

23/06/2013, 21:00.



This evening over 40 aircrews gathered together at Incirlik for a major briefing. The briefing was held in the main briefing room, a large theatre style secure conference room with seating for around 200. Rumours first started swirling around Incirlik this morning that something significant was in the planning, it seems that the maintenance crews are really being pushed to make sure all jets are as serviceable as possible and once orders to attend a large briefing were given we all knew something was going to happen.

As always the briefing began with the intel brief, delivered by the ever ready Major Daniels. Daniels informed us that Russian activity in the region continues to grow, alongside the aircraft me and Woody intercepted two days ago we've seen more Bears on patrol over the Med along with an increase in the number of Russian fighter patrols in the region. It seems the Russians are keen to remind us they're here and serious about supporting their ally. The Russians have also been bringing additional SAM systems into theatre. Following the arrival of an SA-11 into Al Assad the Russians ferried the battery via MI-26 to locations south of Sierra - seems the line of SAMs we've been facing over the no fly is only getting denser. Our Rivet Joint flights remain active however, mapping the SAM locations so hopefully we won't face any surprises when the time comes to finally face into them.

Around Homs the SDF continues to hold it's ground against the Syrian government forces despite continuing Russian airstrikes. The SDF however has reported an increasing number of Hezbollah fighters arriving onto the front line from Lebanon, it seems that the Syrians are utilising their strong relations with Hezbollah to reinforce their strength in key areas of fighting.

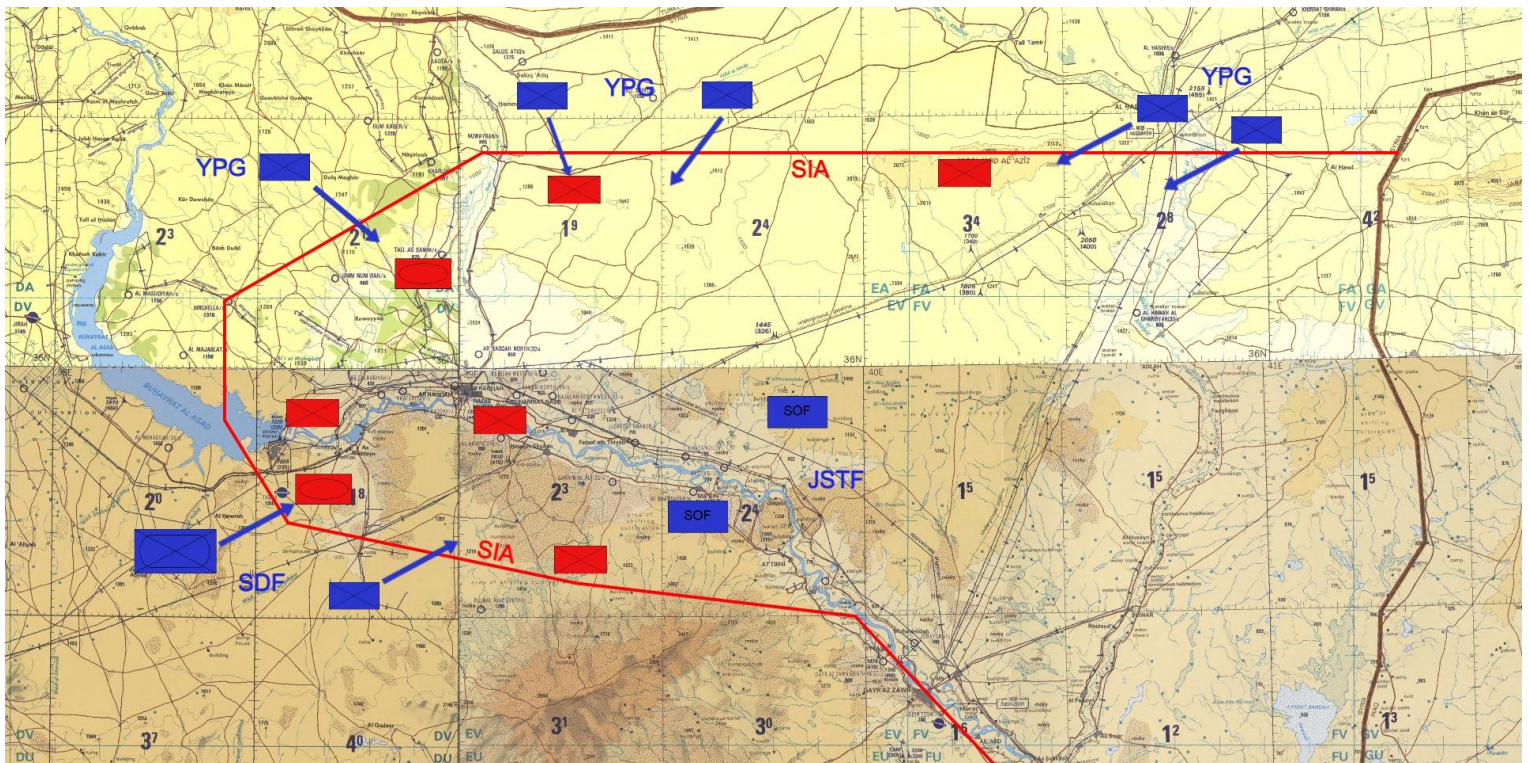
The SIA forces in and around Raqqa are believed to be in a weakened position, with the steady pressure being exerted by a combination of YPG, JSTF and Russian attacks taking it's toll. Although the SIA lines are shrinking and supply routes to the city have been severely restricted, the remaining SIA fighters still remain dug in and well enough equipped to cause any attacking force serious casualties, especially considering their willingness to fight to the last man.

The weather brief for tomorrow was delivered next, as usual this was given by Captain Edwards. The recent storms have thankfully now blown through and we are looking at perfect VFR conditions tomorrow, with clear skies and calm winds forecast all day.

Following the intel and weather briefs, Major General Forster, Joint Forces Air Component Commander (aka Guardian) took to the stage for the main event - the briefing of Operation Jackal.

A tall, wiry character with a loud rasping voice, Forster commanded the immediate attention of the room as he began speaking. Operation Jackal will commence at dawn tomorrow and will see the JSTF provide significant support to a major push by the SDF and YPG into SIA territory towards Raqqa. The main attacks on the ground will be made by the SDF from the southwest and the YPG from positions spread out along their border with the SIA. The JSTF role will primarily be in the air, striking key SIA targets and providing air support to the SDF and YPG ground forces. Close air support in particular will be critical to the SDF and YPG given the lack of armour available to these forces - the SIA in contrast still possesses a healthy number of older Soviet era tanks and IFVs. In addition to the SDF and YPG ground forces the JSTF will be deploying a number of special forces teams into the desert east of Raqqa to capture and hold key locations and cut off any escape routes from SIA territory.

This operation is expected to last several weeks as the SIA are rolled up and pushed back towards Raqqa.



During the briefing one of the Air Force squadrons commanding officers asked about the status of the Russians in this operation. Forster responded by informing us that the Russians had been made aware of the operation and have agreed to stay out of the way, to support this we were also reminded of the importance of staying clear of the Russian FOB south of Raqqa. Another USAF colonel then raised his hand and raised the valid point that if the Russians were aware of the operation then surely Syria was too, in which case might they try to take advantage of the fact that we are all distracted by the SIA? With a wry smile and gleam in his eye Forster responded by announcing that we will be seeing a timely surge in operations by the French and German air forces, who will be reinforcing patrols along Sierra and Whiskey.

Forster continued by providing an overview of the planned air campaign in the days ahead. In addition to providing CAS to the ground forces we will be carrying out a large number of strikes on SIA forces and key locations. Throughout the operation Sentinel will continue to provide ABCCC to all JSTF air.

Once Major General Forster's briefing had concluded, and all questions answered, the assembled crowd left the briefing room amidst an excited buzz. As soon as we exited, myself and three other Red Devil pilots joined Lt. Colonel Lincoln for a smaller briefing on our first mission of Operation Jackal. Back in the small briefing room were Poodle, myself and two other pilots who whilst I've got to know a little in the time I've been in Turkey I've not yet flown with - Lt. Wayne Newton (Newt) and Lt. Elliott Boyd (E-boy). Newt is an affable sort of chap, always quick with a joke and trying to brighten the mood, E-boy is the rookie in the squadron, clearly a decent pilot but green as hell and lacking combat experience.

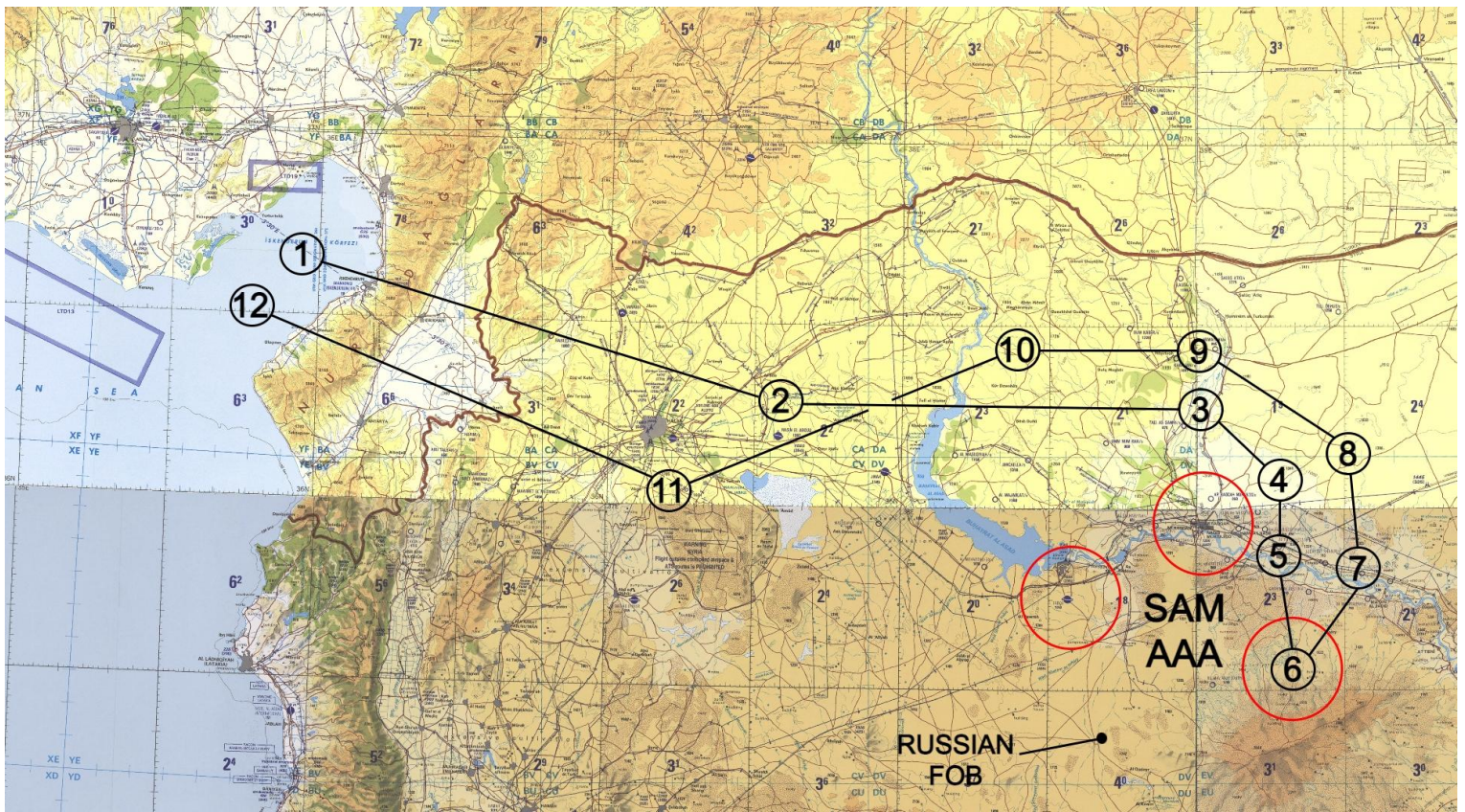
So onto the details of tomorrow's sortie...

The Red Devils are tasked with hitting an SIA camp located south of Raqqa - codenamed Golf 3. This camp, a former Syrian military outpost is the SIA's biggest military facility outside of Raqqa and is the primary base in the southeast of their territory. The base houses artillery and armour which although small in numbers pose a significant threat to our special forces teams being deployed in the desert.

We will launch as a four ship in the first wave of aircraft at dawn. Poodle and Newt will be paired up as a SEAD element and myself and E-boy the strike element.

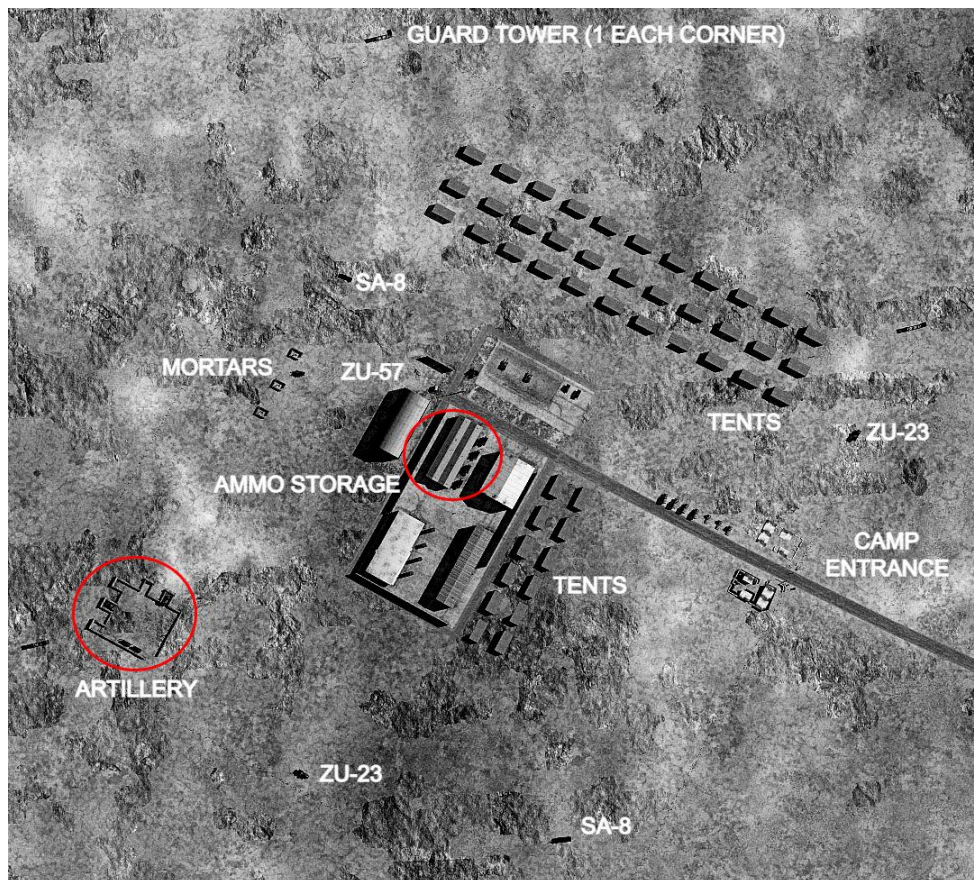
We will follow a standard departure from Incirlik into the Gold Corridor and once clear of Aleppo we will climb to 27,000 feet and proceed on a route that will take us north around Raqqa. This route will ensure we stay clear of the SAMs around Tabqa and Raqqa without having to squeeze through the narrow gap in the south created by the presence of the Russian FOB.

As we pass Raqqa and turn south for the target (located at WP6) we will check in with Sentinel for final strike authority and if received will commence the attack. We will have UAVs in the area on ISTAR and all being well real time target data and BDA should be available. Waypoint 5 (located on the Euphrates) will serve as our IP, 15 miles north of the SIA base. Poodle and Newt will lead the attack by suppressing the SA-8s identified at the target with HARMS. Myself and E-boy will follow in with a strike on our assigned targets. E-boy is tasked with striking the SIA armour present in the base, my target is the SIA artillery - two self propelled 2S3 Akatsia artillery pieces. My secondary target is to hit the building the SIA are using for ammunition storage.

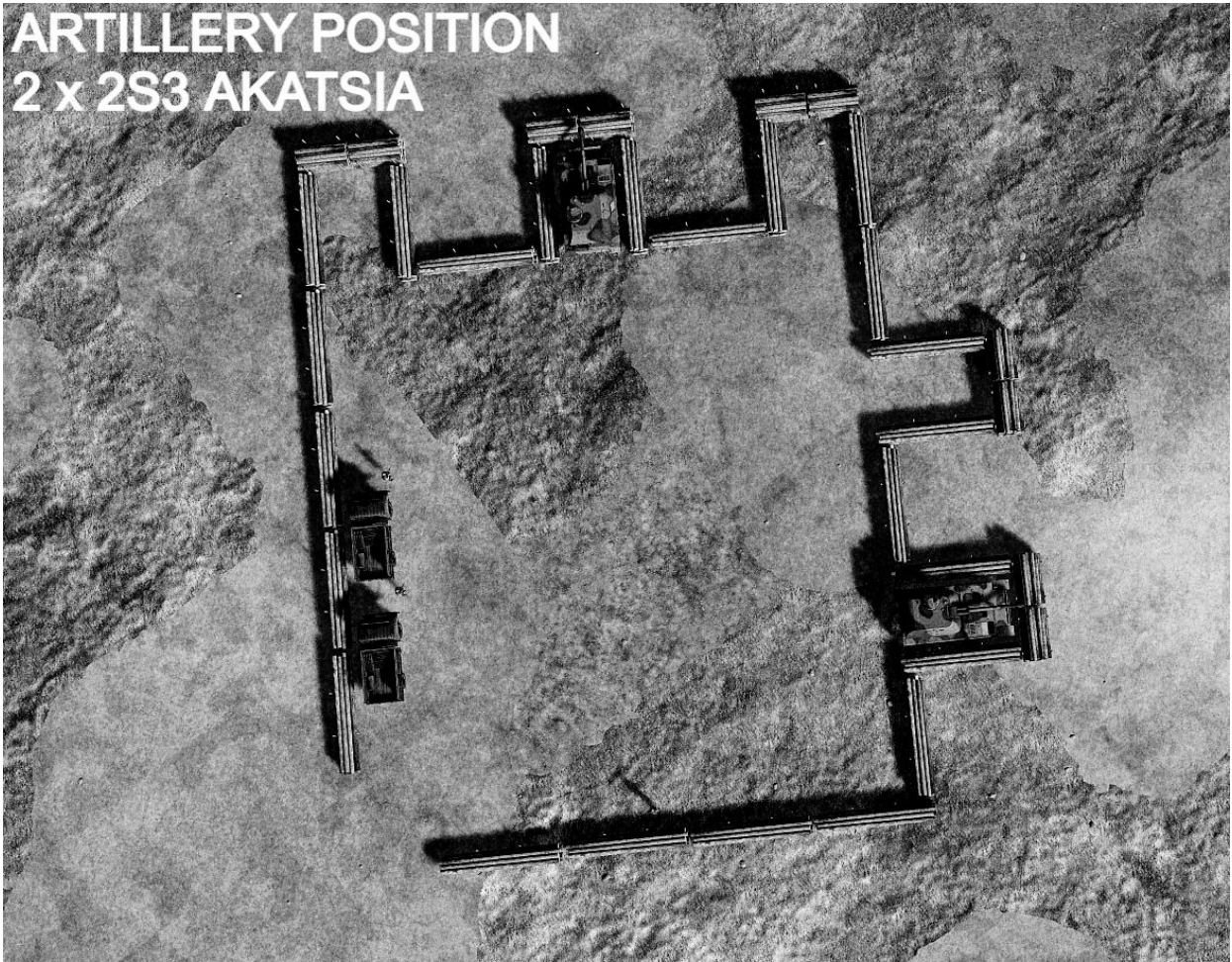


The base is protected by two SA-8 Geckos, and several pieces of AAA, including a ZU-57-2.

The artillery position is located in the western corner of the base, the targets are mobile and I will need to verify the positions of the targets before engaging.



ARTILLERY POSITION
2 x 2S3 AKATSIA



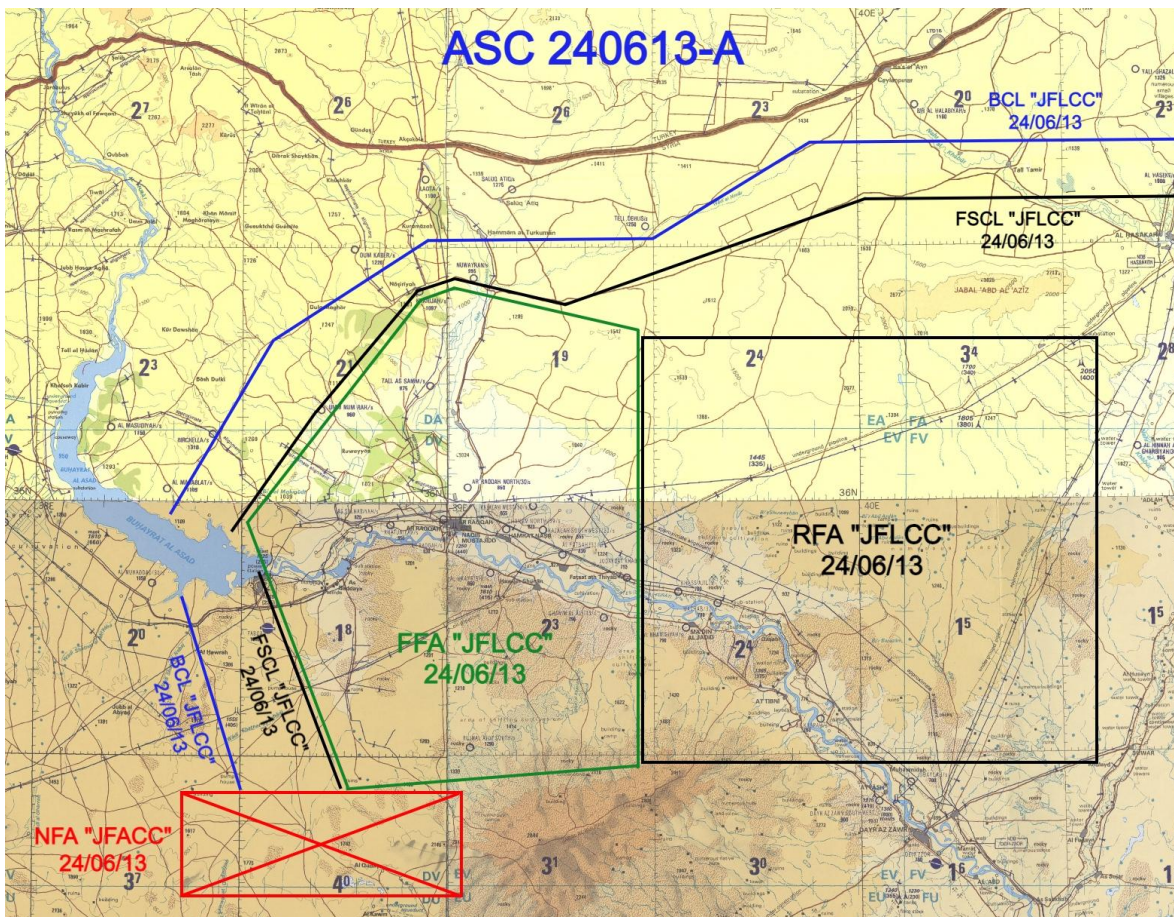
Ammunition Warehouse



Once we have hit our targets we will egress back to the north, once again giving Raqqa a wide berth before turning west and heading back towards Aleppo and the Gold Corridor.

On the return leg, should we have weapons and fuel to spare we can check in with Sentinel and declare ourselves to be looking for trade (CAS). If Watchdog receives any air support requests from the FACs working with the YPG and our special forces they'll then be passed to us via Sentinel. After all, no point hauling bombs back to base if they can be put to good use enroute. The FAC's will be operating on frequency blocks, so if directed to provide air support we may have to scan through the allocated block to find the correct frequency - I'd rather know all the freqs in advance but the CO says that given the sheer number of units involved in the operation this is simpler than taking a huge phone book up with us and of course it also helps us maintain security by not having to broadcast frequencies over the net. To keep this process simple all freqs in use are kept rounded to the nearest .100 (eg. 260.100, 260.200).

Link detailed the air support chart next, detailing the forward most positions of the SDF and YPG forces we will see over the next 24 hours. A free fire area has been established around Raqqa extending out to the bridge over the Euphrates in the east, Tabqa in the west, the hill to the south and the highway in the north. A no fire area exists in the southwest due to the presence of the Russian FOB. A restricted fire area has been established east of Raqqa to protect the special forces teams roving around the desert. Our target falls firmly within the free fire area, which simplifies our ROE for today. It is not expected that we will see any civilians in our operating target area but we will need to observe stricter ROEs should we get involved with providing CAS on the return leg.



We then asked Link to run through the threat analysis for the mission. We should have no reason to approach Raqqa, but we still took careful note of the multiple SA-8 and SA-9 launchers and heavy AAA presence in the city. As mentioned before the SIA camp contains SA-8s but these should be neutralised well before we enter their engagement zone by the HARMS. Once the SA-8s are offline we should only have AAA and MANPADS to worry about. The ZU-23s and MANPADS should be of little concern to us providing we stay high, the ZU-57 has a lot more reach but if we play it safe and deliver all our weapons from high altitude we should still remain out of range. Finally it was drilled into us that AAA and MANPADS should be assumed to be everywhere in SIA territory, we know the SIA has large stockpiles of these weapons, portable SAMS especially, so caution is the order of the day. The thought of taking a hit and having to eject over SIA territory doesn't bear thinking about...

The fuel plan for the mission looks solid, we will be able to hit the target and RTB without the need to tank, there's about 2000 pounds of fuel built into the plan to use over the target until we hit bingo.

Loadout for this sortie will be a variant of the old 'double ugly'. Two tanks, one centre line and one on the wing, with two 1000lb JDAMs and two 500lb GBU-12s, a decent amount of firepower but no doubt the jet will handle like a pig and require some careful trimming. Speaking of the jet, the ground crews did a cracking job, replacing the PTS on 309 and swapping out the left engine. She's been given a clean bill of health and I'm assured nothing else will go wrong, gotta say I'll be glad to get 'my jet' back!

I'm pumped for the mission tomorrow, it feels good to finally be able to take the fight to the SIA.

Now it's time to try and get some sleep, I have an early start tomorrow, takeoff time is 04:55.