

LAST OUT - WEASELS OVER SYRIA II

August 26th, 2013.

It was quite the day yesterday, although I remember 'screwed up' being how I described it at the time. We were on a weasel mission protecting a flight of Buffs as they brought the rain to an SAA staging area in the Bekaa valley in another tough but straightforward enough sortie. Things took an 'interesting' turn on the way home however when Shade was fired on by a Russian Flanker. It turned out to be a case of mistaken identity, with the Russian pilots and ground controllers believing our Vipers to be the Israeli F-16s that had just bombed a Syrian position in the Bekaa. But for a moment there we had a real situation with missiles in the air between Russian and American aircraft. It was a major potential flashpoint between our two forces, but despite us coming into direct conflict with the Russians both sides quickly backed down and thankfully cooler heads prevailed.

What happened up there was quickly and quietly brushed under the carpet and we believe our CAOC and the Russian command were able to use the established communication lines to agree on a way forward. Further escalation between us is not desirable for either side, so despite the notable event of our detachment tangling with Russian Flankers, it will be a long time before it's spoken about outside the squadron.

Inside the det however was another matter, "The Russians must have heard about Shade's reputation," was the clandestine joke doing the rounds last night to our considerable amusement.

I woke this morning, a little worse for wear after an evening de-stressing in the officers club, Bug was in even worse shape than me. We shook off the cobwebs with coffee as we walked over to our ops building in the early morning sunshine. On the walk we ran into Rotor, who had some surprising news for us. Last night he received orders to report back stateside for a TDY assignment, we were all surprised at that, given how tight we are for Weasels out here. Rotor, for his part, didn't look too pleased about it and his attempts at pleading his case to stay fell on deaf ears. So with a glum looking Rotor in tow, we entered the briefing building where we quickly encountered Shade, who gave us a frosty reception, giving us pause for concern that maybe word of last night's jokes had reached his ears. But if it had he kept quiet, and he followed us silently into the briefing room, where Major Norris and Popeye were already waiting. We were joined shortly after by the rest of the detachment and Popeye set the briefing underway by inviting the Akortori OMT to begin the met brief.

The OMT was all good news, the early morning sunshine is expected to last all day, and the winds are expected to be light, with a few scattered clouds around 10,000 feet ensuring good visibility.

After the OMT had departed, Major Norris gave us a short intel update. His focus was on the situation between Russia, Israel and the US. He mostly told us what we already knew - that the Russian engagement yesterday was triggered by an Israeli attack on a Syrian position. But Norris did also reveal that we believe that position contained some Russian personnel, the Russians won't confirm that, but that's no surprise to anyone. The Israelis have once again been asked, and more firmly by all accounts, to stand down and avoid any further escalation. We'll have to see if it has an effect this time.

Norris also discussed the threat of future Russian 'misunderstandings' - the Russians were very quick to step back from yesterday's incident, they know an escalation ends badly for them, but this is likely only about self preservation. We should be under no doubt about Russian intentions to hinder our mission out here, and when two opposing sides are thrown into a highly pressured

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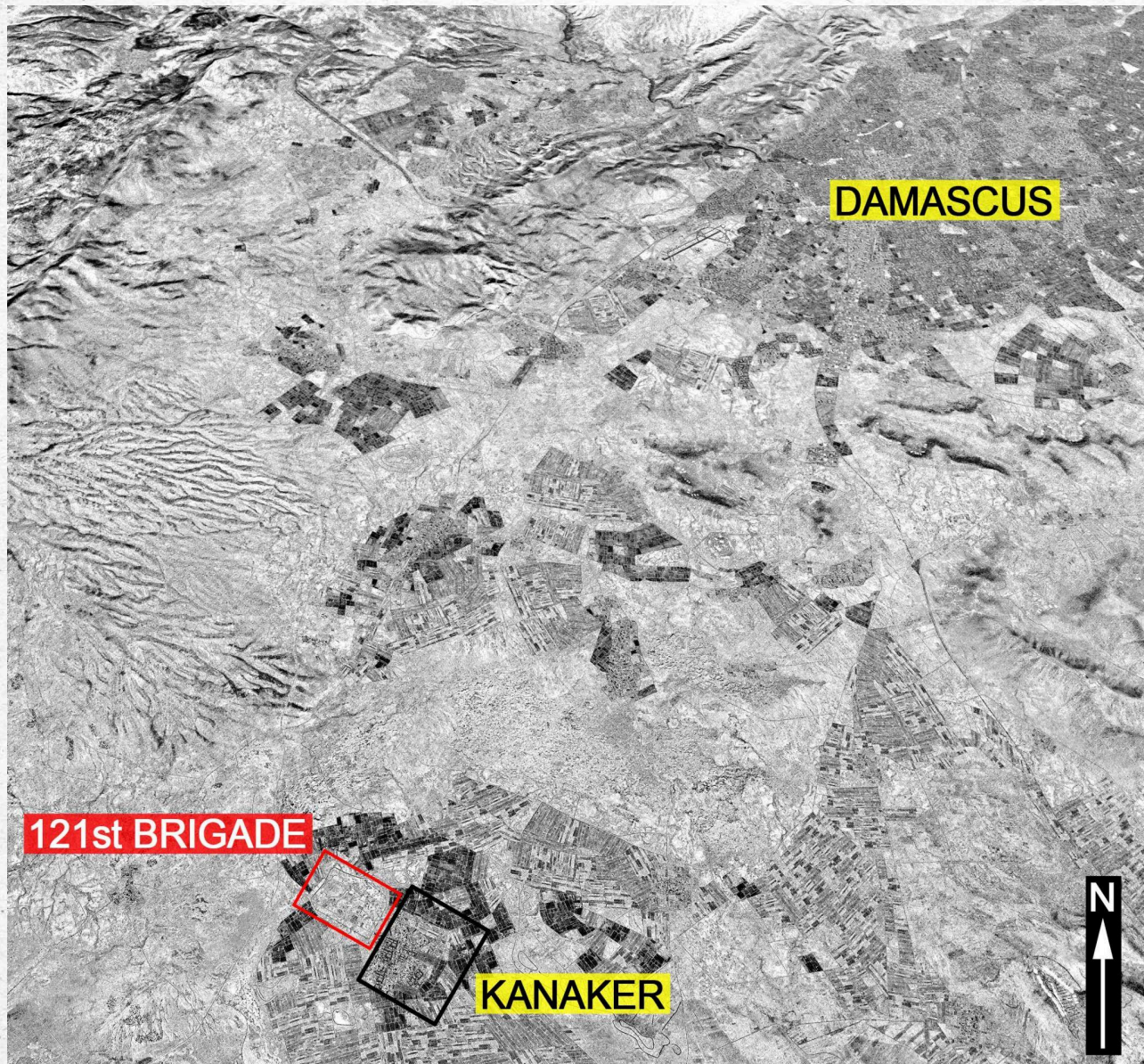
situation like this, mistakes can and do happen. We should tread carefully where the Russians are involved.

Once Major Norris had departed, Popeye began to brief our next mission.

“Ok then pilots, let’s get to it. As a few of you have found out the hard way already, a Syrian SA-10 has been harassing us for several days now. The Syrians have been playing it smart with their Grumble, limiting emissions and relocating the battery every 24-36 hours. The Grumble is believed to be the last strategic level SAM the Syrians possess and still poses a significant threat, therefore the CAOC has tasked us with taking it off the board for good”.

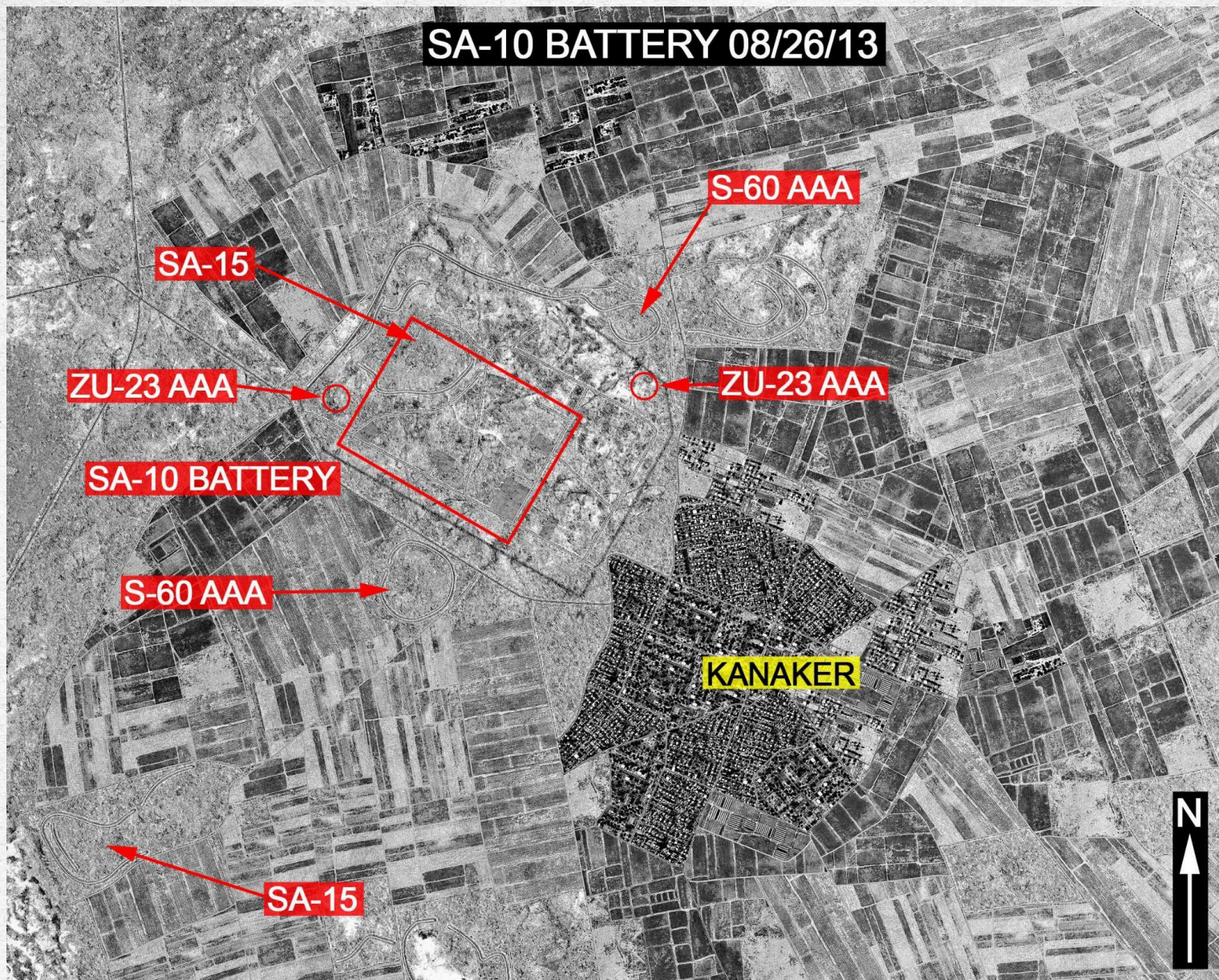
“Our Intel folks have been on a dedicated push to locate the battery early enough to enable us to strike it before it relocates, and it looks like they’ve finally come up with the goods”.

Popeye clicked a slide onto the briefing screen at the front of the room.



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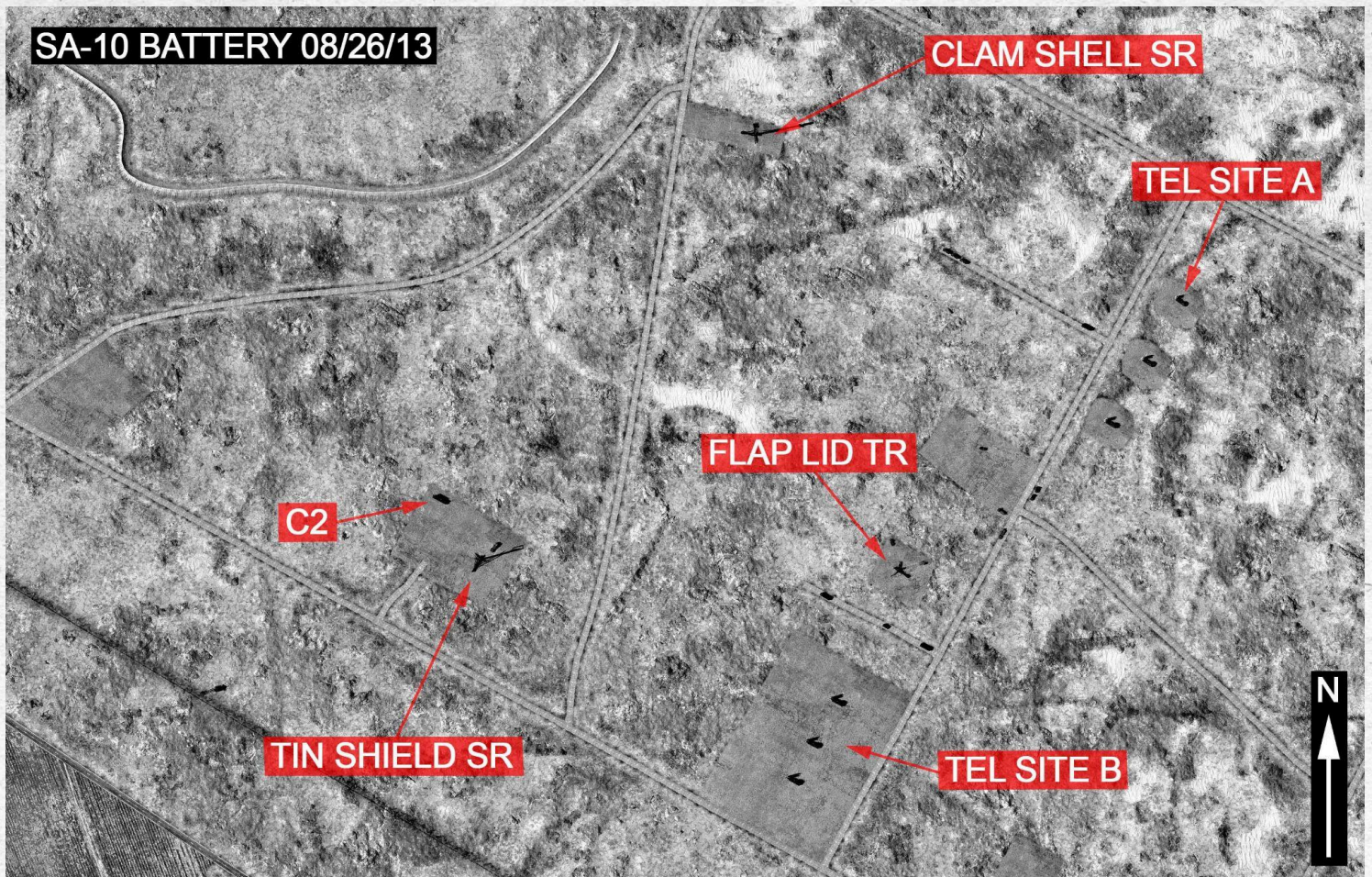
"Late yesterday we located the SA-10 battery beginning to deploy alongside the SAA 121st Brigade at Kanaker, some 15 miles southwest of Damascus".



"As you can see this position is well defended, with two SA-15s providing SHORAD to the site, in addition the SA-10 itself. The position is also likely to be well protected by other Syrian SAMs in the area. This one will be a tough nut to crack".

"The battery itself appears to contain a Tin Shield search radar in place of the usual Big Bird, but apart from that consists of all the usual elements we expect to see. Your mission is the destruction of the entire battery".

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Popeye continued, "Our detachment will be split into two groups. I will lead Sword 1, consisting of Tank, Ghost and Shade in a diversion attack on Damascus, along with a package of Strike Eagles and two B-1s. This attack will be carried out from the north, flowing down the Homs road towards the Damascus area".

"While this is happening, Sword 2, led by Forrest, will be attacking from the south. The attack will follow an unconventional route, entering Syria from northwest Jordan and overflying Israeli airspace as you do so. The Israelis it seems are keen to have this SA-10 battery taken out".

"Oh now they stand down!" Rotor exclaimed over-dramatically, to a few stunted laughs from the rest of the detachment.

"Guess they're leaving the job to the specialists," Popeye replied. "Anyway, you will enter Israeli airspace south of Haifa, mimicking an approach towards Ramat David. The IAF have agreed to keep the airspace clear as you approach the area, which will allow you to descend to low altitude and make a low level ingress towards Syria, hopefully unseen by the SA-10. You will then proceed over the Jordanian border, turning northeast before Irbid and continuing at low level into Syria. Once you arrive at the target you will execute a four ship, low level pop up attack on the SA-10 battery, destroying all battery elements before egressing the area back through Israel".

"Sounds easy!" said Rotor sarcastically, "No wonder the IAF left this one to us".

"What support will we have sir?" I asked, cutting Rotor off.

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Popeye responded, "Sword 2 will be supported by the Marine detachment of Hornets and a flight of Vipers from the 179th out of Incirlik. Both will act as HARM shooters for you and will saturate the target, aiming to knock out the SA-15s ahead of your arrival".

"And if they fail to do so?" I asked.

Popeye responded, "You will also have Spartan 3 to escort you into the target area, and they will set up in a standoff jam while you run in on the target. That combined with the element of surprise should give you enough time to get in, destroy the target and get out again before the Syrians can respond".

Having briefed the mission overview, we then broke down the mission into more detail.

Departing Akrotiri as a four ship, I will lead Sword 2 south across the sea from Akrotiri to waypoint 4, joining up with the Marine Hornets, callsign Buzzard 1, as we proceed south. Rotor will be my wingman as Sword 2-2, with Bug leading Boomer in the second element as Sword 2-3 and Sword 2-4.

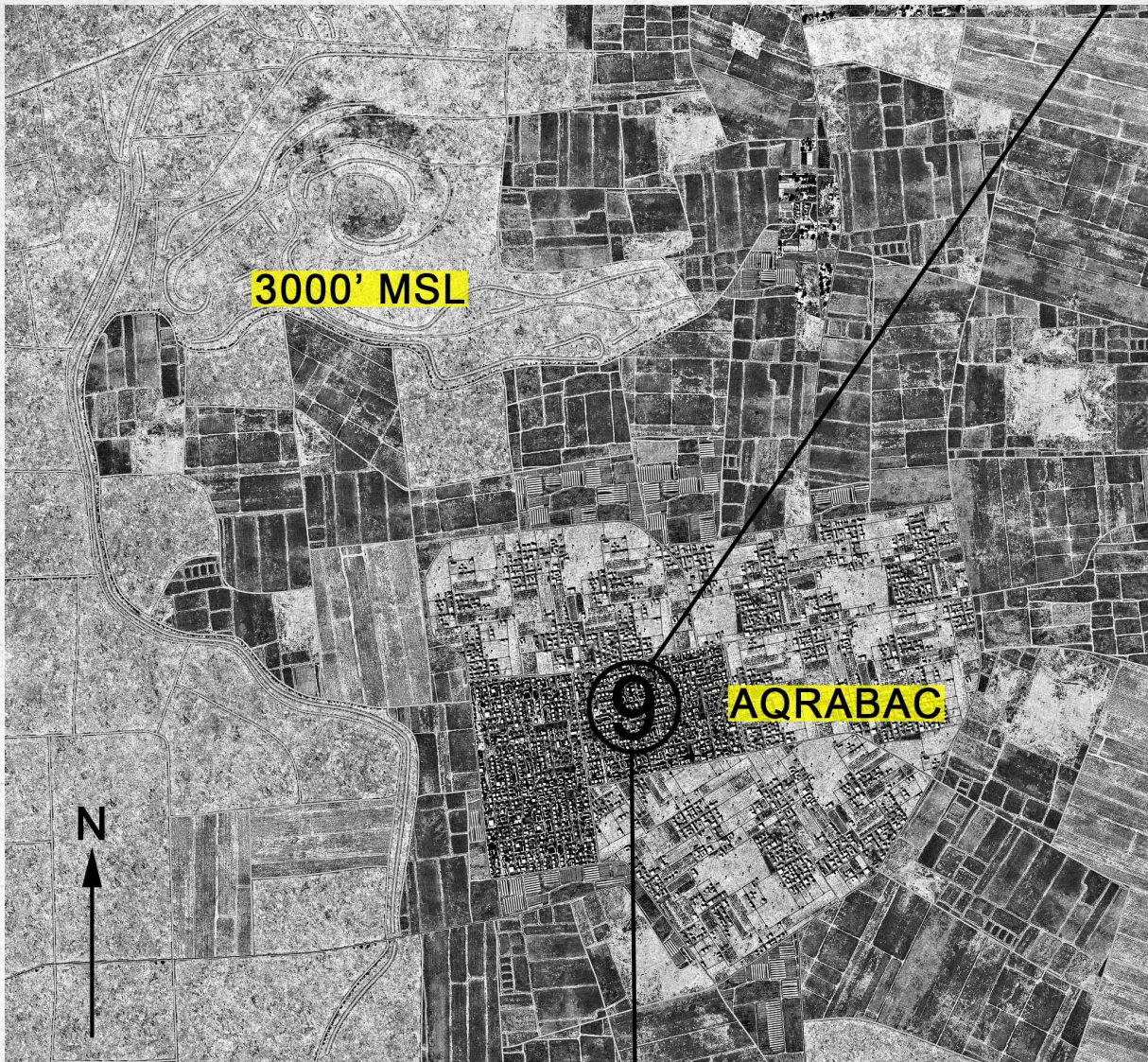
At waypoint 4 we will rendezvous with our Growler escort, Spartan 3 and proceed southeast for waypoint 5. We will collect another addition to our strike package at waypoint 5, the Vipers out of Incirlik, callsign Bulldog 6.

Once the package is fully assembled, we will switch to our strike frequency and begin a descent into Israel towards waypoint 6. It's important we follow our assigned flight plan in Israel, this has been coordinated with the Israelis to ensure our airspace is clear. Once at waypoint 6 we will then descend to 250 feet AGL and push for waypoint 7, maintaining 250 feet AGL as we do so. Our push time is 14:02 zulu, it is important we push on time to ensure our attack will coincide with the distraction attack north of Damascus, which has a vul time of 12 minutes, until 14:14Z. We will turn northeast at waypoint 7, ensuring we do not overfly the city of Irbid as we do so. Popeye was quite clear on this - the Jords will not be happy if we buzz a city at high speed and low altitude. Pushing from waypoint 7 will continue at low level on to our IP at waypoint 9.

As we enter Syria, Buzzard and Bulldog will launch a volley of HARMs at the SA-15s at the target site - hopefully both will be fixated on threats to the north - before turning back for home.

Our IP is the town of Aqrabac, 10 miles southwest of the target. As we pass the IP we should note an obstacle - the hill to the town's northwest, which has an elevation of 3,000 feet MSL, approximately 300 feet higher than the town.

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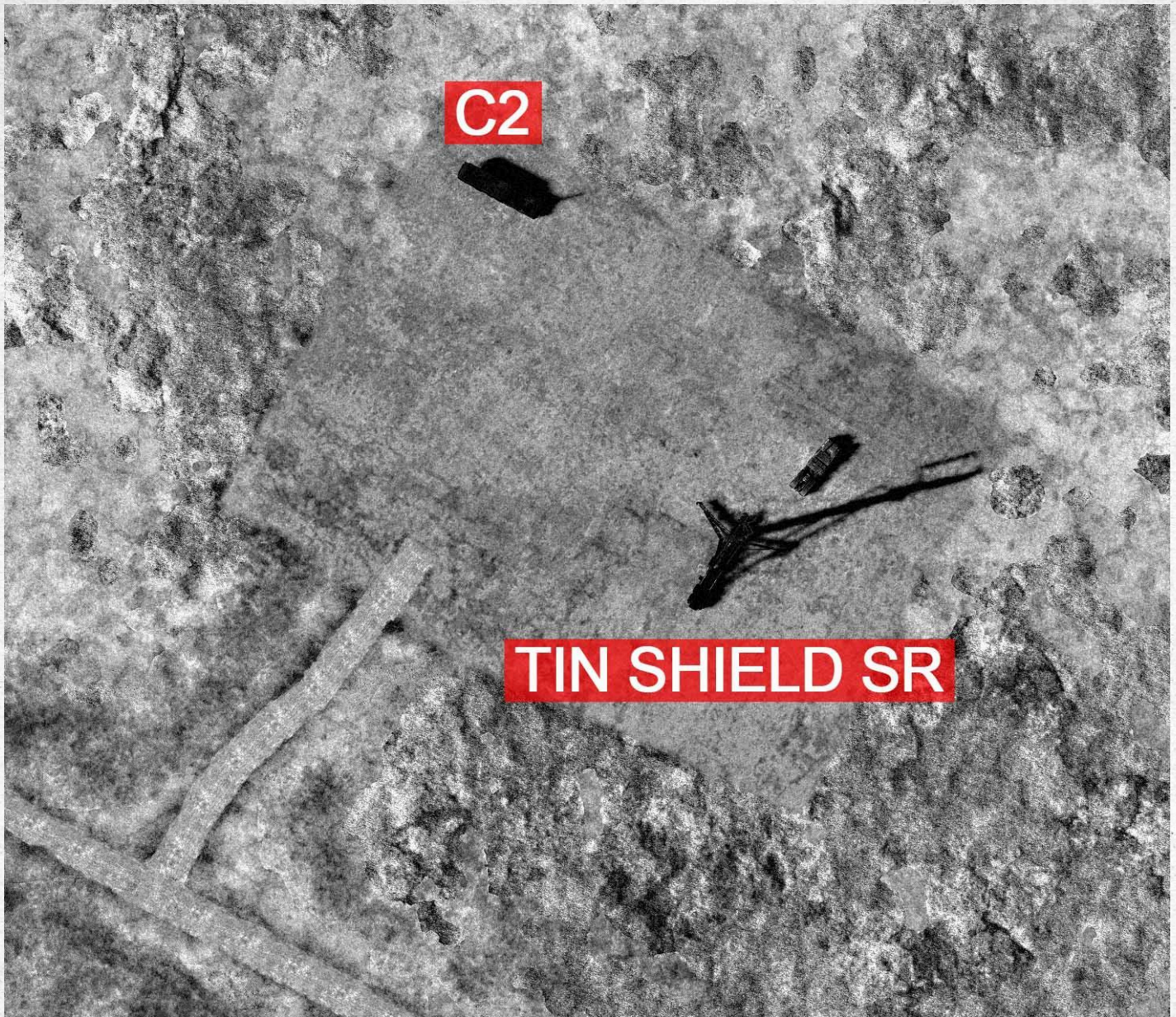
We have been reassured that the earthworks on the hill are a long standing, unoccupied defensive position. Let's hope that's still the case.

As we make our low level ingress into Syria we should ensure we remain at 250 feet AGL to keep ourselves masked against the Syrian SAMs until we execute our attack. This will be a very high threat environment and we do not want to reveal our presence early.

Pushing from the IP, we will execute our attack at 5.5 nm from the target. This will be a four ship pop up attack using CBU-87, each member of the flight will execute a separate attack profile to ensure deconfliction from one another, and to get all aircraft through the target in under 60 seconds. Our attack heading has been designed to keep our attack axis away from Kanaker itself and minimize the potential for collateral damage.

At 5.5nm from the target I will break 20 degrees left, roll out and then pull into a 20 degree climb. As I reach 3,500 feet AGL I will then pull back down onto the target and maintain a 5 degree track nose low, aiming to release 2 CBUs at approximately 2,700 feet AGL. My target will be the Tin Shield search radar and command post (C2), located at waypoint 10.

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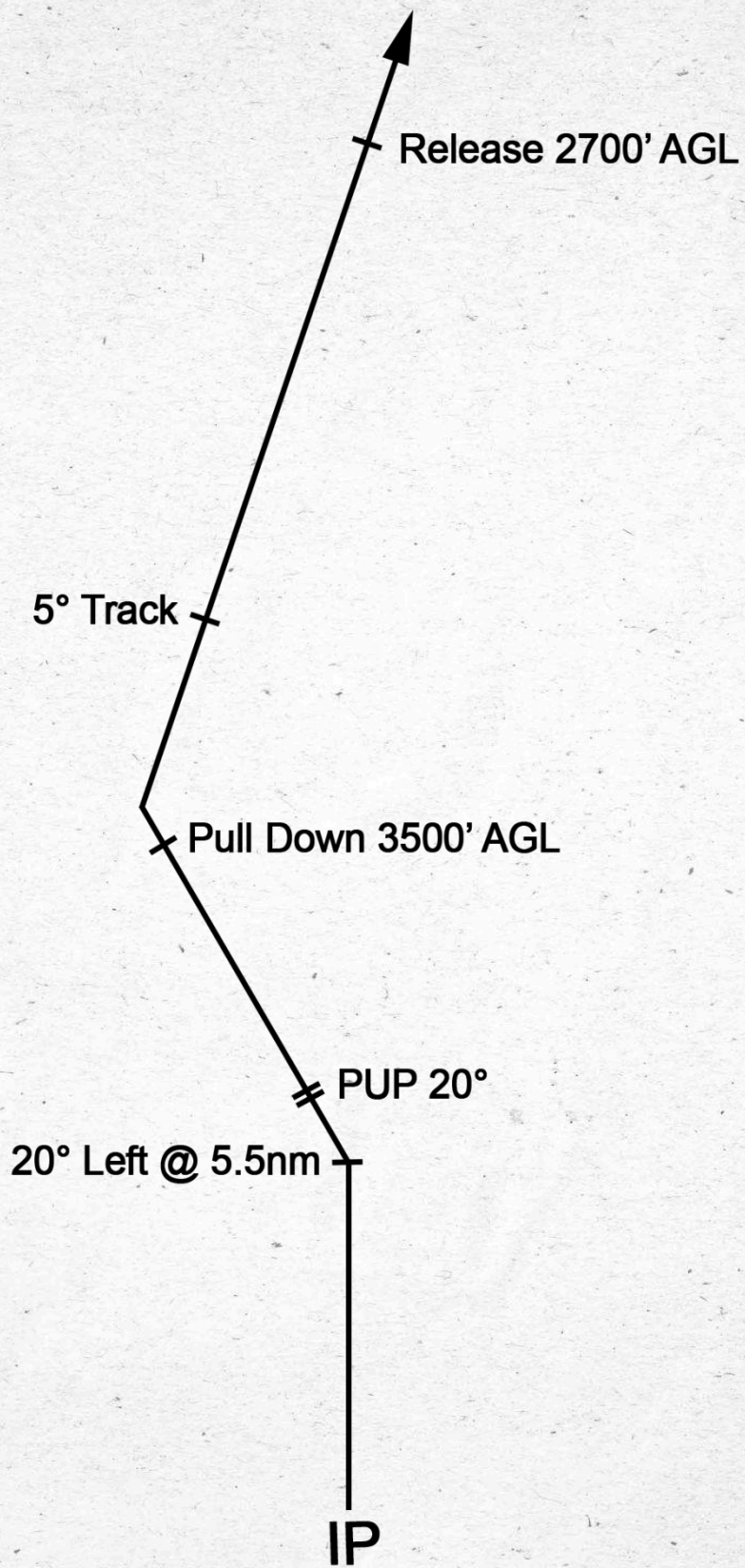
Rotor will be targeting the Flap Lid and TEL site Bravo, Bug TEL site Alpha and Boomer the Clam Shell.

Once all attacks are complete we will then rally back in Jordan at waypoint 12, before pushing back home, departing Israel via waypoint 5. As we push back west into Israel from waypoint 12 we must observe a pre-agreed altitude of 14,000 feet MSL, to help Israeli air defense operators identify us. We have also been warned by the Israelis that we must keep clear of the Golan heights, located west of waypoint 9. IDF forces in this area are on high alert and approaching this position risks us being engaged by Israeli air defenses.

We will each be carrying two CBU-87s for the attack, along with the standard fit of ECM, target and HTS pods and 2 fuel tanks. Bingo fuel for the mission is 3,100 lb.

Bullseye for this mission will be located on Damascus International Airport.

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We concluded the briefing with a threat analysis. There can be no mistakes here, we are flying into a web of complex air defenses, consisting of SA-15s, SA-10, S-60 and ZU-23 at the target site. In addition to this we can expect a mix of SA-2, SA-3, SA-6, SA-8 and SA-11 in the Damascus area. Many of these sites are mobile and we can't be certain of their exact positions, however we know for sure that there is an SA-2 and SA-3 at Mezzeh airbase, an SA-6 at Marj Ruhayill and an SA-3 at DIAP.

We expect Kanaker to be within range of a number of threats, however a combination of our deception attack to the north, jamming and surprise should work to keep us safe - providing we follow the plan and don't make any mistakes at least. Re-attacks on the target are not advised, and we should also remain aware of our position in relation to known threats at all times - get out of position and we risk rendering Spartan's jamming ineffective. We should also note the position of Tha'lah airbase, east of our egress route, which has been noted in the past to contain an SA-6. Although the chance of Syrian fighter interference remains low, we are starting to see more activity by the SyAAF. Mig-21, Mig-23 and Mig-29 are all potential threats we should be alert to.

The briefing then ended and the four of us tasked with this mission retreated to study the mission in it's every detail. There's a lot to remember; restricted airspace, time on target, attack profiles, threat positions and egress altitudes. We're going to earn our pay on this one. Takeoff is 13:40 zulu.

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