

November 10th, 2011.

So yesterday saw Det B's first flights into the Kerman AOR, with Major Drucker taking myself, 'Ein-stein' and 'Baz' on fam flights. 'Chief' and 'Noble' are due to go out on their fam flights today, having spent time yesterday working with the FACs on the weapons range adjacent to the base. Things were relatively uneventful, although the brief appearance of an SA-6 on our flight path created a few seconds of real excitement. One of our ground patrols also encountered an IED, a reminder of the mix of threats we are likely to come across here in Kerman.

Back at FOB Juliet the 1st Marine Division are working around the clock, preparing for their push into Kerman, it seems you can't move anywhere within the base without running into vehicles undergoing maintenance or marines being worked hard by their NCOs. Things are definitely gearing up alright.

And all this activity just adds to the incredible amount of noise on base...man us Marines are loud! This morning I went for a run around the inside of the base perimeter fence, and as I passed the main gate I caught the end of an argument between the gate guards and a local dairy farmer called Bak. From what I caught of it, it sounds like he is not too happy with the level of noise and the distress it's causing his livestock. Perhaps a reminder of the 'inconvenience' our presence here can cause.

But in the grand scheme of things happening in Kerman province, and in wider Iran, a little noise for the locals isn't the worst thing that can happen. We had a stark reminder of that last night, when at approximately 02:15 the air raid warning sirens went off, followed by cries of "gas, gas, gas" around the base. We leapt out of our sleeping bags and into our chemical protective gear, while with a great roar, one of the launchers from the Patriot battery dispatched a SAM skywards. After a minute or so we heard the gentle thud of explosions rolling across the valley floor. Eventually we were given the all clear and still unaware of what exactly had happened returned to a light, restless sleep.

This sleep lasted until just 05:30 when the base started to come alive once again with the sound of thousands of troops beginning their day. Grudgingly we rose and after a quick breakfast in the mess reported to a 06:30 briefing.

The briefing was once again held in the decaying office adjoining the workshop near the control tower. I entered the office alongside the squadron pilots and taking care to avoid touching anything I opted for standing space along the rear wall. Major Drucker, our intel officer Major Daniels and the weather officer Captain Parkin were already waiting for us.

"Good morning pilots", Mother greeted us. "I trust you all slept well?". We kept our mouths shut, but shared wry smiles with our CO. "Well it certainly was an eventful night" continued Mother, "Major Daniels can probably share a little more on that in his intel brief...but before we get to that Captain Parkin has today's weather for us".

"Thank you Major" replied Parkin, rising from a rickety chair and standing at the front of the room. "The weather today is starting nice and calm but we expect things to liven up as the day progresses. Currently the skies are pretty clear and winds are low but as we start the afternoon we're going to see both cloud and wind moving in from the south. Nothing too heavy but we're forecasting scattered, perhaps broken clouds over the area, driven by winds from the south.

Again we're not expecting the winds to be too strong, most likely 5-10 knots max. Temperatures today are expected to reach 18 or 19 degrees celsius".

After Captain Parkin had departed, Major Daniels was invited to begin his briefing. "No doubt you have questions over last night's events" he began, "The impacts you heard, and some of you probably guessed this, were SCUD impacts, fired we believe from somewhere northwest of here, probably in the Kerman city area".

"Do we know where they hit?" enquired O'Brian.

"Impacts were reported about 3 miles southeast of here, thankfully they landed in some empty fields, no civilian casualties reported".

"Any idea if they were chemically tipped?" asked Baz.

"We have no information to support that at the moment, but it is something we are of course concerned about". Daniels continued to discuss the Iranian Scud activity, we already knew the reports from earlier in the war, that Scuds had been lobbed at the UAE, hitting Dubai. This action had led to the coalition tasking additional air assets to Scud hunting, with some real success in the last week. It isn't thought that the Iranians have many of these weapons left, however, as Daniels informed us, the Scud hunt hasn't yet got as far as Kerman given there is still a significant air defence presence in the area.

"So what you're saying..." said O'Brian, "...is that there might still be a number of Scuds left in our AOR".

"Yes Lieutenant" replied Daniels "that is quite probable".

"Well thank Christ for the Patriots", muttered Lieutenant Taylor - we all nodded in agreement with Noble.

Moving on from the subject of Scuds, Daniels informed us that the intel section were still working on their final estimations of the enemy forces in theatre. It has to be said, no-one was impressed that we are still waiting on this information. What Major Daniels *could* tell us though was the concerning level of militia activity in the province - our ground forces have encountered three IED positions in the last 24 hours along with some light, sporadic small arms fire in the Halil valley itself. Thankfully no-one has been injured in these encounters as of yet.

With the intel brief complete, Daniels excused himself and Major Drucker stepped up to brief today's flights.

Mother began by briefing the fam flight he will be conducting with Chief and Noble, this was largely the same as the flight I was on yesterday, just with some minor deviations given the roving SA-6 that threatened us on our flight. Once that brief was completed he moved onto the flight I will be leading later today.

Addressing myself and Ein-Stein he began, "Mitch, Thomas, today you guys are going to be carrying out some target practice on the range, working in conjunction with one of the Sandman FACs. As I'm sure you know, we're going to be working a lot of CAS in the days and weeks ahead and I'm keen you get a refresher on this vital aspect of your role". Personally I felt he laid it on a bit thick, after all I'm a marine aviator and CAS is in my blood, but then I remembered that Ein-Stein was less experienced than me in such close interactions with ground forces.

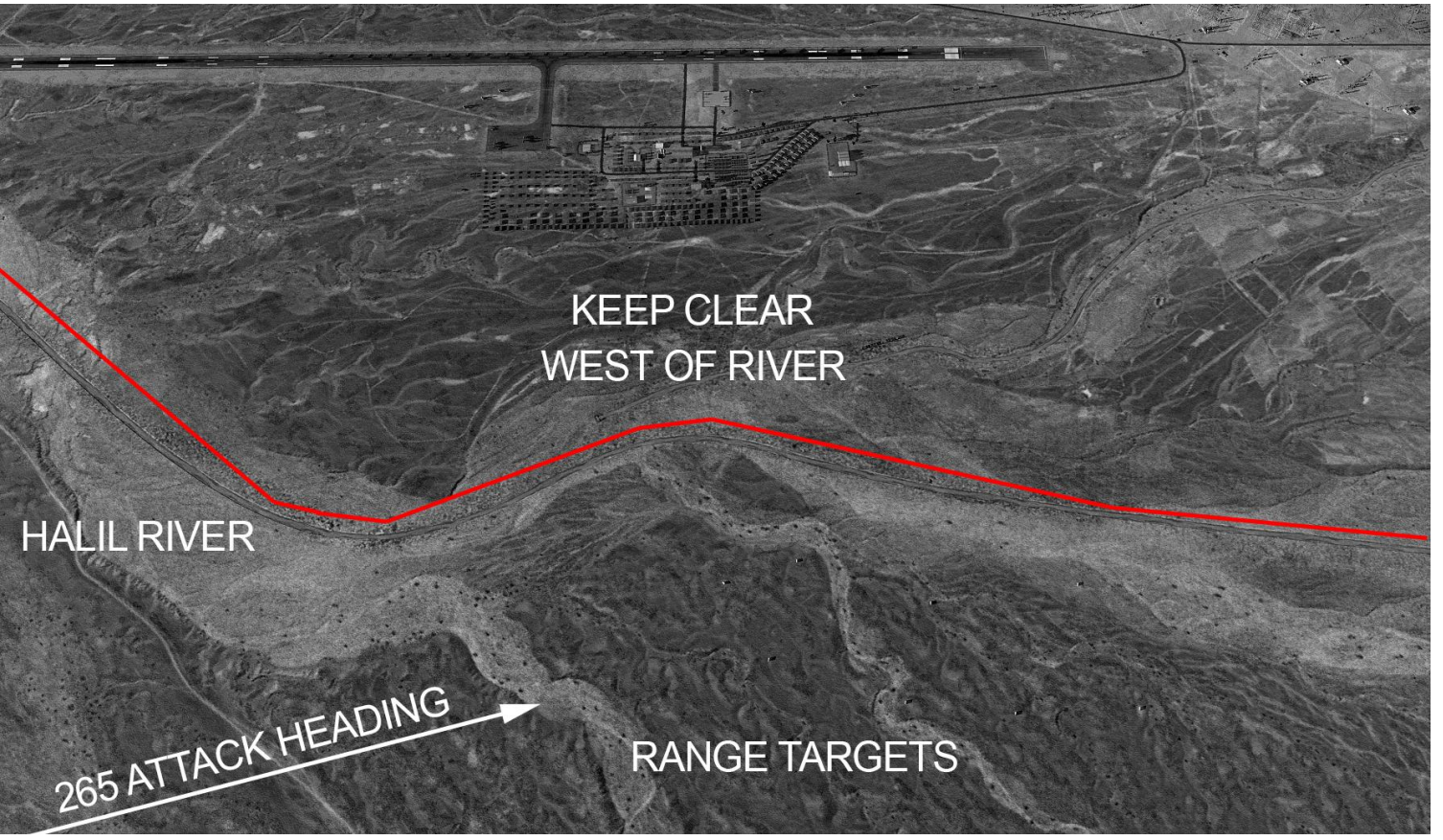
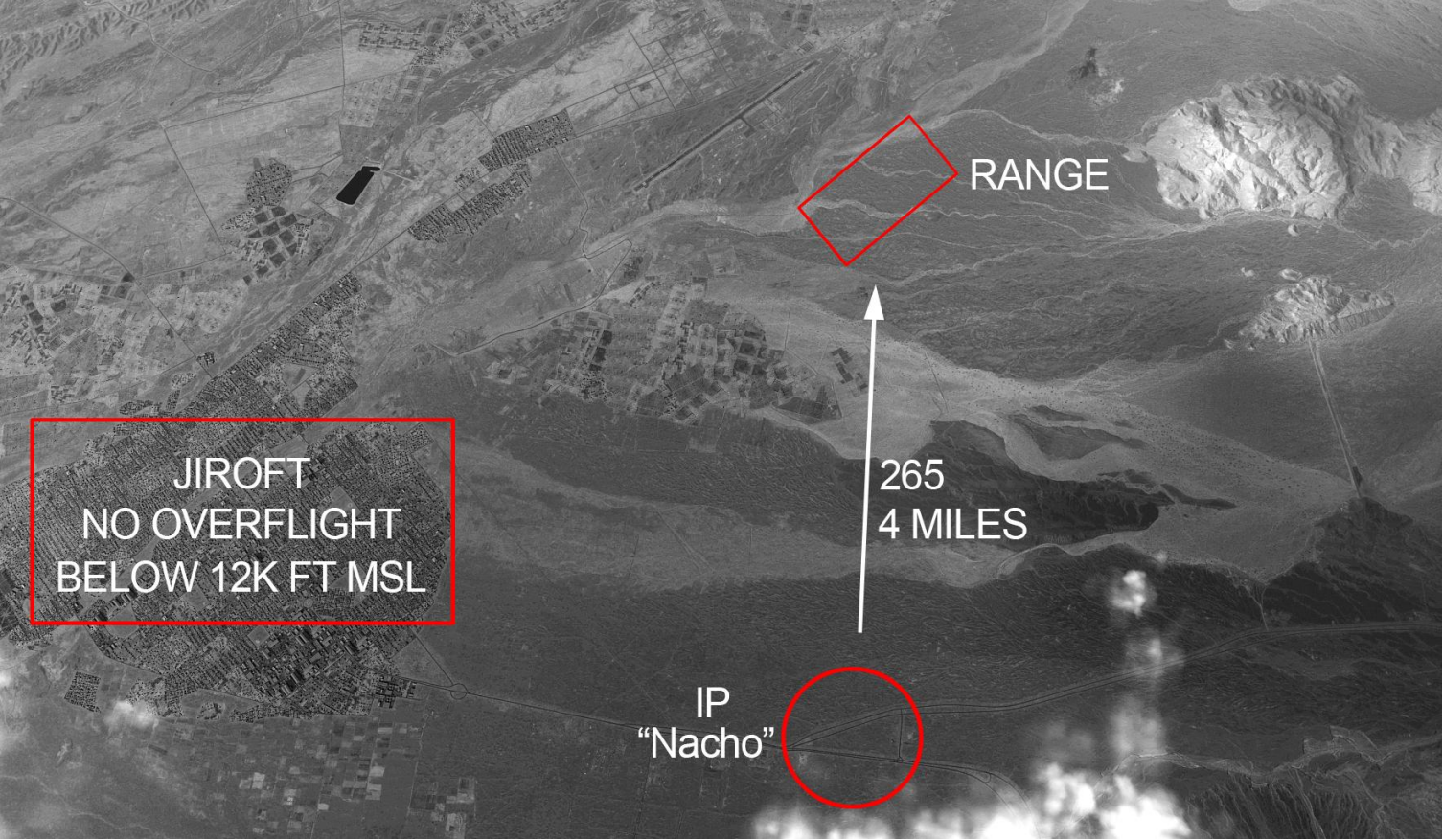
Mother went on to explain the training setup for us. I will lead a flight consisting of myself and Ein-Stein and we will be carrying out live fire training on the weapons range just northeast of Juliet. Neither of us will be carrying targeting pods, the available pods are going out on the fam flights to support the IED scans we're carrying out while airborne. We will instead be carrying dumb iron bombs, (Mk-81s in this case) and rockets, something I'm looking forward to...it's so easy to get reliant on all the technology we bring to the fight and forget the basics so I'm keen to get stuck into some good old fashioned gunnery skills.

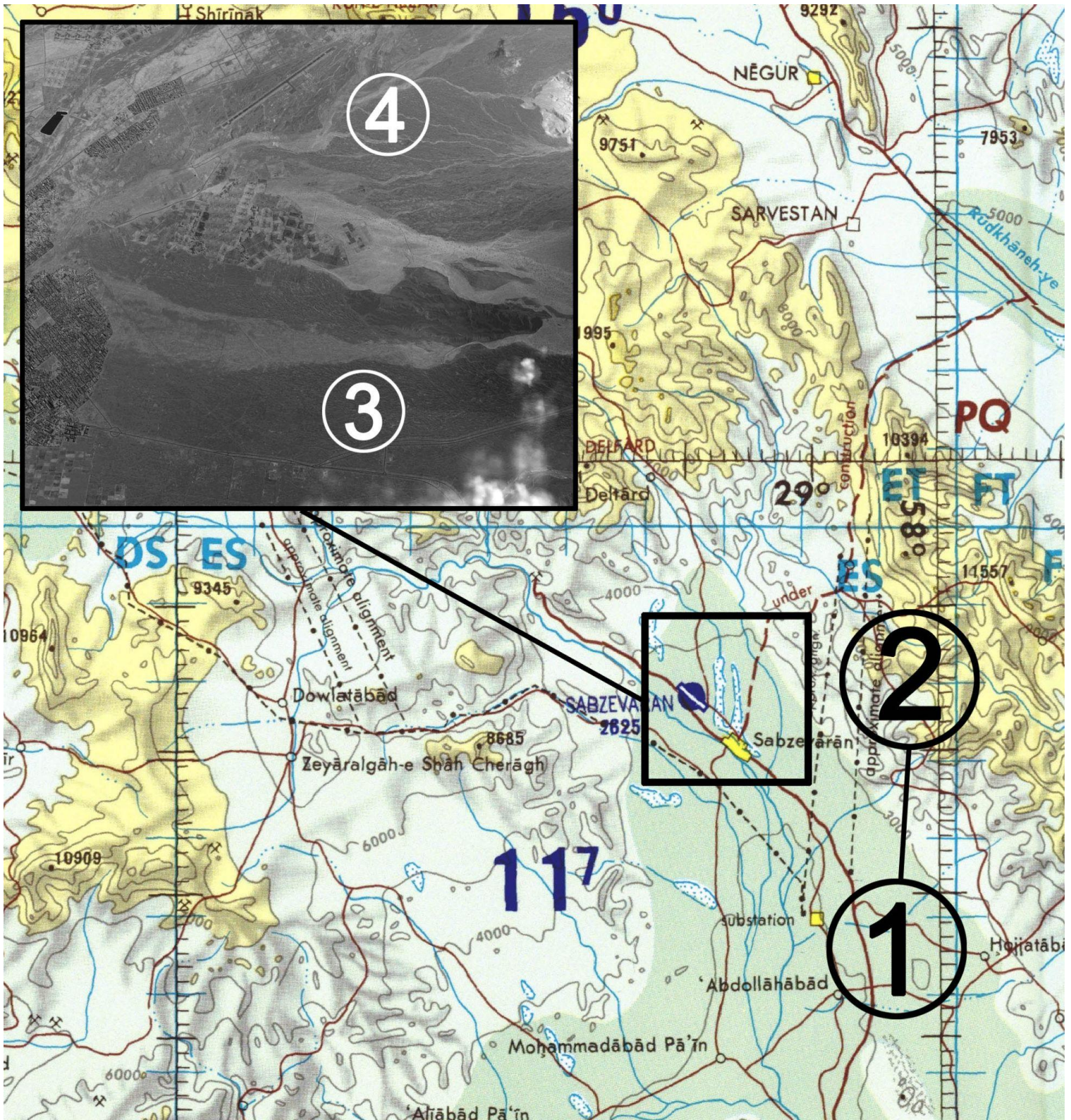
Once airborne we will follow Juliet Departure's instructions until clear of the JACZ, we will then proceed to and hold at waypoint 1, about 25 miles southeast of Juliet. Once in position we will configure our jets and contact our assigned range FAC, Sandman 3-1. The FAC will brief us on last minute updates we need to be aware of and we will then make contact with Juliet Arrival, who will give us a safe corridor through which to approach the weapons range. We will re-approach the range as directed, holding at waypoint 2, our designated 'CAS stack' location, once stacked Sandman 3-1 will give us our 9-line brief and pass us the details of the range target we will be striking. Once we have successfully received the 9 line we will take it in turns to strike the assigned targets, making sure we closely follow the FACs instructions.

Safety, as ever, will be a key consideration. The range is very close to FOB Juliet, too close really but the geography of the area left us no other choice nearby. To mitigate the risk of the range's location all air to ground work here is strictly carried out under control of a FAC. Any pilot violating the FACs instructions can expect some real pain coming their way once back on the ground. Simply put - you only drop what you're told, when you're told.

Sandman will be assigning us attack runs using a common IP as the start point, this will be the road intersection north of Jiroft (WP3), chosen due to being easily recognisable from the air. All attacks from this IP (designated 'Nacho') will approximately be on the heading 265, which ensures the jets will be pointing away from Juliet during the attack run. We will egress the range (WP4) to the north to avoid crossing to the west of the river which marks the range boundary, thus avoiding interfering with departure operations at Juliet.

Once we have finished on the range, we will check in with Juliet Arrival who will safely guide us into the pattern for Juliet and initiate the landing process. As we will be so close to home for the duration of this flight, bingo fuel is set at 1800lb, taking into consideration fuel use in the pattern and on landing.





Mother wrapped up the briefing by discussing potential threats. We will be staying firmly within 'friendly' territory on this one so the threats are relatively low. Our main concern is of course a militia member with a MANPAD so as ever we will be holding our altitude high to mitigate against this.

As the briefing concluded, Mother asked us if we had any questions, which no one did. Dismissed, we filed out of the office and headed to prepare for our flights later in the day. There was little banter this morning and everyone looked tired after last night's disturbance. My wingman today, Ein-Stein, said very little all morning, I've not yet had the opportunity to get to know him well and he still seems very distant...very quiet. But if he keeps his mouth shut on the ground and let's his flying do the talking...well...I'll be ok with that.

Time to brush up on my nines, takeoff is set for 14:45.