

FIRST IN - WEASELS OVER SYRIA

28th June, 2013.

Yesterday we were ambushed by an SIA operated SA-6. Our weasel four ship was once again operating up around Deir ez-Zor airbase in support of strikes on SIA targets. We were drawn into the area by active SA-8s before a sophisticated ambush was sprung by the SIA. First an SA-6 radar - a system we were on high alert for - sprang into life. We promptly engaged, with Ghost and Rotor firing their remaining HARMs at the radar, but the operators were pretty sharp and kept powering down to defeat the shots. Popeye gained a tally and blew the radar away, but it turned out to be the first stage in the trap as close by was a second fully operational SA-6 battery. We handled the situation, as we are trained to do, but we had to admit in the debrief later on that it was a pretty cunning move by the SIA. Bad, bad people they may be, but they ain't stupid.

After such a demanding sortie I slept well last night, and somewhat refreshed, reported to a dawn briefing. All the usual briefers were already present and waiting. Also in attendance was an individual (who from his insignia I assumed to be the CO of the army's aviation assets stationed at H4) and an imposing army officer, who stood in the corner of the room deep in discussion with Major Norris. I noted with interest the jump wings on his uniform but distinct lack of other identifying insignia. My curiosity raised, I took a seat alongside Bug who was the only other detachment pilot present.

Captain Johnson began the briefing with the weather for the day ahead. The captain confirmed what I saw on my walk over from my tent, the clouds have finally cleared and the spell of poor weather we've had to deal with the last few days is coming to an end. In fact the weather today is forecast to be quite fine, with light scattered clouds at around 8,000 feet MSL and winds not exceeding 5 knots at lower altitudes. Temperatures will likely peak at around 36 degrees celsius.

Major Norris followed Captain Johnson and delivered his intelligence briefing. He had little new news to offer today on the Syrians. The SyAAF are still yet to jump the fence and attempt to enter the no fly zones, although their feints and probes continue as they have done for several days now. Turning to the SIA Norris commented on intelligence indications that the SIA are already beginning to feel the pressure of Operation Jackal, with reported major disruption to their financing operations following strikes on both their cash reserves and oil infrastructure. Norris' brief was short and to the point, but as he handed over to Popeye he did hint at some as of yet undisclosed intelligence we were about to hear.

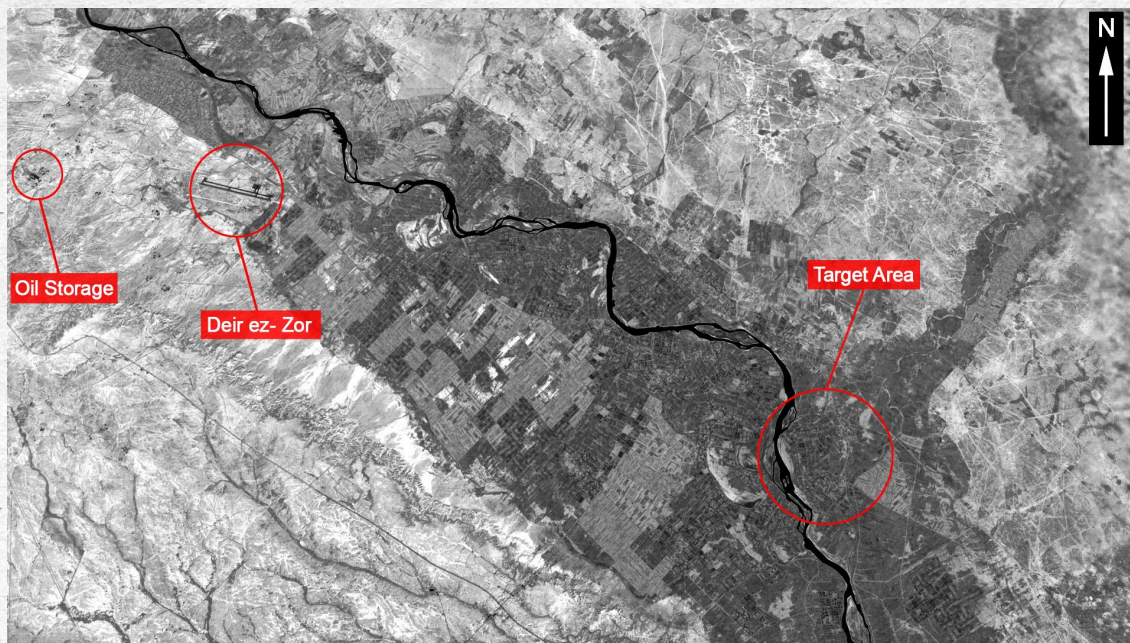
Popeye stepped to the front of the briefing room and began to speak.

"Ok then pilots, let's get to your mission today". Popeye pointed to the army officers in the room, "This is Captain Smith and Major Evans. Captain Smith is the CO of the army's aviation detachment here at H4. Major Evans is with the special forces community. Forrest, Bug, today the two of you will be flying in support of a special operations mission. Major Evans will now brief you on the details".

"Thank you Colonel" said the special forces major as he replaced Popeye next to the briefing screen. "Around 24 hours ago we received intel that a high level meeting of SIA leadership figures will be taking place in eastern Syria. This meeting will take place late this afternoon and is only expected to last several hours. This gives us a small window in which to raid the meeting venue and secure the leadership targets. Needless to say the capture or removal of these targets will be a major blow to the SIA and we expect to recover significant, further intelligence from the site".

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Major Evans pulled up the first slide on the briefing screen.



"The target is located at a village on the east bank of the Euphrates river, 14 miles southeast of Deir ez-Zor airbase. This, as I'm sure you know, is firmly within SIA held territory".

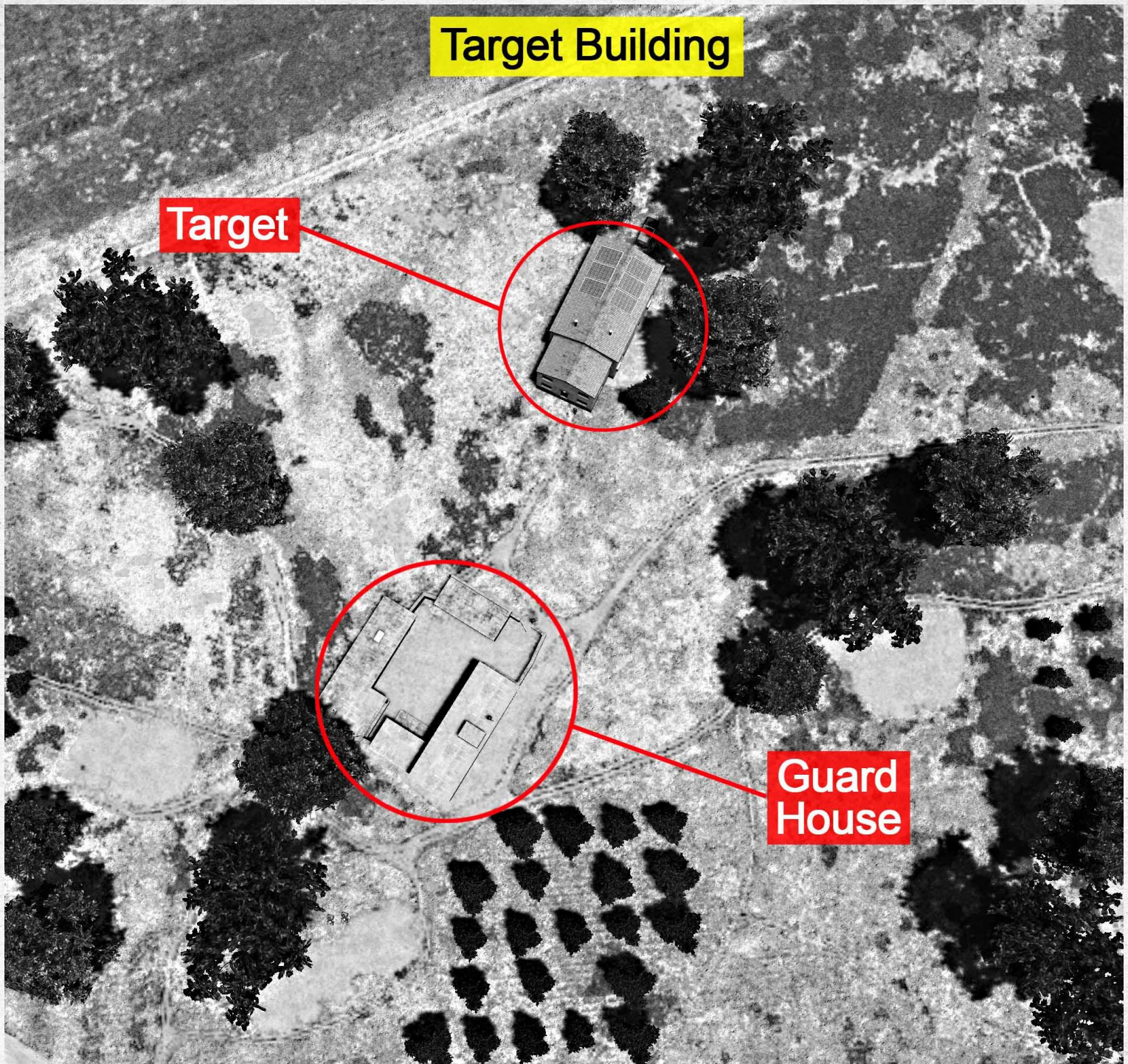


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“The meeting will be taking place at this location - a villa on the western edge of the northern village. One mile to the south is a substantial SIA garrison, which is in place to maintain control of the local population”.



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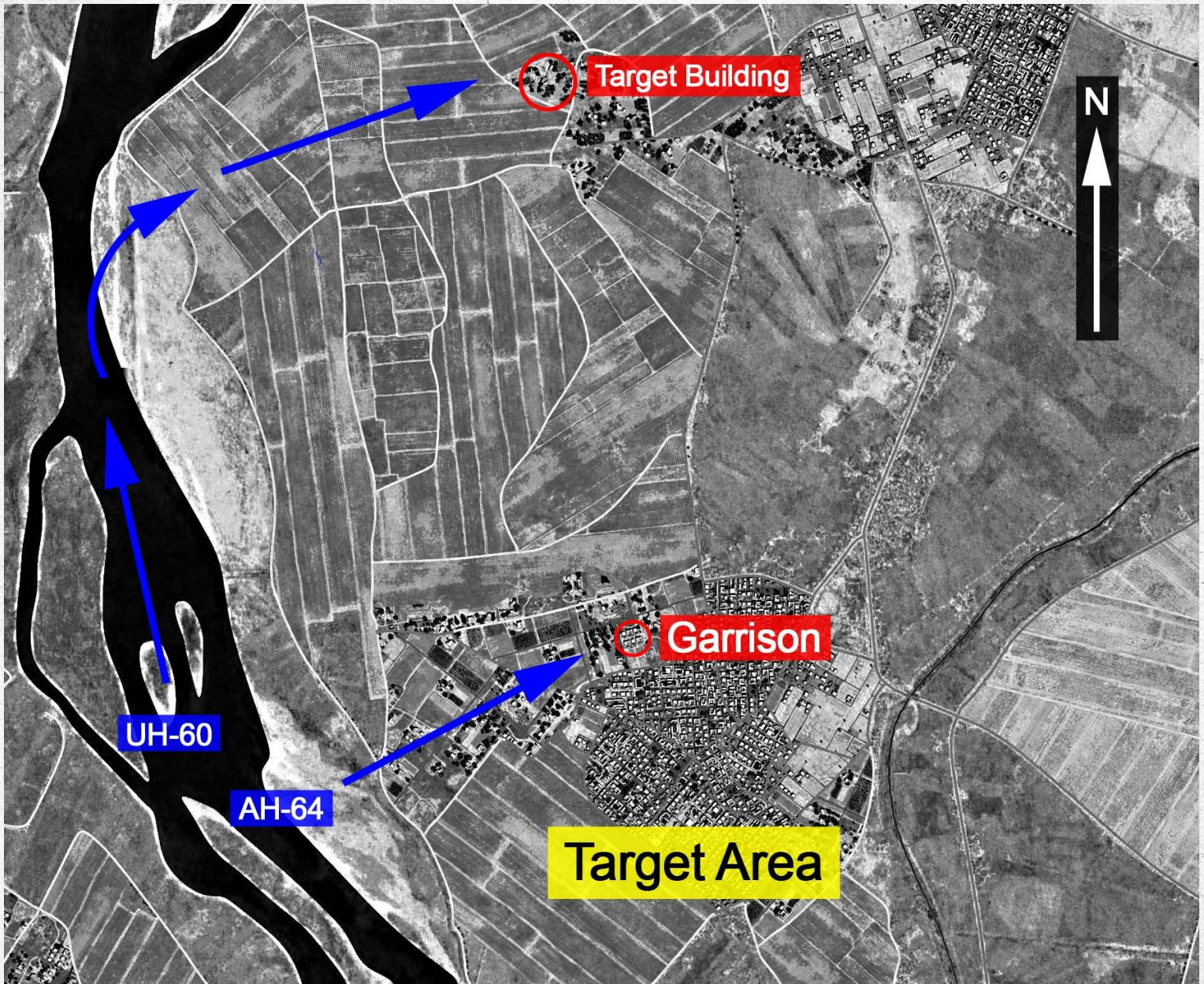


"My assault force will be landed by Blackhawk in the vicinity of the compound, once on the ground we will simultaneously assault both the guard house and the villa. Once the targets are secure we will initiate recovery of intelligence material from the site before extracting to the Blackhawks with any captured personnel. Total time on the ground will be 20 minutes maximum".

"A QRF force of Rangers will also be holding on CH-47s at the Iraqi border should things go south, but we won't allow that to happen. Now I'll leave it to Captain Smith here to brief the particulars of the helo insertion".

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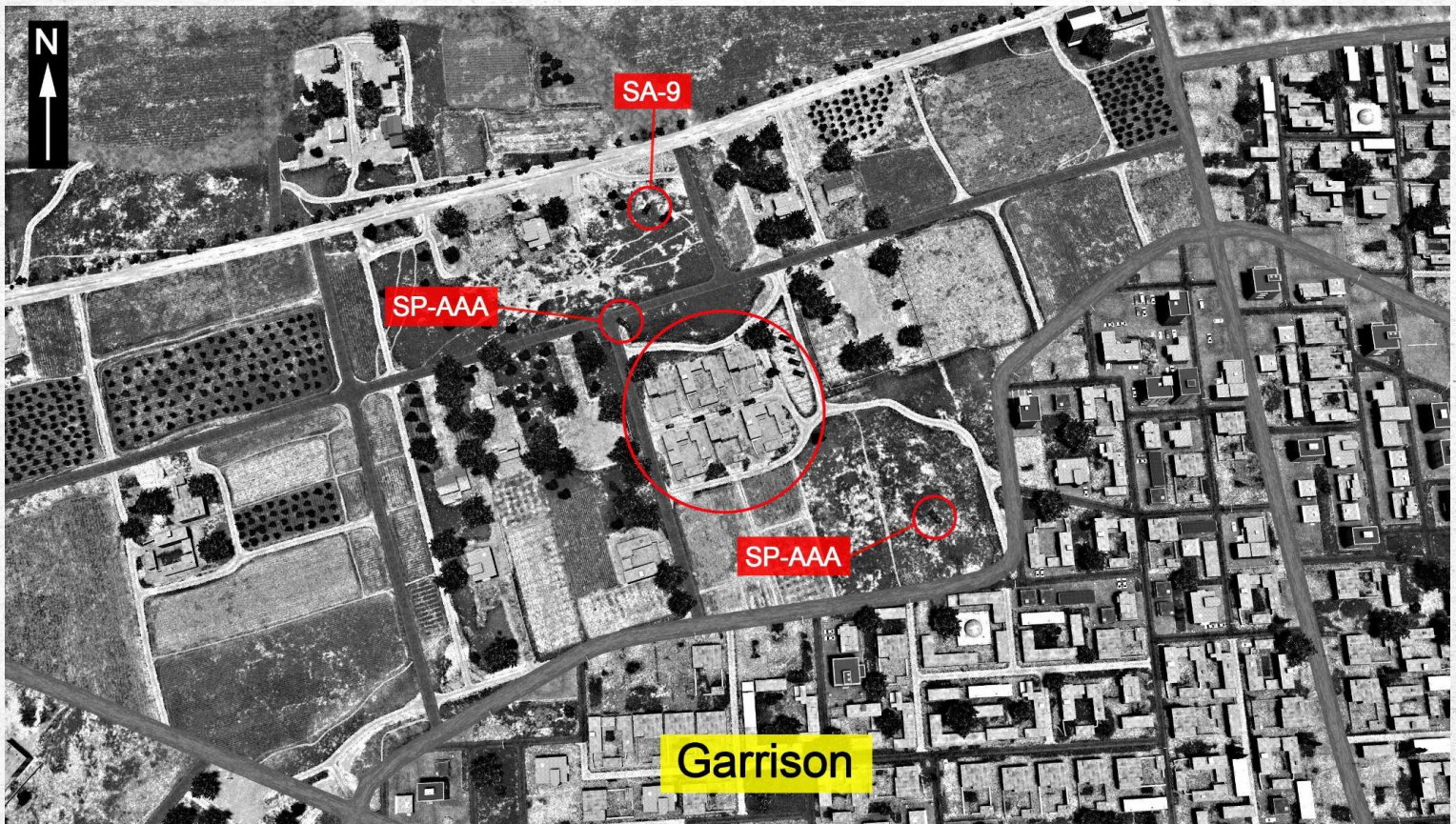
Captain Smith replaced Major Evans at the front of the room. "The assault team will be carried aboard 3 UH-60s, escorted by two Apaches. We will depart H4 and proceed to a hold point around 10 miles south of the target. Here we will wait for your F-16s to signal us that the target area is clear of surface to air threats. Once cleared to proceed, we will insert Major Evan's team into the target area, coming in low through the river valley so as to use the river banks as cover. Once the Blackhawks hook in towards the target my Apaches will begin to engage the SIA garrison to the south, pinning them in place and ensuring they are unable to support in the defense of the target".



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"Due to the time sensitive nature of this raid we are being forced to assault in daylight, negating the considerable night fighting advantage we possess, and of course making the threat to my helicopters a lot more significant. This is why we require your support".

"Thank you Captain" Popeye said, getting to his feet again. Addressing Bug and myself directly he continued. "The Apache's will handle any fire support the ground force requires, so your role will be to provide overwatch and air defense suppression for the helicopter force. Your TOT for the target is 15:45 local, 12:45 Zulu. Once on station you will locate and engage any SIA surface to air threats in the vicinity of the target, clearing the way for the assault force. Intel assessments so far have revealed 2 truck mounted ZU-23 guns and an SA-9 positioned at the SIA garrison, these must be eliminated before the assault force can proceed. Once the attack begins you will hold an orbit overhead and provide protection against any pop up threats that may appear. Finally once the strike force clears the target and is safely away, you will destroy the villa and guard house with a GBU, denying their further use to the SIA and covering our tracks with regards to the intel we seized".



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Popeye checked with the two army officers if they had anything else to add. They did not and departed soon after.

At this point we delved deeper into our mission flow. Me and Bug will be operating as Sword 2. Once airborne we will follow the now familiar route into eastern Syria - pushing from waypoint 1, along the border with Syria, before turning northeast at waypoint 2. Waypoint 3 will be our IP, 10 miles south of the target location. Enroute we will switch our UHF radio to 'Gold 1' a common frequency we are sharing with the helo and ground force. The ground team has the callsign 'Whiplash', the UH-60s are 'Angel' and the Apaches 'Fury'. Whiplash 6 will be the mission commander.

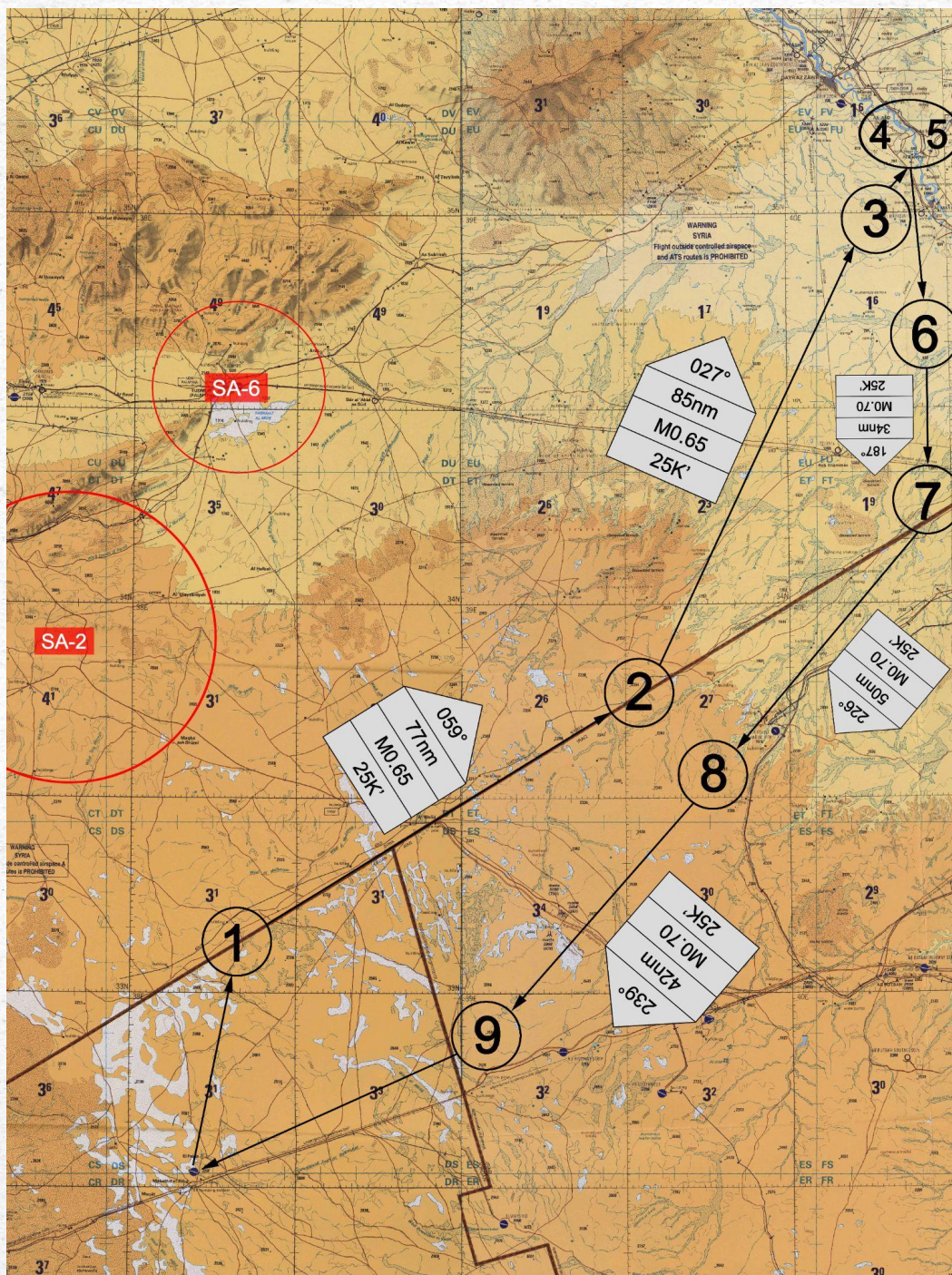
From our perch at the IP we will search for air defense targets, eliminating from a safe distance any that pose a threat to the helo force. At least 2 self propelled AAA guns and one SA-9 are confirmed at the garrison position, which is located at waypoint 4. Once we are satisfied all threats have been eliminated, we will signal for the assault to begin, moving to cover the insertion from any pop up

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threats that emerge. At this point we will need to be mindful of friendly units, with the Blackhawks, Apaches and special forces teams entering the battlespace.

Once the special forces team has secured the target and stripped it of intel we will ensure they make a clean getaway before dropping the target building and adjacent guard house, located at waypoint 5. Our egress route will be via waypoint 6 and back to H4.

My loadout today will be a pair of Mavericks and a pair of GBU-12s. Bug will be carrying 2 Mavericks and a 2000 lb GBU-31 to handle the destruction of the target building.. We will both be losing the HTS pod and ECM pod for this mission, instead carrying an additional fuel tank on the center line station, which will allow us additional loiter time on station. We are assured by intelligence there will be no SA-8s or SA-6s in the target area, let's hope they're correct.



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Peopeye finished up with the threat briefing. As discussed, the garrison has both ZU-23 and SA-9 in it's immediate vicinity, which will be easily mitigated for with attacks from high altitude or at distance. There are no other identified air defense targets in a position that will interfere with the assault force - however this does not mean they don't exist and we should remain highly vigilant at all times while in SIA territory. Most likely pop up threats will be further AAA or MANPADs. West of the target area are the oil fields we were operating near recently. We should continue to avoid these as they still contain the multitude of short range air defenses we have already encountered, minus of course the SA-8s.

Following the threat briefing we finalized all mission details and asked the questions we needed to before Bug and I headed for the mess to fill up on food. As we were eating we heard the deafening noise of 3 Blackhawks and 2 Apaches getting airborne before the noise receded into the distance. "It's on then" Bug remarked to me, as we shared a look, understanding that the lives of over 20 fellow service men and women would soon be in our hands.

Takeoff time is 12:15 Zulu.