

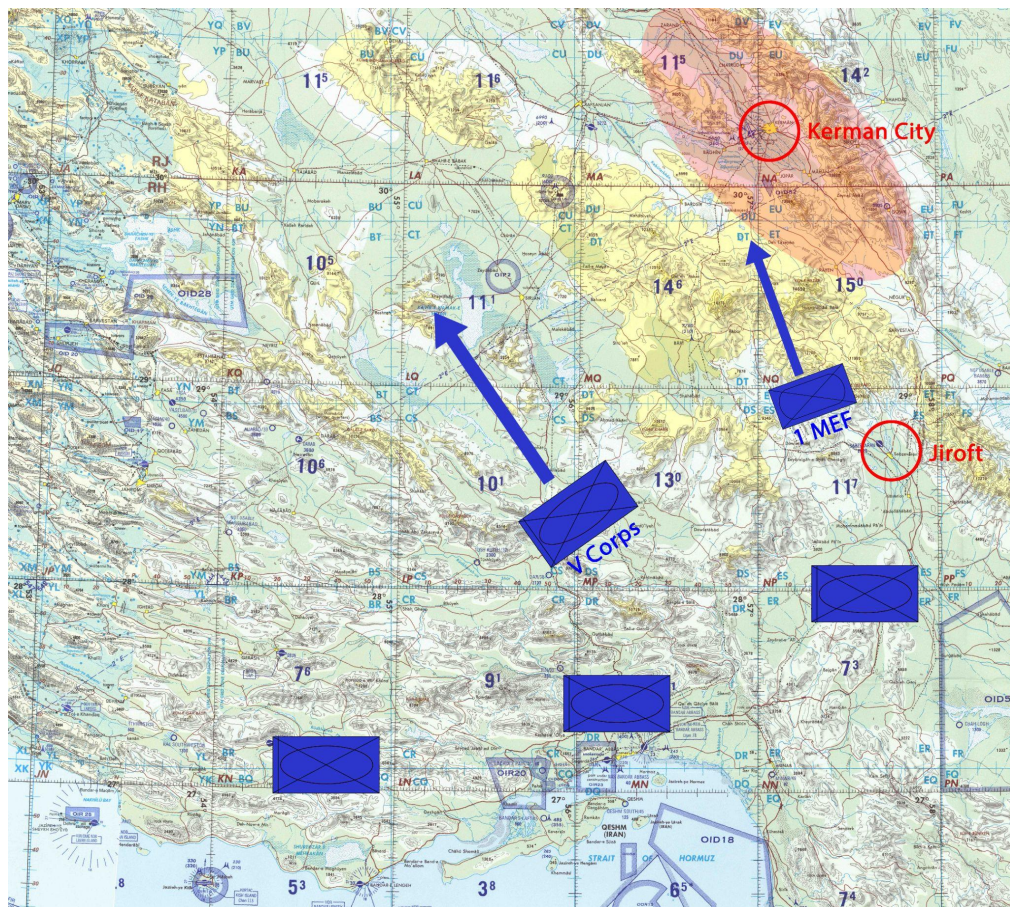
My name is Captain Mitch Mickleson, callsign *Mike-Mike*. I'm a United States Marine Corps Aviator, husband, father and a proud American. I make my living and serve my country flying the AV-8B Harrier II Night Attack aircraft. My current assignment is with VMA-311 'The Tomcats', part of the 3rd Marine Air Wing 3 (3rd MAW) - the air combat element of the powerful 1st Marine Expeditionary Force (1 MEF).

The Marine Corps is an expeditionary force, designed to go overseas and fight America's battles. We're the shock troops of the US Military, hard as nails, self sufficient and ready to deploy anywhere in the world at a moment's notice. The core of our capability is based around the Marine Air Ground Task Force (MAGTF) - we operate as an integrated Ground Combat Element (GCE), Air Combat Element (ACE) and Logistics Combat Element (LCE), all under a common command. What does this mean on the battlefield? It means when we fight we bring our own aircraft. Our aircraft are our flying artillery, we can hit anywhere on the battlefield with speed and precision, all in support of our troops on the ground. The Corp has a philosophy, 'every Marine a rifleman', we all begin our training this way, and everything the Marines do is to support the soldier on the ground.

My journey started in 2002 in New York state when I began my ROTC scholarship at college. From college I joined the Marine Corps in 2005, and began flight training, eventually being assigned to and qualifying in the Harrier II. My first tour was with VMA-231, where I joined the squadron on deployment towards the end of Operation Iraqi Freedom. From here I changed squadrons (and coast), moving out to MCAS Miramar with my wife and daughter to join the 'Tomcats' under 3rd MAW.

I was approaching the end of my tour with VMA-311 and preparing to receive new orders when the trouble in Iran started. This began during the 2011 Arab Spring with protests by democratic reformers and the violence quickly escalated, setting in motion a chain of events that ultimately led to a chemical attack by Iran on one of it's own cities when it's population rose up. Cue the UN, a resolution, coalition and invasion...you know the story.

Plenty has been said in the media about the rights and wrongs of Operation Persian Freedom. My view? I stay out of the politics. I'm a Marine...I serve my country and I serve the grunt on the ground, the rest doesn't matter.



As I write this it's November 8th, 2011. Operation Persian Freedom has been underway for two weeks and the coalition has made good progress so far. Marine forces carried out a successful amphibious assault on the Iranian mainland and with the capture of Bandar Abbas and its large airport, the coalition march in-land was inevitable. As it stands the US Army's V Corps is thrusting north towards Tehran, but as they push forwards they leave their right flank exposed and it is here that the might of 1 MEF will be brought to bear.

1 MEF has been tasked with the capture of Kerman Province, no easy task given it's size, geography and large urban areas. The area is believed to be home to a significant number of Iranian Army forces as well as many IRGC units and a sizable militia presence. In short, we are expecting a real fight.

The majority of 1 MEF is staging out of FOB Juliet, a repurposed regional airport near the city of Jiroft, about 100 miles southeast of the provincial capital, Kerman City. This small airport is now home to thousands of marines, hundreds of vehicles, dozens of helicopters and our Harrier detachment. The place is bursting at the seams with personnel and equipment, all here in support of what has been designated as *Operation Rapid Eagle*.



ORE has a great deal of air support assigned, two squadrons of Hornets and a squadron of Harriers in addition to a sizable helicopter force. There is however one major problem with the majority of our fast air, it's based aboard ships some 250-300 miles from the Kerman AOR, meaning less time on station, more reliance on tanker support and longer response times. That is why Detachment B has been formed from 6 aircraft of VMA-311. Det B will be based at FOB Juliet, the Harriers STOVL capability meaning it is the only Marine attack aircraft that can operate on Juliet's limited runway space.

The forward deployment of Det B will allow our small detachment to be on station quicker, loiter longer and haul more weapons to the battlefield. The rest of 3rd MAW will still be assisting ORE as well but it's safe to say those of us assigned to Det B are pretty sure we're going to be very, very busy and our aircraft maintainers, ordies and pilots all believe the task assigned to Det B is of the utmost importance, and we've formed a pretty tight group of individuals that believes in our assignment. Hell, the maintainers have even taken to marking the aircraft as 'Det B' aircraft so that we stand out from the rest.

Here with me on 'Det B' are our detachment CO Major Nick '*Mother*' Drucker, the XO Captain Brian '*Baz*' Lyndon, Lt. Kevin '*Chief*' O'Brian, Lt. Amy '*Noble*' Taylor and Lt. Tobias '*Ein-Stein*' Meyer. Ein-Stein is a German Luftwaffe pilot on exchange with the Marines. We've brought 6 aircraft with us, along with a number of Litening II targeting pods, unfortunately not enough pods for all the aircraft, but given the Harrier's excellent dual mode tracker and FLIR systems we are hoping this won't be too much of a hindrance to our capability.

I arrived at Juliet yesterday, quickly settling into the tent our detachment has been assigned close to the Harrier parking area. Man it's noisy here, sleep is a luxury we're going to have to get used to going without...if it's not the choppers, it's the Marines training, the tanks firing on the range or worst of all one of our detachment's Harrier's letting rip with the mighty Pegasus engine...a beautiful sound alright, but hell it's loud. When I got here someone joked about wearing ear defenders to bed, I thought they were winding me up but now I'm not so sure. The base is vast, a seemingly endless sea of tents, vehicles and aircraft spread before us. It's a testament to the industrial might our military can bring, having rapidly constructed a working airbase, vehicle maintenance depot, firing range and tent city all in one location, in a very short time frame.

I reported for my first briefing at Juliet this evening. Having got slightly lost on the way from the mess tent I was a couple of minutes late. The briefing was held in a cramped office within a dingy, single story workshop adjacent to the base's control tower, three Iranian flags still fluttering in the breeze out front. The place was filthy with a layer of greasy dirt and reeked of old oil, providing evidence of the workshop's past. The office walls were an unappealing, off green colour and the paint was flaking away. As I squeezed into the room past my fellow detachment pilots I brushed against the wall and could feel it's dampness through my fatigues, looking down I saw with disgust a streak of mouldy green paint on the side of my leg. Looking unimpressed, I approached the rickety old wooden table in the centre of the room as one of the detachment pilots, 'Chief' O'Brian pushed an empty chair out with his leg from beneath the table. With a muttered "thanks" I squeezed myself into the creaking wooden chair, but as the bulk of my 6 foot frame settled into the seat there was an almighty crack and I found myself rapidly deposited on the floor in a tangled heap of arms and legs. 'Chief' immediately burst out laughing, quickly joined by most present.

Sheepishly I climbed up from the floor, trying to see the funny side, "That'll teach you for being late" Chief exclaimed through fits of laughter. Removing the damaged chair from the middle of the room I instead opted for standing space towards the doorway, doing my best to avoid the damp walls that still threatened to soak through my clothing.

Once in position I finally looked up and made eye contact with Major Drucker, a squat, tough looking Nebraskan native. "You ready Mike-Mike?" he said dryly.

"Yes sir!" I replied.

"Very well then, let's begin" said 'Mother'. "Pilot's please let me formally welcome you to FOB Juliet. You know why we're here and you know the mission we have ahead of us, our detachment is going to be the key player in Operation Rapid Eagle and we're going to be in the game from day 1, keeping our fellow Marines on the ground safe. No other group of pilots in the Marine Corps are going to be able to shape the battlefield the way we will in the coming weeks and our Harriers will be a constant thorn in the enemy's side. But to achieve this we will need to push ourselves hard...our maintainers are ready to work 24-7 to deliver you the jets you need to do your work, are you Marines up for it?". "Yes Sir!" came the thunderous reply from the five remaining pilots in the room. "Very good Marines" said Drucker, and then, gesturing to a young, dark haired female he said "Now let's get down to business, Captain Parkin would you please give us the met brief".

"Yes Major" replied the Captain in a Californian accent. Stepping forwards to the head of the old wooden table, the young captain began to brief us on the weather in Kerman. "Hopefully by now you've all read the theatre briefing you were provided with, I've detailed some of the common weather patterns in Kerman in there, but just to clarify, the weather up here isn't what you would typically think of for a country in the middle east. We certainly see high temperatures in the summer, but during the winter it gets real cold out here. Kerman gets it's fair share of clouds as well and given the high altitude of the terrain you'll be operating over low cloud cover should be anticipated. The high mountains can also bring heavy turbulence at times". Lt. Amy Taylor pitched in at this point, "I guess we should be grateful for the cooler air given the altitudes we're operating at, especially in a vertical landing profile" said 'Noble'. Captain Parkin nodded in agreement.

"Onto the weather for tomorrow, I'm pleased to report that things are looking good for your first flights into the Kerman AOR. Temperatures are going to start off quite mild, about 5 degrees through the night and we're expecting them to reach around 15 degrees celsius during the day. Cloud cover is looking like high scattered clouds, around 14 to 15 thousand feet with another scattered layer at higher altitudes, somewhere in the 30,000 feet region. Winds are expected to be relatively light and turbulence is also expected to be light. Now, does anyone have any questions?" Captain Brian 'Baz' Lyndon, raised his hand. "Yes Captain" said Parkin,

"There's a lot of major mountains around Kerman" asked Baz "I'm guessing we can't always count on light turbulence?",

"That's right Captain" replied Parkin, "The conditions tomorrow are looking quite benign all around but I wouldn't count on that being the case all the time". After checking there were no more questions, Captain Parkin was then dismissed by the Major.

The Major next introduced our assigned S-2 (intelligence officer), Major Daniels. Daniels was a tall, wiry man, slick talking and serious, I noticed he didn't look too impressed at my antics with the chair earlier. Rising from a chair at the rear of the room, Daniels approached the table and began to speak. "Our intelligence teams are still pulling together more detailed information on force compositions, concentrations and more precise air defence locations, we anticipate that information will be available to you within the next 48 hours, certainly ahead of the commencement of planned offensive operations. My understanding is that currently your detachment is not planning on entering hostile territory, and will be staying south of the Hezar range and the east wall of the Halil Valley?". After receiving confirmation from Mother, Daniels continued. "In that case the most likely threats you will encounter for now are, as ever, MANPAD systems. We have intelligence to suggest that the IRGC has distributed a number of MANPAD teams across the area prior to our arrival. We have no solid intel on *where* specifically but our belief is that there are likely teams within the Jiroft area...".

"...Hence the 12k restriction over Jiroft" interjected O'Brian.

"Yes, that's right," responded Daniels, "Our recommendation is that you stay at least 10,000 feet above ground level whenever possible to negate the MANPAD threat". "Moving on, we're expecting to see a mix of both conventional and asymmetric tactics at play from the Iranians as this fight progresses and we're already seeing reports from other areas in Iran that IED attacks are becoming more common. The enemy is keen to mix things up so be ready for all eventualities."

At this point Major Drucker asked about the likelihood of Iranian air to air interventions. Daniels told us "Current assessments are that it is unlikely we will see much Iranian air in Kerman, they only have a small detachment of F-5s in the area and we don't believe they will risk their longer legged jets as they're being held back for the protection of Tehran." It was then my turn to ask a question.

"What about the civilian population? Are we seeing much movement there? There are a number of large urban areas in our AOR and I don't like the idea of dropping bombs in a populated area".

"Not yet" replied Daniels, "But we do have PsyOps plans in place for use ahead of any ground ops in the cities. Command is concerned about civilian casualties but we also have the militia threat to consider as well and obviously the presence of civilians is going to be a major complication we hope to avoid". With that Daniels concluded his intel brief, promising to have more detailed information for us in the coming days.

After Major Daniels had departed, Drucker got to his feet, pinning a map onto the board at the front of the room. "Ok pilots" he began, "We expect combat operations to begin in around 72 hours, that means we don't have long to get acquainted with the Kerman AOR, get all the jets fully operational and hopefully squeeze some target practice in for good measure. I intend for us to start as we mean to go on...with pace and focus. This assignment will be a real surge in flight hours, the expectation is 4 two ships a day will go out, with the jets and pilots being rotated constantly. Most days you will fly two sorties each, on your day off you'll go out just once. The pace is going to be demanding but that's what we need to do, the regimental combat teams are going to be relying on us more than anyone else. Anyone got any problems with that?".

The major was met with silence.

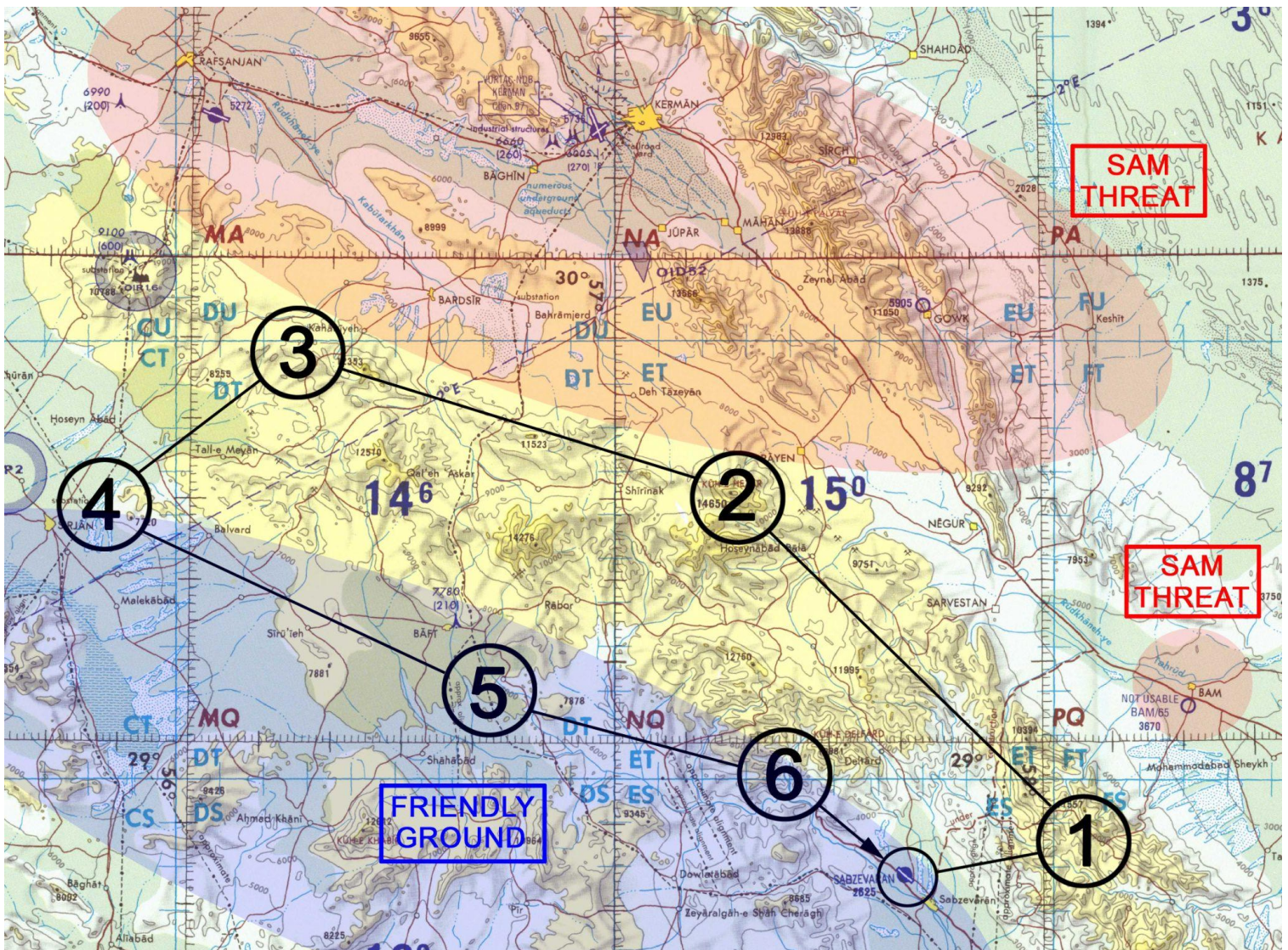
"Good, in that case let's talk about tomorrow's sorties". Mother turned to the map he had placed at the front, "Other than having flown into Juliet none of you has yet seen the Kerman AOR from the air. I at least have had the benefit of having had a fam flight aboard the DASC 'Chieftain'".

“Over the next two days I will lead each of you on a fam flight around the AOR, introducing you to all the landmarks and threat areas. I’ll also make sure you’re up to speed on the SPINS here at Juliet so I would encourage you to make sure you’ve studied them ahead of your first flight. If you’re not on a fam flight, you’ll be tasked with live fire training on the range north of the FOB, working with the Sandman cell to brush up on our air-ground coordination for close air support”.

Drucker made eye contact with me, “Mitch, you’ll be on the first fam flight tomorrow morning, let’s go through the flight plan”.

Mother then began to brief tomorrow’s flight. He told us we will be on a fam flight but also conducting armed reconnaissance as we go. We don’t have enough Litening pods to equip all the jets so I will be carrying a targeting pod plus GBU-12s and Mother an ECM pod, CBUs and dumb bombs.

Referring to the SPINS for Juliet, the major informed me I would be departing the FOB via runway 13 and once airborne should immediately turn south to avoid overflying Jiroft before climbing out to 6000 feet MSL. Whilst doing this I should communicate with Jiroft Departure who will guide me out of Juliet’s controlled airspace. Once clear of the ‘JACZ’ (we have taken to pronouncing it Jack-zee ) I will proceed to waypoint 1 where Mother will be holding for me. Referring to the map on the board Mother began to discuss the planned route.



“Forming at waypoint 1 at 20,000 feet we will head northwest towards waypoint 2 at mach 0.7, holding angels 20 and making sure we don't stray east of the mountains below us and end up blundering into the SAM zone around Bam. Waypoint 2 is set on Mt. Hezar, aka bullseye, aka White Cap. Everything north of here is bad guy territory. We'll fly the route to waypoint 3, which is south of Rafsanjan, the route should be out of SAM range as things stand, but a lot of those SAMs are highly mobile so we should be ready for any eventuality. From waypoint three we'll turn away from hostile territory and head back into friendly lines, waypoint 4 is set on Sirjan, a key city on the western edge of the AOR. Sirjan is under our control and is of major importance due to the road and rail junctions that meet there. From waypoint 4 we will begin the journey back to Juliet. During this phase of the flight we will be scanning the main roads with our pods for potential IED threats...as Major Daniels said the IED threat is becoming ever more real”.

Lt. Tobias Meyer now spoke up for the first time, “What are we looking for with regards to IEDs?” he asked.

Baz answered him, “In OEF we gained an almost second sight after a bit of experience, you're looking for anything that's out of place near a road or path. A rubbish pile, disused equipment, an oddly parked car...basically anything that looks like it doesn't belong”.

Ein-Stein responded “And if we find one?”.

Grinning O'Brian said, “We blow it up!”.

Nodding, Mother continued, “Providing it's safe to do so of course, otherwise the EODs will handle it”.

Getting back to the flight plan Drucker concluded by informing us waypoint 6 marked Jiroft reservoir, about 20 miles north of the FOB. Once overhead we will make contact with Juliet Arrival and follow instructions for landing - the type of landing, slow or vertical, will be at the pilot's discretion.

*Flight Plan:*

Waypoint	Alt (Ft MSL)	Mach	Notes
<b>1</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>0.7</b>	<b>RV with 'Mother', threat to NE</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>0.7</b>	<b>White Cap, threat to North</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>0.7</b>	<b>Threat to North</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>0.7</b>	<b>Sirjan, friendly area</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>0.65</b>	<b>Friendly area, scan routes for threats</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>0.65</b>	<b>Jiroft Reservoir</b>
<b>7</b>			<b>Land FOB Juliet</b>
			<b>BULLS N29°30'55", E57°16 '24"</b>

Mother then moved onto the fuel plan for the flight, we use a ladder system to calculate our fuel burn, with our expected fuel state monitored at each stage of the flight. This allows us to easily determine if we are ahead of or behind the fuel curve and make adjustments as required.

<b>Stage</b>	<b>Notes</b>	<b>Target Fuel lb</b>
STARTING FUEL		<b>11700</b>
WP1	<i>20Kft @ M0.7</i>	<b>10300</b>
WP2	<i>20Kft @ M0.7</i>	<b>9370</b>
WP3	<i>20Kft @ M0.7</i>	<b>8470</b>
WP4	<i>20Kft @ M0.7</i>	<b>8020</b>
WP5	<i>15Kft @ M0.65 - allow time for route scanning</i>	<b>7034</b>
WP6	<i>15Kft @ M0.65</i>	<b>2021</b>
WP7	<i>LAND</i>	<b>530</b>
<b>Bingo</b>		<b>2800</b>

The fuel plan for the fam flights is pretty generous, we'll be getting airborne with two external tanks so will have a full 11,700 lb fuel load. We expect to have around 7000lb remaining once we reach the back leg of our flight plan so will have plenty of additional time on station should we be required to loiter and assist in scanning the routes through the AOR. Bingo fuel is 2800lb which will allow us to reach waypoint 6 with approximately 2000lb remaining and ensuring we have sufficient fuel for our approach and landing.

Mother finished up the briefing by discussing the expected threats we will face today. "Major Daniels pretty much covered the threats in his briefing" he began, "Expect MANPADS any time you are below 10,000 feet AGL, we don't anticipate any air to air threats, but there will be a standing CAP of Hornets overhead throughout the duration of this operation in case the IRIAF try anything. SAM threats, as I mentioned, should be confined to the areas marked on the chart, but again stay frosty Marines...those things move around!". The briefing rumbled on for some time as the detachment asked questions and Mother then talked through the rest of the detachment's sorties over the weapons range. The wider air plan outside our detachment was also discussed, there's talk of the rest of VMA-311, who are still based aboard the Tarawa using FOB Juliet as a FARP to increase their time on station. Eventually as darkness closed in the briefing drew to a close and we were dismissed. Filing out the narrow office doorway we passed through the old workshop and out into the cool evening air. There was a light breeze and still the Iranian flags flew before us. "What's that all about?" exclaimed Noble, "This is an American base now...should've ripped those things down already".

Baz was quick to reply, "General White wanted them to stay, we're liberators not conquerors, we're not here to stay and this is still Iran, not America". "That's just dumb" replied O'Brian, "We'll respect your flag while we bomb your country...I don't get it!". As always I tried to stay out of the politics and keeping my mouth shut I stumbled through the darkness to my tent. Once inside I settled in for the evening and hit the books, one last chance to go over the SPINS and theatre briefing before I get airborne tomorrow. Later, I tried the ear defenders. They actually worked.