

LAST OUT - WEASELS OVER SYRIA II

August 27th, 2013.

Something big is going down in Syria.

We returned to Akrotiri this morning, having flown a mission south of Damascus in support of an attack on Mezzeh airbase. Our strikers were going after the latest round of supplies delivered by the Russians before the Syrians could whisk them away to the front line. Once again we encountered a heavy SAM presence in the Syrian south, as well as some Mig-29s eager to join the fight. I then saw the Russians getting pretty worked up again as I returned to Akrotiri, with an unusually large package of aircraft leaving Russian airspace. I still don't know what that's all about, but I have a feeling I will soon find out.

Another curiosity as I returned to base was the arrival of two Strike Eagles at Akrotiri, after all it's pretty rare to see them all the way out here. Turns out they were here to do some planning with the boss, just what exactly I still don't know, neither do I know yet if whatever's happening in Syria will be a part of it.

So a lot of questions, and not a lot of answers. At least not yet. I spent a few hours after the debrief unwinding at Akrotiri with Bug and Tank. We all had plenty to say about losing Rotor, we're certainly going to miss him around the det. Finally, when orders came in to report for a late afternoon briefing, the three of us made our way over to our ops building, eager to find out more about what was happening.

We entered the briefing room, noting 4 new faces in USAF flight suits already seated at the front. As we seated ourselves alongside the rest of the det Popeye began to speak.

"OK everyone, let's get started. First of all let me welcome our friends from the Rocketeers down here at the front". Popeye gestured at the four new faces with a mischievous smile. "I'm sure you've already seen the eyesores that are Mud Hens taking up our parking spaces out on the ramp. Lt. Col Smith here has come out to plan a set of missions with us, so be sure to afford all the proper hospitality a non Viper driver deserves. We'll talk more about what we're planning shortly but first Major Norris has some...well...major news. Over to you Major".

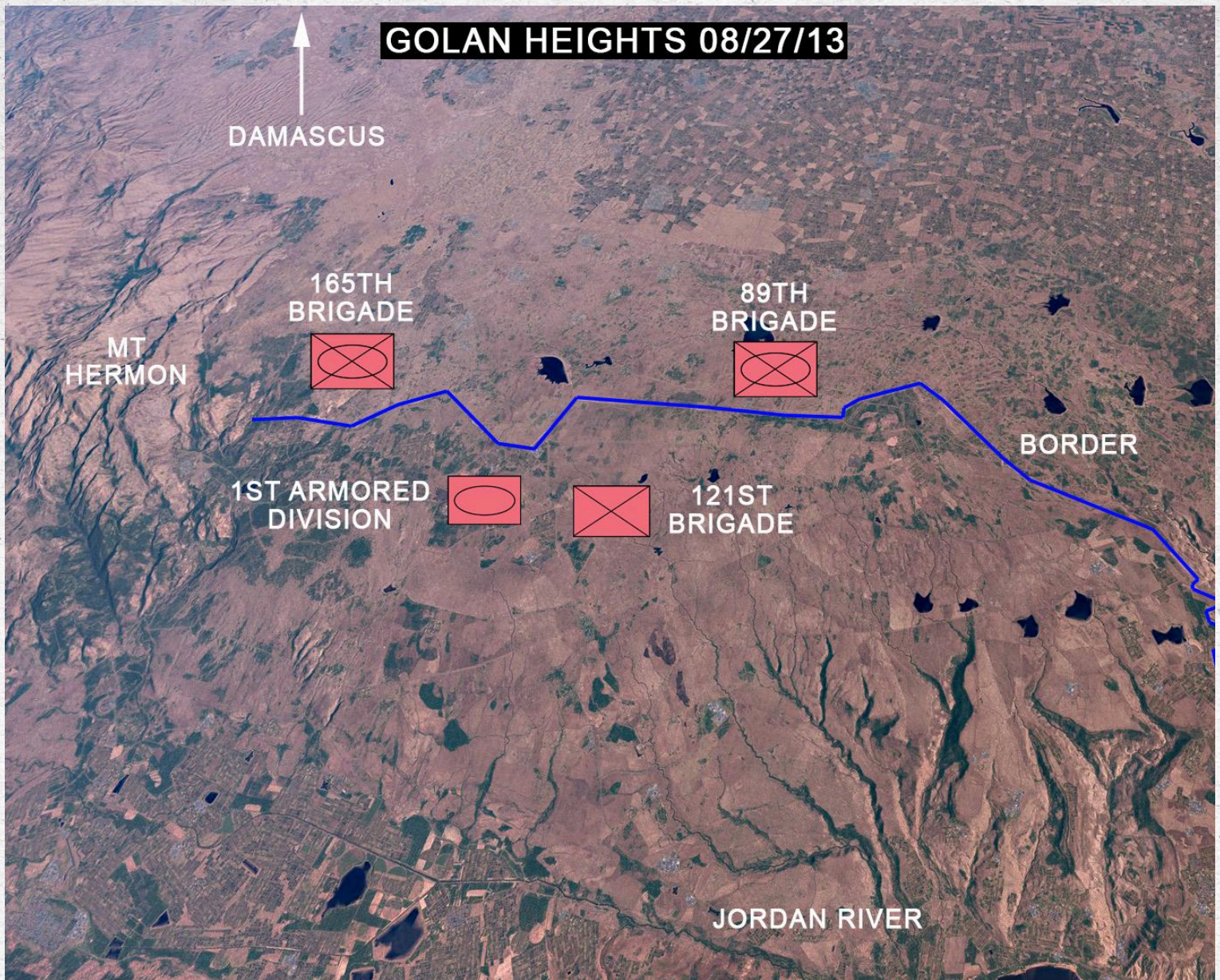
"Thank you sir" said Major Norris stepping to the podium. "The situation in Syria is extremely fast paced right now, we're struggling to accurately confirm all the details but this is the current picture as we understand it".

"Early this morning Israel launched a large attack into Syria from the Golan Heights, this caught us all by surprise and was not expected. However, this attack has not gone well. The Israeli attack was blunted by stronger than expected Syrian resistance, supported by both Hezbollah and what we believe are Russian mercenaries...not that the Russians will admit to it. Russian air power also played a part, and in combination with the strong air defenses still present in that region denied the Israeli ground forces adequate air support".

"Israel it would seem, has made a big miscalculation".

Norris clicked a slide onto the briefing screen.

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"After the initial Israeli attack was stopped, the Syrians began to rapidly counter attack into the Golan, utilizing the large number of mechanized and armored units in the area. The latest report is that the Syrians have penetrated around three miles into the Golan Heights, with the attack led by the 1st AD and 121st infantry brigade. Two mechanized brigades are also locked in heavy fighting around the border. We believe the Syrian objective will be the bridges over the River Jordan, likely an attempt to isolate the Golan from the rest of Israel and prevent reinforcements being brought into the fight".

"Efforts are being undertaken by the JSTF as we speak to shore up the Israeli position. We have made some good early progress, the Syrian advance has been halted...for now at least and the strikes carried out today have certainly hurt the Syrians. We also now have a large number of Syrian targets out in the open, which presents a golden opportunity. Lt. Col Doyle will brief your missions shortly, but as you can expect to be operating in this area let me talk to you about the threat picture".

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"Reports from the debriefs carried out so far are of a very dense missile umbrella over the battle area. This consists of at least fifteen mobile systems - mostly SA-6 and SA-8 but with at least two SA-11s and we believe two or three SA-15s as well. The Syrians look like they're throwing everything they've got into the fight. We're also seeing the Syrian air force a lot more active than usual, with several engagements carried out today with Mig-21s and Mig-29s".

The Major asked for questions, and with none forthcoming he departed and Popeye began to brief our next mission.

"OK then, let's get to it" Popeye began. "The Syrian attack into the Golan has put Israeli forces in a bad situation, but with the support of the JSTF their position has now just about been stabilized. This presents us with a golden opportunity".

"We believe the Syrians have over-reached, their response to the Israeli attack has brought a number of their most capable units out into the open. This leaves them exposed to widespread attack from JSTF air power, giving us an opportunity to deliver a huge blow to the Syrian military and maybe bring this war to a close sooner. However, as Major Norris has already said, the Syrians have also deployed a large SAM umbrella over the area, this is preventing us from completing that task...and so as you're probably expecting...we're going to go in and kick the door open".

"Tomorrow we're going to run a series of missions south of Damascus. The objective of these missions will be simple, hunt out and kill every SAM we can and make the area more permissive for follow on JSTF strikes. However, as you know, this area is a long way from Akrotiri, limiting our time on station. Therefore each flight will be carrying out two vuls in the AOR, with a stop in Jordan between each vul for fuel and weapons".

"H4 again?" Bug asked quizzically.

"No, not H4" replied Popeye. "Jordan has opened up two further bases to us in the north of the country - King Hussein and Muwaffaq Salti. We will be using Muwaffaq Salti".

"Will we be operating in the same airspace as the Israelis?" I asked.

"No," replied Popeye. "They are fully aware of our plans and have assured us they will keep out the way, which should remove the threat of an unintentional tangle with Russian aircraft as well".

I sensed Shade shifting uncomfortably behind me at this point. Popeye continued.

"As we heard, the Syrians are committing to the aerial fight more readily as well, so each flight will have a flight of Eagles commit to a fighter sweep ahead of them".

Popeye then shifted his gaze to the four Strike Eagle crews at the front.

"Now let's discuss where our Strike Eagle friends come into this. We've been planning a collaborative effort for some time, and with the recent developments down south...well let's say this seems like the perfect time to put them into action".

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"Now everyone in this room knows the Viper is the greatest airplane ever built, but even greatness can have its shortcomings...and in the Viper this is fuel and weapons. The Syrians have a lot of SAMs out there and as we've found out these last two months there are just not enough of us to deliver a knockout blow once and for all. This is where the Strike Eagles can assist us. We will enter an area and neutralize the SAM radars, and once we've made it a safer environment Lt. Col Smith's Strike Eagles will then roll in after us and obliterate the rest of the site. Given the long loiter time of the Mud Hen and its big weapons load, we should work very well together".

I noted a few grins around the room as Popeye described our plans, this was old school Weasel tactics, with shades of Vietnam and Desert Storm and we were all clearly excited to fly such a mission.

With the mission overview completed, we started to breakdown the mission in detail.

Sword 2, consisting of Boomer and myself, will depart Akrotiri at 04:00Z alongside Sword 3 (Shade and Bug) and proceed as standard into Syria through the Silver Corridor. Once clear of Silver at waypoint 6 we will turn southeast for waypoint 7 where we will rendezvous with Renegade 4, an Eagle four ship who will carry out a fighter sweep ahead of us. Renegade's push time is 04:35 Zulu.

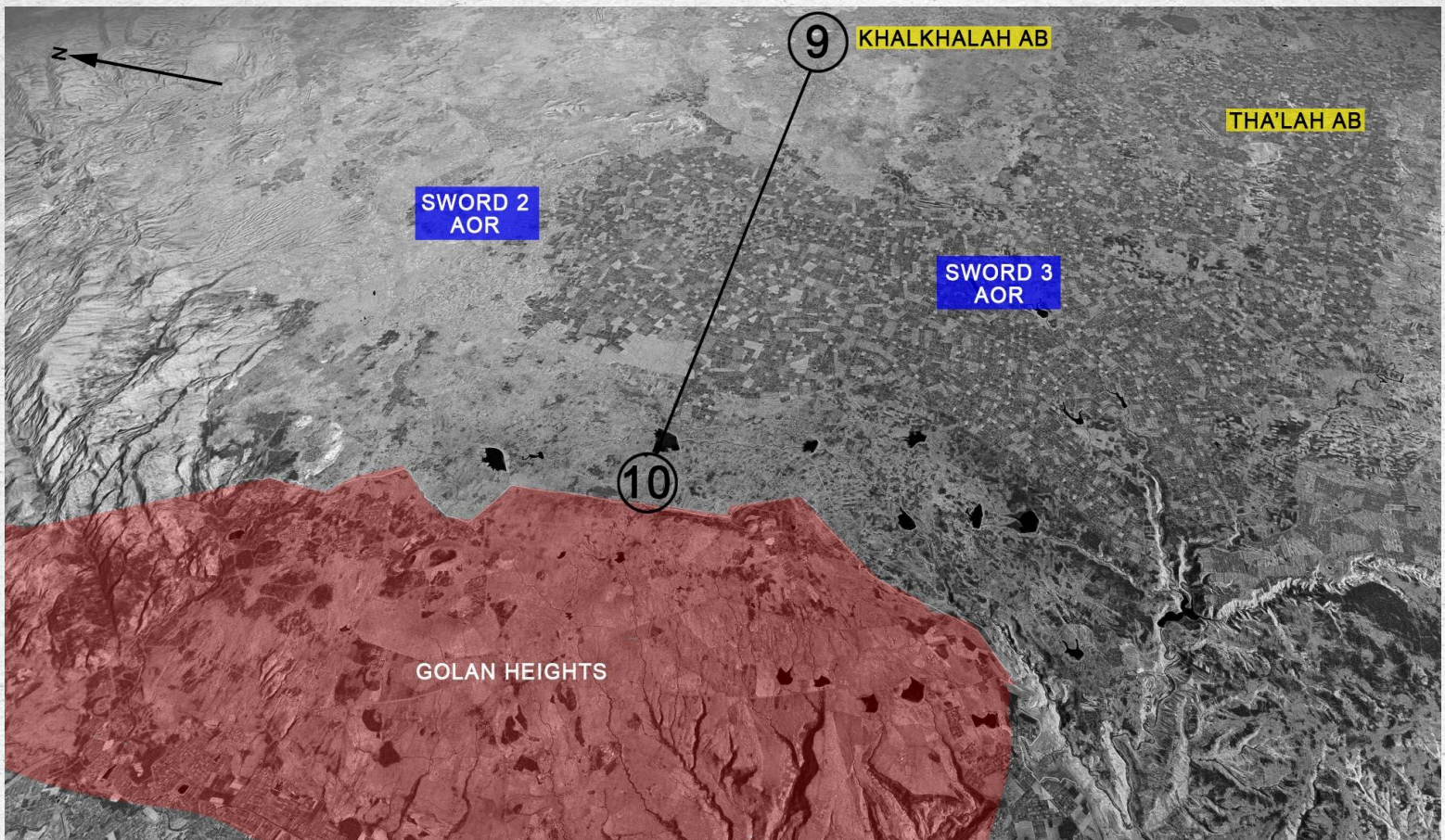
Once Renegade pushes south we will follow in behind them towards waypoint 8, trailing by about 10 miles. It will be essential we keep behind Renegade as they push, we do not want to end between them and any targets. Should Renegade be engaged by any SAMs we will then be in a position to react accordingly and cover them as they fall back.

We will follow the fighter sweep through to waypoint 9, which loops us east around Damascus, avoiding the AAA and SHORAD around the city and its airbases. Renegade will turn back for home at waypoint 9, where we will then push to our AOR for our first vul. Our initial vul time begins at 04:50. We will receive jamming support from Spartan 2 between 04:50Z and 05:20Z.

Our AOR will be the region south west of Damascus, north of a line drawn between waypoint 9 (Khalkhalah airbase) and waypoint 10. Sword 3 will be responsible for the area south of this line extending out to Tha'lah airbase. We will have overlapping vuls and so will be in a position to provide each other with mutual support if needed. During our initial vul we will be hunting for and killing SAMs, Vacuum will be on hand to assist us in locating targets.

We should not go further west than waypoint 10 as this will put us in the Golan Heights, the Israelis are currently fighting in this area so we should ensure we deconflict.

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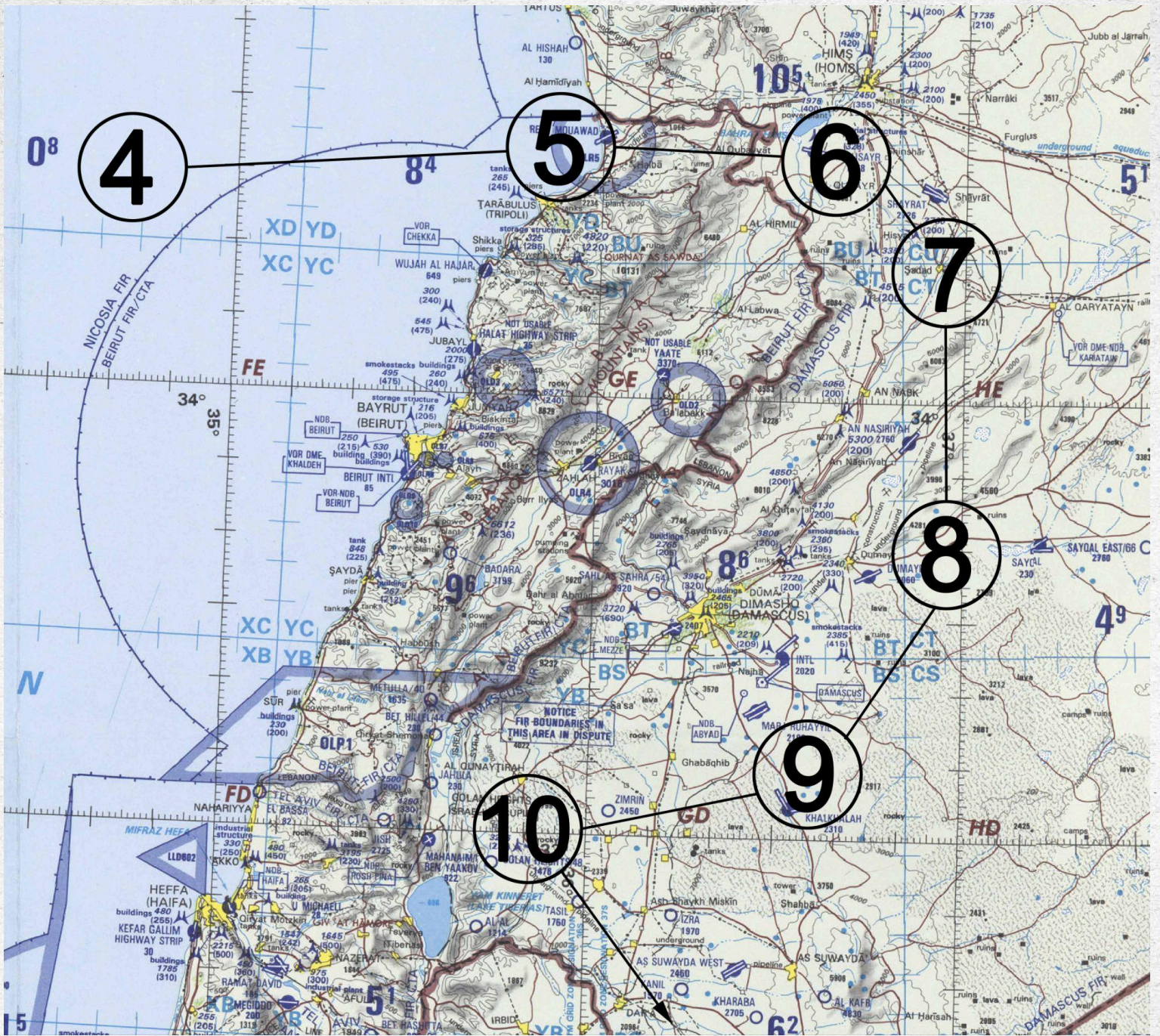
Once our vul is over at 05:20Z, or earlier should we be bingo or winchester, then we will egress south to Jordan, where we will land at Muwaffaq Salti, coordinating with their air traffic control as we do so.

We will be on the ground in Jordan for around two hours as the aircraft are turned around, this will give us a short time to stretch our legs and refocus to go back out again. We will takeoff for our second vul at 08:20Z, with a time on station of 08:30Z. Spartan 4 will be on station to provide jamming from 08:30Z - 09:30Z. During this vul we will be operating in the same AORs again, with a two ship of Smith's Strike Eagles (callsign Rock 3) planned to join us, with a TOT of 08:40Z. Once our second vul is complete we will return home to Akrotiri.

For our first vul Boomer will carry 2 HARMs, I will be carrying 2 CBU-105s and 2 Mavericks. Our bingo from the AOR to Muwaffaq Salti is 2,000 lb.

Bullseye will be located on Damascus International Airport.

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This mission looks like it's going to expose us to a wide range of threats. While the area north of Damascus is now largely clear of SAMs, south of Damascus it's a different story. Several SA-11s, and large numbers of SA-6s and SA-8s have created a large missile umbrella over the area. This will be tough to operate in so I'll need to rely on the effectiveness of Spartan's jamming and every trick I know to keep myself safe.

As always, good situational awareness will be important. We can expect heavy SHORAD located at Damascus International Airport, Marj Ruhayill, Khalkhalah and Mezzeh airbases, as well as along the frontline in support of the Syrian ground forces. This will be especially true around the Golan, where Syrian SHORAD is particularly heavy.

Finally we should be prepared for air to air threats as well, with Mig-21, Mig-23 and Mig-29 all potential threats.

The briefing then drew to a close, and we filed out the room, silent and deep in thought. On the way out we stopped by the weather shop and got a met brief from the OMT, the weather tomorrow is expected to be scattered to broken clouds at 9,000 feet with winds of around 10 knots on the deck.

Later, as we were continuing our mission prep, we got word of a shutdown of a JSTF Strike Eagle. We didn't need it, but it was another reminder of just how hostile an area we were going into tomorrow.

I'll need to bring my A-game.