

LAST OUT - WEASELS OVER SYRIA II

August 12th , 2013.

Three days have passed since our attack on the Syrian radar site. A low level attack on a heavily defended site is always a dangerous prospect, even more so if it's your combat debut - as it was for Boomer. But our Marine exchange pilot handled himself well and we both came home in one piece.

On our ingress into Syria we witnessed a cruise missile strike by a Russian Tu-160, more evidence that the Russians aren't going away anytime soon. Our egress from Syria saw us receive a tasking for a show of force in support of troops in contact near the Lebanese border, where an SDF and US special operations team were pinned down by harassing fire from Hezbollah heavy weapons. This incident is further evidence of a growing threat to the SDF from Hezbollah forces.

However the involvement of Hezbollah wasn't the event that got the most chatter between our det's pilots once we landed at Akrotiri. That was reserved for the fact that Shade appeared to bail on us for the tasking, heading to the tanker for fuel when the call for help came in. We pushed Rotor for more info, and although he was reluctant to discuss it any further, it was clear that he was unhappy about something.

Since that mission we have had a couple of days without flying, along with one quiet patrol of the no fly zone. Activity in Syria has been relatively quiet but we got the feeling that was all about to change for us when we were called to a briefing this morning. As Bug, Rotor and I walked to the briefing room we commented on the noticeable temperature drop this morning and the ominous looking clouds beginning to gather overhead.

We entered the briefing room and joined Popeye and Shade, who were waiting for us.

"About time" Shade commented as we entered, despite the fact we were actually 2 minutes early.

Once we were seated, the Akrotiri OMT delivered the met briefing. The fine weather we've seen up to now in Cyprus is going to end - at least temporarily - and will be replaced by a storm that will be building up throughout the day and is predicted to hit overnight. We are hoping to avoid the worst of this on our mission this afternoon, but we will certainly be flying in stronger winds and with more cloud cover than we've become used to.

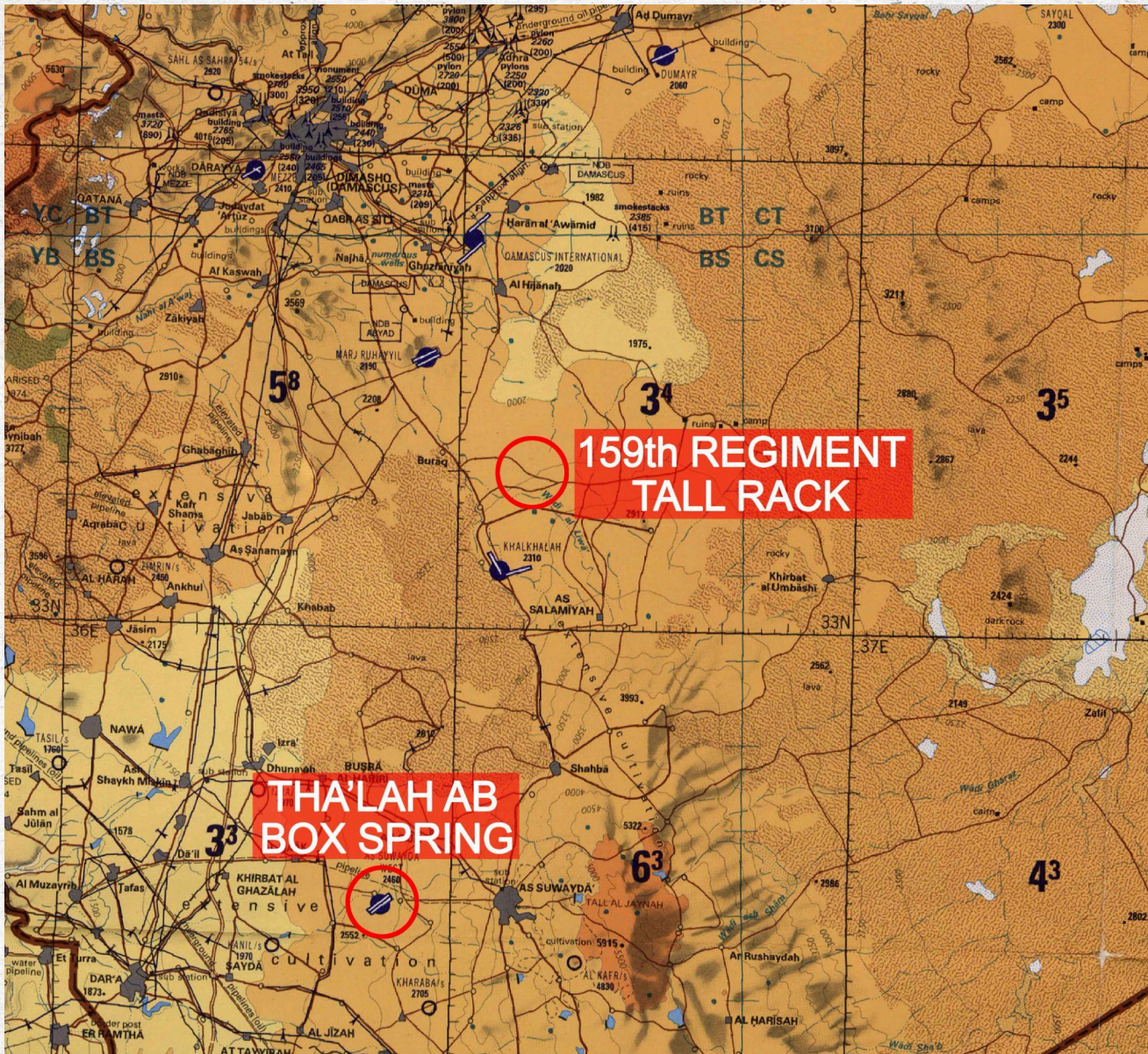
Once the met briefing was over and the OMT had departed, we received an intel update from Major Norris. The Major didn't have a great deal of new information for us and the briefing was short. We did however discuss the movements of the Russian navy in the Mediterranean, they appear to be moving around a lot - possibly in further attempts to complicate our operations as they have sat astride our ingress routes into Syria on several occasions in the last week. Some US Navy ships have moved closer into the coastline in response to help keep Russian behavior in check. We also briefly discussed the continuing attack south by the SDF and the building of Hezbollah forces on the Lebanese border.

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

"Ok then pilots let's get to it" he began. "The decision for the JSTF to provide close air support to the SDF is driving the need for better air superiority in the south of Syria. Simply put we need a more permissive environment for our aircraft to operate in".

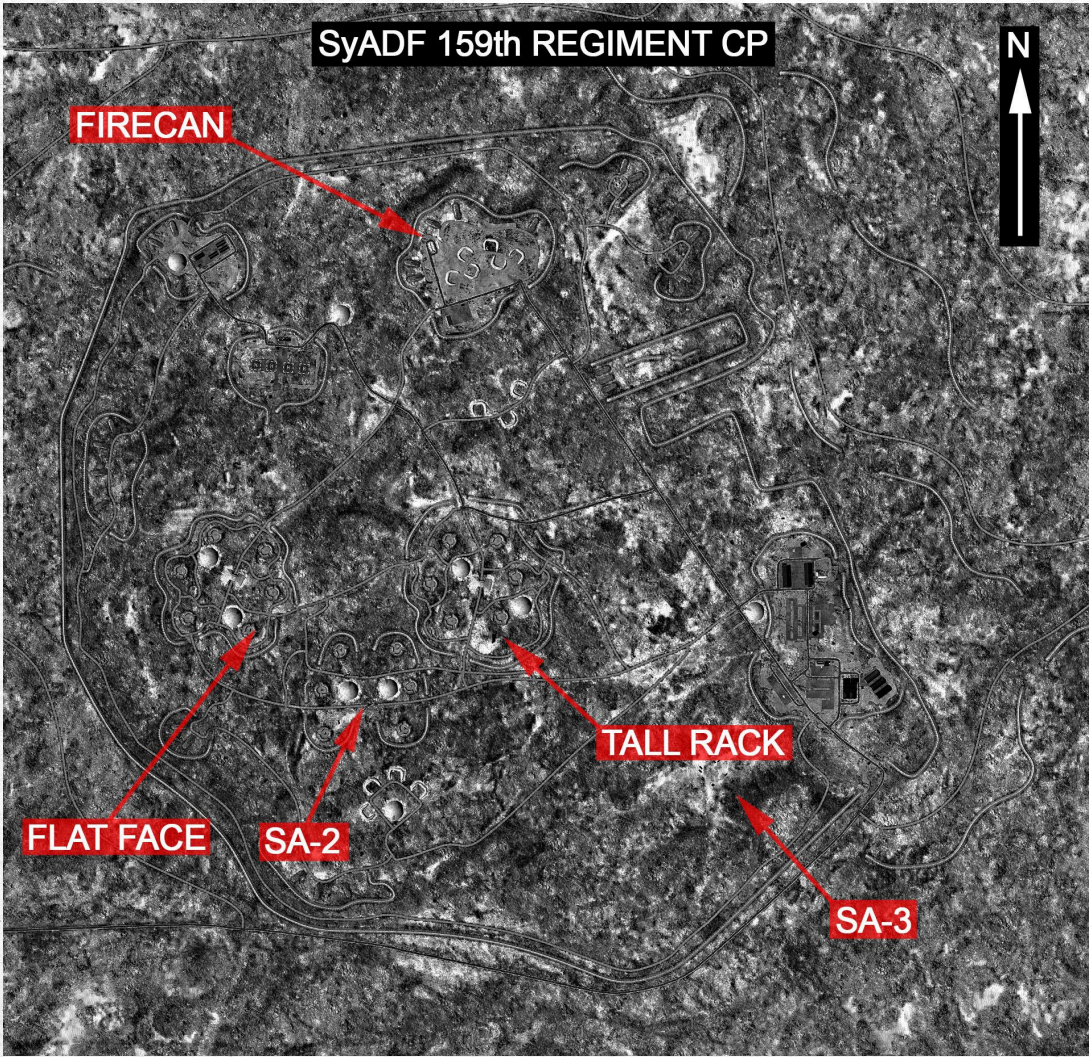
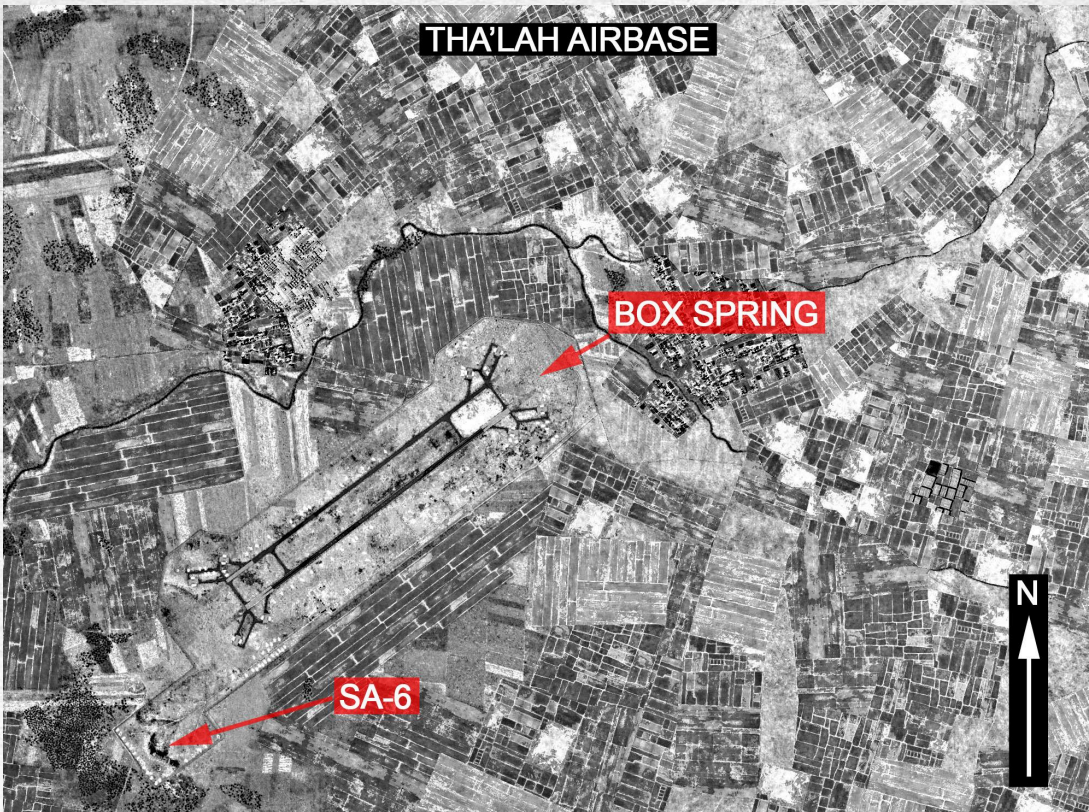
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Clicking the first slide onto the briefing screen, Popeye continued.



"Later today, JSTF strike packages will attack these targets, the last dedicated surveillance radars the Syrians have operational in the south and their last remaining major air defense command posts. In the far south, the Box Spring and command facilities at Tha'lah airbase will be targeted, while further north the command post for the 159th Syrian Air Defense Regiment will be attacked - including the Tall Rack radar located here".

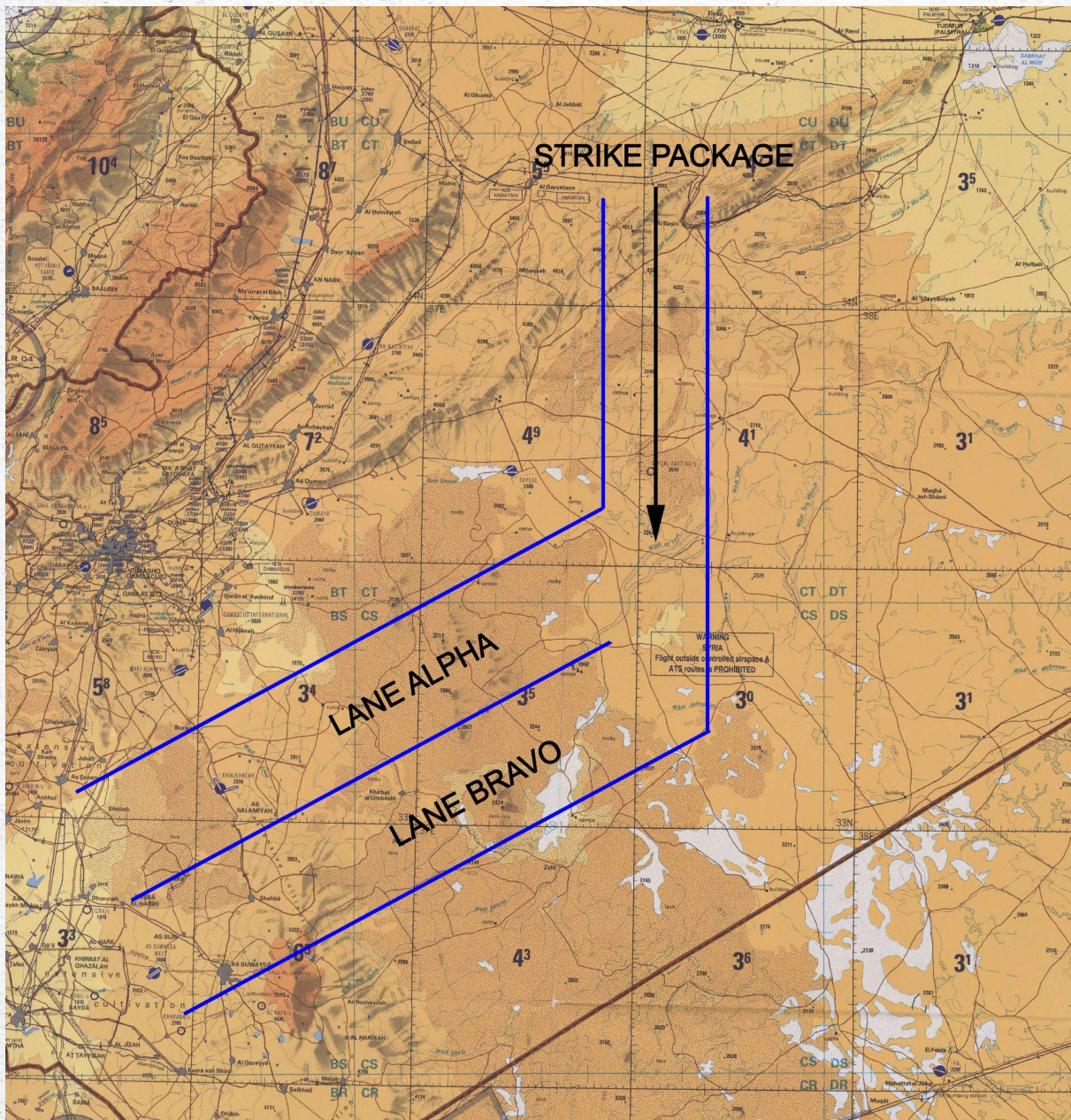
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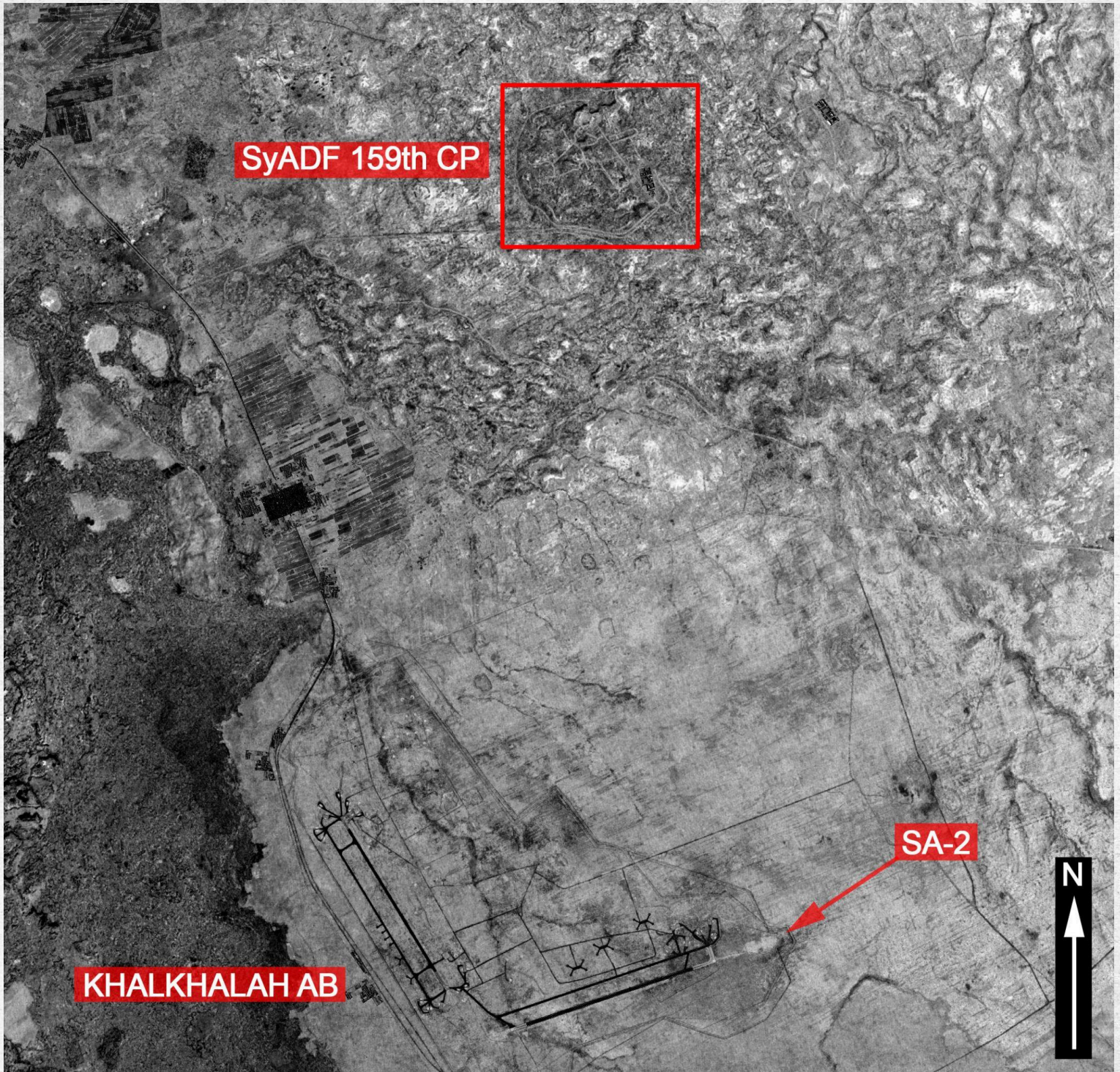
"Both these targets will be attacked simultaneously by two packages out of Incirlik. A package of Strike Eagles, callsign Hammer, will attack targets at Tha'lah airbase, and a package of Marine Hornets, callsign Devil, will strike the targets at the 159th CP. The command facilities at both targets are in hardened bunkers so both packages will be dropping 2000 lb JDAM penetrators and will therefore need to get in fairly close to the target. This is where you come in".

"The strike packages will push south from the no fly zone, passing to the east of Sayqal airbase, before swinging west out over the desert east of Damascus. This route will keep the strike package at a safe distance from the SAMs protecting Damascus. Two of our Weasel flights will sweep ahead of the strikers, clearing two lanes to the target. I will be leading Sword 1 - with Bug on my wing - to clear lane Bravo to Tha'lah. Forrest and Rotor, you will be Sword 2 and tasked with clearing lane Alpha, covering Khalkhalah and the 159th. We will be accompanied by a flight of Growlers - Spartan 1 - who will set up a jamming orbit north of lane Alpha".

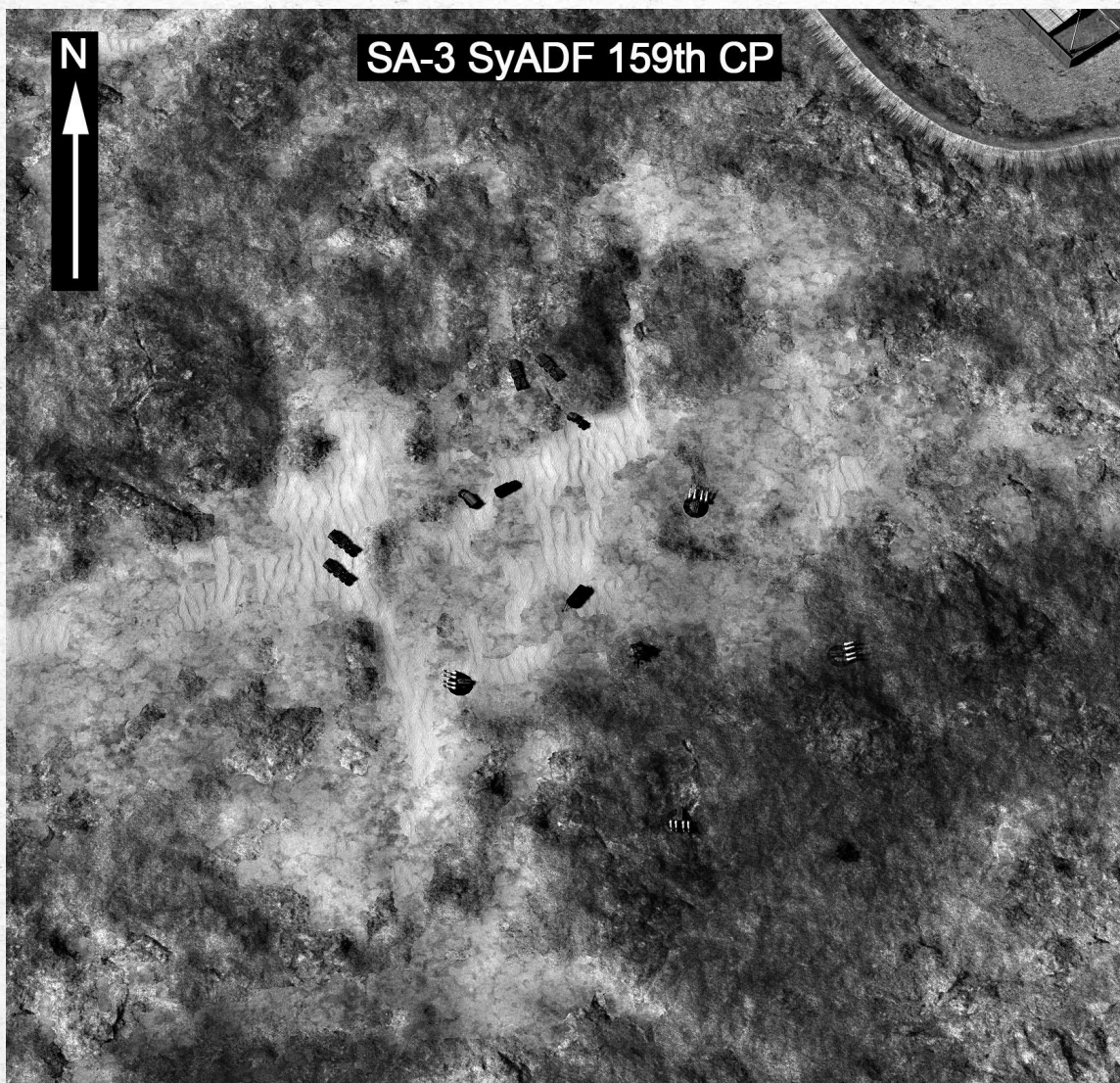
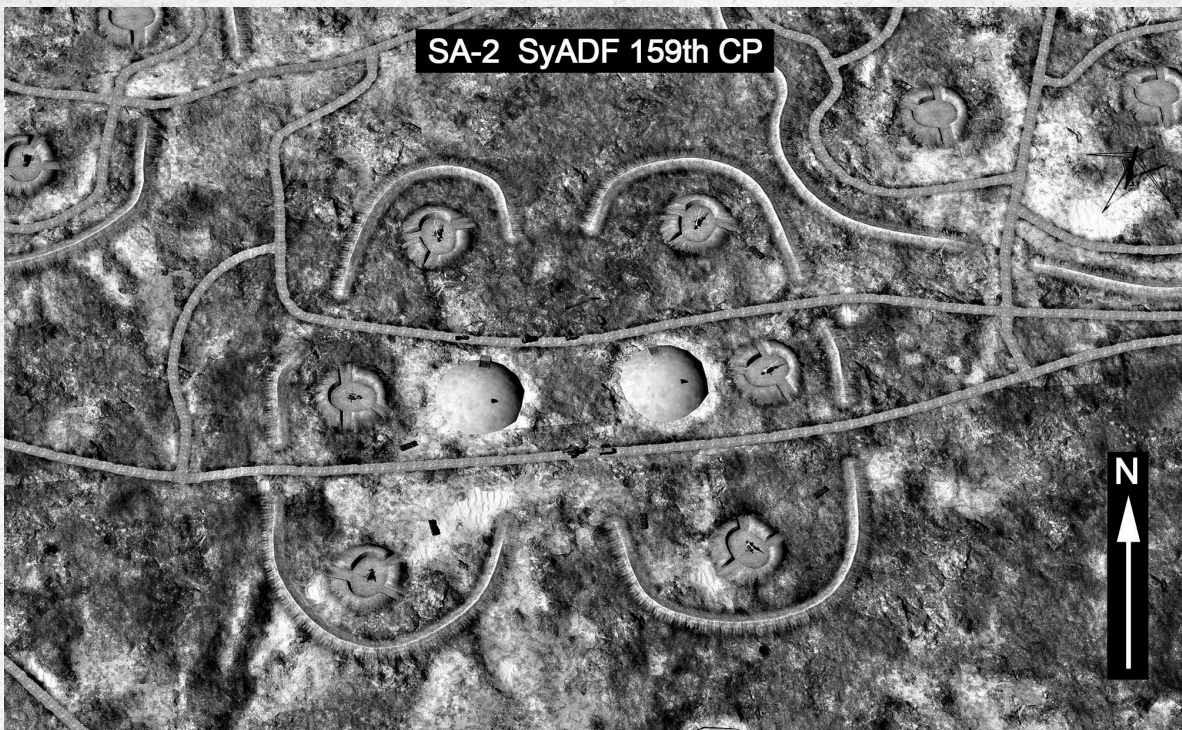


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"While the attack route has been planned to avoid the worst of the SAM threats, there will still be a number of known threats to take off the board. Sword 1 will have an SA-6 to eliminate at Tha'lah, Sword 2 will be facing an SA-2 and SA-3 at the 159th CP, with a further SA-2 located at Khalkhalah airbase, around 6 miles south of the target".



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"We should begin sweeping our lanes of threats at 13:05 Zulu, 20 minutes prior to the striker's TOT of 13:25 Zulu. As we enter our lanes we will need to prioritize targets and ensure they are suppressed or killed before the strikers arrive. And as always you know my thoughts on this, go for the kill when you can, a sleeping SAM lives to fight another day and might well pop up on you when you least expect it. Forrest and Rotor, maintaining your SA will be really important, you have the Damasus MEZ to the north of your lane so don't get sucked up there and put yourself in danger unnecessarily. You'll also need to be clear on what SAMs you are engaging, no point wasting shots on SAMs that won't threaten the strike package".

"Once the threats are eliminated, the strikers will enter the target area with their escorts and we will push north and flow back through the Silver Corridor to home".

With the mission having been outlined by Popeye, we then spent considerable time breaking down the details.

Sword 1 and Sword 2 will depart Akortiri and rendezvous at waypoint 4, before pushing through the Silver Corridor into Syria. Once clear of waypoint 6 we will head southeast for waypoint 7, where we rendezvous with Spartan and push south through the no fly zone, ensuring this area is clear of any mobile SAM threats. Waypoint 8 marks the start of lane Alpha, the area we need to sanitize of threats. Here we will split from Sword 1, who will proceed to clear lane Bravo. Alpha is a corridor roughly 60 miles in length and 15 miles wide, anchored by Khalkhalah AB and the 159th CP at it's southwest corner. We will use a common frequency - designated Alpha in our comms plan - to communicate with our strike package (Devil flight) and with the mission commander Warden.

As we progress through lane Alpha we should ensure any SAM threats are either suppressed or killed ahead of the strike package's TOT of 13:25 Zulu. Our primary targets will be the SA-2 at Khalkhalah airbase and the SA-2 and SA-3 located at the 159th command post. We will also have to deal with any pop up threats within lane Alpha that endanger the strike package.

Once our lane is sanitized, we will clear the strikers into the target area before egressing the area to our rally point at waypoint 12 and then through to waypoint 13. Due to fuel constraints we won't cover the vul period of the strike - Navy HARM shooters will deal with follow up threats. We will then flow back through waypoint 6 into the Silver Corridor and on towards home. As we egress back north we should continue to keep a watch out for threats, as to conserve fuel our return route brings us a little closer to Damascus.

Bingo is set at 3,700 lb from the target area. Due to the target's distance from Akrotiri, fuel will be tight on this mission. From bingo we will be able to get home without tanking, but it will require a max conserve profile on the return leg. If we want it, gas will be available on the way home - either from Texaco north of waypoint 6, or from Arco off the Lebanese coast as we exit the Silver Corridor on the return leg.

My loadout today will be 4 CBU-103s, with Rotor carrying two HARMS for SAM suppression. The weather has the potential to be poor today, so approval to use our limited stocks of WCMDs has been approved. The three confirmed, static threats in lane Alpha have waypoints 9, 10 and 11 set on them, with waypoint 9 covering the SA-2 at Khalkhalah, waypoint 10 the SA-2 at the 159th CP and waypoint 11 the CP's SA-3.

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As usual we ended the briefing on a threat analysis. Two SA-2s and an SA-3 are confirmed as being present in our target area, and although these are older SAM systems they can still pose a threat to us. The SA-2 remains vulnerable to low level attacks due to it's inability to track low flying targets, however this does not apply to the SA-3, making them a more dangerous combination. The SA-2 and SA-3's aging radars cannot track multiple targets, another vulnerability we can potentially exploit with high/low splits, just like we practiced way back when at the SWARTC.

We will also have jamming support on this mission. Spartan will be set up in a standoff jam, protecting us from the SAMs around Damascus and in lane Alpha. The jamming will keep us protected while we are in lane Alpha, provided we don't get too close to any SAMs - which of course I will need to in order to drop my weapons. Choosing how and where I attack, and where to have Rotor fire his HARMs will be important decisions for me to make.

The target area will also contain the ever present threat of SHORAD - with AAA and SA-8 being the biggest threats. Given the ever building cloud cover, visually aimed AAA will be less potent at medium altitudes, but radar guided threats such as KS-19 or ZSU-23-4 will still pose a significant threat. It is important to note that while the SA-8s are a threat to us, they won't be able to reach the strikers at their assigned altitude.

We should also be prepared for pop up threats from mobile SAMs in lane Alpha and in the target area - most likely threats are SA-6 and SA-11.

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No air to air threat is anticipated, given the weather and typical Syrian pattern of behavior. However F-15 CAPs will be on standby to the north should they be required.

With the briefing ending soon after, Rotor and I retired to a room to continue our mission planning. As we worked, we noted with growing concern the ever building cloud, let's hope that storm doesn't arrive early.

We start engines at 12:15 zulu.