

# FIRST IN - WEASELS OVER SYRIA

29th June, 2013.

So things are beginning to heat up in Operation Cerberus North. Yesterday the Syrian Air Force finally jumped the fence and entered the no fly zone, the JSTF responded and shots were fired. We're still unclear on all the details, but it certainly sounds like things have just gone up a level. All this occurred while Bug and I were out over eastern Syria, supporting a special ops mission to capture some SIA high value targets. There was little on this mission to seriously trouble a Weasel, but I'm fairly certain that after the events near Homs yesterday we will be going into a more high threat environment today. Anxious to find out more, the detachment reported for an early briefing at 05:00 this morning.

Myself, Bug, Rotor and Ghost entered the briefing room still rubbing sleep from our eyes. Popeye and Tank were already present and thankfully had coffee waiting for us. Also present were Captain Johnson and Major Norris.

"Good morning pilots" exclaimed Popeye jovially as we sat ourselves down in the briefing room. "Morning sir" we mumbled back, still adjusting to the early morning start following several days of operational flying. As we sat Captain Johnson was invited to stand and begin the Met brief. The news today was good and yesterday's fine weather looks set to continue, with just a few scattered clouds to worry about around 8,000 feet.

Once Captain Johnson had departed it was Major Norris' turn to step to the front of the room and begin his intel brief. I expected him to have some important news, and I was not disappointed.

The Major began, "So as I'm sure you're aware things in the north took a turn yesterday, I'll get to those events momentarily, but before I do I'll bring you up to speed on other events within the STO. First let's look at the SIA. In the north around Raqqa we are seeing the results of the YPG and SDF push starting to materialize. North of Raqqa the YPG have pushed the SIA back towards the city limits, while southwest of Raqqa we're also seeing the SDF advance rapidly. The SDF are now in a position to attack Tabqa and reclaim the strategically important hydroelectric plant there".

"However, despite the pressure the SIA are facing in the north, and despite our intense air campaign against them, the SIA have actually made some gains in the east - with a rapid push west along the desert roads in the last 48 hours. The objective of this advance looks like it was to capture Palmyra airbase and possibly the mines to the southwest. However we have seen strong Russian and Syrian resistance to this assault, both with the rapid deployment of ground forces and through Russian air strikes, and the situation looks like it has been stabilized".

"Major, does this new deployment of forces also contain air defenses?" asked Tank.

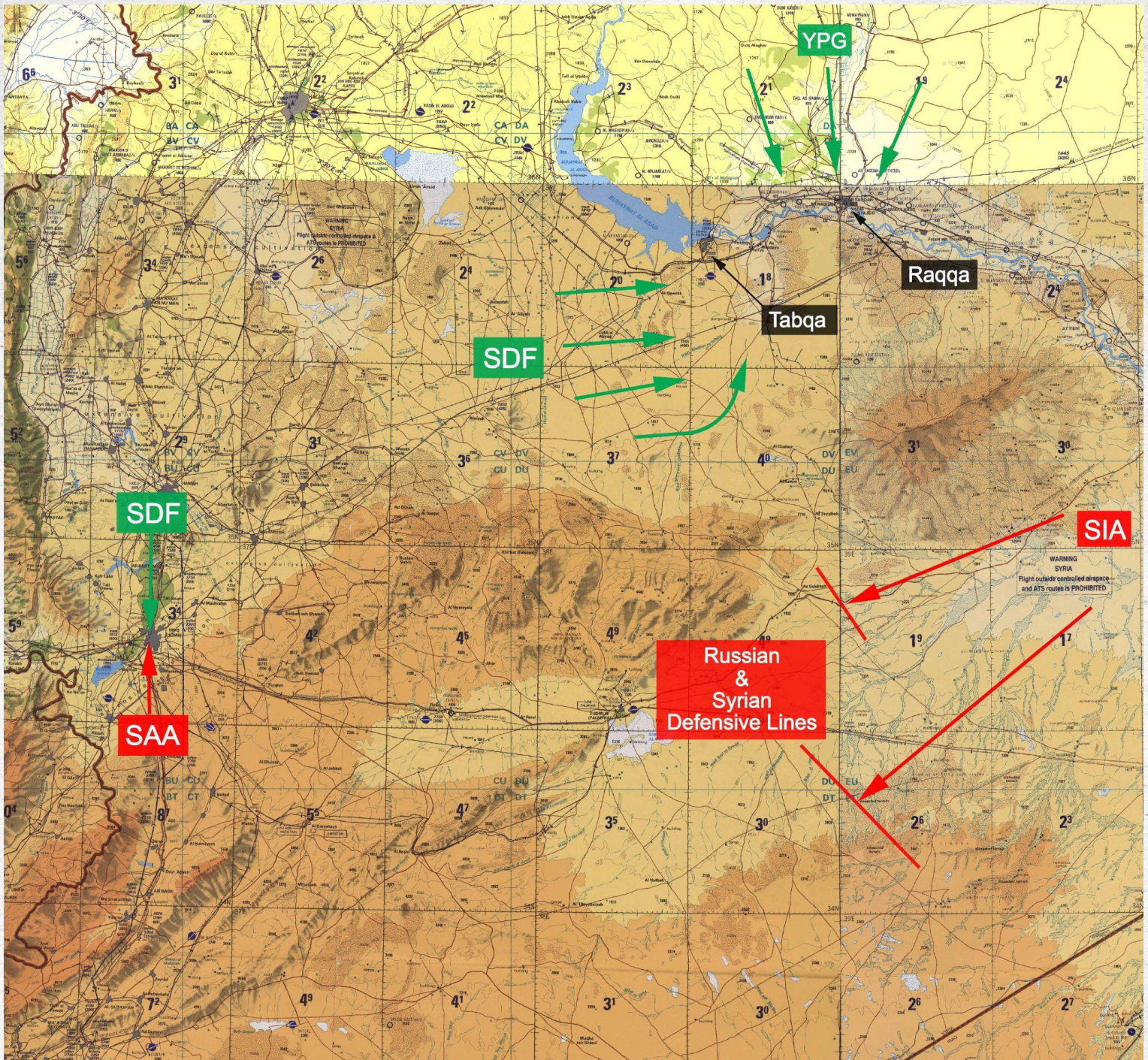
"We're still working on that assessment Major" Norris responded, "Vacuum hasn't given us any ELINT indicating their presence up to now, but it's certainly likely, probable in fact, that there will be SHORAD with the Syrian and Russian forces, and quite possibly the SIA as well".

"So keep clear!" Popeye remarked.

Norris nodded then continued, "Now in the west, around Homs, the Russian volume of air attacks on the SDF has begun to slow a little, and we are receiving reports that the Russians are beginning to struggle to maintain their operational tempo. On the ground the SDF and Syrian Arab Army remain deadlocked at Homs".



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“Finally, over in Lebanon, we are receiving sporadic indications of possible military activity by Hezbollah, raising concerns over their potential involvement in this conflict. Now switching to the hot topic of the day, let’s look at what happened in no fly Sierra”.

Norris went on to detail the events of yesterday. The Syrians made a concerted effort to breach the no fly zones, making three separate incursions with SU-24s to attack SDF positions round Homs. JSTF F-16s responded, shooting down one of the Fencers, however a volley of SAMs were fired by the Syrian air defenses south of the no fly zone, forcing our aircraft to abort.

Having thoroughly briefed us on the Syrian attacks on Homs, Major Norris departed and Popeye began to brief our mission.

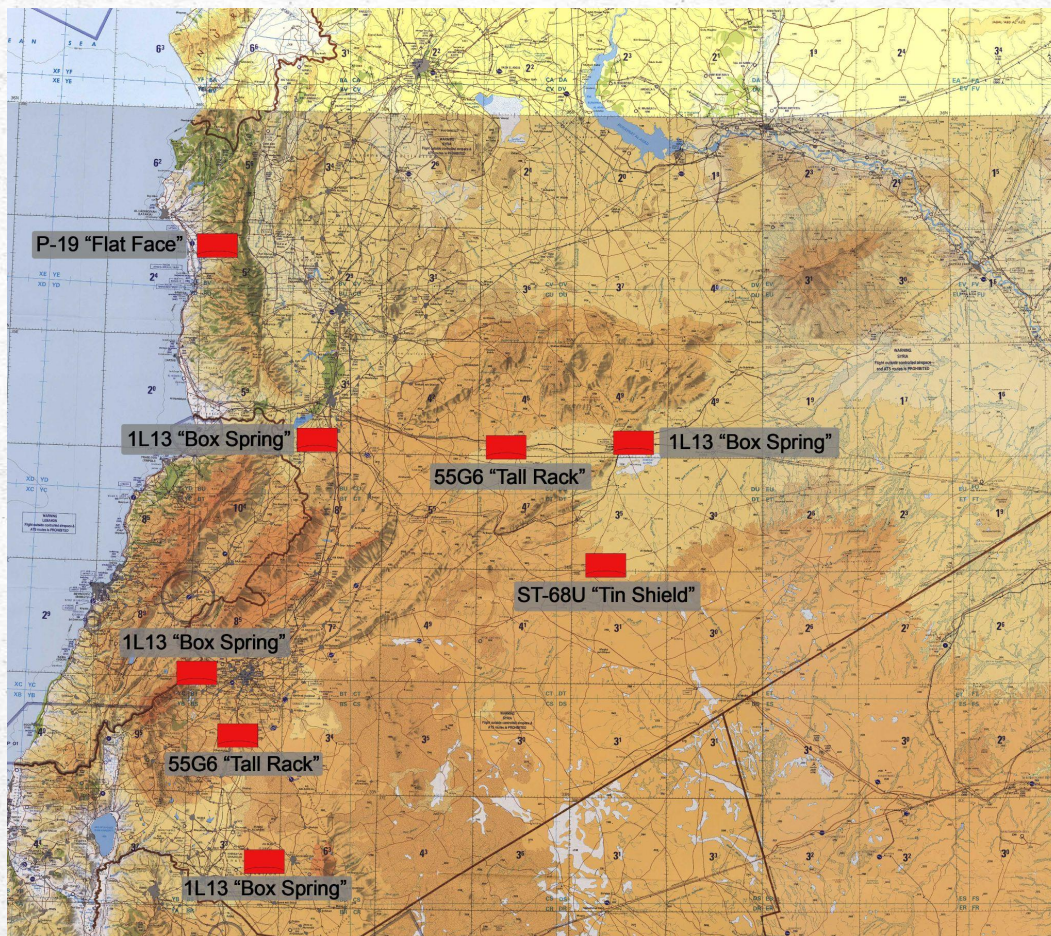


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“Ok then pilots let’s get to it. Up to now our focus in Syria has been on Operation Jackal and the SIA, but as I’m sure you expected, that focus is about to shift to the north and to the Syrians. Now as Major Norris explained, the Syrians have finally begun to violate the no fly zone, and our fears of being unable to sufficiently respond have become realized”. Popeye paused to pull up a new slide on the briefing screen.



“No fly Sierra runs east to west across northern Syria, around Homs. On it’s southern border are a number of SAM sites, at least 3 SA-6s and an SA-11 have been confirmed up to now. These are backed up by an extensive network of early warning radars”.





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"As you can see there are three such radars also south of Sierra. Add them to the SAM sites...and the Homs to Palmyra SAM belt is a potent threat. Now following the strikes by the Syrians yesterday the CAOC has planned widespread retaliatory attacks, but before these can take place..."

A grin broke out on Popeye's face.

"...a little Weaseling is going to be required".

The grin was infectious, and despite all logic and common sense it was clear that we were all excited for this mission.

Popeye continued, "The SAM belt south of Sierra still contains too many unknowns. We're confident that in addition to the four SAM sites I already mentioned there are additional mobile SAMs present. These are probably SA-6s but could possibly be SA-11s as well given how the Russians have made a big effort to deliver them to the Syrians in the last week. We of course have Rivet Joints up continuously helping to map out emitters and SAM sites, but as you know these will not pick up any dormant, non emitting sites. It's probable that the Syrians are keeping these systems offline until they need them, no doubt worried about the possibility of being on the receiving end of a HARM. The CAOC then, has tasked *us* with waking these emitters up and allowing Vacuum to suck up all that valuable ELINT. This information can then be used in the planning of the follow on strikes".

"To do this we will be operating as 3 two ships. Sword 1 - myself and Rotor, will be looking to penetrate the western end of the Sam belt. Sword 2 - Forrest and Bug, will work their way into the east of the SAM belt. Sword 3 - Tank and Ghost, will be holding north of the SAM belt in a position to provide overwatch with their HARMS should any of us find ourselves in a difficult situation. Sword 1 and Sword 2 will penetrate the edge of the threat rings, making sure we're a nice obvious target but without getting ourselves sucked in too deep where the SAMs will really threaten us. Remember the primary goal of this mission is not to destroy these SAM sites, but to locate them, however should you find yourself engaged then by all means take whatever action you deem necessary to defend yourselves".

"The Syrians appear to be moving their SAMs at least once every 24 hours so the four known systems I've already mentioned are believed to be operating in the approximate areas marked on your charts, however an exact location is not known at this time".

"Sir, what support can we expect?" asked Ghost.

Popeye replied, "There will be 2 CAPs of Eagles up supporting the mission package, these will be callsigns Bear and Renegade and will cover the west and east of the no fly zone. Shell is also going to push further into country to provide AAR should you require it".

"No EW support?" remarked Tank.

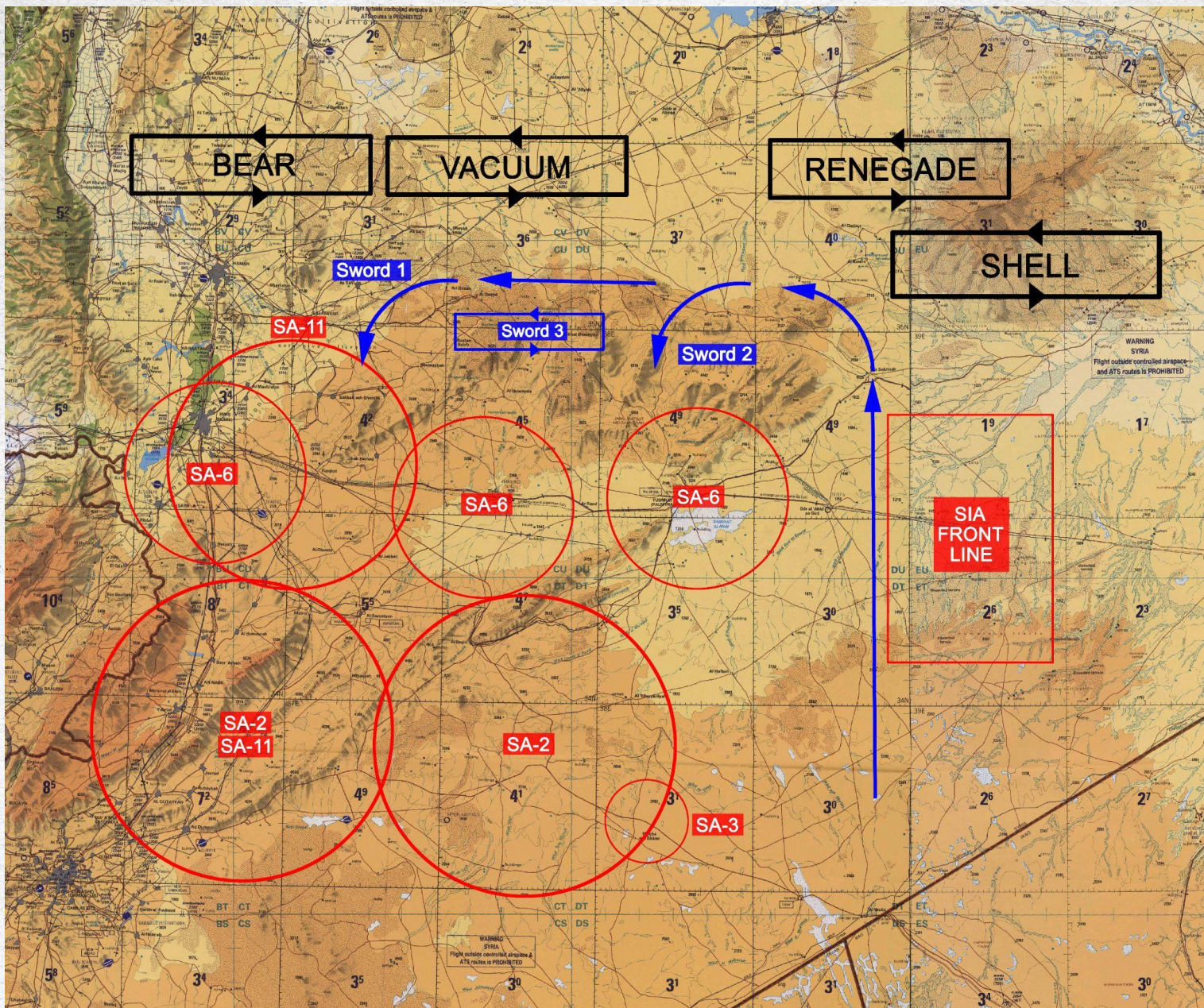
"Unfortunately not" said Popeye, "The Growlers are unavailable at this time".

"You gotta be kidding me!" exclaimed Rotor.

"I'm not," responded Popeye. "I know we'd rather have electronic attack assets to support us, but we don't, so we'll deal with it. We will have our own jamming pods if we need them, and you all know how to handle a SAM site...so let's move on".



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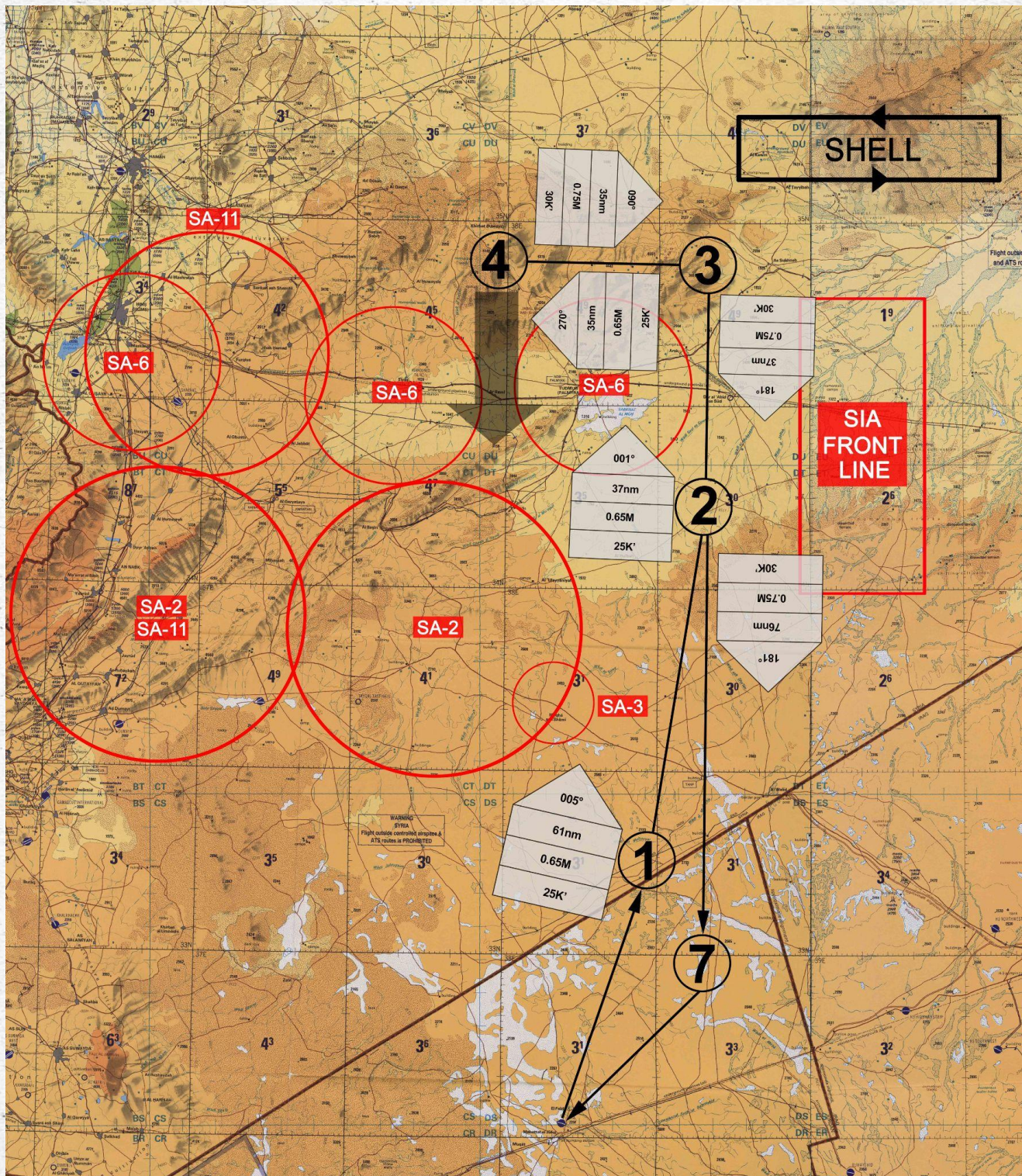
Having quickly shut down any potential dissent Popeye moved on to discuss our mission flow. Departing H4 airspace our flight will rendezvous at waypoint 1 at the Syrian border. As we push north on our flight plan into Syria we will need to be mindful of the activity on the Syrian/Russian/SIA front. As we approach waypoint 2 we should carefully monitor our position to ensure we don't enter the threat ring of the SA-6, still believed to be located at Palmyra airbase.

Reaching waypoint 3, we will turn west and proceed along no fly zone Sierra, ensuring we maintain high altitude so we remain nice and visible to any Syrian radars looking our way. Once at waypoint 4 we will turn south and push into the eastern end of the SAM belt, at this point we should make sure our ECM is active. Intel believes there are SA-6s deployed in the vicinity of Tiyas and Palmyra airbases, this deployment leaves a small gap between the threat rings therefore the safest, most obvious route to penetrate the SAM belt will be between these two threats. We are looking to wake up any emitters in this area and are not necessarily looking to destroy them, but of course should we be seriously threatened then theater ROE allows us to defend ourselves. Tank and Ghost will also be holding behind us ready to send some HARMs out should we require the cover.



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Popeye was keen to stress that our penetration of the SAM belt should be fast and precise. We are not looking to bait SAMs into firing and should avoid loitering in the threat areas, a quick sweep through the threat area should be sufficient to announce our presence and give Vacuum the opportunity to suck up all the subsequent electrons. Popeye also stressed that we shouldn't push too deep into the SAM belt, of course the further in we push then the more likely it is we will agitate the air defenses and the more intel Vacuum will suck up...but the further in we push the more likely it is that we may also end up running into range of the SAM belt defending the north of Damascus, as well as the SA-10 batteries defending Damascus. All of this will be highly dangerous without electronic support.





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Once we are satisfied we have penetrated the SAM belt far enough, we will turn back north and egress the area back to the rally point at waypoint 4. From here we will track back through waypoints 3 and 2, before proceeding back to H4CA via waypoint 7. Waypoint 5 will be used to mark the position of Tiyas airbase and waypoint 6 will mark Palmyra airbase.

Shell will be running a tanker track northeast of waypoint 3 should we wish to get gas before we RTB. Bingo fuel to get back to H4 from waypoint 4 is 3,700lb.

My loadout for this flight will be 2 HARMs, along with 2 bags and the HTS, TGP and ECM pods. Bug will be carrying two GBU-38 instead of HARMs, allowing us the ability to strike in self defense if required. Popeye went over the ROEs carefully with us, we are not cleared to engage any Syrian targets unless in self defense of a hostile act. As per the theater ROE a hostile act is defined as us being tracked by a targeting radar as well as being fired upon.

Moving onto the threat brief, Popeye laid out the density of the threats in stark detail. We are pushing into airspace between at least 2 SA-6s, likely centered on Palmyra and Tiyas airbases, we can also expect SHORAD to be present at and in the vicinity of both bases. Furthermore, around 5 miles northwest of Palmyra lies the HQ of the SAA 550th Brigade and what are believed to be its adjoining chemical weapons bunkers. We expect this area to be heavily defended by SHORAD systems. South of both Palmyra and Tiyas lies the Sharqiyah mines, these are a strategically important Syrian asset and are also likely to be well defended. Further south/southwest are a second belt of air defenses (SA-2, SA-3, SA-10 and SA-11) protecting An Nasiriyah AB, Sayqal AB and Damascus.

We should also expect the full range of AAA and IR SAM systems throughout our operating area today, so we should keep high and keep moving. The A-10 shot down near Raqqa is a timely reminder of the danger a single soldier with a MANPAD can be.

Syrian air is expected to stay out the way but should they attempt to interfere then Renegade and Bear will be on station to support.

This will be a high threat environment, but providing we can keep our SA we can minimize the risk. We are looking to probe the threat rings, we are not looking to buzz Tiyas or Palmyra airbases. If we maintain a safe position in relation to the threat rings then should any SAMs surprise us we should be able to turn away and outrun them easily enough. We should also be wary about getting sucked down low into AAA and MANPAD engagement envelopes so it's important we maintain altitude while in the SAM belt, getting launched upon and being forced low is a proven way of getting ourselves killed.

The briefing concluded shortly after and as we filed out of the briefing room it was clear from the way we were talking that there was a mixture of both excitement and nerves about the job we had ahead of us. This is what we thought of as a proper Weasel mission, putting ourselves in the spotlight of enemy SAM systems...making sure they see us and try to shoot at us...YGBSM indeed!

We don't have much time to dwell on it. We step in just a couple of hours, takeoff is 11:00 local, 08:00 Zulu.