

17/07/2013, 08:00



So the last 2 weeks have been eventful....

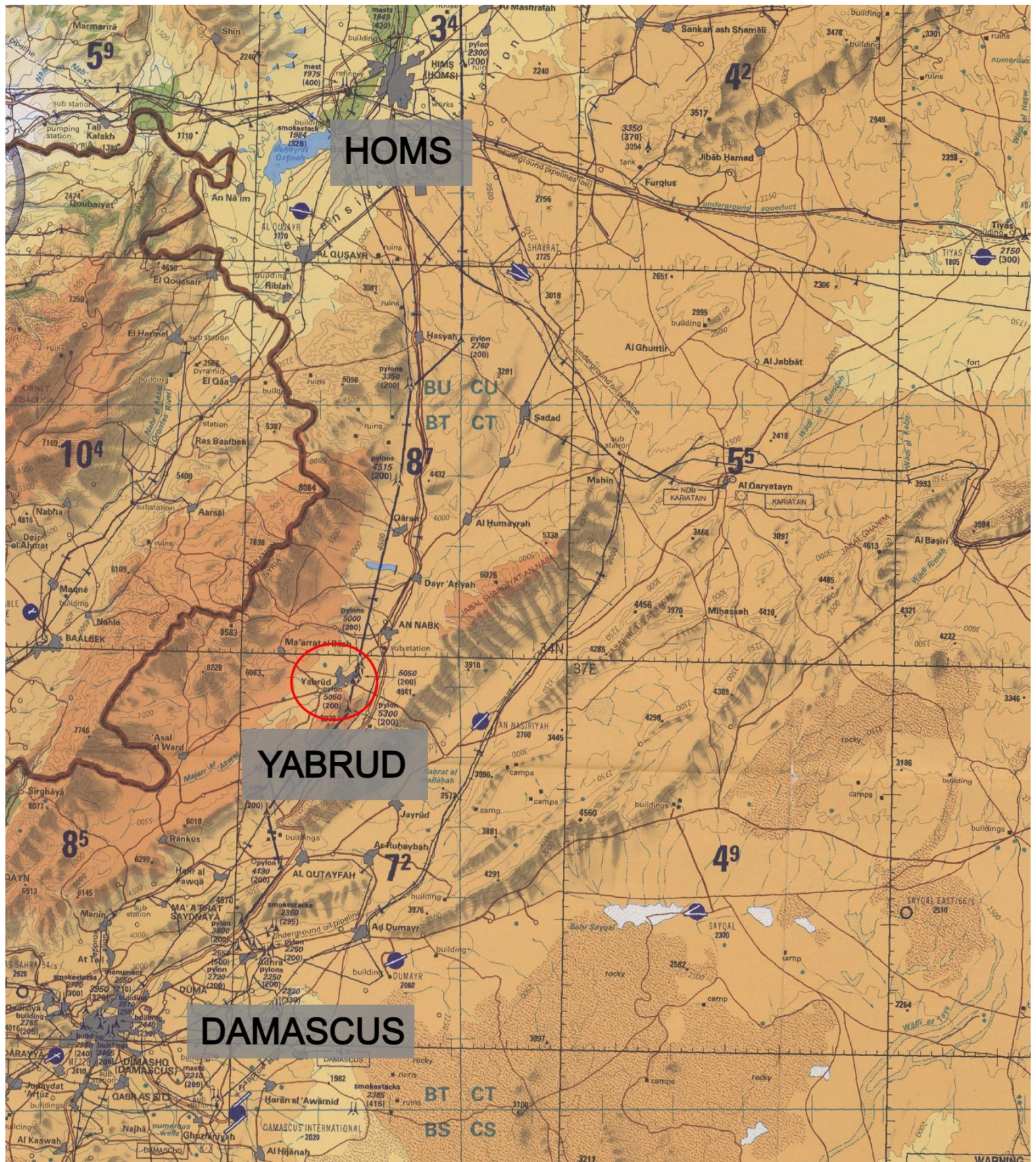
Things really started to get interesting a couple of weeks ago when the Syrian Air Force wised up and started to attempt to break through no fly Sierra in earnest. Eventually by using multiple flights and diversions they succeeded in getting a flight of SU-24s through Sierra at low level and were able to strike at SDF convoys moving towards Homs. The first convoy hit cost the lives of 2 US special forces soldiers, 10 SDF fighters and a whole load of fuel and ammunition. This marked the beginning of numerous attempts by the SyAAF to repeat this success - overwhelming our CAPs with multiple fighter screens before trying to sneak attack aircraft in at low level.

However the JSTF quickly got wise to this tactic and most of the subsequent Syrian attacks were stopped, the Syrians attempts to influence the battle around Homs from the air failed and the SDF were able to drive the SAA back from the city. The frontline around Homs now sits further south and the SDF have captured Al Qusayr airbase as well as besieging both Shayrat and Tiyas airbases. Although Tiyas and Shayrat are still under the control of the Syrians they are effectively out of commission as any Syrian aircraft attempting to leave the base is exposed to considerable fire. This deliberate strategy from the SDF leaves Palmyra as the only SyAAF base still active within the central belt across Syria and means any Syrian aircraft attempting to attack the SDF forces around Homs have a much greater distance to travel, decreasing their endurance and giving us more time to react in the air.

And as if all that activity wasn't enough, buoyed by the SDF success in Homs a fresh uprising then broke out in the town of Yabrud, which sits atop a plateau just 30 miles north of Damascus. The uprising quickly drew in support from the SDF, who immediately started bringing in reinforcements and supplies to Yabrud via the now open main road from Homs. This of course also brought a response from the Syrians and the SAA 128th Brigade soon responded with an attack on Yabrud, supported by both fixed and rotary wing attacks by the SyAAF. The attacks on Yabrud have been a significant escalation in this growing conflict, the Syrians have systematically attacked both military and civilian targets in the town with numerous indiscriminate attacks taking place over the last 4 days. Reports from Yabrud have also indicated that the SyAAF has been deliberately targeting civilian rescue forces through 'double taps'...that is carrying out follow up attacks on a target several hours after the initial attack so as to catch rescue forces out in the open.

The JSTF issued an ultimatum to the Syrian forces 2 days ago - they have 48 hours to stop attacking civilian targets or there will be consequences. There was no response from the Syrians and no let up in their attacks.

Things are about to get real interesting...



HOMS

YABRUD

DAMASCUS

I reported to Incirlik's small briefing room at 06:00 this morning for the briefing on today's mission. Also present from our squadron were Link, Newt, Woody and E-Boy. Major Daniels was the officer available for the intel briefing and kicked things off with an update on the current situation within the STO. In the northeast Raqqa is now very close to falling as the SDF and YPG both fight their way through the city and squeeze the SIA out. The fighting in Raqqa has been tough, with heavy casualties being taken by the SDF and YPG and even heavier casualties being inflicted on the SIA with the support of JSTF air power. The fighting has also driven a lot of civilians out of Raqqa, the SIA seemingly distracted enough to not prevent them from leaving SIA held areas. Lt. Col. Lincoln asked the question of Daniels if it was possible that SIA fighters were mixed in with the refugees that have been fleeing towards the Turkish border. Worryingly Daniels said yes, anything was possible...a sobering thought indeed.

Further south the sieges at Shayrat and Tiyas continue, the Syrian base defence forces are holding out for now but the bases remain cut off from both the land and air with no sign of relief.

The SyAAF have remained very active over the last few days with numerous attempts to attack SDF forces made around Shayrat and Tiyas, however all attempts were successfully turned back. Attacks by the SyAAF on Yabrud continue uncontested up to now, with strikes by SU-24 and SU-25 aircraft as well as by Mi-24 helicopters. Intel assessments believe there is a strong chance of further activity by the SyAAF today.

Daniels also revealed a further piece of information that made everyone sit up and pay attention, yesterday an F-15 flight on CAP south of Homs intercepted a new radar contact lingering over the road from Homs to Yabrud. The bogey turned out to be a UAV. Devoid of any markings it's origin was initially unknown...until it turned west and headed for a small airfield in the Bekaa Valley, Lebanon. Seems Hezbollah now has a drone programme! Analysis of the type of UAV has led to speculation that this is most likely of Iranian origin, an indication of just how extensively the old Iranian regime funded and supported Hezbollah. The possibility also cannot be ruled out that some of Iran's expertise in drone technology fled the country after the invasion and now reside within Lebanon amongst the Hezbollah forces.

Major Daniels closed his briefing by informing us that the Russian period of relative inactivity remains, something that still makes us all feel rather uneasy.

Captain Edwards then delivered the weather briefing, we are looking at broken clouds between 7,000 and 16,000 feet with winds of up to 18 knots at altitude.

With the weather brief complete, Captain Edwards stepped aside and allowed Lt. Colonel Lincoln to commence briefing our latest mission. Link began by telling us that the Syrians have not responded to the JSTF ultimatum to cease attacks on Yabrud and command has decided enough is enough. A JSTF strike force will therefore attack An Nasiriyah airbase and send a clear and unmistakable message to the Syrian government that attacks on civilians will not be allowed to stand.

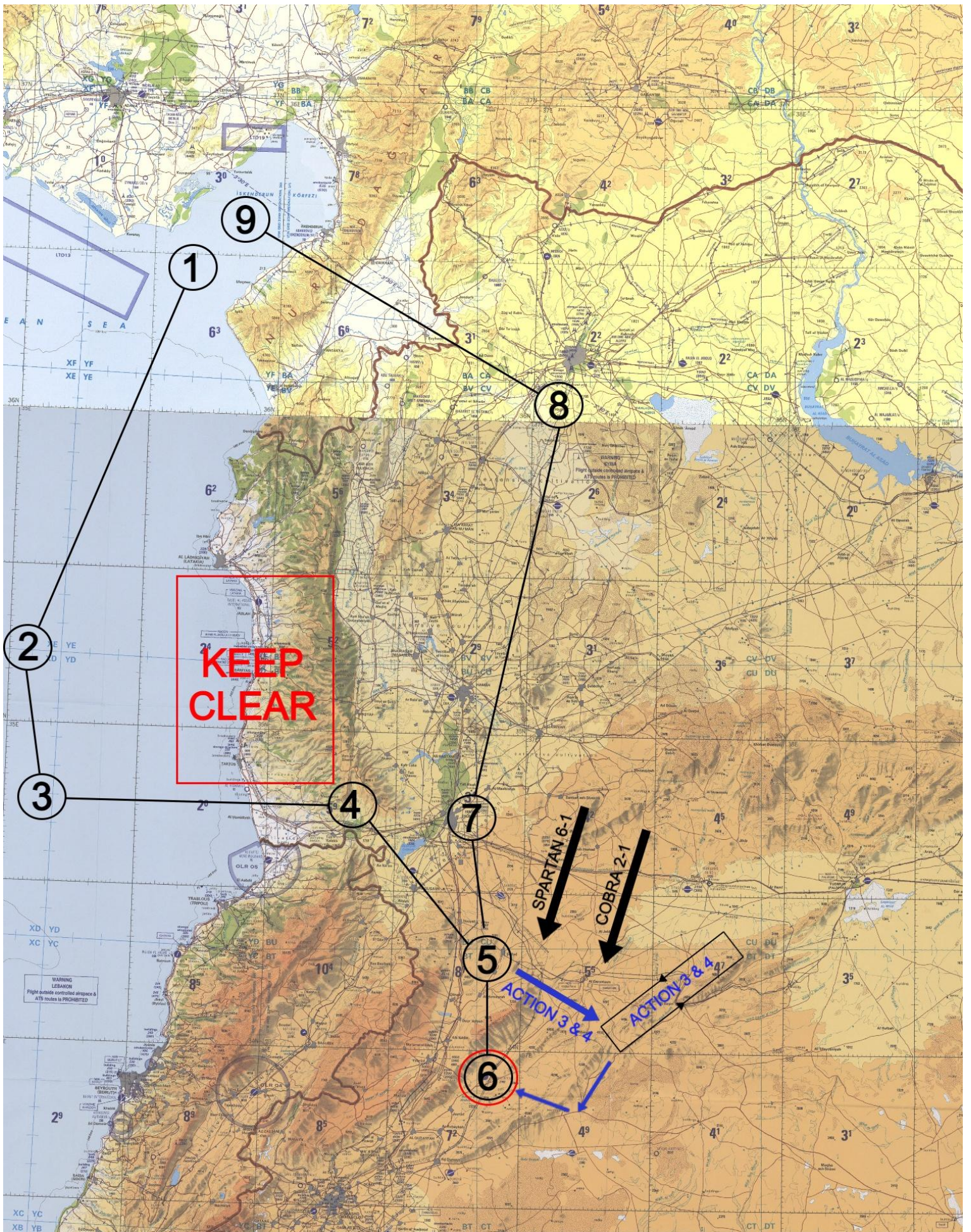
An Nasiriyah is the primary base of operations against Yabrud, and houses both Mig-23 and Mi-24 aircraft, both of which have been used against the town. The attacks on the base will take place in several waves over the next 24 hours. Our flight will be in the first wave. The strikes will target aircraft shelters, aircraft parked on the ramp, runways and taxiways. Command wants to send a message but with as low a body count as possible so we're going after the machines and infrastructure, not the men...maximum destruction with minimal loss of life as Link put it.

A large package will be going in for wave one; 8 UK Tornado GR4's from 617 squadron, callsign Action 3 and Action 4 will be carrying out the initial strike - targeting the runway and main taxiway at An Nasiriyah. The Red Devils will be escorting them in and protecting them from both ground and aerial threats. In addition to the Red Devils, Navy Growlers and USAF F-16s will be on electronic warfare and SEAD missions respectively. Prior to our aircraft arriving USAF F15's will conduct an OCA sweep through the area and force any Syrian air cover away from the target.

Poodle, conspicuous in his absence, is sitting this one out through a minor bout of food poisoning, which means I will be leading the Marine contingent today. This will consist of four of us split into two flights. I will be paired with E-Boy on a DEAD mission - our responsibility will be to destroy the air defences at An Nasiriyah ahead of Action's arrival. Woody and Newt will also be up with us as additional air to air support - protecting the package from any Syrian airborne threats that may attempt to return to the area once the Eagles have departed.

The mission will commence with a standard departure out of Incirlik, but unusually we will not be using the Gold Corridor to enter Syrian airspace. Instead we will head southwest into the Med and rendezvous with the two British flights, Action 3 and Action 4 east of Cyprus at waypoint 3. Our formation will then enter Syria at the southernmost edge of the Russian Quarter, squeezing by the Lebanese border. Link wasn't crazy about the idea of us taking this route but the RAF have set this route to save fuel and so we're going to have to put up with it. To avoid spooking the Russians it will be important we stay as close to the border as possible and avoid getting too close to the Russian naval facility at Tartus. Link also said that the USAF will be providing distraction flights further north along Whiskey, hopefully drawing Russian and Syrian attention away from our ingress route.

Once in Syrian airspace the package will be joined by the Navy E/A-18s (Spartan 6-1) and USAF F-16s (Cobra 2-1) who will carry out electronic attack and suppression of enemy air defenses. Link assured us that Spartan and Cobra will be able to give us room to operate in and will neutralize the defences around An Nasiriyah and the longer range SAMs out of Damascus. As we proceed through Syrian airspace we will accompany the GR4s to our IP - waypoint 5. Once at our IP the Tornados will break off to their marshall point, where they will hold until my flight has cleared the defences around the airbase.



KEEP CLEAR

SPARTAN 6-1

COBRA 2-1

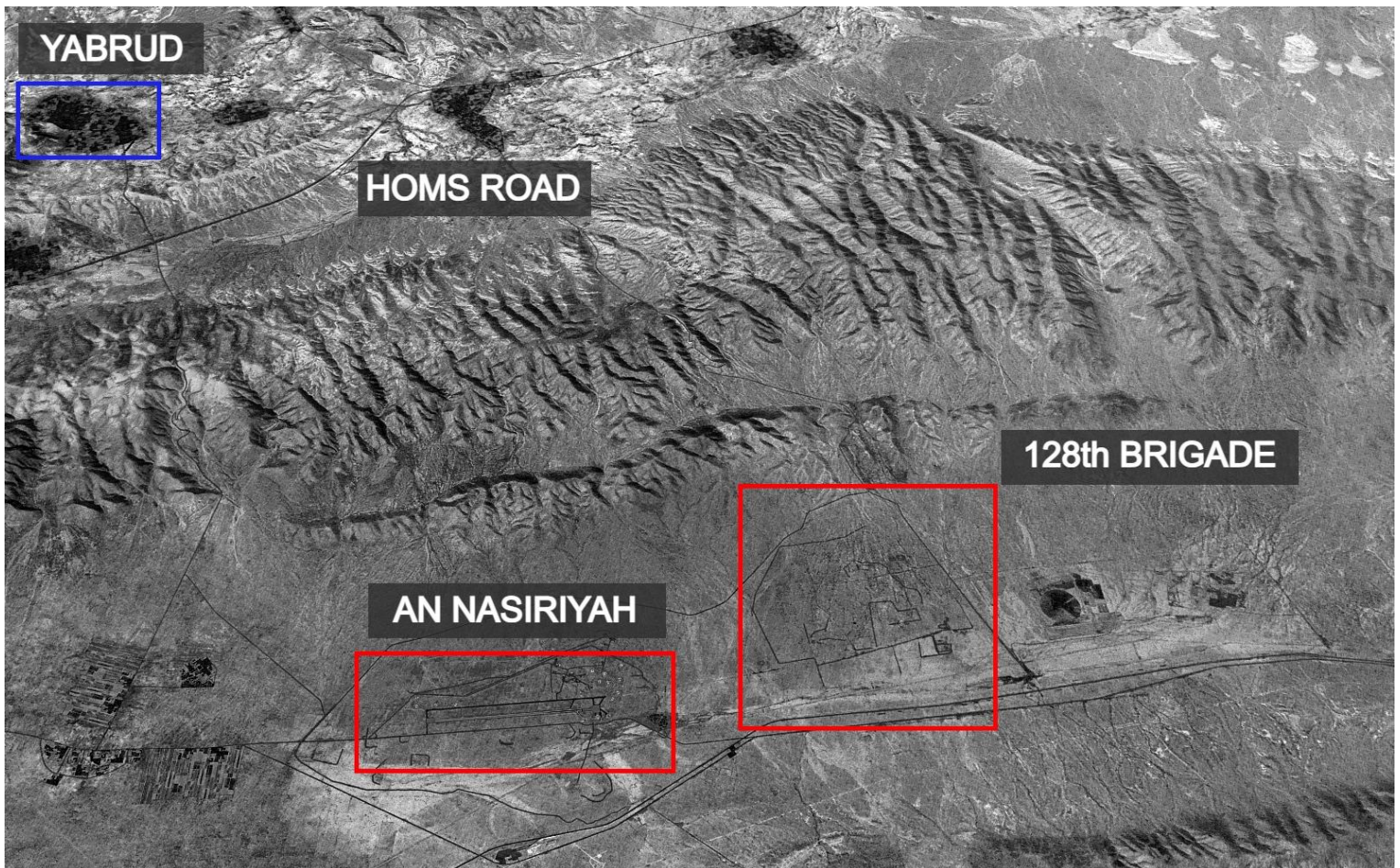
ACTION 3 & 4

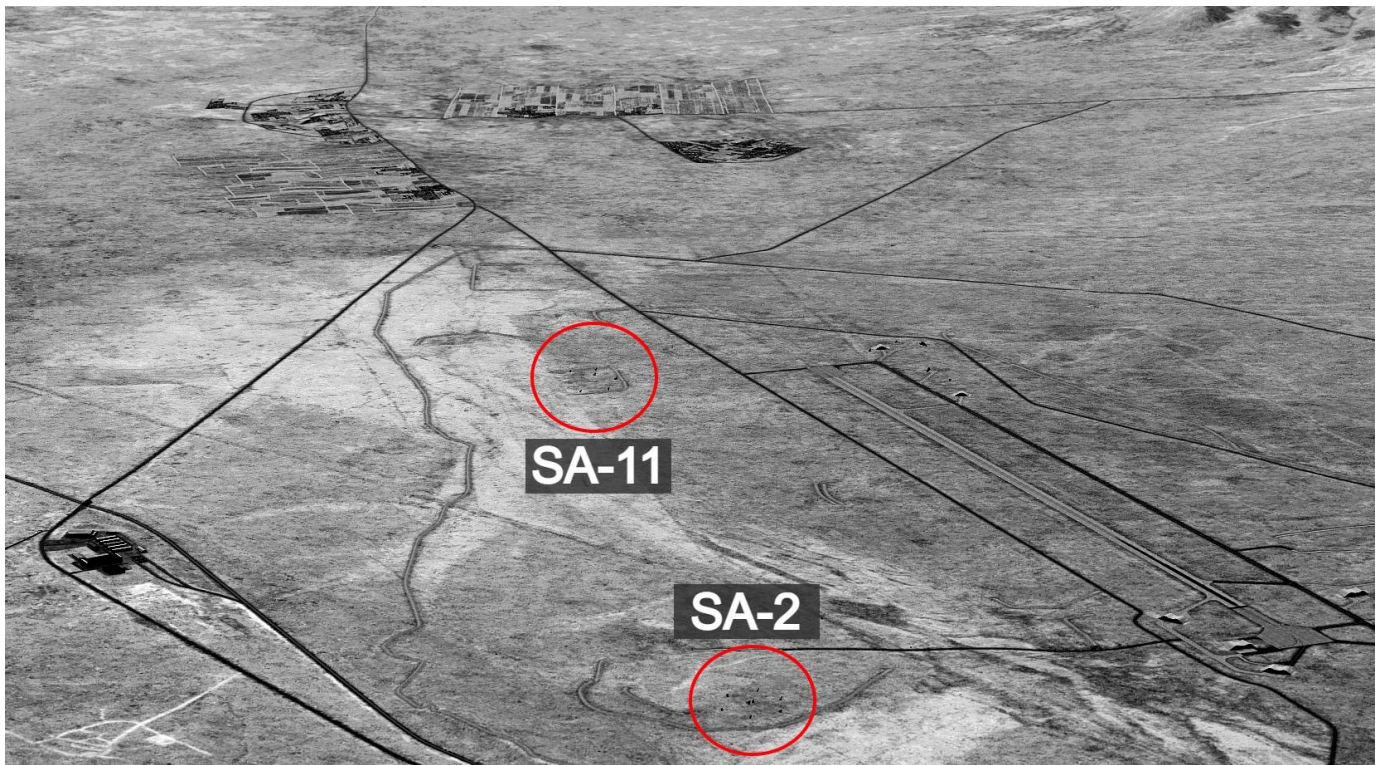
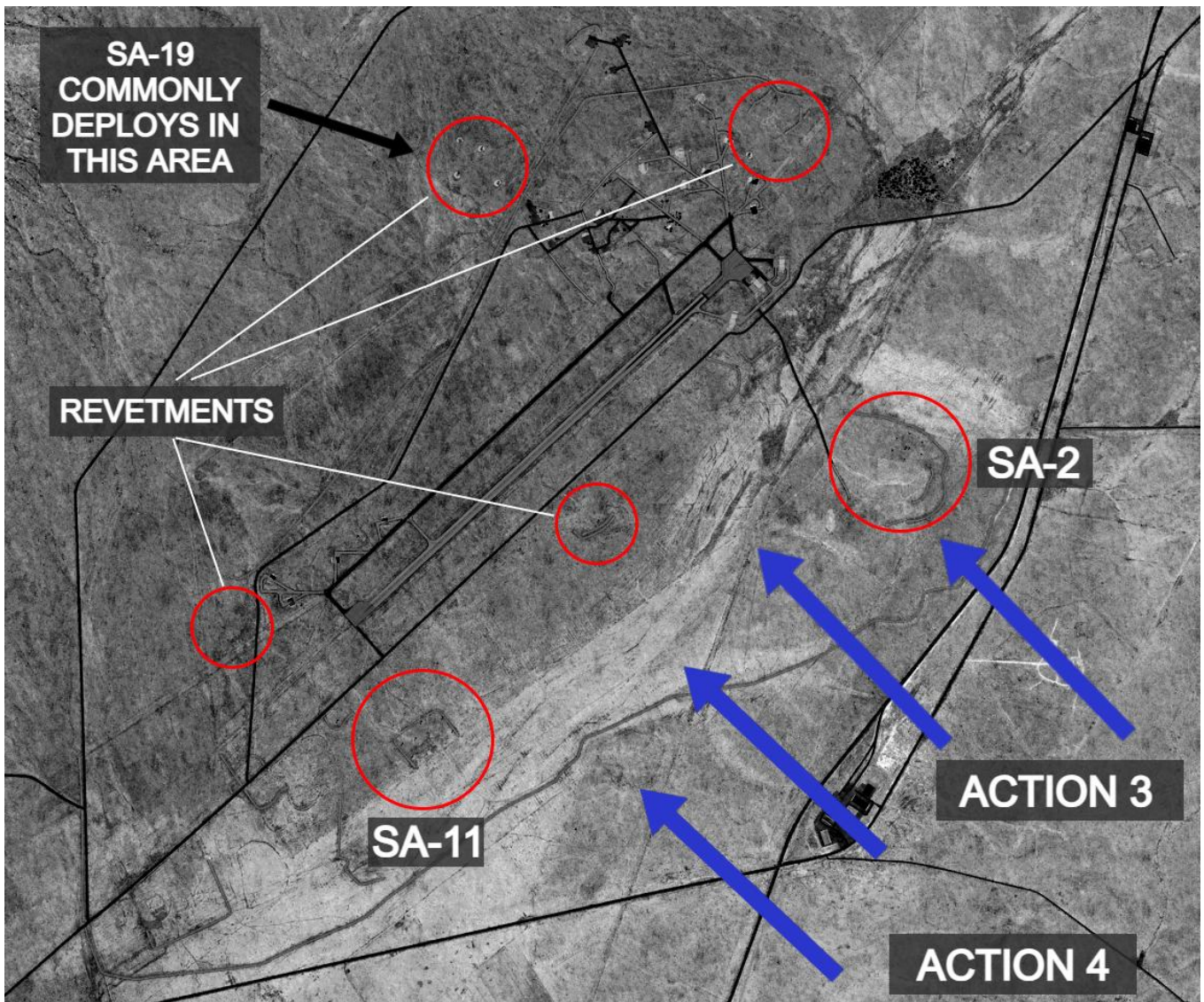
ACTION 3 & 4

At this point E-Boy and I will push from the IP and locate and engage our targets. An Nasiriyah is well defended due to it's location as a buffer between Homs and Damascus, it contains both an SA-2 and SA-11 battery - both of which will be suppressed ahead of our arrival. The two batteries will then be targeted by E-Boy using 2000lb JDAMs, which ought to ensure their destruction.

Meanwhile it will be my responsibility to locate and destroy the short range air defences at the base, the priority amongst these will be an SA-19 and an SA-9. A variety of AAA has also been sighted on SATINT. The British strike force will be coming in low and fast and the biggest threats will be the Gaskin and Grissom but I shouldn't discount the threat the AAA can bring as well. I will be carrying two AGM-65F Mavericks and two Rockeye CBU's for this mission. In addition to his JDAMs E-Boy will also be carrying two Rockeyes and will be available for tasking against the AAA once he has eliminated the SA-2 and SA-11 batteries.

The slides in the briefing revealed the revetted positions around the base, the air defences are most likely to be located in these positions but being mobile it is possible they will be present in other locations as well and will need to be located ahead of my attack.





Once I am satisfied that the threat to Action has been sufficiently reduced I will signal them to start their attack. The Tornado's anti runway munitions need to be delivered at low level and given the threats the Brits have opted to come in as low and fast as possible. From their marshalling point the Tornados will use the ridge lines east of the base to mask their approach before turning west and attacking their targets. They will be making one pass and then hauling ass back north and I'm pretty sure we will be right behind them.

Bingo is set for just over 6000lb, leaving us with approximately 2500lb to 3000lb over the target. If there's a lot of targets to engage that could make fuel uncomfortably tight, if I need to push slightly past bingo and into my reserve I can modify the flight plan and cruise back at higher altitude...but this will be at my own risk.

The briefing concluded with a discussion of the threats we may face today.

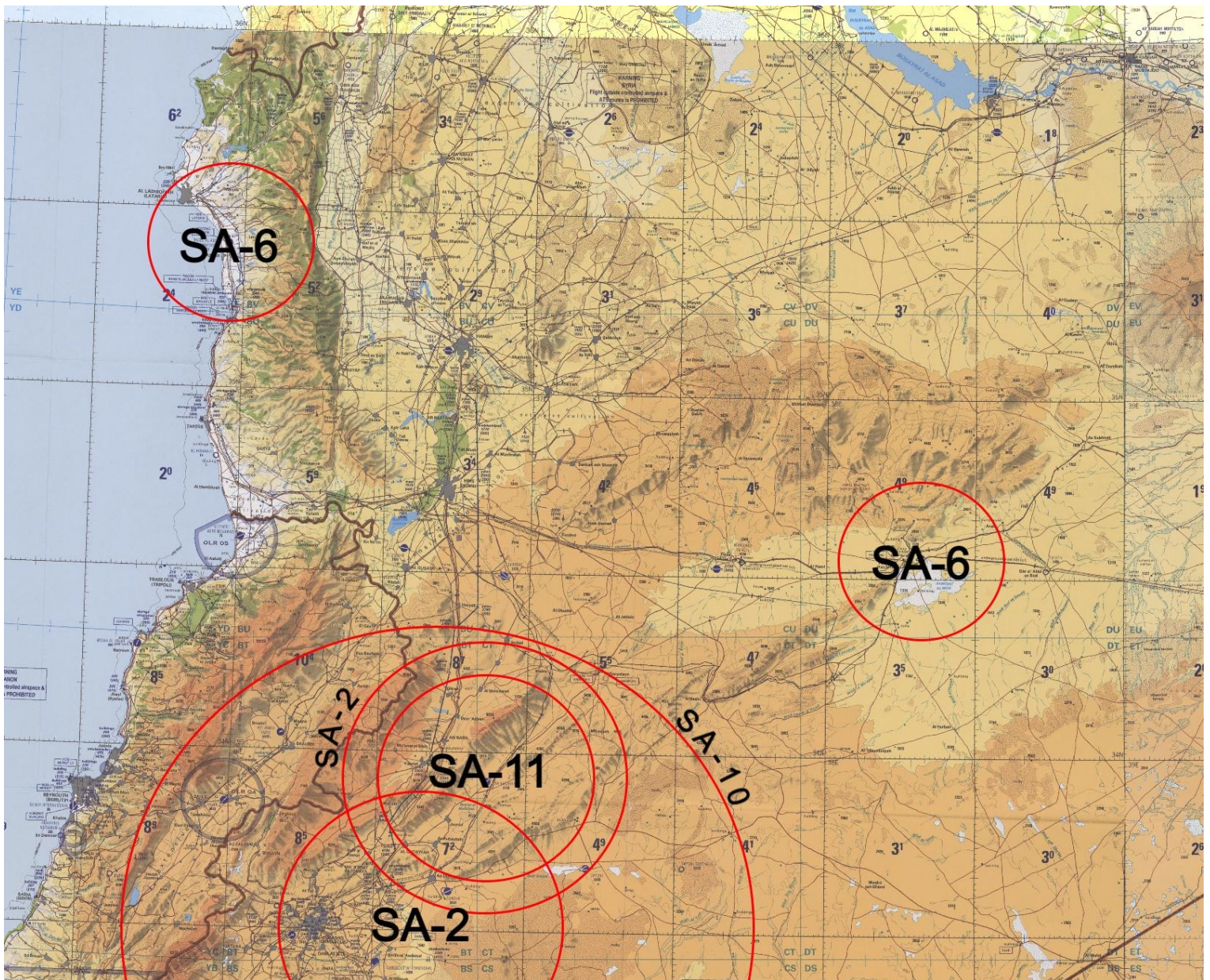
An Nasiriyah is protected by both SA-2 and SA-11 batteries, these will be suppressed before we reach the target but care should be taken not to get too excited and get too close before this can happen.

South of An Nasiriyah lies Damascus and it's formidable array of SAM systems. Venturing too far south of the base carries considerable risk and will increase the likelihood of the Syrian radars burning through our jamming screen, bringing systems such as SA-10s and an additional SA-2 into play. With the electronic attack being carried out by the Growlers we should be safe from these systems providing we pay careful attention to our position. SA-9, SA-19, ZU-23 emplacements and S-60s have all been sighted around An Nasiriyah in ever changing positions, but fortunately in relatively limited numbers. MANPADS have also been sighted in some of the AAA positions.

Adjoining the northeast side of the airbase is the SAA 128th Brigade HQ, the majority of the air defence for this position is provided by the airbase and it is not believed there are more than a small handful of AAA pieces in this position. A considerable number of the units from the 128th Brigade are currently in position around Yabrud and short range air defences should therefore also be expected in the vicinity of the town.

On our egress route the area around Homs is considerably safer than it was several weeks ago. With the removal of the SAA forces from the south of Homs, the Syrian air defences in the area are now contained only within Shayrat and Tiyas airbases, consisting of short range defences only and being limited to AAA and IR SAMs. However the SA-6 at Palmyra is currently still active, having so far escaped the admittedly limited attempts to knock it out.

In the air the most likely threats are once again Mig-21s and Mig-23s, however as we move ever further south it is increasingly likely we will begin to encounter the Mig-29s in the Syrian inventory.



Once the briefing finished we filed out of the briefing room and headed back to our rooms, where we had time to collect our thoughts. I'm excited to be working with 617 squadron and my fellow Brits today, hell I know some of the guys over there...all of which makes me even more determined to keep them safe. We're once again facing a formidable array of threats today but with proper planning I'm confident in our ability to overcome them..so with that said, it's time to study the mission plan some more...there's a lot riding on this one.