

20/06/13, 08:00

I had my first flight in Cerberus North two days ago, patrolling the no fly zones. It started out as a gentle introduction to the complex operating environment here at Incirlik but things took a turn when we ended up running an intercept on two Syrian Mig-21's approaching no fly Sierra. Thankfully the Migs turned back before they breached the line, and despite the best efforts of an SA-6 site the situation was eventually de-escalated. I have to admit I was getting worried there for a moment. I think I handled myself OK on the first mission - Major Dane doesn't strike me as someone who takes any prisoners and I made it through the debrief in one piece.

Following my first debrief I was walking towards the base housing and ran into a familiar face! Lt. Colonel Pete Jones, aka Davy and my former CO when I was on the Warthog in OPF. We had a good catch up that evening, Davy is still CO of the Flying Tigers, with the squadron now deployed over here for OCN - supporting the operations against the SIA of course (not be much use enforcing the no fly...although I still have nightmares about Migs at night over Iran). Towards the end of OPF Davy was pretty forthcoming with his opinions on our overall mission, generally they weren't very positive about the situation we found ourselves in (although he was always totally committed to our mission of protecting our folks on the ground), we talked about the situation here in Syria and the spillover from OPF - the condensed version of this conversation...? "I told you so."

Today's 08:00 briefing was once again held in the small briefing room, most of the Red Devils were present with our squadron being one of several on CAP duty today. Major Daniels kicked off once again with the intelligence briefing.

The major told us the Syrians continue to test our response to flights towards no fly Sierra, Along with the two Fishbeds Poodle and myself turned back the other day we also saw two further Mig flights carry out the same maneuver yesterday. So far we've always met them head on and turned the Syrians back but things are certainly tense up there right now. We were warned to expect more of the same and Lt. Col Lincoln intervened at this point to reiterate the theatre ROEs and the need for cool heads. Our flights responding to the Migs yesterday were also locked onto by an SA-11 near Homs, they never entered it's engagement zone but the presence of these SAMs remains a constant worry.

Daniels next informed us that the Russians remain active with 5 sorties yesterday over Homs. Their continued attacks on the SDF in Homs is a real problem for the democratic forces and one we are currently unable to prevent. But of course the Russians and Syrians know this, which is why the Russians are the ones conducting these missions. We also saw an interesting turn of events yesterday with a number of Russian maritime patrol aircraft entering the Mediterranean. It appears Turkey had granted overflight rights to the Russians (albeit with an escort), allowing them to reach Syria and the Med far more easily from their bases near the Black Sea. It is unclear what Turkey's intentions were in allowing this but it's fair to say that the rest of NATO were less than pleased. My squadron mates however looked more pleased about this news, seems they're all hoping to get a close up look at some of the more exotic aircraft in the Russian fleet!

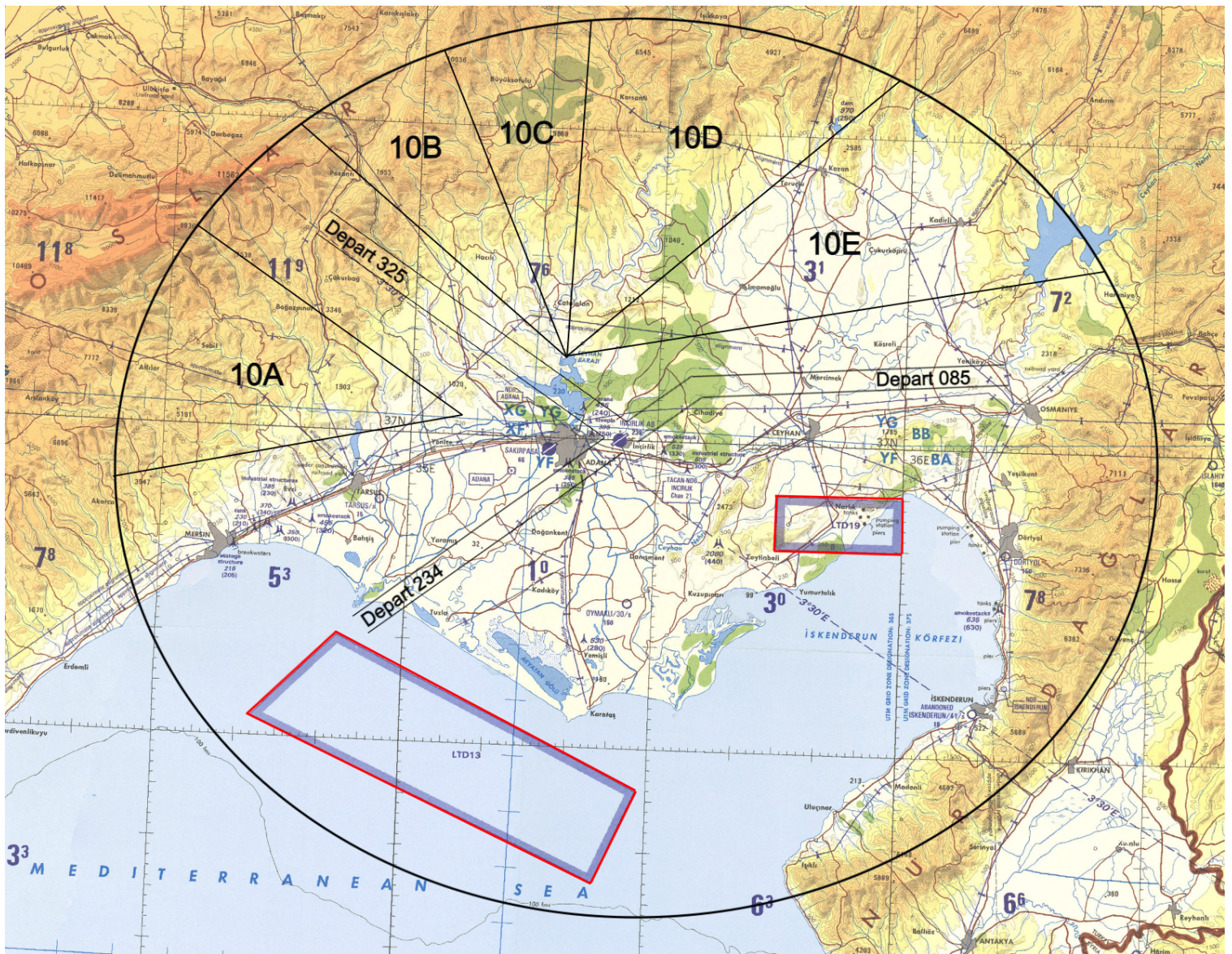
It appears the Russian fleet has also set sail from Tartus and has dispersed into the Med, shouldn't be of any direct consequence to our missions over Syria but I'm sure the navy are keeping a close eye on them.

Daniels concluded with an update on the TuAF, who continue to be very active along the Syrian border. The Turks claim to be hitting PPK targets but we are seeing reports that they are in fact striking the YPG in places as well. It is thought that these strikes may actually be inadvertently assisting the SIA, allowing them room to pull back and regroup when the YPG are slowed down.

The intel brief was followed by the met brief. Edwards led this once again, the weather today has been good and is set to continue into the evening with very little cloud and low winds.

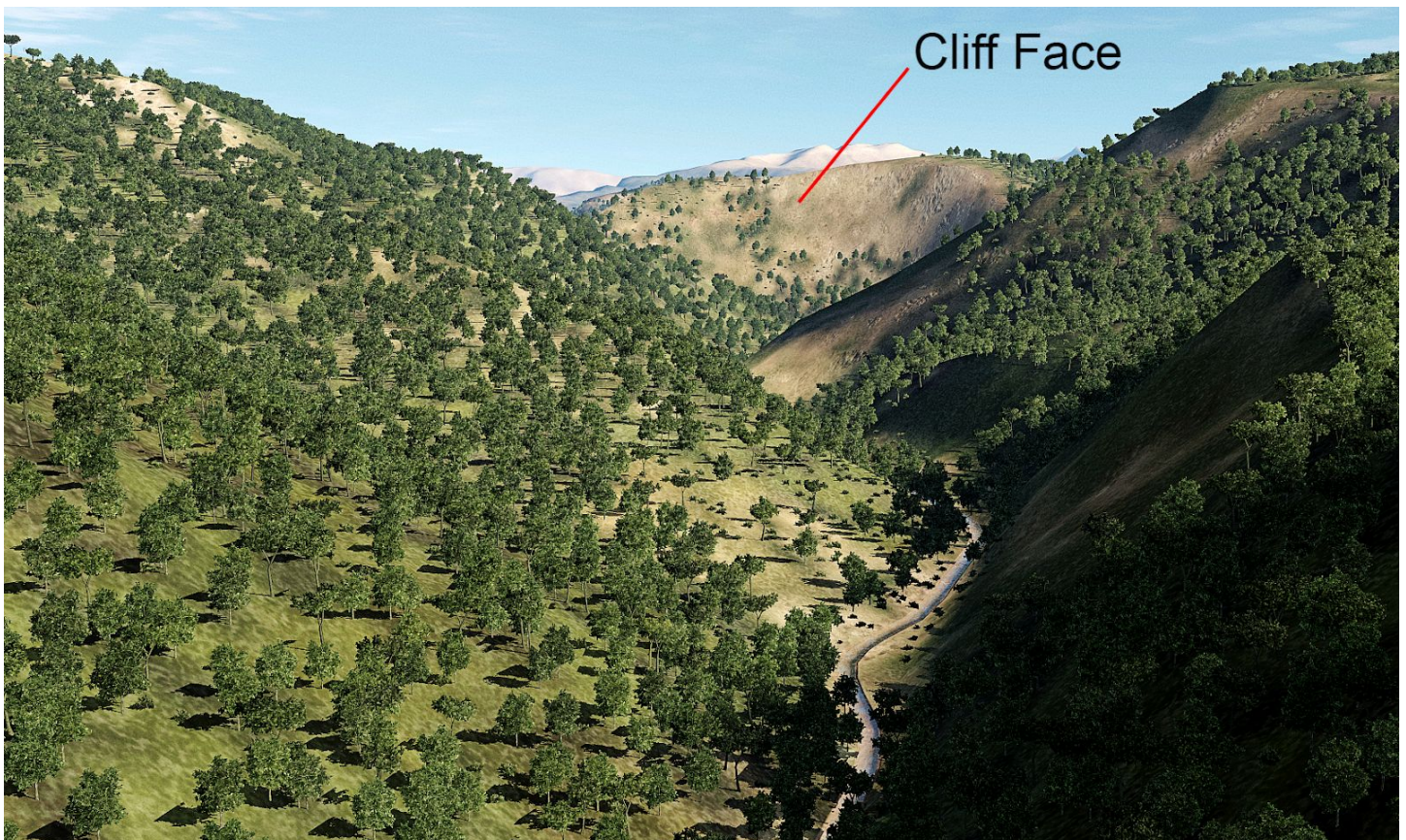
Today's CAP flights were then briefed by Lt. Col. Lincoln, although this part of the briefing didn't apply to me today. Being new to the Hornet and the squadron, Major Dane wants to put me through my paces on a training sortie instead - said he wanted to see how proficient I was at putting bombs on target. Got to say I was a little bit insulted given my experience, but what the hell...sounds like it will be an enjoyable sortie nonetheless, it will also be good training for our forward air controllers so I guess I'm glad to help.

So my flight today is a low level exercise through the Taurus Mountains, northwest of Adana. I will be required to navigate through the mountain passes and valleys before turning into one of the weapons ranges on the MTCA and conducting an attack using good old fashioned iron bombs and skill. We will begin low level flight in training area 10A before transitioning at low level into 10B. The gunnery range itself is located in area 10B. We went into a lot of detail in the briefing - I will be flying a low level, high speed route through challenging terrain, great training for the real thing but dangerous if you go into it unprepared. I made notes and paid attention to every word he said!

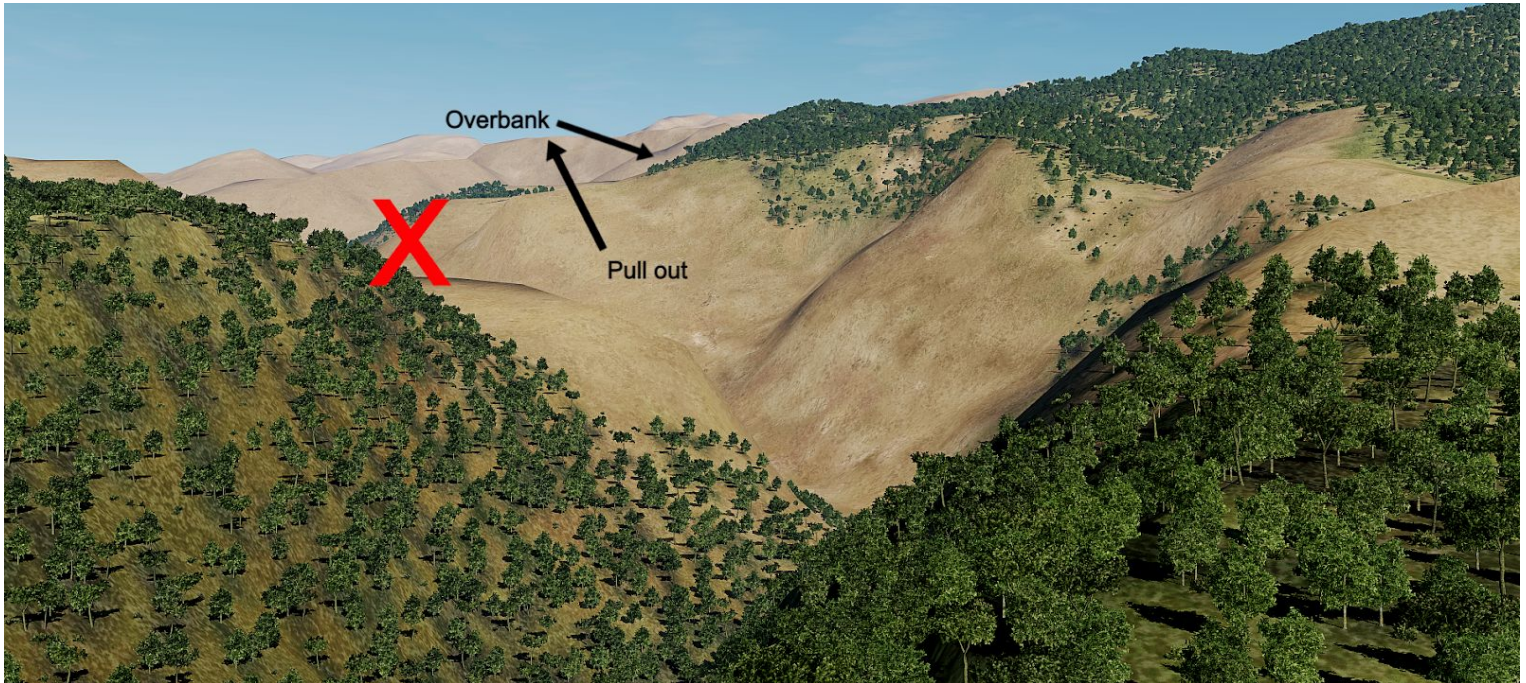


Major Dane will accompany me on this flight. We will follow a non standard departure from Incirlik as we will be remaining within the MTCA. I will need to follow the instructions from ATC departure until cleared to proceed to waypoint 1, where I will regroup with Poodle over the lake north of the town of Tarsus and just south of the mountains. From here I will descend to 500 feet AGL and follow the river north to waypoint 4.

At waypoint 4 the river valley widens and I will descend into the valley at 150 feet AGL. Poodle will maintain position above and behind me to monitor my progress and make sure I stay on track. I will then follow the river through the valley to waypoint 5, Poodle was very keen to stress that this was quite a difficult left turn as you initially fly directly towards a cliff face. I should try to keep my nose level with the cliff top as I line this turn up so that if I need to execute a vertical escape maneuver I can do so...and avoid scattering myself across the valley floor.



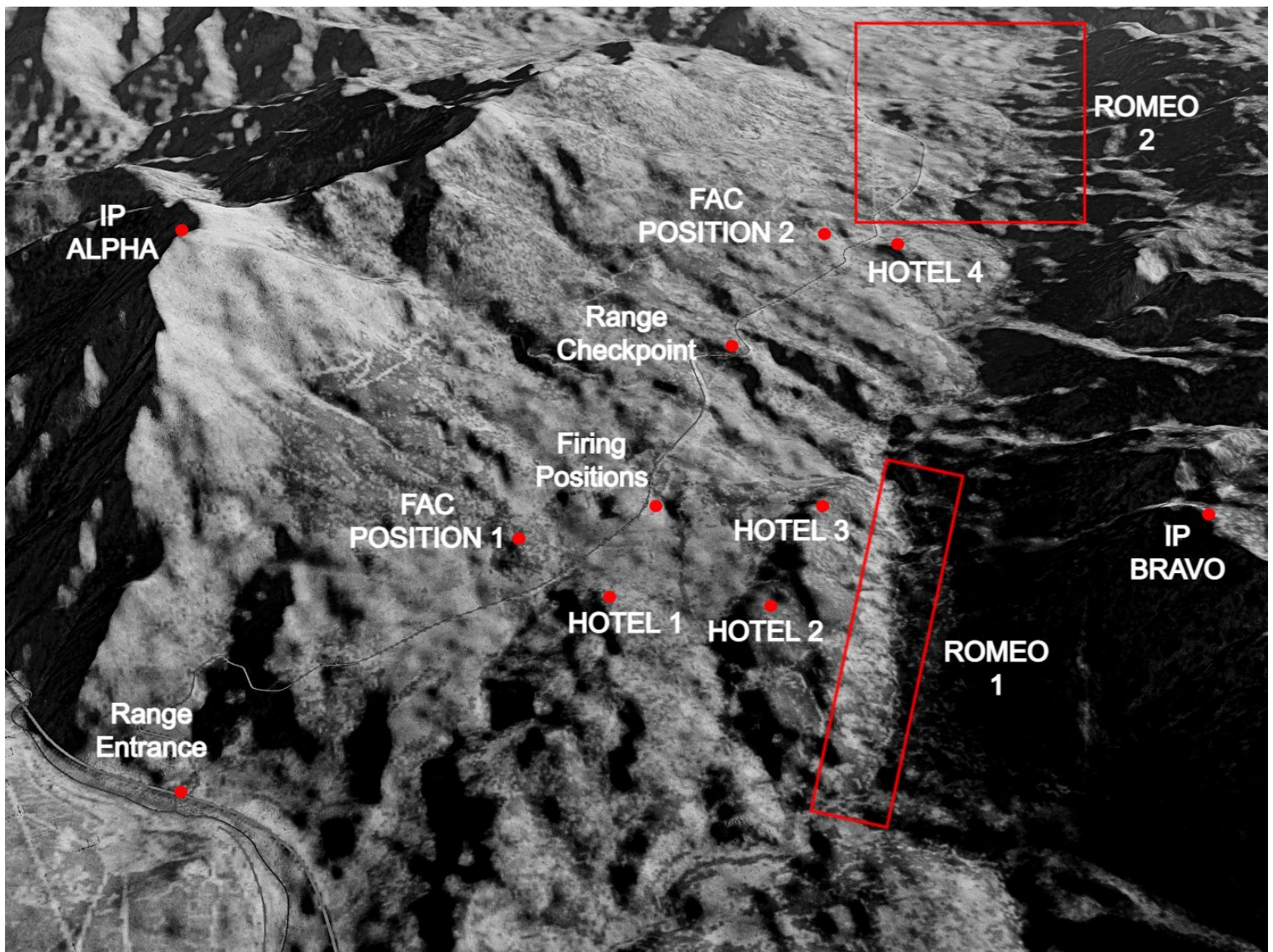
After waypoint 5 I will continue to follow the river until the trees start to thin out at waypoint 6. The left turn at 6 is very dangerous as the valley narrows and should not be attempted, instead I will pull up and over the ridge before overbanking and pulling back down to the right into a wider forested valley.



I will follow this valley north to waypoint 7 where I will make a right turn into a gully, cresting the ridge between two peaks before pulling right and down into a new valley running south at waypoint 8.

I will then follow this valley south until waypoint 9, which is a left turn (to the east). I will pass between two shallow peaks, cross a road running north to south and then immediately after the first road pull down and left at waypoint 10 into a valley containing a highway running north. I will follow this road north to waypoint 11 where the valley widens. On the approach to 11 I will conduct my check in with range control and once cleared I will enter the valley.

The gunnery range is located at waypoint 12, at the end of the valley. The range is northeast of the highway running through the valley and has 6 target points. Hotels 1 through 4 refer to four elevated positions with targets sited on them, usually reserved for air to ground use. Romeo 1 and 2 are two larger gunnery ranges used by our armour. We received an extensive briefing about the gunnery range, safety is of course a priority and it's vital I follow the instructions from the range controllers and FACs to the letter. The range has two initial points (IP) that are used by the FACs to control attacks. IP Alpha is the summit of the mountain on the north of the range entrance and IP Bravo is marked by the radio tower sitting atop the east wall of the valley.



As I pass waypoint 11 I will need to hold south of the range and then check in with my assigned forward air controller, King 3-2, who will pass details of my target and its position through a nine line. The FAC will observe my aircraft position once I call myself as 'in' on target, and if I am in safe parameters will authorise weapons release. If I am in an unsafe delivery position the FAC will call abort and I will pull up and out of the valley to the right (south) and circle around to re-enter the valley and make another attempt.

Once I have dropped my bombs I will exit the valley by pulling up and to the right and egress south towards Adana. At this point we will contact RAPCON and follow instructions for landing.

We'll be close to home for the whole sortie so less emphasis has been placed on the fuel plan this time out. Bingo however is 2800 lb.

Should be a nice quick and exciting sortie this one, I love low level flight in a fast jet—something we have always excelled at in the RAF. My thoughts drift to fond memories of tearing up the Mach loop in Wales and the Lake District in England and putting on a show to the aviation enthusiasts camped out on the mountain tops. Takeoff is planned for 16:30...time to study the route again.

