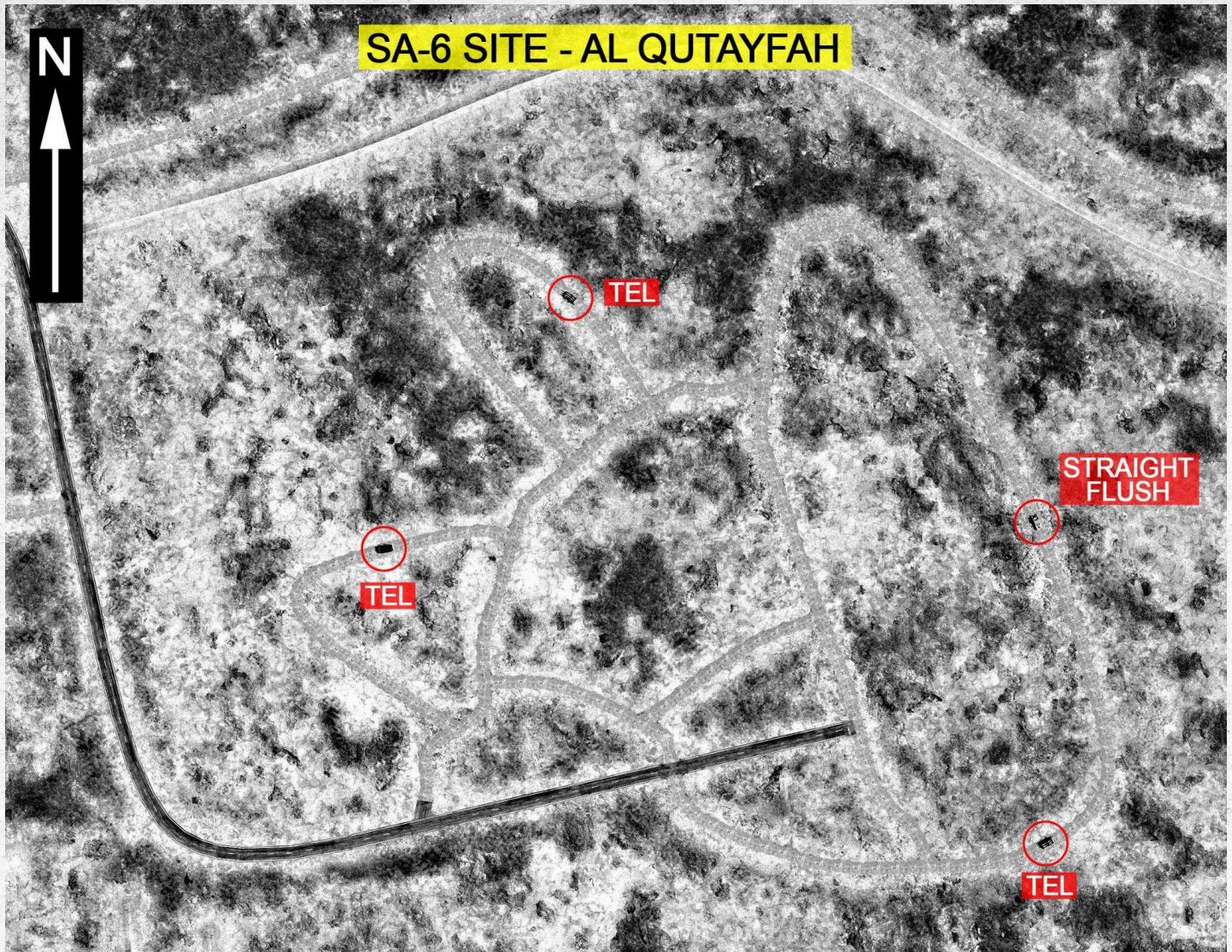
"Let's hope they turn up this time..." I interrupted.

Popeye ignored me and started to brief the packages each flight would be covering, eventually arriving at my assigned mission and bringing a new slide up onto the briefing screen.

"Forrest, Boomer, you will be Sword 2. You will be protecting a four ship of Strike Eagles, callsign Wrench 2. Their target is an SAA artillery battery, located just northeast of the town of Al Qutayfah. Latest intel shows an SA-6 battery is co-located at this position. This will be your primary target".



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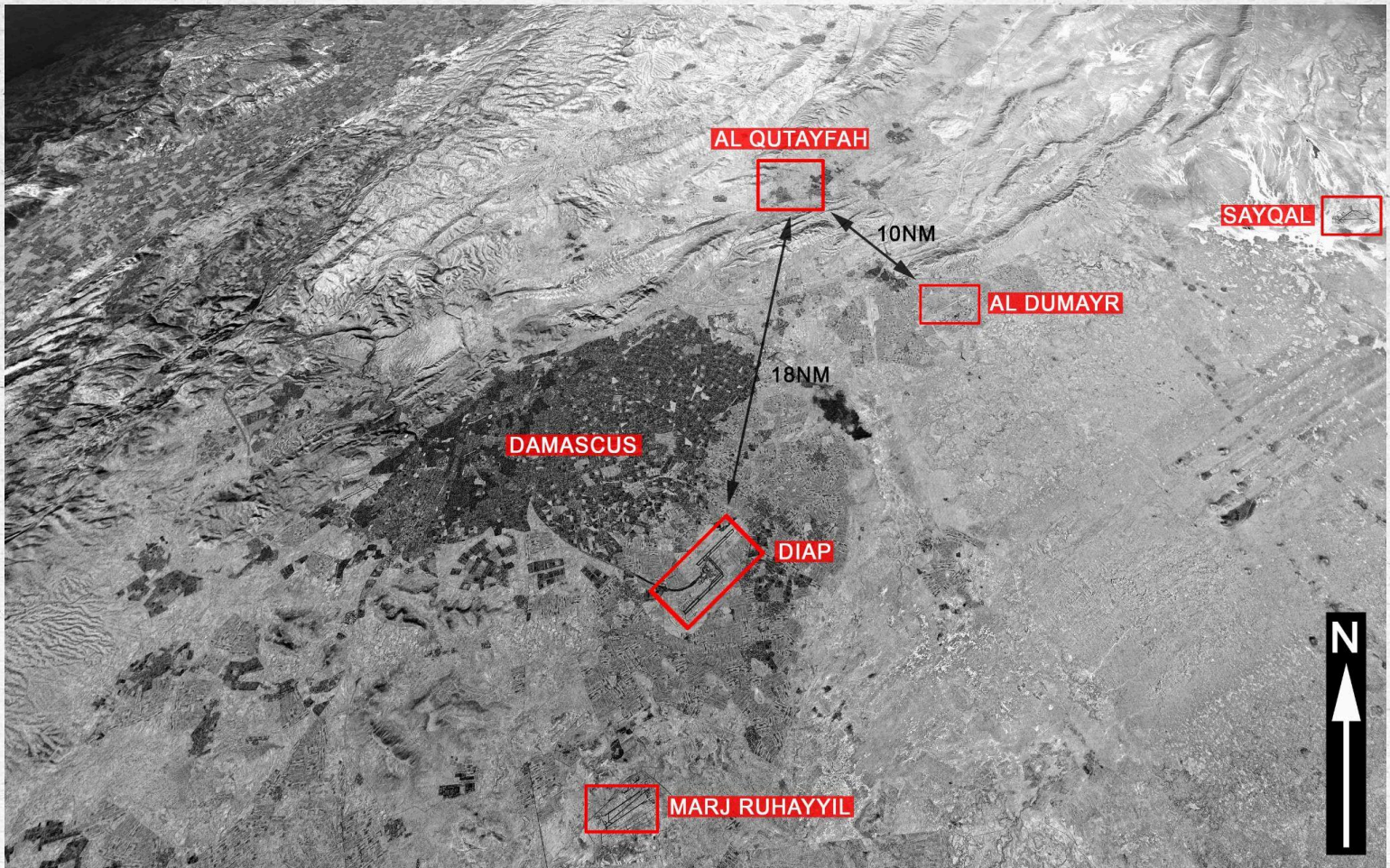


"Al Qutayfah also lies well within the threat area north of Damascus. Al Dumayr airbase lies 10 miles southeast of the target, and we've seen both SA-6 and SA-8 indications in this area before. We also know that there has been additional mobile SAMs moved into this area in recent days, although Vacuum has yet to pin down any definitive positions, so once you have neutralized the SA-6 site don't assume the job is done, get doing what you do best and start hunting SAMs".

"Yes sir!" I replied enthusiastically.

"Now you've been to this part of Syria before, so you don't need me to tell you that this is a dangerous part of the world. I don't want you getting sucked too far south of Al Dumayr and towards Damascus itself if you can avoid it. Keep focused on the target area and only worry about the threats that will pose a risk to your strike package".

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Having briefed our target Popeye continued to brief the packages and targets for the rest of the Sword flights. Once the initial brief had concluded, Boomer and I broke away to brief our individual mission in more detail.

We will follow our now familiar departure route out of Akrotiri and onto waypoint 4, where we will switch to our strike frequency and rendezvous with our Growler escort - Spartan 5. We will then proceed with Spartan to the Silver Corridor and onto waypoint 6, making sure we are fenced in as we enter Lebanon. At waypoint 6 we will turn south over the Anti-Lebanon mountains and then push through eastern Lebanon towards waypoint 7.

Waypoint 7 will serve as our IP, 20 miles northwest of Al Qutayfah. As we arrive at the IP Spartan will set up in a standoff jam north of waypoint 8. Our TOT for the IP is 03:30 Zulu.

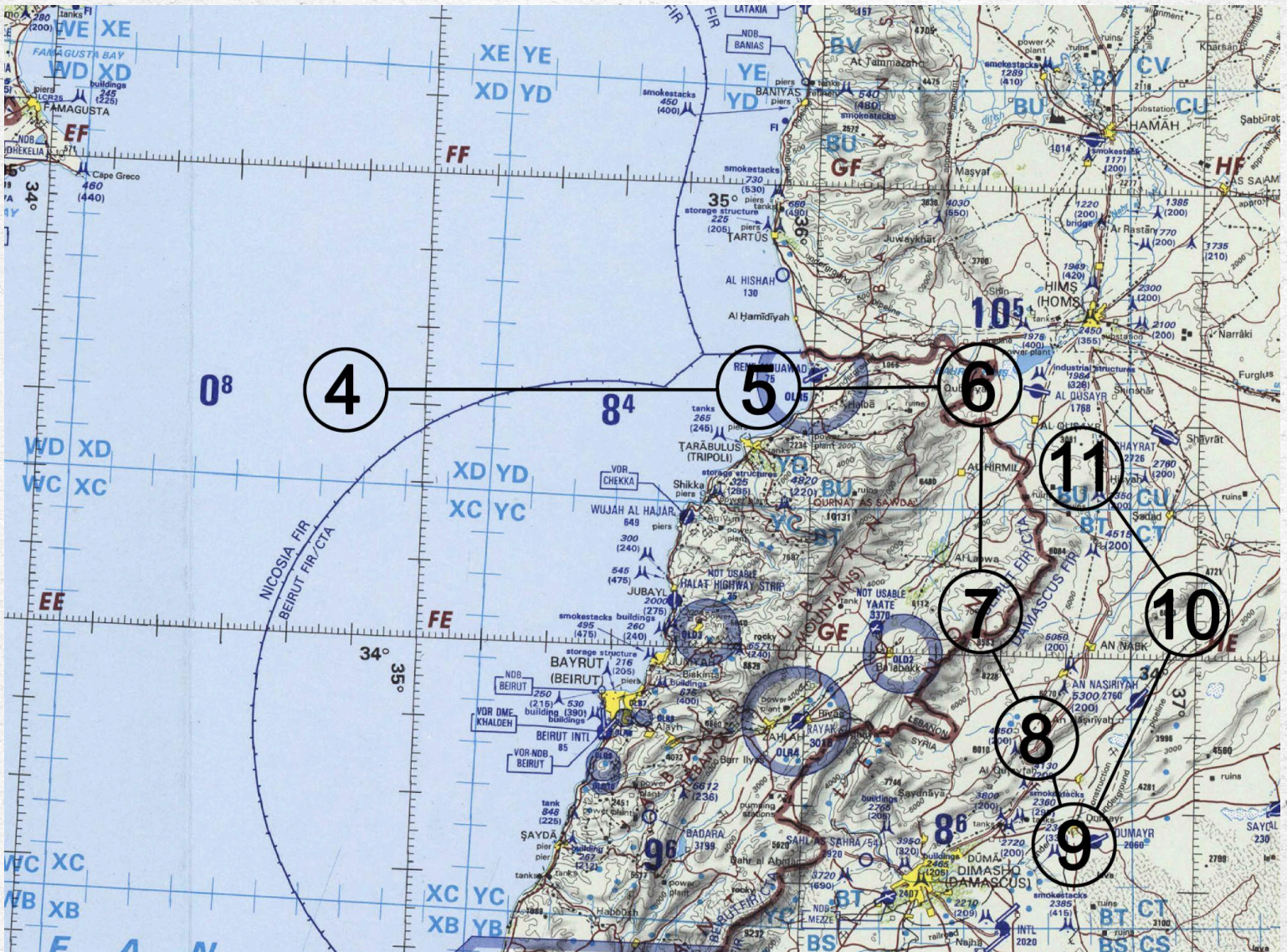
The last known position of the SA-6 battery has been assigned to waypoint 8, with any luck it won't have moved yet but we should be prepared to search it out should it not be where we expect. Once we have located the target we should kill the radar ahead of Wrench 2's TOT of 03:45 Zulu. With the SA-6 position dealt with, we should then also start hunting out any further threats to Wrench, ensuring they can safely strike their target. Once their attack is complete we will follow Wrench north through our rally point at waypoint 10 and onto waypoint 11 before flowing back through our waypoints to home.

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In addition to EW support from Spartan, we should have additional support from Vacuum and a two ship of Eagles (Renegade 3) will be on CAP to the north, ready to respond should the resurgent Syrian Air Force attempt to get involved.

I will be carrying my now standard mixed load of GBU-38s and Mavericks for the destruction of air defense targets. Boomer will once again be supporting with HARMs.

Bingo fuel is set at 3,200 lb, leaving over 5,000 lb for use over the target.



The primary threats in the target area will be from Syrian mobile SAMs, with SA-6 most likely, but the possibility of SA-8 and SA-11 as well. Our operating area also puts some of the static SA-2 and SA-3 sites around Damascus in play should we get pulled too far south, however the jamming from Spartan should keep us protected from any Damascus SAMs so long as we maintain a safe position. South of the target lies Al Dumayr airbase, we can expect significant SHORAD at this position and potentially additional Syrian SAMs as well. Flying further south than Al Dumayr (located at waypoint 9) is not advised.

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We should also expect SHORAD at Al Qutayfah, with a variety of AAA types identified, including ZSU-23-4. These threats should not pose a risk to Wrench 2, who will be attacking from high altitude.

Boomer and I spent several hours preparing for the mission, covering every detail, every outcome and thinking through and anticipating all eventualities. Finally, exhausted, we hit our bunks to get some sleep in preparation for the mission - this will be an early start - we step at 5am local, takeoff will be at 06:00 local / 03:00 Zulu.

Hopefully the SAM operators will still be asleep when we arrive and it'll be easy pickings.