

# FIRST IN - WEASELS OVER SYRIA

26th June, 2013.

We had our first flight out of H4 yesterday, a four ship training and familiarization flight around H4 airspace and out to the SWARTC. Out on the range we practiced dueling with a simulated SA-2 and SA-3. Not the most capable systems we will face in Syria but a great refresher in flight level tactics in attacking SAM sites. The SA-3 surprise that Popeye cooked up with the SWARTC controllers was a timely reminder that a Weasel should be ready for anything.

While we were in the air Popeye said we wouldn't have to wait long to get into the action, and as it turns out, he was right. An early briefing was called for 6am this morning, we emerged from our tents to the desert sun just beginning to rise in a clear blue sky above the base.

As we wearily settled into our seats in the briefing room Popeye greeted us all a good morning, he was far more alert than the rest of us and I suspected he'd already been up hours preparing this briefing. However a coffee urn in the corner of the room soon got us into action.

Kicking things off Popeye invited Captain Johnson up to deliver the met brief. Johnson filled us in on the weather for the day ahead, the fine conditions we started the day with weren't quite going to last, with a band of clouds rolling in from the Med expected to arrive over Jordan and eastern Syria later this morning. Johnson said we should expect scattered clouds around 15,000 feet with another lighter layer up around 30,000 feet. Winds are forecast to be between 10 and 20 knots at medium to high altitudes. It will be another hot day with temperatures around 35°C. After delivering his brief Johnson departed and Major Norris stepped up to begin the day's intel brief.

Norris had little new information to offer in addition to yesterday's brief. The Syrians continue to probe the no fly zone and the Russians continue to hit SDF targets unhindered. Things continue to bubble just below the surface, but with the tension out there on the front I can only wonder at how long it will be until things boil over. To the east in SIA territory, Operation Jackal continues to ramp up as the strikes against the SIA begin to push deeper, striking at not just their military targets but at their infrastructure and wealth generating assets as well.

Which brings us to our combat debut in Cerberus North. As Major Norris left the briefing room, Popeye took front and center and began his briefing.

"Well I know how hungry you all are to get out there and start doing your thing, I've been pushing the CAOC to get us in the game and for our sins, we have our first missions. We will be supporting a series of strike and CAS packages as they engage SIA targets around Raqqa and in the Euphrates valley".

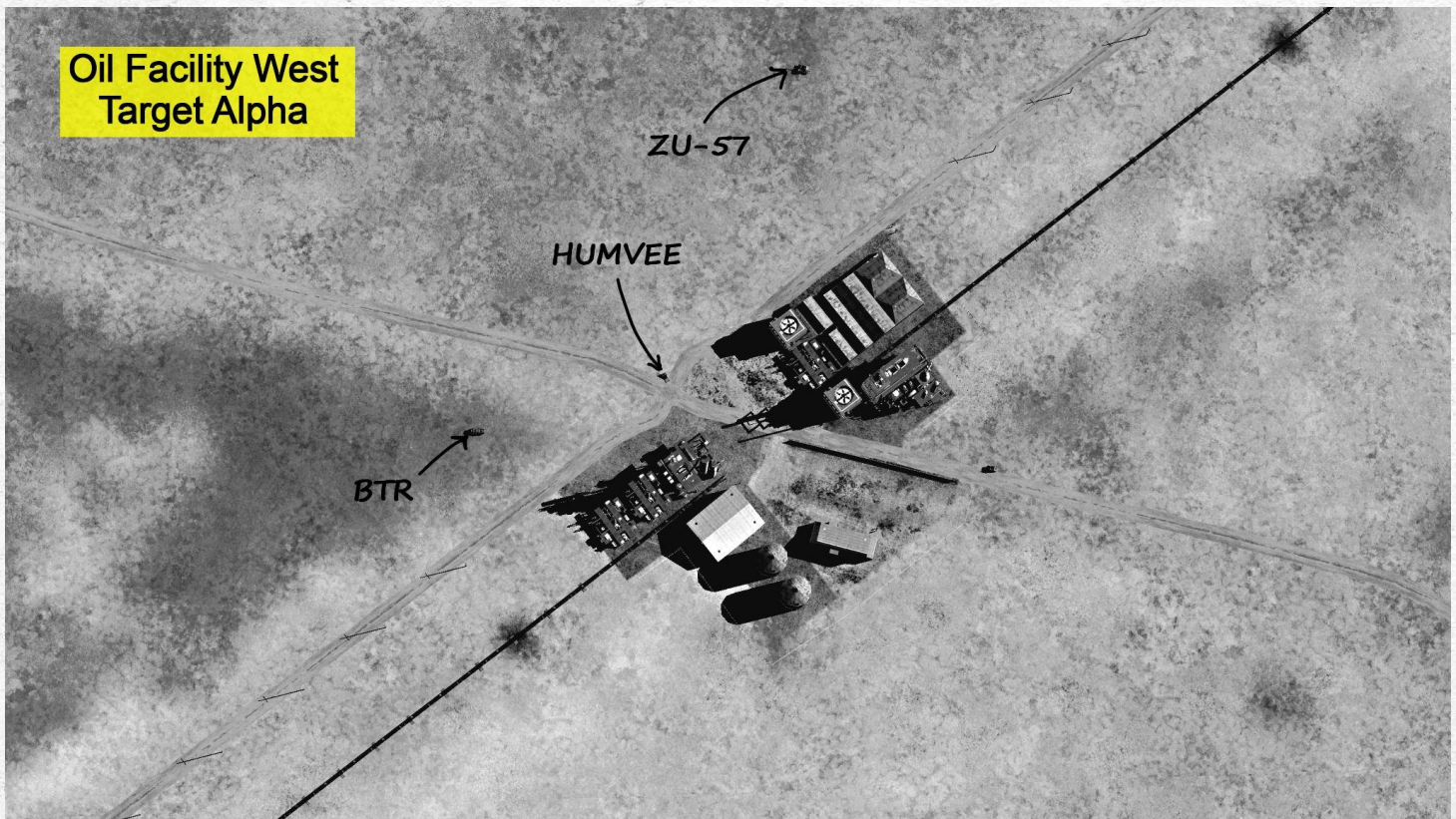
Popeye handed out briefing materials to us all, we immediately pulled the lids off our marker pens and began making notes.

"Sword 1, consisting of myself and Rotor, will be providing Weasel support to a package attacking SIA targets around Raqqa. Sword 2 will be Forrest and Bug, you will be supporting a package of Strike Eagles and Luftwaffe Tornados as they strike SIA oil targets in the Deir ez-Zor region of the Euphrates river valley. Finally Tank and Ghost, operating as Sword 3, will be supporting CAS operations north of Raqqa".

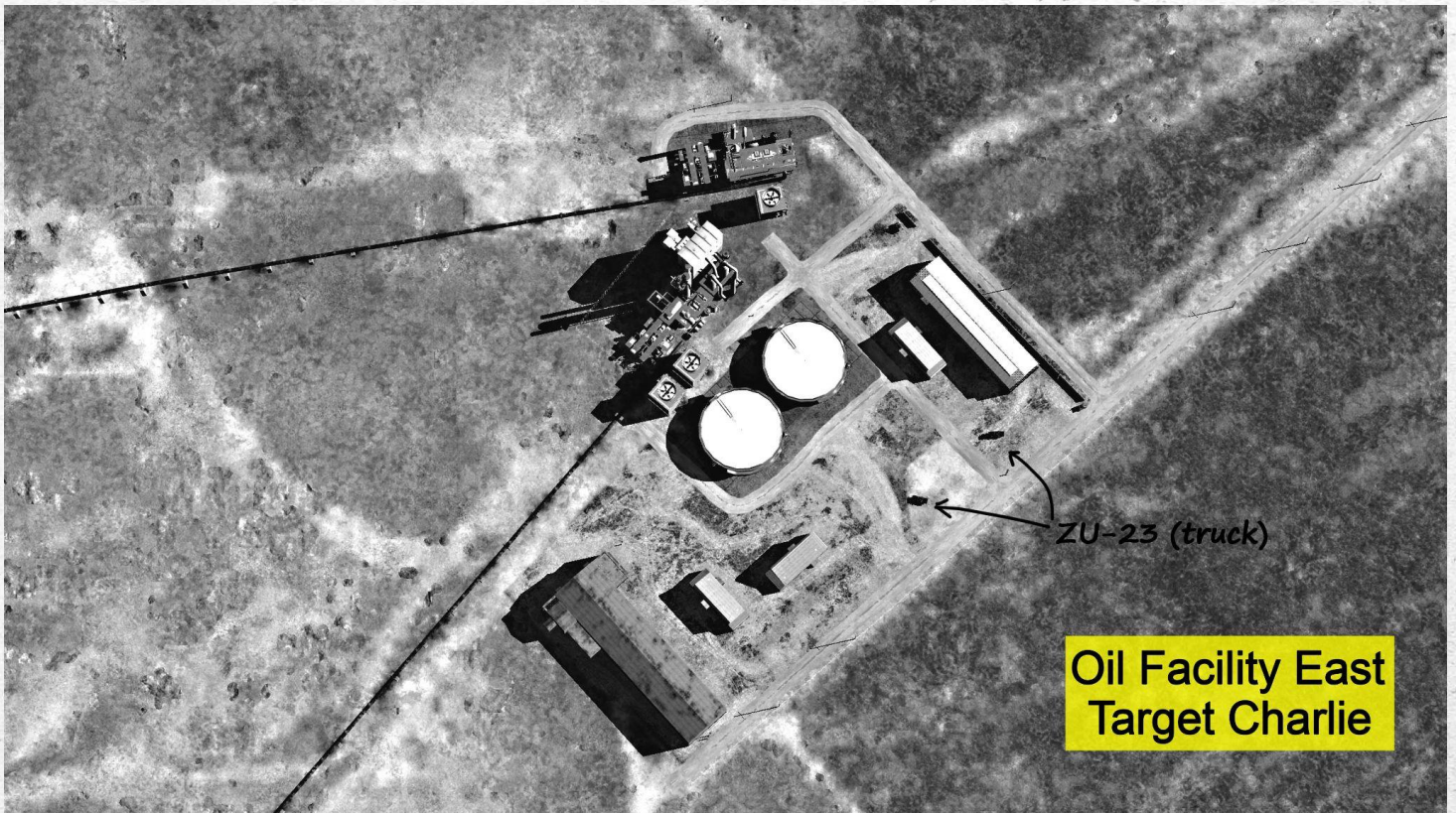
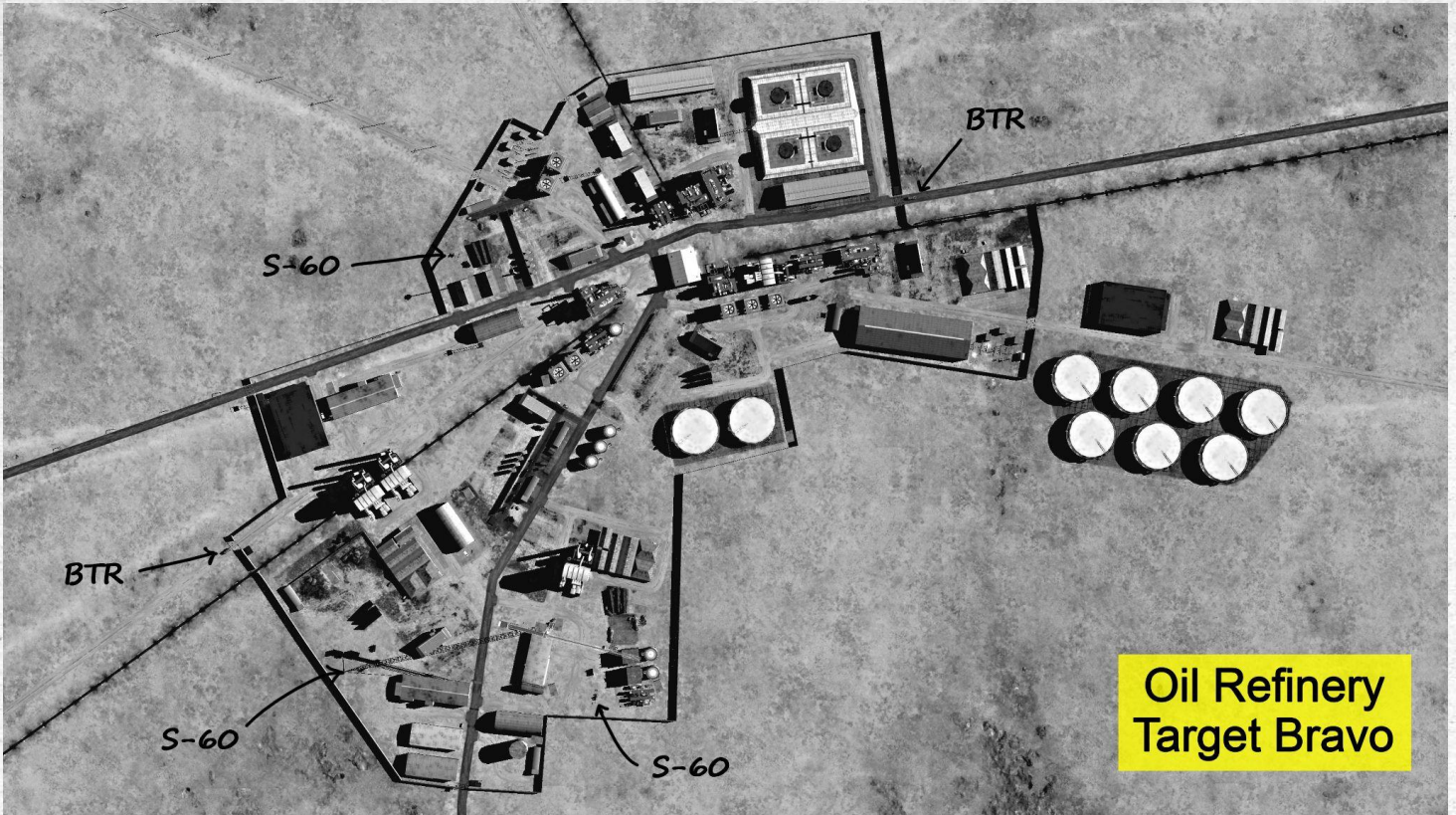
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Popeye went on to describe the missions Sword 1 and Sword 3 would be supporting before turning to Sword 2's assignment.

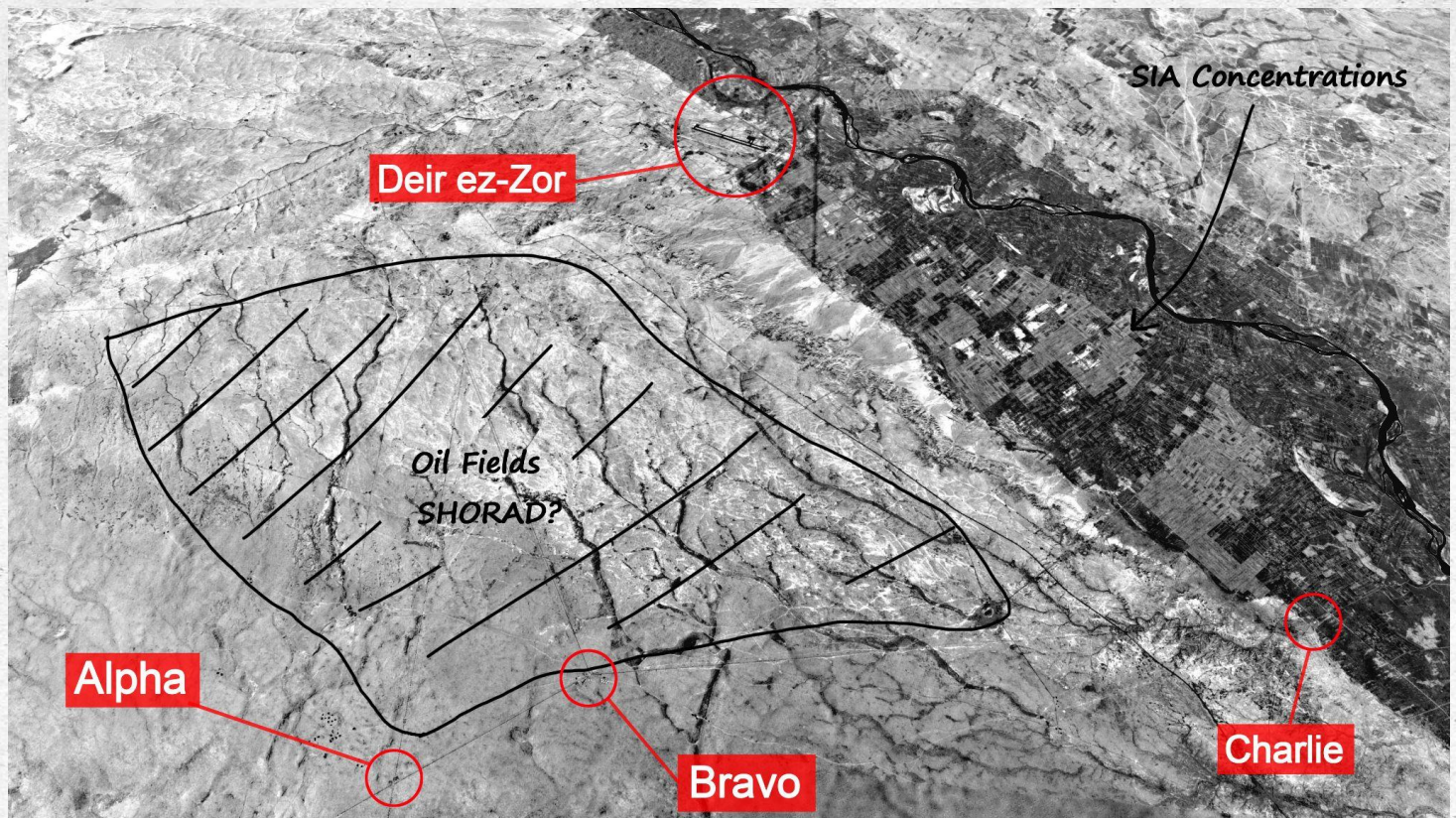
"Sword 2, your strike package will be hitting three targets spread along the main oil pipeline which runs east to west around 15 miles south of the SIA occupied Deir ez-Zor airbase. A flight of Tornados, callsign Agro 3 will be striking the western most target, designated Alpha - an oil processing facility and pumping station. The first flight of Eagles, Hammer 2, are targeting an oil refinery - target Bravo, with the second Eagle flight, callsign Hammer 3, targeting Charlie - another processing facility and pump station further east. These targets are of significant economic value to the SIA, the elimination of which will go some way towards undermining their financial capability to support their so called state".



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"Each site has limited SHORAD present, ranging from truck mounted ZU-23 at Charlie up to larger caliber S-60 and ZU-57 at Bravo and Alpha. The air defenses the SIA possess are all mobile systems and as such they do keep moving around regularly so keep that in mind. The SIA are also in possession of a fair bit of US equipment that they captured in Iraq so don't be alarmed if you see Humvees or even M1 tanks down there".

"North of the targets is a large oil field, in roughly a 15 by 15 mile square box. There are a number of dispersed AAA guns throughout this location, mostly S-60 we believe and no particularly heavy concentrations that we've identified, these shouldn't be anything other than an inconvenience to you but be aware they are there. We also can't rule out the possibility of MANPADs in this area".

"What about SAMs?" asked Bug, "Not seeing anything yet that warrants a Weasel mission".

"Indeed" replied Popeye, "I was just getting to that. Bug is right, AAA is not our primary concern on any of the packages. The SIA are believed to be in possession of maybe as many as a couple of dozen SA-8s. Now we know a number of those are located in and around Raqqa and at least 2 more are at Deir ez-Zor airbase. But that leaves a fairly substantial number in as of yet unidentified locations".

"And we think their oil production sites are where some of them might be?" I asked.

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"Quite possibly" replied Popeye, "The oil infrastructure that generates wealth for the SIA is their most valuable strategic asset, logic is that they are going to defend it. The river valley east of the targets contain a number of settlements also heavily occupied by the SIA, any SAMs covering this area may be in a position to interfere with the strikers".

At this point Major Tom 'Tank' Porter spoke up. "Sir if a lot of these sites are looking at nothing more than SA-8s defending, can't a high, fast delivery from the strikers with JDAM be all we need...not that I don't want to get in on the action, just not clear on the tactics here".

"It's a fair question Tank" Popeye responded, "There's three reasons. First off we're still unclear of which SA-8 variant we're dealing with, as you know the later variants can reach up to around 40,000 feet, fully laden strikers are going to struggle to overfly them, we're not going to risk it. Second, the weather is a factor, the clouds moving in are an issue for ROE. The CAOC wants the strikers to eyeball the targets before dropping, we have reports of the SIA moving in human shields at key targets, they'll need to make sure the target is clear before dropping, which means potentially dropping into SAM range to clear the overcast. Finally, we simply don't want the SIA to have SA-8s, they are a threat to any operations in the east, so we're going to find them and kill them".

"Sounds good then" said Tank grinning.

Popeye continued, "Our role will be to protect the strike packages and CAS platforms by drawing out the SA-8s, provoking them into revealing themselves and then killing them when they do".

Popeye went on to describe the operating areas for each flight.

"Sword 2 has been assigned a kill box 20 miles in radius from target Bravo, so anything you ID as hostile within 20 miles of Bravo is fair game. The SA-8s are your primary targets, but should you locate other targets of opportunity then prosecute at your judgment. We also have indications of a Fire Can radar in the area, if true it could indicate the SIA also have heavier caliber radar guided AAA such as KS-19".

"15 miles north of the targets is Deir ez-Zor airbase, I advise you steer clear of here, there are certainly targets to be found but consider it out of scope for this mission, the air defenses here will not interfere with your strike package's mission so you're best off saving the fuel and ammo for more threatening targets. Of course if you are engaged from this area, feel free to defend yourselves if needed but remember this is not your mission".

"We will also have a Rivet Joint, callsign Vacuum, airborne during the operation. Should any updated tactical information become available, Vacuum will share it with us".

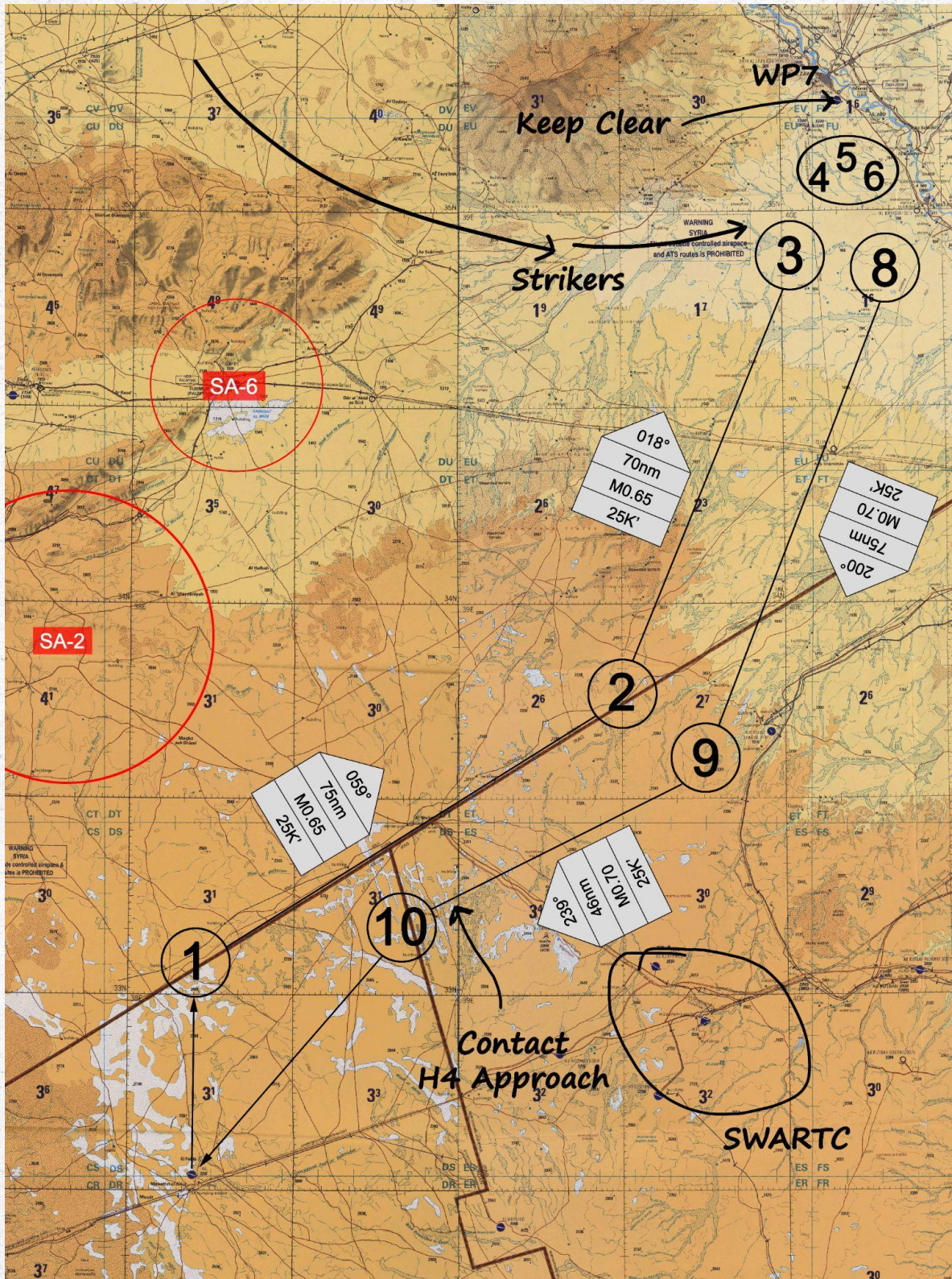
Popeye moved on to discuss the mission flow. I will perform a standard departure from H4 alongside Bug. Once clear of H4 airspace we will proceed to waypoint 1 where we will check in with Sentinel before following the Syrian border to waypoint 2, we will then turn north and push into Syria. Waypoint 3 marks the IP for our push into the target area 15 miles south of target Alpha. Our estimated TOT for waypoint 3 is 08:56 Zulu, which gives us almost 25 minutes on station ahead of the strike package's TOT of 09:20 Zulu. The strike package will be ingressing the target area from the west of waypoint 3.

Ahead of our arrival in the target area we will push to the strike frequency, where 'Warden' will be providing C3 for the strike package.

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Targets Alpha, Bravo and Charlie along with Deir ez-Zor airbase have been assigned waypoints 4-7 in our flight plan. Our egress and rally point will be waypoint 8. We should remember to contact H4 Approach as we get close to waypoint 10.

If on plan, we should arrive in the target area with around 8,500 lb of fuel, giving us 4,500 lb of fuel until we hit bingo at 4,000 lb. 4,500 lb should be enough providing we don't spend all our time thrashing around at ground level.



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Shell will also be available southeast of waypoint eight should I need to take gas at any point, although the fuel plan we have should be adequate without needing AAR.

For this mission I will be carrying 2 AGM-65D Mavericks alongside 2 GBU-38s, Bug will be loaded with two AGM-88 HARMs. This loadout will give us a flexible amount of firepower enabling us to keep any SA-8s we locate at arms length and prosecute any other targets of opportunity. My loadout will create a lot of drag and weight, I know a lot of Viper drivers out there don't like flying with 2 Mavs on a TER but as Popeye likes to point out, the load is cleared for use and given that our weasel detachment is pretty small we want to pack as much punch as possible per aircraft. If we locate any SA-8s it will be my decision when Bug makes use of his HARMs, which gives me tactical considerations to think about, the HARM is a pretty noticeable launch so once fired it can be a useful tool to force an emitter off the air as they attempt to avoid impending death. If an emitter goes offline it might live a little longer, but if I've clocked its location that will only make it easier for me to follow the HARM up with a kill shot. The HTS pod in conjunction with the targeting pod we'll be carrying will be invaluable in helping me pinpoint SAM positions.

We concluded the brief looking at the threat systems we might encounter today. Our primary threat will be the SA-8, which given its short range missiles and a missile engagement zone of just 6nm, we should be able to easily out-distance using Mavericks and HARMs. The main challenge we will face from the SA-8 is if we get surprised by them, their missiles are fast and agile so we shouldn't take any chances. The SA-8 also has an exploitable vulnerability in its difficulty at tracking targets at low level, but the low level environment will clearly pose other threats such as AAA and MANPADS so the decision to root around in the weeds must be carefully made. AAA we expect to see is ZU-23, ZU-57 and S-60, giving cover at low to medium altitude. The presence of a Fire Can radar indicates there also might be heavier KS-19 AAA in the target area. Popeye was keen to reinforce with us that despite the older equipment, and questionable abilities of the SIA to operate it effectively, this area still looks well defended and we should give it the respect it deserves. In short, don't get cocky!

Our ingress route has been designed to easily clear the easternmost Syrian SAM sites, but still we should be aware that there are SA-2, SA-3 and SA-6 sites about 50 miles west of our ingress route and operating areas. We don't expect to encounter any air to air threats in our operating area today, but as insurance we will have two flights of Eagles on BARCAP between the strike package and the Syrian air bases to the west.

With the mission and threats discussed, debated and briefed thoroughly, Popeye concluded the briefing. I had several hours afterwards to prepare my thoughts and continue my planning. The biggest unknown we have is the location of any SA-8s, this then will be a good old fashioned Weasel patrol, where we fly into enemy areas and see who we can provoke into action. Our job is to root out the SAMs and force them into revealing their locations, to do this we can try flying around the target areas at low level, possibly attacking any targets of opportunity we come across and generally causing mayhem - making the SAM operators want to come up and shut us down. Our focus should be on the targets that will pose the most threat to the strike package - the SA-8s and any Firecan radars will be the most dangerous, the ZU-23s and S-60s less so. If we decide to take out targets to bait the SAMs into coming up then we should do this selectively, no point hitting more than one target in any one target area as there'll only be so many SAMs. Of course if they do come up then using our HTS pod we will rapidly be able to narrow down their location and prosecute the target. Quick reactions, nerves of steel and great situational awareness are traits that will serve me well today. Bug and myself are the first flight out, the other two flights are scheduled for later in the day. We start engines at 08:20 Zulu, takeoff is 08:30.