

FIRST IN - WEASELS OVER SYRIA

24rd July, 2013

It's been 4 days since our attack on the sector operations center close to Damascus. We went right into the lion's den on that one, and it took nerves of steel from Bug and me to fly straight into the Damascus super MEZ. But through great teamwork, solid tactics and some very effective drones we came through it in one piece, but as we remarked once we had landed...we weren't looking to do it again anytime soon, especially now all the drones have been used up.

We've only flown one mission since that strike, in support of a limited JSTF attack in the Yabrud area. It was uneventful and the Syrian air defenses decided it was safer to stay off the air that day...perhaps we're starting to get a reputation out here.

But back to the present moment, where we were summoned to a late morning briefing. Getting straight down to business Popeye asked Captain Johnson to deliver the met briefing. Obliging, the captain confirmed what the previous day's ever building clouds had suggested - the fine weather we've been seeing the last few weeks is finally breaking. Johnson told us the clear blue skies are giving way to a weather front moving in from the coast overnight, with clouds driven inland by strong winds - looks like our next mission is going to be carried out in more challenging weather than we've become accustomed to.

After Captain Johnson had departed Major Norris delivered our intel brief and he had a lot of ground to cover. He began by discussing the Russians, who have been making a lot of noise the last few days. The Russian's have condemned JSTF attacks on Syrian airbases - calling them a dramatic and dangerous escalation. No condemnation of course of the Syrian slaughter of civilians in Yabrud, however the Russian words have been backed with action. First off we've seen notable reinforcements sent to the region with the arrival of both A-50 AWACS aircraft and Mig-31s in theater. The Foxhounds are particularly noteworthy with this being the first overseas deployment of the Russian interceptor, a couple of Marine pilots reportedly got up close to a flight of Foxhounds several days ago, which by the sounds of it got the intel guys pretty excited. In the air the Russians continue to harass our aircraft and no doubt pass intel over to the Syrians, something they will be able to do even more effectively now they have an AWACS in theater. Norris also told us that Russian airstrikes have resumed, with a series of strikes being carried out around Yabrud over the last two days.

Moving onto the Syrians, Norris revealed a fast moving situation on the ground around Damascus. Uprisings have broken out in several suburbs of the capital, initiating harsh reprisals from the Syrian Government and pro government militias. The ferocity of the government's response in their home territory has apparently alienated certain elements of the SAA, with reports of defections amongst Sunni dominated units as they were ordered to attack Sunni populated areas. Norris called these defections a 'significant' development, the ramifications of which are yet to be fully realized. Meanwhile the fighting around Yabrud continues intensely, with neither side yet able to achieve a decisive breakthrough.

In the north the battle for Raqqa continues as the SIA are ever so slowly squeezed out of the city. By all accounts it's been a bloody and attritional fight, but the YPG and SDF are fighting valiantly and victory is finally within sight...assisted of course by JSTF air power.

Norris finished his briefing by referring again to the rocket attack on H4 we experienced recently. It is now believed this was SIA in origin, likely from one or more technicals driven down through the

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relatively empty eastern desert. It is by now no secret that US forces are based at H4 and intel is concerned that the base may become a target for SIA forces as they are displaced from the areas they are being driven out of. To add to these concerns the situation in Yabrud and Damascus is driving refugees in all directions, many are ending up in Lebanon or at the Turkish border but a significant number are also traveling south and arriving at the Jordanian border. Intel believes that SIA fighters are attempting to blend in with the refugee population, this was concerning news and sobering information for us all.

Norris concluded his briefing and departed and Popeye stepped to the front of the briefing room and began to brief our next mission.

"Ok then let's get to it. Last night we saw a dramatic shift in our posture towards the Syrian Government and the commencement of what's been named Operation Dominant Enforcer. The Syrians have failed to heed the warnings issued by the JSTF and have continued to strike civilian targets in and around Yabrud. Operation Dominant Enforcer is the very large stick the JSTF intends to use to bring the Syrians back in line. The operation will see a number of Syrian locations targeted over a 24 hour period, these targets include key government, military and intelligence facilities along with critical industrial sites that are key to the Syrian war effort. Wave 1 went in last night, successfully striking a large number of targets. Wave 2 goes in late this afternoon and waves 3 and 4 will follow on tonight".

"So there was a raid over Damascus and we were left out!" exclaimed Rotor.

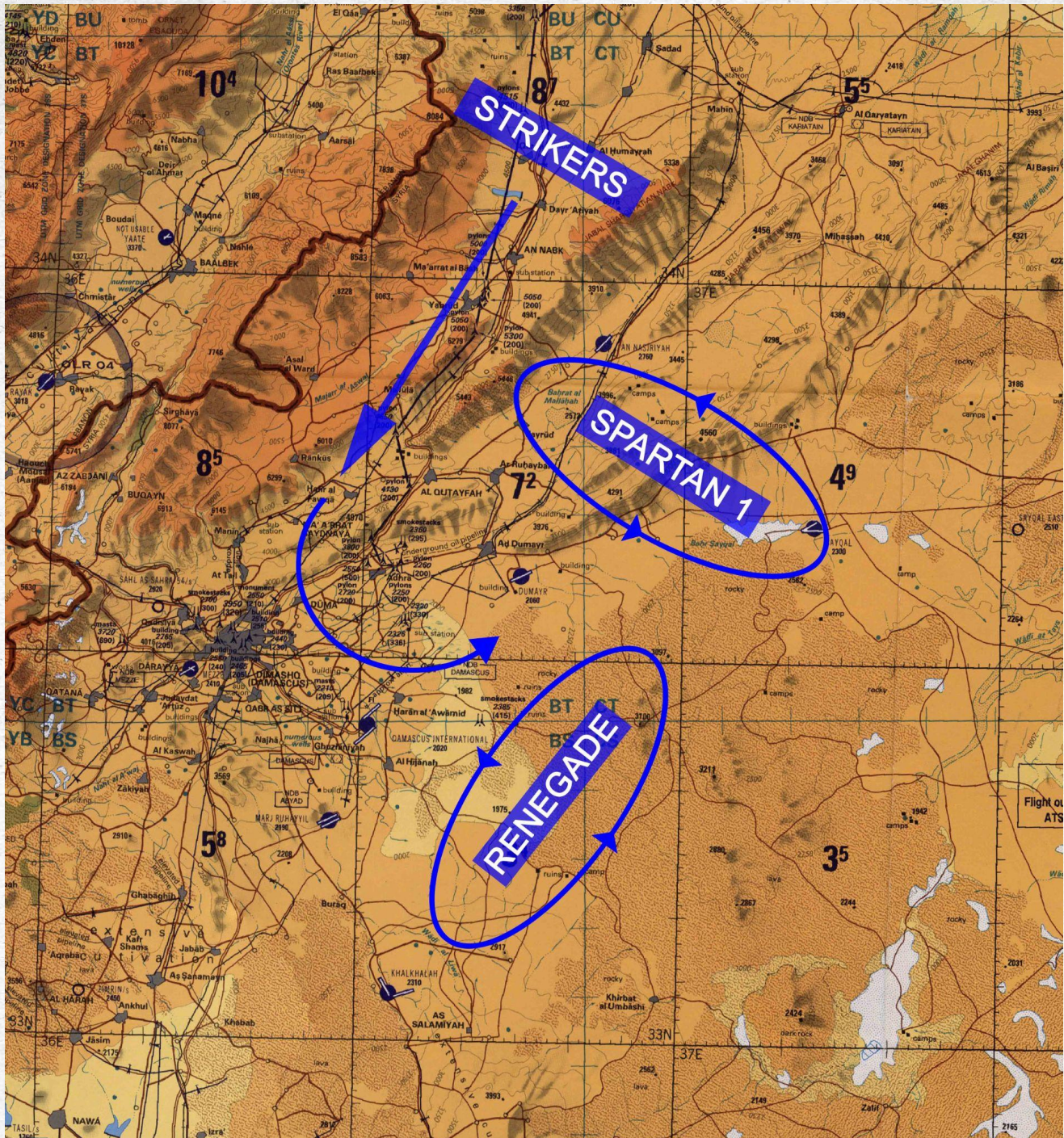
"We were," replied Popeye, "But don't worry Rotor, you'll get your chance to go downtown soon enough. The first wave relied on surprise to protect the strikers, prior to their attacks the two SA-10 sites at Damascus were targeted by B-2's and reduced to small pieces. The 170th's F-16s out of Incirlik then suppressed any active Syrian SAMs with HARMs. And now that the Syrian air defenses are on high alert and expecting further attacks, it is our turn to join the party".

"We will therefore be supplying a Weasel flight to support each of the three remaining waves. Sword 2 - Forrest and Bug - will cover wave 2. Tank and Ghost will cover wave three and myself and Rotor wave four".

Popeye continued, "The second wave has a TOT of 14:45 Zulu. 15 minutes prior to this, at 14:30 Zulu, Navy and Marine Hornets will release a large number of TALDs, hopefully bringing the Syrian air defenses online. A second wave of Hornets coming in behind them will then release a barrage of HARMs. You will follow the HARMs in and suppress or destroy any remaining SAM threats. And you already know my thoughts on this, go for the kill over the suppression any time you can, otherwise you might later have a nasty surprise pop up on you at the worst possible moment".

"The Strikers will flow in from the north and egress to the northeast, their vul period will run from 14:45 to 15:05 Zulu. To support you and the package a flight of Growlers - Spartan 1 - will set up in a standoff jam northeast of Damascus. F-15s, callsign Renegade, will also be holding a CAP station east of Damascus throughout the operation".

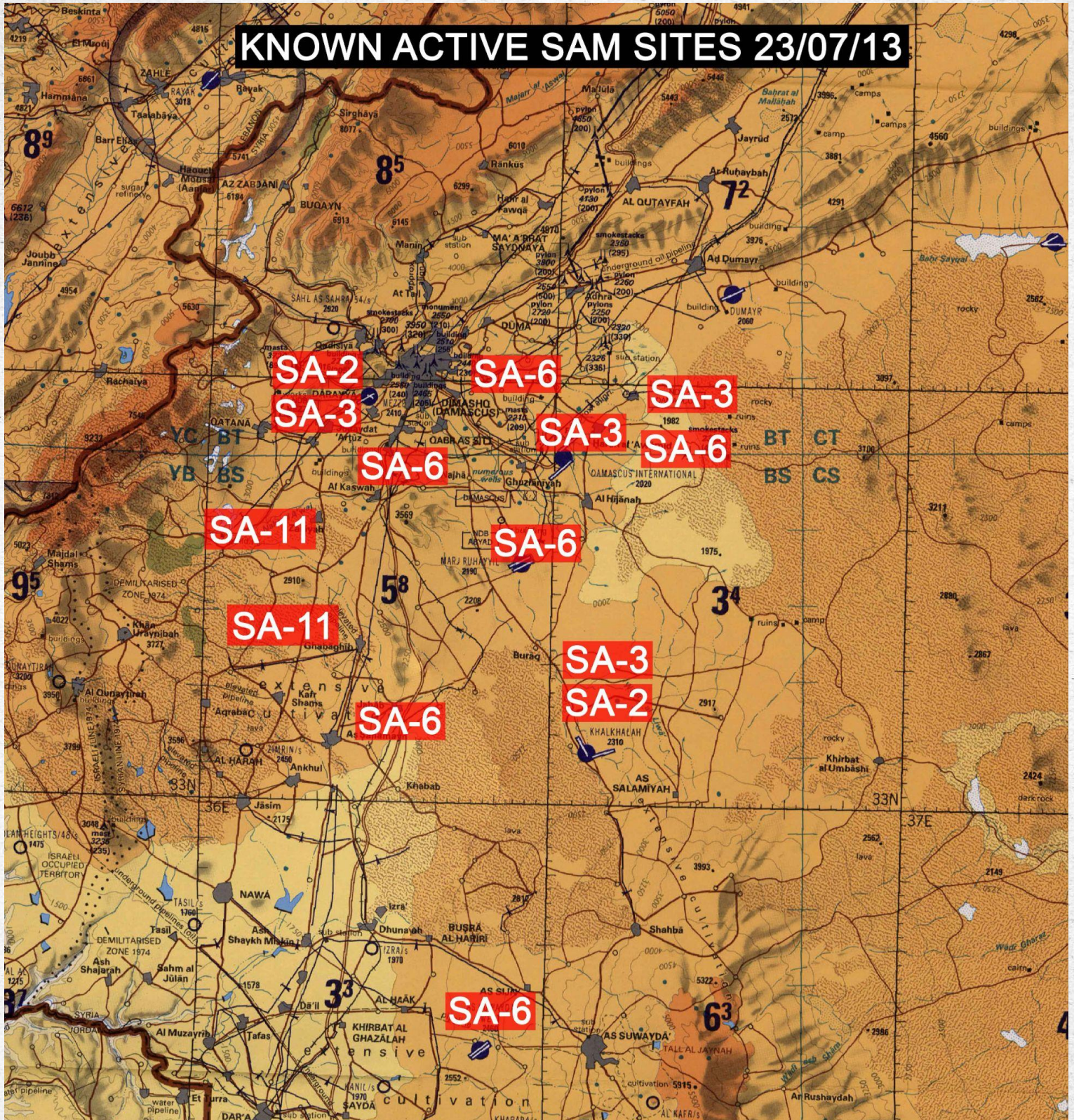
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"Now we visited Damascus recently so you don't need me to tell you how dense the threat is. The good news is the two SA-10 sites have been destroyed, but of course that still leaves every other SAM in the Syrian inventory to be concerned about along with a shit ton of AAA. Now it is vital you keep your SA - do not get fixated on a target and dragged into an area you don't want to be in. Damascus has 4 major airbases within 15 miles of the city, each of these bases will have significant SHORAD present and the city itself is bristling with AAA. So if you find yourself reacting to a new threat or a SAM launch make sure you think about your defensive moves, diving straight into a MANPAD envelope or AAA barrage will kill you just as easily. ELINT assessments have the following SAM systems operating in these approximate positions...remember a lot of these are mobile and may be moving around regularly".

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Popeye brought a new slide up onto the briefing screen.



With Popeye's warning words ringing in our ears, we reviewed the mission flow in more detail.

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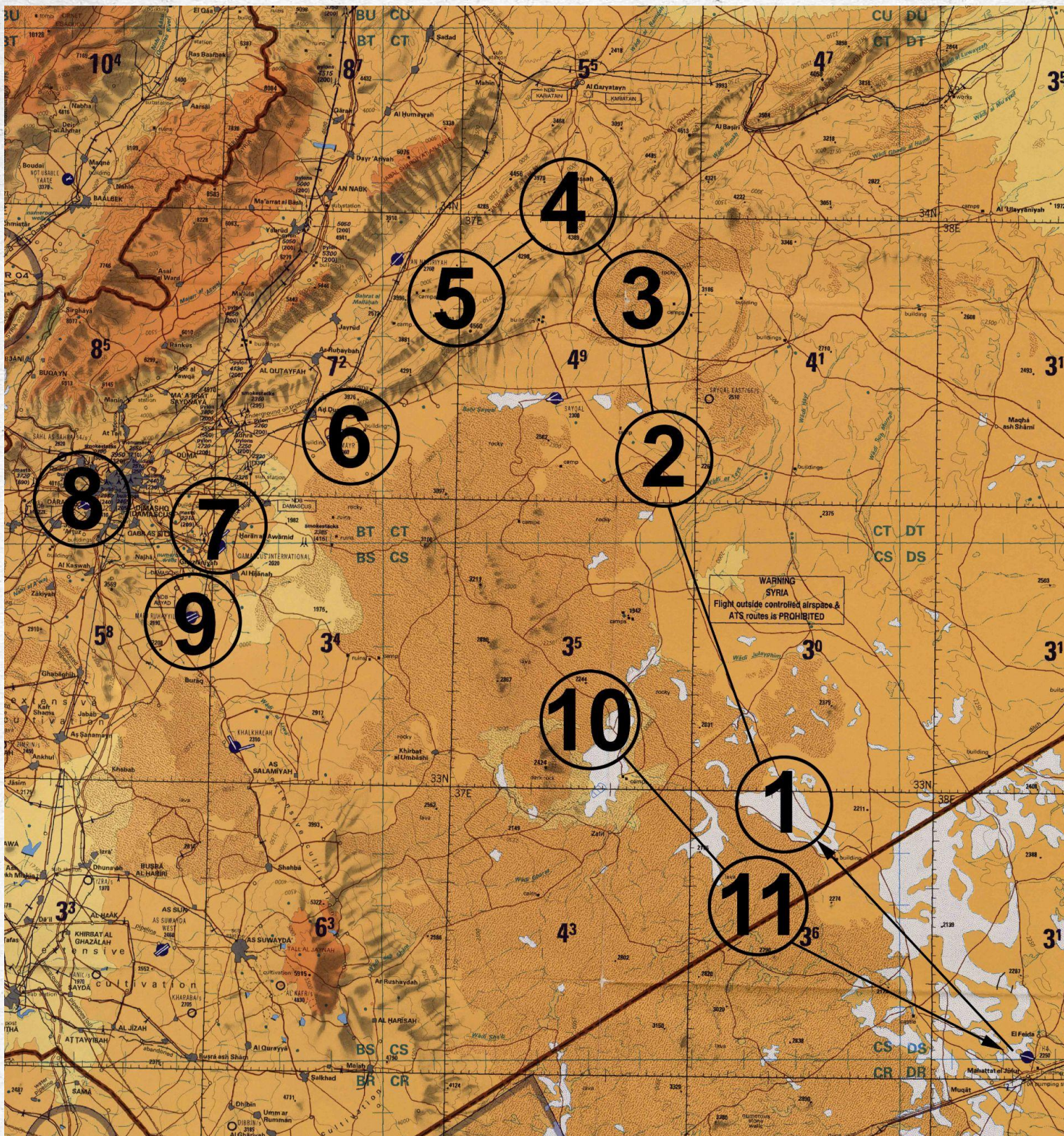
First Sword 2 will depart H4, rendezvousing at waypoint 1 before pushing onto our flight plan. We will flow through waypoints 2 and 3, taking care to avoid Sayqal and any SHORAD present at the airbase. Our TOT for waypoint 4 is 14:30 Zulu, where we will switch to our strike frequency on Red 4 and contact the mission commander - Warden. We will hold between here and our IP at waypoint 5 as the Hornets (Devil flight) launch their TALDs and HARMs. The TALDS will be released at angels 23 and the HARMs at angels 27 so we need to be mindful of deconfliction and should stay between these altitudes as the Hornets release their ordnance.

As the Syrian radars come online we should work to prioritize threats, and be ready to engage those that survive the barrage of HARMs. We will remain on station as the strike package enters the Damascus area at 14:45 Zulu and suppress or kill threats as required until the strikers leave the target area at 15:05 Zulu. Waypoints 6-9 have been placed on the four airbases in the Damascus area to aid us in keeping our SA. Bullseye has been set over Damascus international Airport.

During the briefing I marked the striker's target points on my kneeboards, these are spread around the Damascus area. When on mission we will be able to use these target points and cross check them with the latest intel reports to narrow down the areas in which to search for and kill SAMS - preempting any issues to the strikers. We also need to remember that SAM hunting in such dangerous territory is very risky, it will be safer for us to hold a position a few miles away from the city and react to threats as they emerge, but at a potential tradeoff of it taking more time for us to react and increasing the risk to the strikers.

Popeye was keen to stress to us that we must not deviate from our flight plan on our ingress and should not approach Damascus before 14:30 Zulu, to do so would be immensely dangerous to our flight.

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My loadout for this mission will be two AGM-65H Mavericks, along with two GBU-38s, Bug will be carrying 4 HARMs to support with SAM suppression, Bug will be carrying less fuel than me so to mitigate for this will hold a high orbit north of Damascus from where he can engage threats with HARMs. The targets we may see today will be in and around a dense urban area so CBU's are out and we have been instructed to carry precision munitions only.

Bingo fuel is 2,800 lb, leaving me around 6,100 lb to use during my vul window. There will be no tankers available to us in this area. As we egress the target area our rally point will be at waypoint 10.

We finished up reviewing the mission threats in more detail. We are well acquainted with the SAM threat by now, along with the SA-2, 3, 6 and 11 sites around Damascus we should expect SA-8, 9, 13 and 15 amongst the SHORAD systems at key military sites. SHORAD will also contain heavy concentrations of AAA, we should again expect the full range of systems from ZU-23 up to KS-19, along with ZSU-23-4. The AAA of Damascus is still a threat but was thinned out overnight in targeted attacks on the heavier concentrations. Situational awareness will be vital over Damascus, it will be very dangerous for me to approach the airbase sites, and with four of them spread around Damascus I need to stay aware of where I am in relation to them. I also need to watch my altitude, most of the threats won't be able to touch me at higher altitudes, leaving just the bigger SAMS and radar guided AAA to be concerned about.

Despite the dense SAM threat there is some good news. The Syrian IADS has become more disjointed and less organized following our recent attacks - the overnight reports are that the SAM threats are not working in coordination. This makes the overall threat easier to manage from our end - think divide and conquer - but each individual system is still deadly in it's own right.

The attack last night also saw the Syrian air force keep out the way, this may well have been down to the overwhelming air power we deployed but we also can't discount the Syrian's reluctance to fight at night. We will have 8 F-15 holding a CAP during today's attack so if the Syrian Air Force does decide to join the fight they will probably wish they hadn't. However we should still be mindful of air to air threats, given the sheer number of airbases in our operating area.

The briefing then ended but Bug and myself lingered in the briefing room for hours, going over every detail of the operation. Dominant Enforcer is being sold to us as a highly important mission - one which has the potential to bring the Syrians to heel, or at least swing the civil war in the favor of the SDF. But to Bug and me that is not the most important thing, to us our mission is clear - protect the strikers at all costs. This raid will see 50 JSTF aircraft venture into incredibly well defended airspace.

It is our job to make sure they all come home.

Takeoff is set for 14:15 zulu.