

18/06/2013, 07:00

It's been two days since I arrived in Turkey...and crikey it's hot. But I'm used to that. After all I served in Afghanistan and Iraq in Operations Iraqi and Enduring Freedom as well as in Iran last year for Persian Freedom. Not to mention that I spent the last 6 months at Marine Corps Air Station Miramar in California. My time in Miramar was spent with VMFAT-101 'Sharpshooters' converting to the F/A-18C Hornet, I'm not a Marine though...I'm an RAF Harrier GR9 and (former) Tornado GR4 pilot on exchange to the USMC. This isn't my first exchange either, I spent 18 months with the USAF on the Warthog where I was in the thick of it on Operation Persian Freedom. I personally don't know anyone else who has ended up on two back to back exchange tours but the USMC had a space and I was keen to get onto the Hornet so here I am!



My tour with the Marines is with VMFA-232 'The Red Devils', part of the 3rd Marine Aircraft Wing in Marine Aircraft Group 11. The Red Devils are a proud bunch, the oldest and most decorated fighter squadron in the Marines, I hope I can measure up.

Our CO is a Lt. Colonel called Thomas Lincoln, a tall, thin and intelligent looking man, with grey hair just starting to show on top. I've only met him briefly and have found it hard to read him so far. He seemed quite distant on first impressions but the guys in the squadron I've met so far all speak highly of him and they say he's a hell of a pilot. I've spent more time with the squadron XO Major Ben Dane, a squat and well built man with a shaved head and who is known by the callsign 'Poodle'. He sure didn't look like a Poodle, I'll have to make sure I ask him about that!

I'm here in Turkey for Operation Cerberus North, the name given to the mission to protect the breakaway forces in Syria from the Syrian Air Force and to hammer the SIA out of Syria and out of existence.



Cerberus is an apt name. Cerberus was the many headed hound of Greek mythology that guarded the gates of hell...now there are many nations taking part in OCN and as for the gates of hell...well that may be a bit too strong a description for a region so important to three major religions but what's going on in the Middle East and in Syria right now sure can't be described as heaven. A flick through the intelligence briefing quickly reveals the human tragedy in Syria as well as the complex geopolitical situation. There is so much going on over here it made my head spin at first.

But writing it down here helps me focus on the details. So...

The Arab spring in 2011 had a number of ramifications throughout the middle east and North Africa, the most lasting of which are the disintegration of Libya and Syria into civil war. Last year's major conflict in Iran was of course also a result of the Arab spring and the Iranian regime's response to the protests there. Thankfully the insurgency in Iran is now largely contained with most of the prominent figures either dead, captured or fled, although that may yet prove to be a factor here in OCN.

Syria currently finds itself in a state of ever escalating civil war. The Syrian government responded to the Arab Spring in brutal fashion, massacring hundreds of civilians in the weeks that followed what were initially peaceful protests. But as the violence against it grew, so did the reformist movement, freshly boosted by defectors from the Syrian military. This movement became a fully fledged guerrilla insurgency, initially formed as the Free Syrian Army and then growing into a military alliance known as the Syrian Democratic Forces. The SDF now controls territory from the Turkish border down to the city of Homs in the south and out to Lake Assad in the east, with both regions seeing heavy fighting. In Homs the SDF is fighting to gain control of the city from the Syrian forces whilst further east it engages the Syrian Islamic Army close to the city of Raqqa. However areas under SDF control have been facing heavy attacks from the Syrian Air Force.

The SIA are a terrifying prospect to us in the west but even more so to the Syrians living under or under threat of their rule. The SIA formed from elements of a Sunni insurgent extremist group in Iran which fled to Iraq before joining forces with insurgent groups still active in the Iraqi insurgency. In western Iraq this new group grew and when fighting broke out in Syria they embarked on a rapid campaign, carving out a corridor of territory from western Iraq to the Syrian city of Raqqa. Within this new territory the SIA declared a caliphate, subjected millions of people to a brutal, fundamentalist rule and began a new campaign to capture all of Syria, and from there attack their ultimate objective - Israel.

But the SIA are also in direct conflict with the Kurdish militia, the YPG - a highly effective light fighting force made up of mostly ethnic Kurds from northern Syria. The YPG has so far done an excellent job at curtailing SIA ambitions in the northeast of Syria and have recently gone on a counter offensive to force the SIA out of their capital Raqqa. Yet this may still be undermined as the YPG face another threat - Turkey.

However Turkey is an ally of the US...well, on paper at least. In recent years Turkish and US interests have diverged somewhat and NATO has looked on as one of its members has warmed to Russian courtship. Turkish intentions towards Syrian Kurdish groups such as the YPG are being carefully monitored and are a cause of concern - the Turkish government often view the YPG in the same light as the rebel Kurdish group the PKK and there is a real threat the Turks will use any campaign against the SIA as cover to also attack the YPG.

Speaking of the Russians this is where things start to get really complicated out here. You see the Russians continue to support the Syrian government owing to their strong economic ties (Syria is a major importer of Russian arms) and to their strategic interests (Syria is the home of Russia's military presence in the middle east). To support the Syrian government the Russians have carried out numerous attacks on the SDF, YPG and SIA. So now we have a situation where the Russians in theatre are actively working against our

mission, as we are against theirs, and of course neither side can take direct action against the other.

And then on top of this powder keg we have Israel. Israel continues to watch vigilantly at the chaos breaking around it, poised, as ever, to strike if the situation dictates it. Their gaze is currently fixed on the growing Iranian influence in Lebanon as Iranian exiles bolster the Hezbollah forces committed to the destruction of Israel but no doubt they are also watching events in Syria very carefully.

Hezbollah has emerged as a serious power in recent times, it's vast arsenal of rockets repeatedly wreaking destruction on Israel. Based in Lebanon, Hezbollah is more than a rag tag bunch of militants. It is a well funded, well equipped, well trained and motivated organisation with a significant military capability. Hezbollah are a Shia organisation whose formation was supported by Iran but it also has strong links with the Syrian government. Following the collapse of the Iranian regime that was it's primary source of support, Hezbollah now has an ever more important stake in the survival of the Syrian regime.

And finally we have Jordan, this bastion of stability in an unstable region has become an ever more reliable ally to the west in recent years. However concerns have started to arise in Jordan about the conflict in Syria, especially it's ability to cause disruption in southern Syria and drive problems over the border. Despite this Jordan will hopefully be one area of the Syrian Theater of Operations we won't have to worry about.

*Like I said, things out here are complicated.*

Operation Cerberus North is being carried out by the Joint Syrian Task Force (JSTF). This is a multinational force, it's major contributors being the US, UK, France and Germany. Following UN approval, OCN has two stated goals; first protect the SDF and YPG controlled areas from Syrian airstrikes, second - support the fight against the SIA. The first objective will be achieved through enforcing two no fly zones over Syria, these will prevent the Syrian air force attacking SDF positions, and more importantly, civilian populations - as has been alleged. The second will be achieved mainly through airstrikes supporting the SDF and YPG forces, although I expect we shall see some of our special operations forces on the ground as well. The JSTF is headquartered out of Incirlik AB in Turkey, which is where I am based. RAF Akrotiri in Cyprus, Al Asad AB in Iraq and the USS John C. Stennis are all also supporting OCN.

OCN kicked off a couple of weeks ago and we've been building up our forces in the region since. We ultimately aim to base a significant force close to Syria that will ensure air superiority over the country, however we are yet to fully achieve this goal owing to how hastily this operation was put together.

I have my first flight out of Incirlik this morning, it will also be my first flight in the Hornet on actual operations. Incirlik is a busy airbase, especially now with OCN starting. It's also a Turkish airbase and the TuAF is of course operating from here on it's own agenda against the PKK and YPG. We also have Adana International Airport very close to Incirlik, not to mention the base's proximity to the city of Adana itself. With all this going on it's been really important that I familiarise myself with the SPINS for Incirlik and all the relevant ATC procedures. This also extends to the SPINS covering the STO - with such a complex environment no one can afford to make mistakes.

This morning's 6am briefing was held in what's called the 'small briefing room', a windowless, air conditioned room with space for about 30 people and a projector screen up front. The briefing was attended by the various flight crews due to fly CAPs today.

It began with the intel brief. Our assigned intelligence officer Major Daniels gave us the rundown of what's happening today in the STO. He seemed a slick but serious chap, and didn't take too kindly to any of the off hand comments some of the other pilots made. The brief was quite light on new content, Daniels outlined the SAM threat faced near the no fly zone, but this was pretty much the same as already detailed in the theatre intel briefing document. He revealed we have constant Rivet Joint flights monitoring Syria, building up the electronic order of battle and positions of SAM sites so at least we'll be kept up to date on the potential threats out there. The Russians also continue to be active over Syria, Daniels tells us that so far they've not been hiding their intentions and Rivet Joint has been passing details of any flights over to the ABCCC 'Sentinel'. There is currently no indication that the Syrian's are preparing to take any significant action to violate the no fly zones.

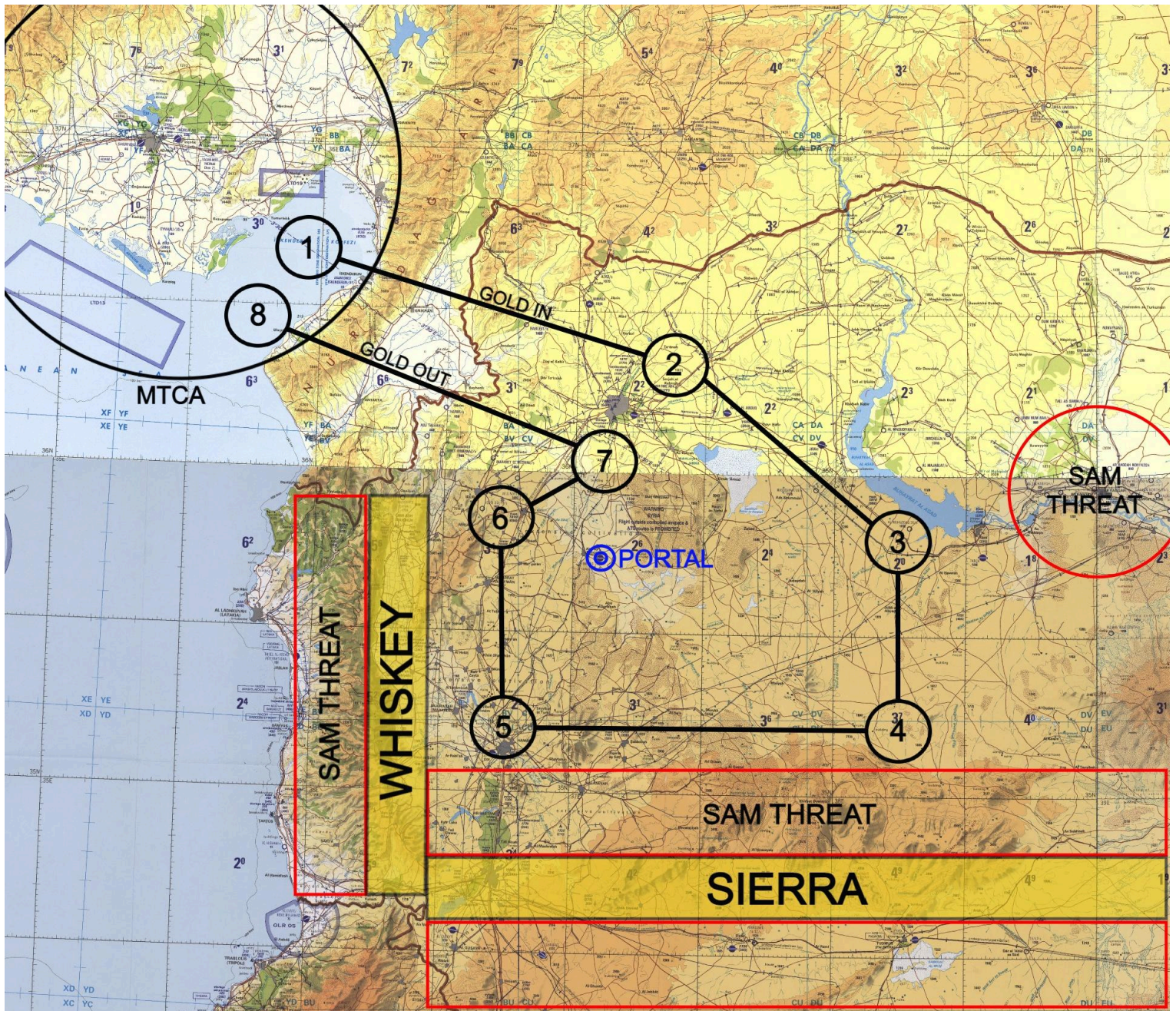
Next was the met briefing, given by USAF Captain Edwards, an older but down to earth and likable sort of man with an obvious passion for the weather. Captain Edwards enthusiastically informs us with lots of exaggerated gestures that we'll see fairly settled weather today with light clouds, light winds and temperatures of around 27 °C. He seemed quite a character this Edwards, strikes me as someone with a lot of stories to tell. He kept going on about the Russians a lot as well, which struck me as odd for a weatherman.

Lt. Colonel Lincoln then started briefing today's CAP operations. My first flight in OCN will be as a number two on a two-ship combat air patrol of the no fly zone. 'Poodle' will be leading the flight, our departure from Incirlik will be 'standard' (meaning as briefed in the SPINS). Major Dane was keen to point out in the briefing that he will talk me through all the intricacies of Incirlik and the STO as we go.

Once airborne, flights will assemble at WP1 before entering the 'Gold Corridor' into Syria. Once clear of Aleppo flights will follow their assigned routes, maintaining contact with Sentinel and monitoring the no fly zone. The CO was keen to press the need for us to stay on freq for Sentinel at all times, the ABCCC will keep us updated on any Syrian or Russian activity as well as handle any urgent requests for air support if ground forces are in trouble. Although our flight today is primarily a patrol to enforce the no fly zone, we will be carrying air to ground weapons in case we're the nearest asset to an urgent troops in contact.

Lt. Col. Lincoln, who I discovered has the callsign 'Link', also placed a great deal of emphasis on the rules of engagement. Any aircraft violating the no fly zone must be intercepted and visually identified, the Syrians and Russians both operate some of the same aircraft types and with the Russians not bound by the no fly ruling we cannot risk an accidental shoot down of a Russian plane.

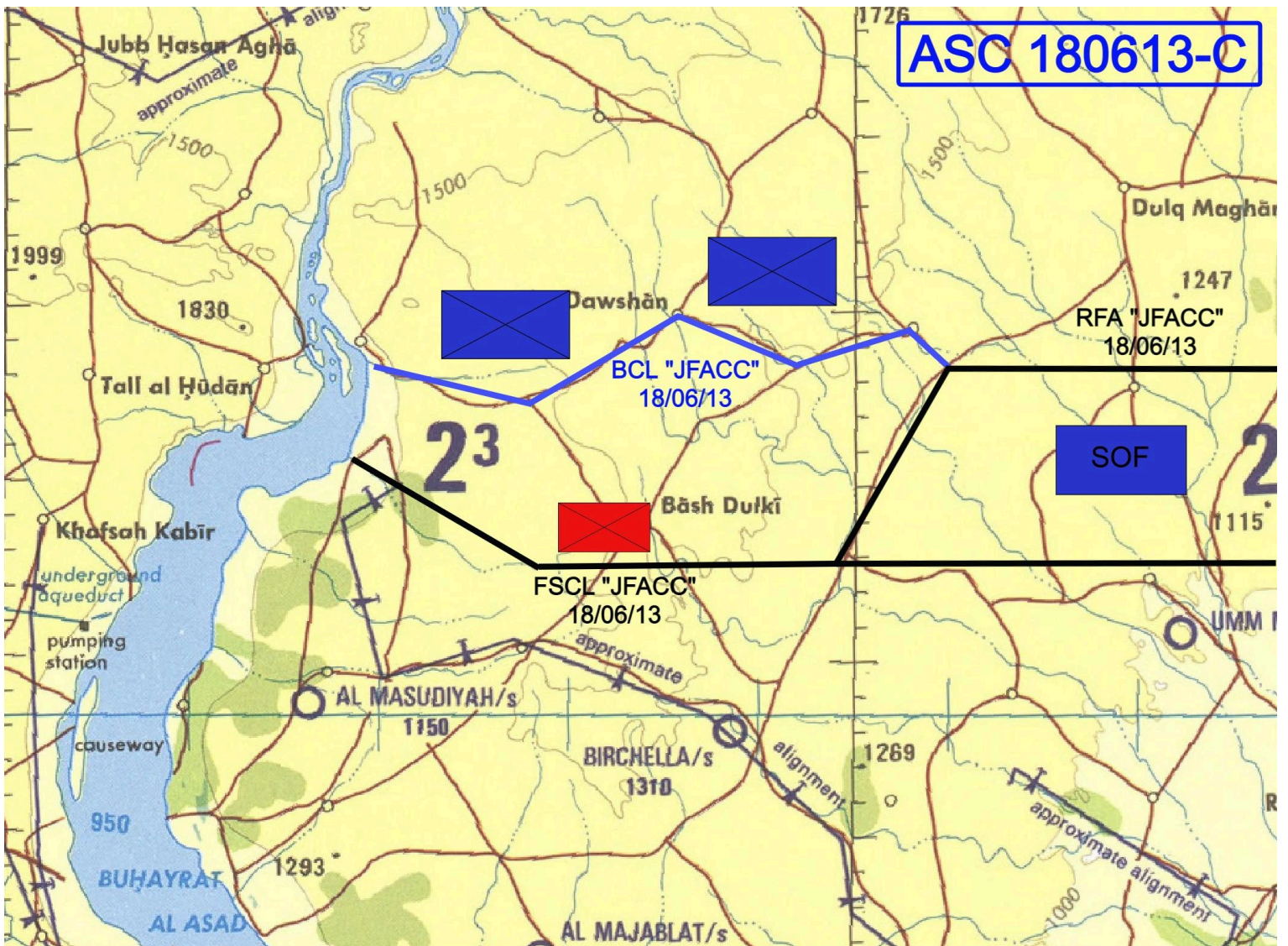
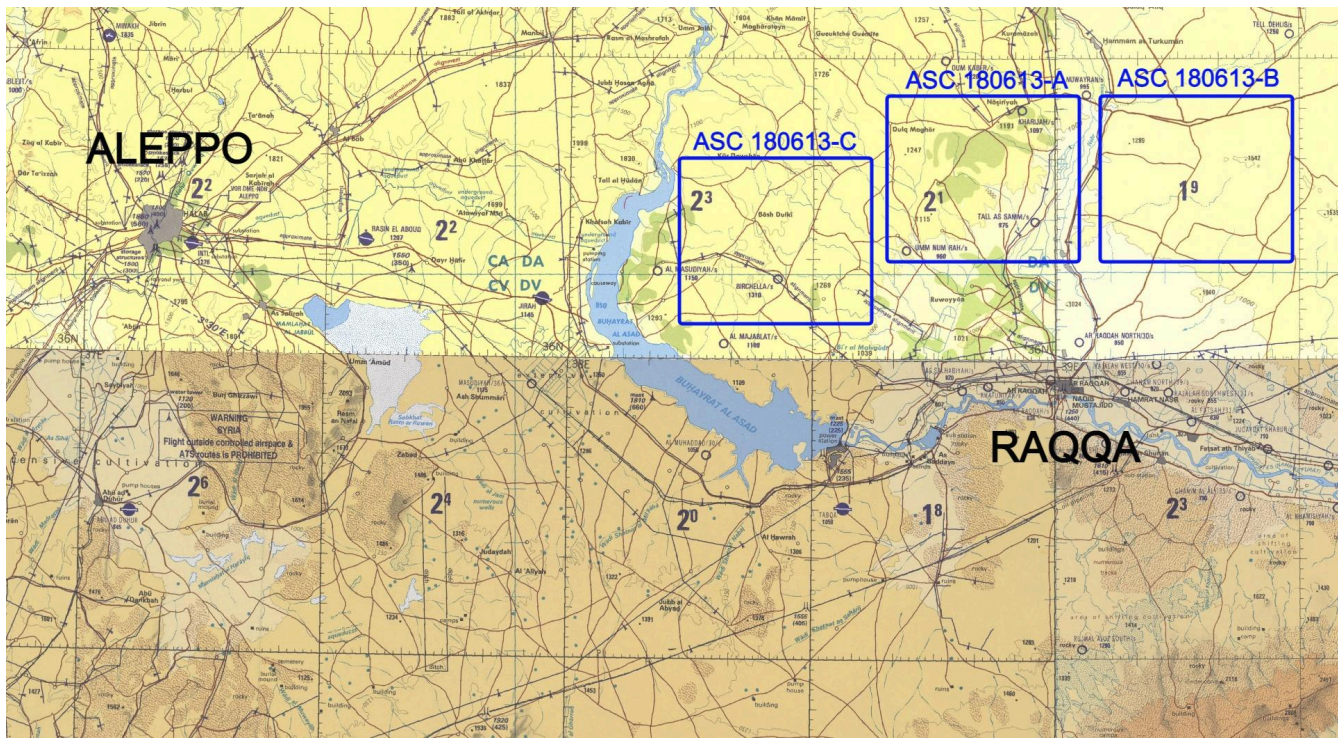
Once we are on station over eastern Syria we will relieve the current CAP Echo 2 and patrol our way west and then north back to Aleppo. We will then be relieved by Outlaw 3 before passing back through the Gold Corridor towards Incirlik. Fuel as ever will be critical to the mission, the mission planning cell have budgeted 3600 lb into our loadout for any additional actions we have to take such as intercepts. The MPC have provided us with a fuel plan to help manage our fuel use, the fuel plan provides a target fuel level for each stage of the flight which will be accurate providing the correct profile is flown.



<b>Stage</b>	<b>Notes</b>	<b>Target Fuel lb</b>
Takeoff		<b>14721</b>
Departure	<i>To 25k Ft</i>	<b>13491</b>
WP1	<i>25Kft @ M0.75</i>	<b>12937</b>
WP2	<i>25Kft @ M0.75</i>	<b>11817</b>
WP3	<i>25Kft @ M0.75</i>	<b>10953</b>
WP4	<i>25Kft @ M0.75</i>	<b>10425</b>
WP5	<i>25Kft @ M0.75</i>	<b>9273</b>
WP6	<i>25Kft @ M0.75</i>	<b>8665</b>
WP7	<i>25Kft @ M0.75</i>	<b>8249</b>
WP8	<i>20Kft @ M0.75</i>	<b>7160</b>
Approach	<i>15Kft @ M0.75</i>	<b>6260</b>
Pattern & Landing		<b>5240</b>
Combat allowance to 10% reserve	<i>3608 lb available</i>	
<b>Joker = 6000 lb</b>		
<b>Bingo = 5593 lb</b>		

The air support charts were covered next, these detail where ground forces are expected to be operating today and will be an important reference point if we are called in to support.

Our flight today is tasked to assist with any air support requests in ASC 180613-C.



Lt. Col Lincoln concluded the briefing with a breakdown of the threats we could face. AAA and older SAM such as SA-8 and SA-9 systems currently cover Raqqa, and although we shouldn't end up anywhere close to them it pays to be vigilant. Whilst on our patrol route across Sierra we shouldn't deviate south of our flight plan unless cleared to do so by Sentinel. The Syrians have several SA-6 sites and an SA-11 along the southern side of Sierra, if we do need to respond to any incursions we ideally will be matched up with a SEAD escort. This is especially true around Homs where the SAM cover is thickest. I asked the CO what the long term plan was to deal with these SAM sites as to me it appears difficult to enforce a no fly zone we can't easily access ourselves. The boss informed me that the CAOC were working on it and that will have to do for now. I think the question irritated him.

With the briefing over we got up and filed out the door. One of the other pilots patted me on the back on the way out, he said that the question needed to be asked. Poodle overheard him and glared at us both.

Step time is 08:30 with wheels up at 08:55.

But first breakfast.