

November 11, 2011.

It's been a busy few days here at FOB Juliet as things continue to ramp up and we're now only 24 hours away from the commencement of Operation Rapid Eagle. Det B has been a hive of activity as pilots, ordies and maintainers rush around preparing for our first combat missions. All the Det B pilots have now completed both fam flights and additional time on the weapons range and our pilots are ready and eager to begin. Yesterday saw me and Ein-Stein out on the range where we worked with one of the Sandman FACs, at least we did until we were interrupted by a request to support a broken down convoy south of Juliet who were taking fire from suspected Basij forces. Yet another reminder that we face more than just conventional opposition out here.

I rose at 6:30 this morning, just as dawn was breaking over a clear and calm sky. The sun was just beginning to rise over the walls of the Halil Valley making Juliet shine in a golden glow, and on this November morning there was a noticeable chill in the air. We experienced a relatively peaceful night, no more SCUDs at least...although 'peaceful' is most certainly a relative description for Juliet. Heading to the mess tent I met up with Chief and Noble, where we ate breakfast together and discussed the events of the last few days. The consensus we came to was that we were really concerned about the militia threat, and as Chief put it - the two militia encounters we've had so far have been well behind our front line, worrying indeed.

With breakfast over, the three of us made the trek across the base towards our briefing room. As we walked we passed a vehicle maintenance area, where rows and rows of Humvees, AAVs and trucks were being readied by their operators. The vehicle crews looked excited and full of energy, in anticipation of what lay ahead, even while complaining about the state of some of their equipment.

We arrived at our usual briefing location in the workshop, the three Iranian flags still gently waving in the morning breeze. I could sense Noble's annoyance as we passed them. Entering the workshop we passed a group of maintainers working on one of the det's targeting pods, stopping only briefly to salute us as we approached the damp old office for this morning's briefing. Although we arrived earlier than the 07:15 start time, the three of us were the last to arrive, with Mother, Baz and Ein-stein plus a range of briefers already in position and ready to begin.

As we sat ourselves around the table in the centre of the room Mother began to speak.

"Pilots, tonight sees the commencement of combat operations in Operation Rapid Eagle. RCT 1 has already begun to deploy forward elements of the regiment up the MSR towards Sirjan in preparation of their attack towards Rafsanjan. 1st Recon Battalion are also already in motion, starting to screen the flanks of both RCT 1 and 7 as they secure the mountain ranges. RCT 7 will jump off tonight, and begin their assault on Bam".

None of this was news to us, but we still listened with rapt attention. "Bam is a key initial objective in Rapid Eagle. It's an enemy strong point and sits astride one of the main routes to Kerman City, simply put, we cannot take Kerman without first taking Bam. The aircraft of Det B will be tasked with providing support to RCT 7 during their attack on Bam. That is our objective, but before we get into the details we'll take care of our usual business first. Captain Parkin, over to you".

“Thank you Major” replied the Captain, replacing Mother at the front of the room. “I’m glad to say that the weather for now is on our side. The fine weather we’re seeing this morning is expected to continue through the next 48 hours, with just a few clouds expected to form later today, so expected scattered clouds around 14-15,000 feet. Winds are expected to be fairly calm, max of maybe 5 or 6 knots. The cool air is expected to stay and we’re expecting temperatures under 10 degrees celsius”.

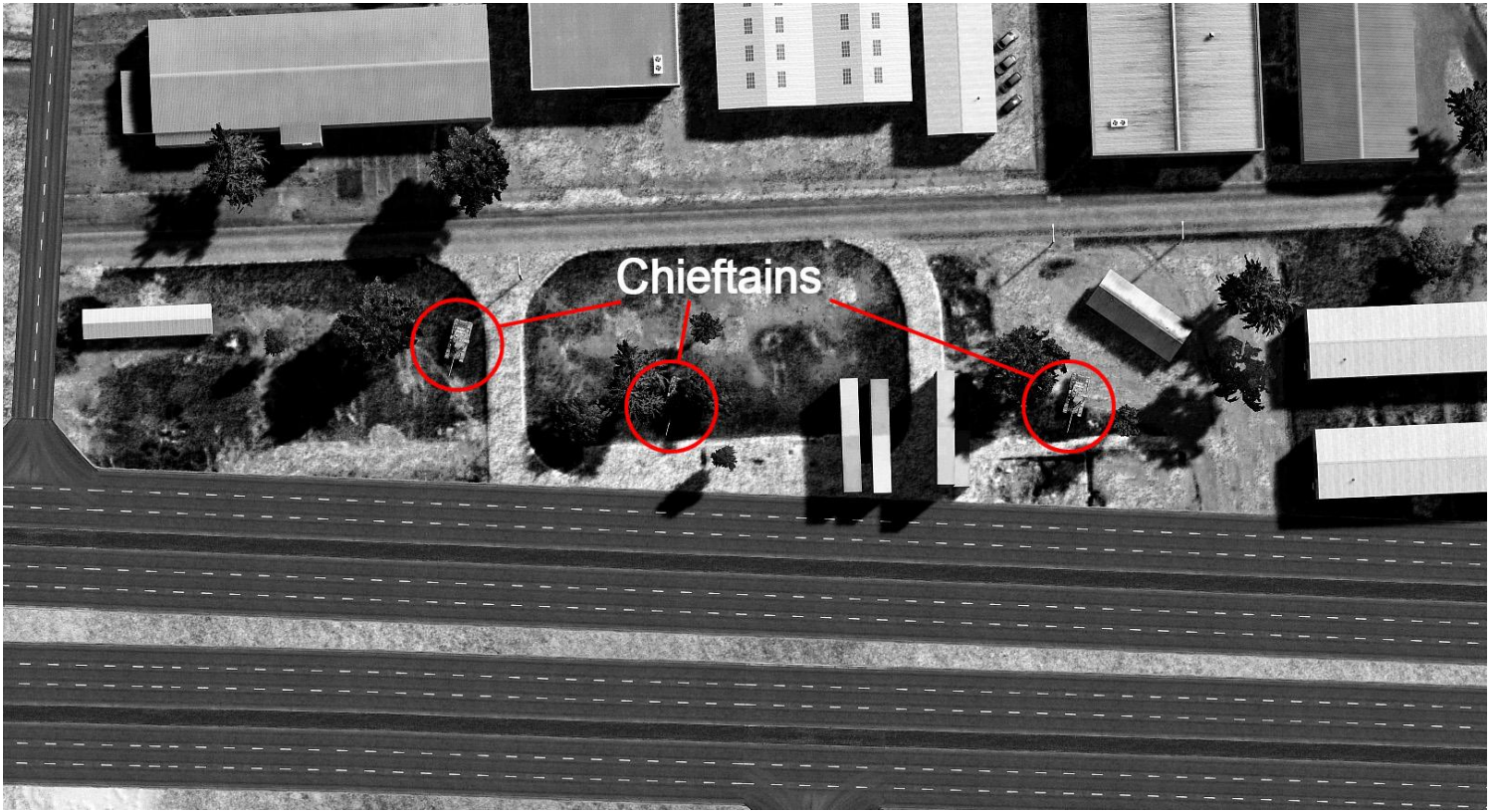
“What about turbulence?” asked Baz.

“We’re forecasting light turbulence as well, the conditions are currently looking really benign”.

At this point, Mother stepped forwards, “Any further questions?” he asked the assembled. After seeing a few slow shakes of heads, Mother dismissed Captain Parkin before introducing Major Daniels for the intel brief.

As he rose, Daniels began to speak. “As you’ll see from the packs I’ve prepared for you, we now have more solid intel on the composition of the ground forces RCT 7 will be facing as well as the air defence threats you’ll see around Bam. Starting with the ground forces we assess that Bam is defended by 2 battalions of infantry and a brigade of armour, supported by limited numbers of 2S1 Gvozdika self-propelled artillery and BM-21 Grad rocket systems. These appear to be conventional Iranian army and not IRGC units. The armour is a mix of T-55 and Chieftain MBTs, and the infantry is supported by a company of BMP-1s. The majority of these units are deployed along the southern edge of Bam, facing the expected direction of RCT 7s attack”.





"What about Basij forces?" enquired Noble.

"We have indications of Basij strong points throughout Bam" replied Daniels, "SATINT has revealed a number of ammo and weapons dumps with armed individuals present at these sites, these are strongly suspected of being Basij fighters".



"Sounds like a solid defence" said Chief, "RCT 7 will be advancing across flat, open desert, I assume we plan on softening up the defences first?".

"Of course," replied Mother, "Our Harriers, along with Hornets from the Death Rattlers will be carrying out battlefield prep ahead of the assault...and if we need them..." Mother fixed us all with a piercing stare at this point, "...the Air Force has A-10s standing by to support the removal of enemy armour".

"Screw the Air Force!" exclaimed Chief and was met by a ripple of laughter around the room, "We won't need their help".

"Agreed" said Mother, grinning.

Daniels interjected at this point, "Moving on to the Iranian air defences, ELINT and SATINT have revealed the presence of at least one HQ-7 battery in the vicinity of Bam, likely deployed on the northwest of the city. There are a number of AAA batteries across Bam, consisting of a mix of S-60 and mounted ZU-23s and we have identified at least two ZSU-23-4s. We assess the entire city is covered by AAA at both high and low altitudes".

"Are these batteries part of the battlefield prep?" I asked.

"The larger ones are," answered Mother, "But we don't expect to get them all, so take sensible precautions when over the city - keep your speed up and don't fly a predictable course".

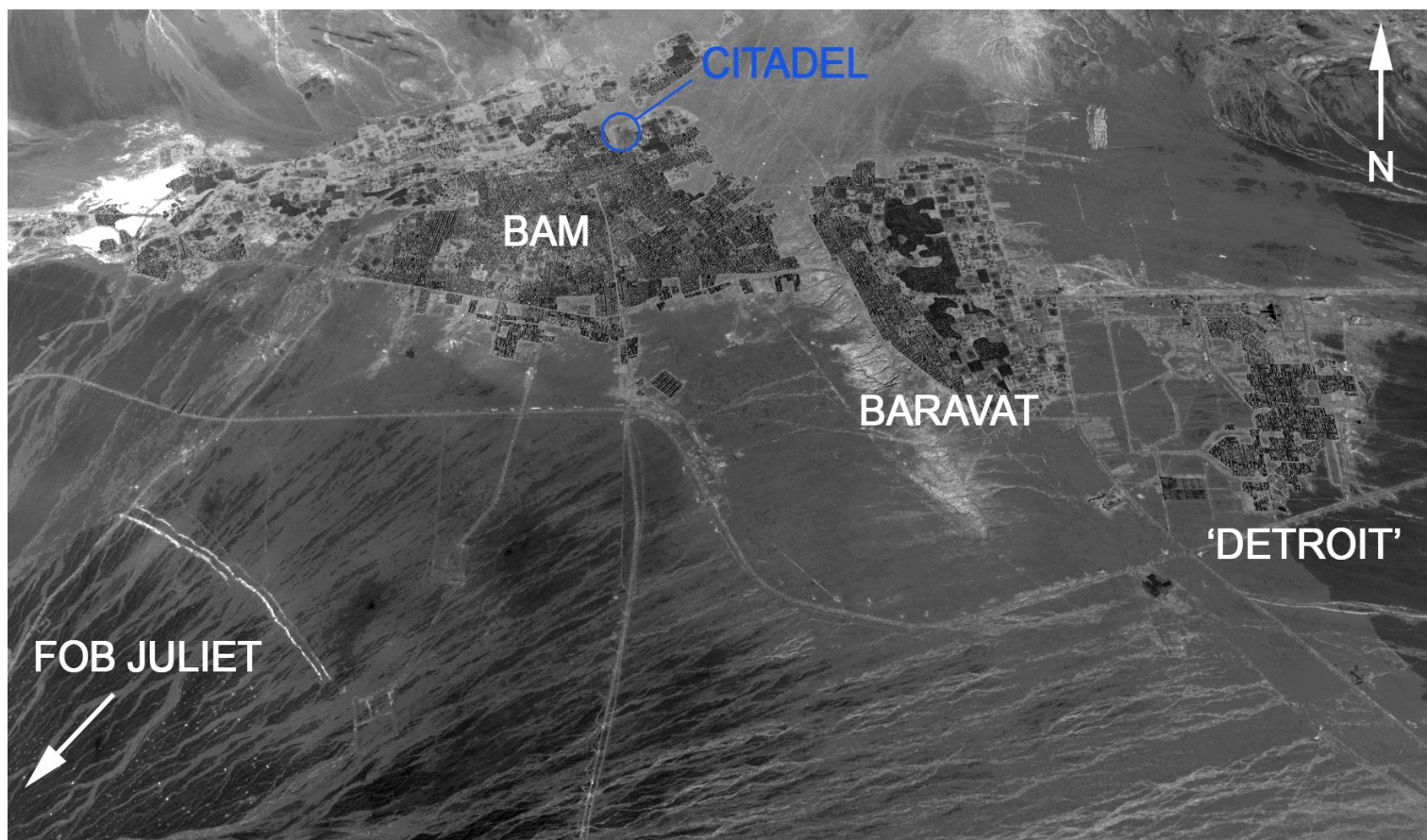
Daniels continued, "That just leaves the MANAPD threat, it's impossible to quantify, but the threat is certainly there, so again take the appropriate precautions".



Daniels finished up his intel brief by discussing how determined the resistance in Bam could be. The ability and commitment of the regular Iranian units, who are mainly conscripts, is in doubt, but the militia are expected to make a real fight of things inside the city. With his brief complete, Daniels departed.

Mother stepped back up and began to brief the operational details. "As I stated earlier, the role of Det B tomorrow will be to provide support to RCT 7's assault on Bam", Mother pointed to an officer standing at the side of the room who had yet to speak, "This is Major Shaw, the air officer for MEF 1, he is here to brief you on the specifics of the air support plan".

Bringing up a satellite image on the screen at the front of the briefing room Mother began. "The objectives of RCT 7 are actually threefold, to secure Bam itself, along with the town of Baravat east of Bam and the large industrial auto manufacturing centre east of Baravat, which we have taken to calling *Detroit*."



"Note the position of Bam citadel on the northern edge of the city. This is strictly a no fire area".

"The first wave of strikes will begin at dawn. VMFA 323's Hornets, with support from Navy Growlers, will be going after Bam's primary SAM and AAA threats, and destroying defensive strong points in Bam ahead of RCT 7's advance. The main ground force will begin to move out of the Halil Valley during darkness and will begin their attack on the city shortly after the Hornets have struck their targets".

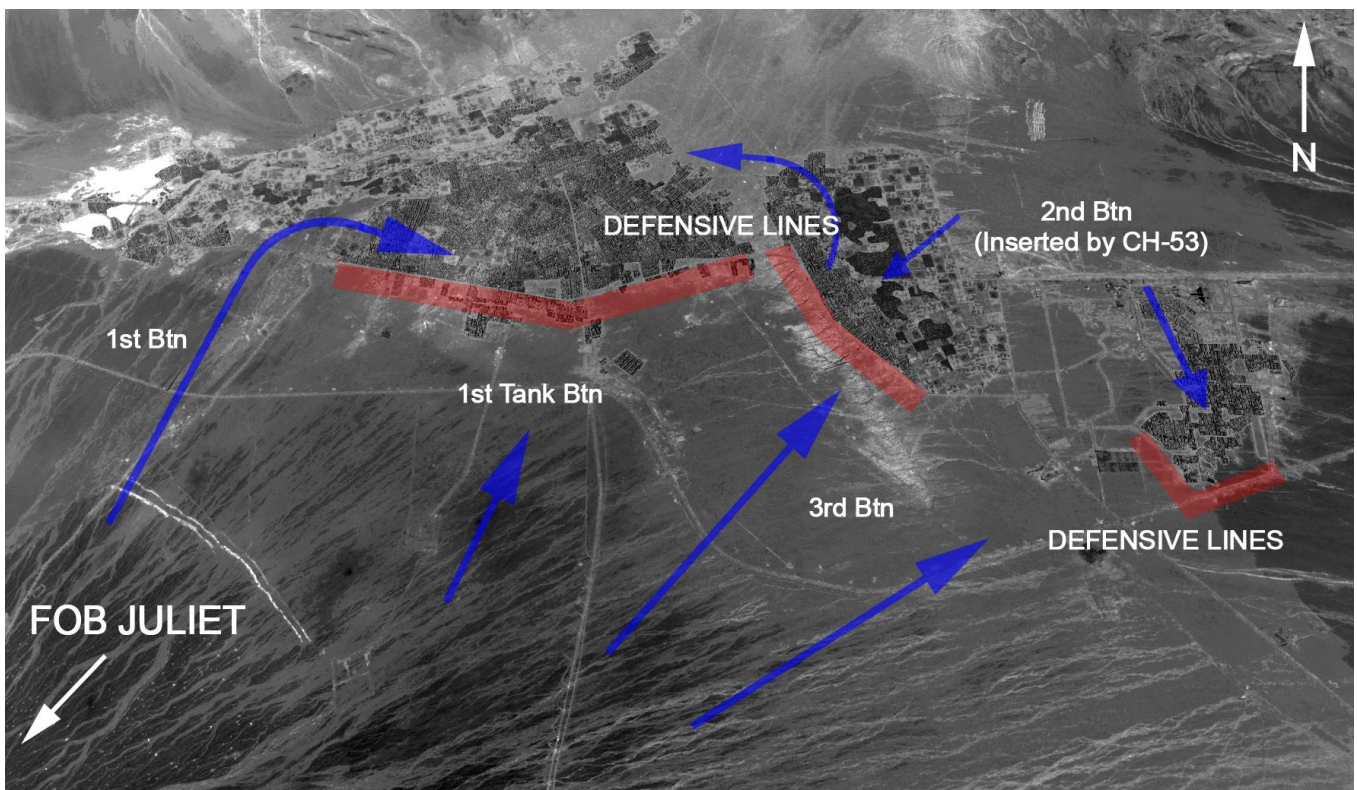
“Our role will primarily be to supply CAS to RCT 7 throughout the day, making hops back and forth from Juliet - your takeoff times are in your briefing packs. Mike-Mike and Noble will be kicking things off, and will be relieved by Baz and Chief, who in turn, will be relieved by Ein-Stein and myself. However, as part of the first wave of aircraft, Mike-Mike and Noble you will be additionally tasked with preparing Baravat for a heliborne assault by the 2nd battalion, but we’ll get to the details shortly”.

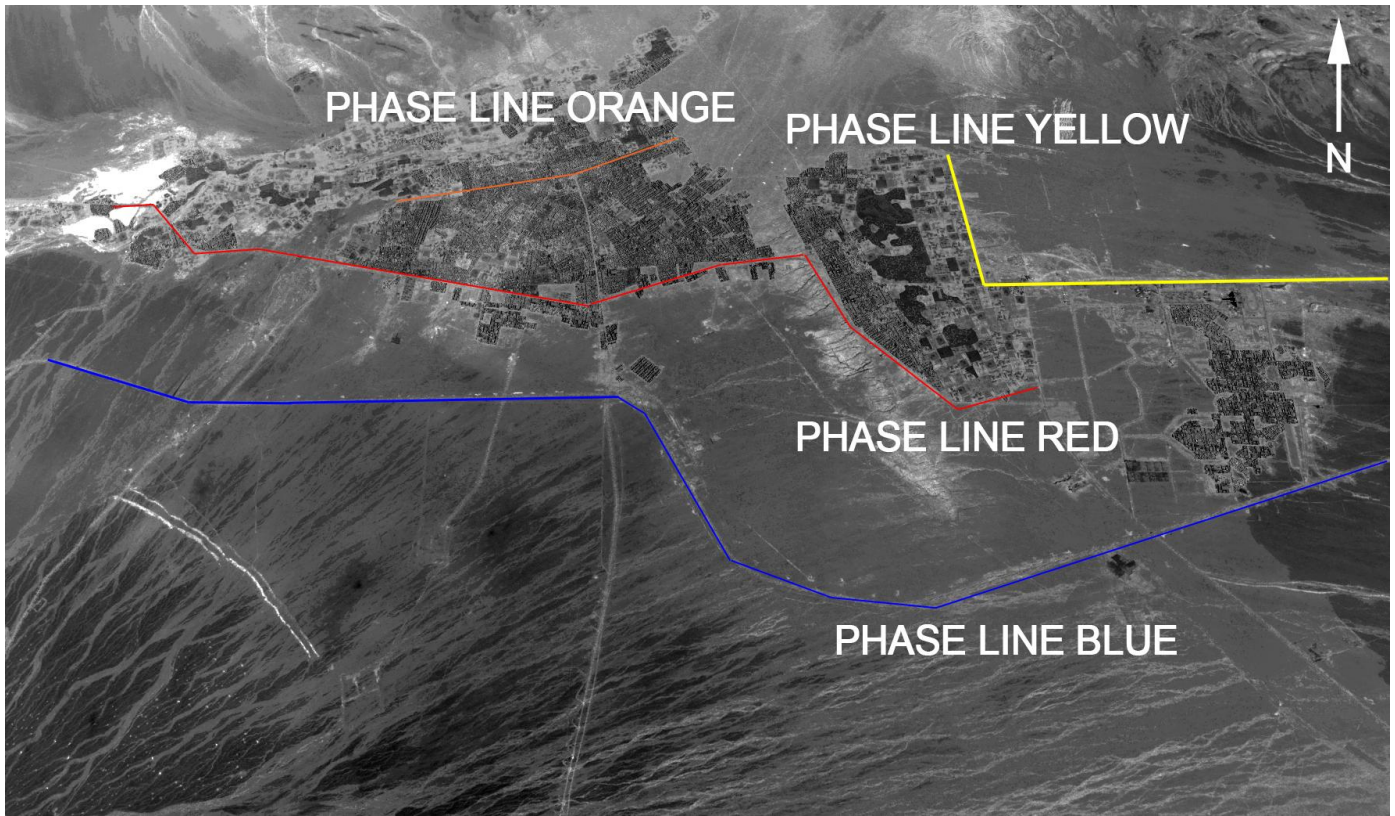
I raised an eyebrow at this and sensed Noble shifting in her seat.

“Now I’m going to hand over to Major Shaw, who will talk through the air support plan in more detail”.

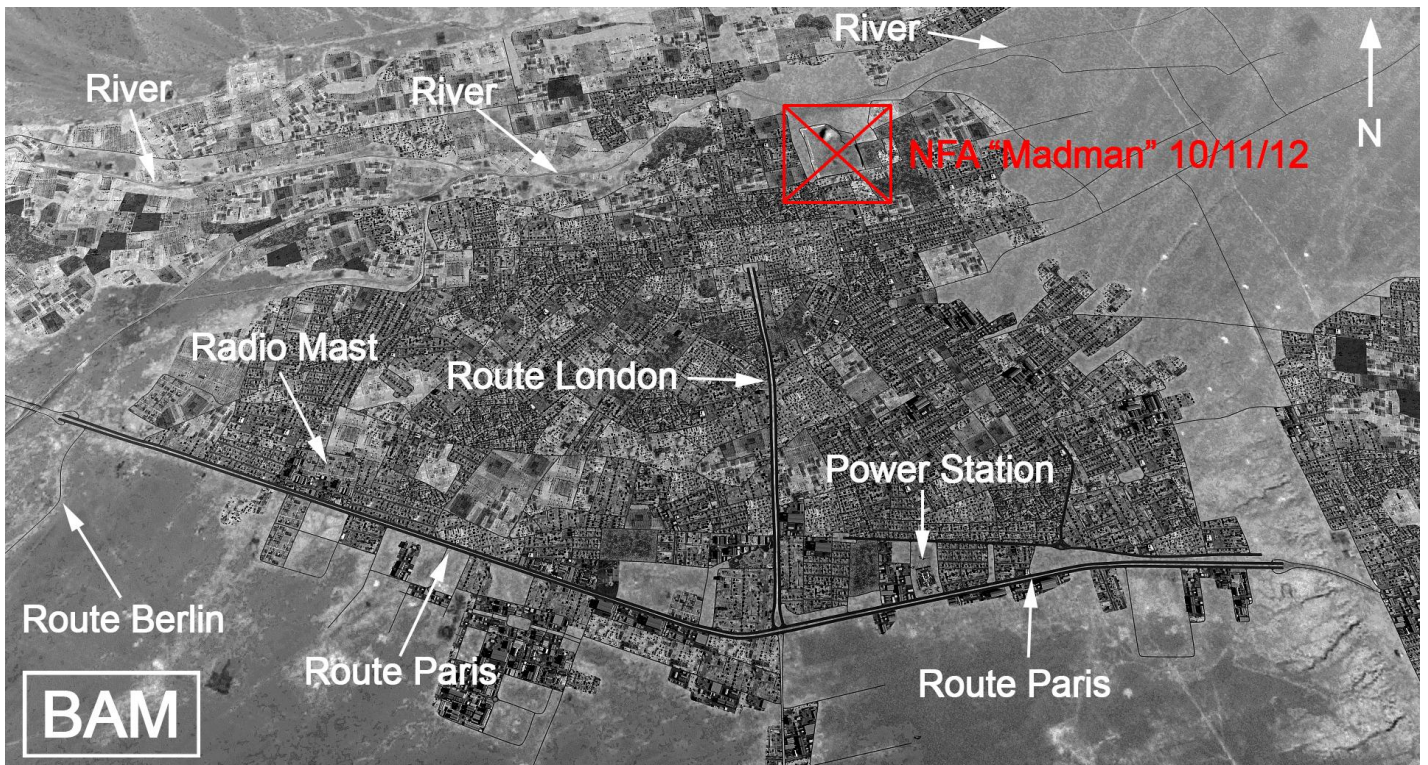
“Thank you Major Drucker” said Shaw as he stood next to the briefing screen. A tall, shaven headed man in his early 30’s, he had a powerful frame and commanding voice. “As the Major said, we have 3 ultimate objectives, the capture of Bam, Baravat and Detroit. The attack will begin with the insertion by CH-53 of the 2nd battalion to the desert east of Baravat, from where they can attack into the relatively lightly defended rear - the bulk of the Iranian armour being deployed along our expected axis of attack. As this insertion is underway, Marine air will be undertaking battlefield preparation by eliminating the defensive strong points south of Bam and all identified artillery batteries. Once the defences have been suppressed or destroyed, the 1st and 2nd battalions, supported by elements of the 1st tank battalion will begin their approach across the desert plain. They will be especially vulnerable to artillery at this point and we will have Hornets on FAC(A) and UAVS high above watching and ready to task air assets in to deal with any artillery that pops up”.

“As they approach Bam, the 1st battalion will attempt to bypass the defensive line, now being pinned down by our armour, and enter the city from the west. 3rd battalion will punch through the lighter defences at Baravat and Detroit and link up with 2nd battalion, where they will start to push into Bam from the east”.





“To assist coordination between assets we will be referencing these phase lines and landmarks as we progress through our attack plan. Phase line blue is marked by the main rail line running east to west through the AO. Phase line red is marked by the main highway running east to west along Bam’s southern border. Phase line yellow marks the rear perimeter of Baravat and Detroit and is where we expect the 2nd battalion to commence combat actions. All forces will be looking to push up to phase line orange as they enter Bam”.



“Note the No Fire Area over the citadel, we are not permitted to engage targets in the vicinity of the citadel from the air, and that comes from the top...the very top in fact. Also make sure you are clear on the landmarks within Bam, marked on the satellite imagery. The FACs will likely reference these if they need to talk you on to a target”.

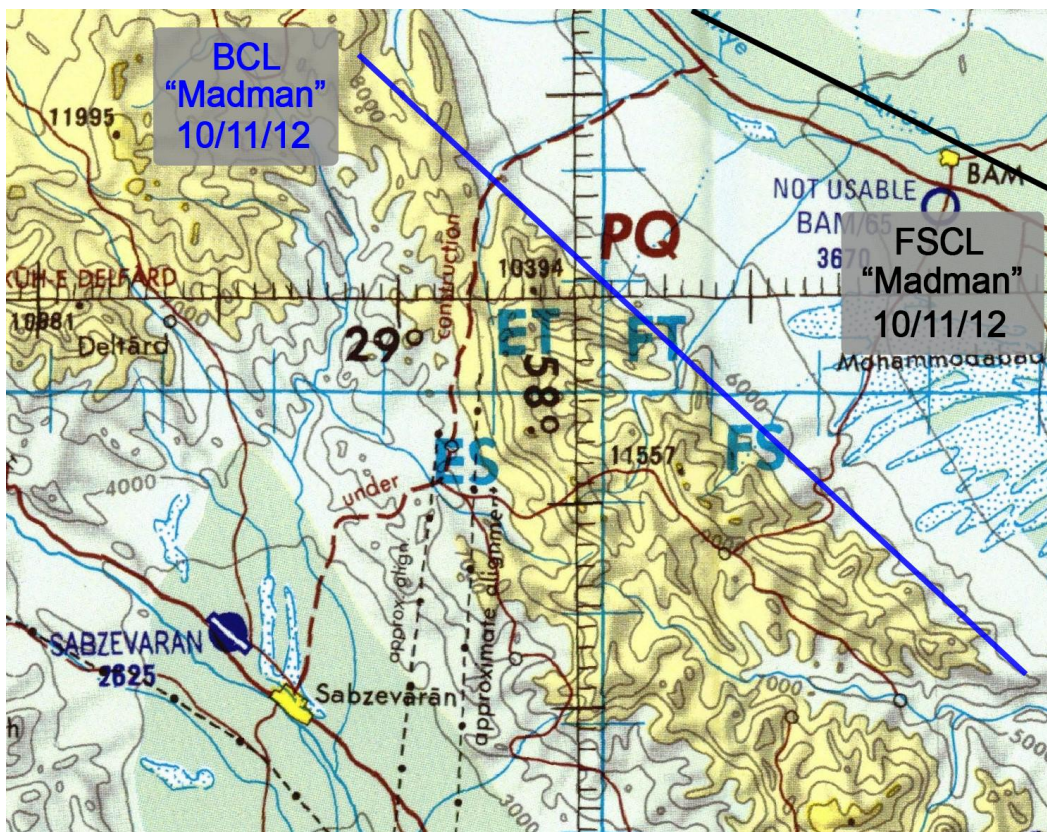
“Along with the CH-53s and UH-1s providing transport and other duties, we will have AH-1 Cobras providing close in support. As per the ORE SPINS all rotary assets will be assigned an altitude block from ground level to 10,000 feet MSL”.

“Which means we stay above that altitude unless required to break the deck for an attack” Mother interrupted”.

“Absolutely,” agreed Shaw, “If cleared hot by a FAC you can assume the airspace is clear for you to descend into or drop a weapon through. Otherwise stay above 10,000 feet”.

“No need to tell us twice” remarked Chief, “That’s MANPAD territory anyway, we avoid going low if we can help it”.

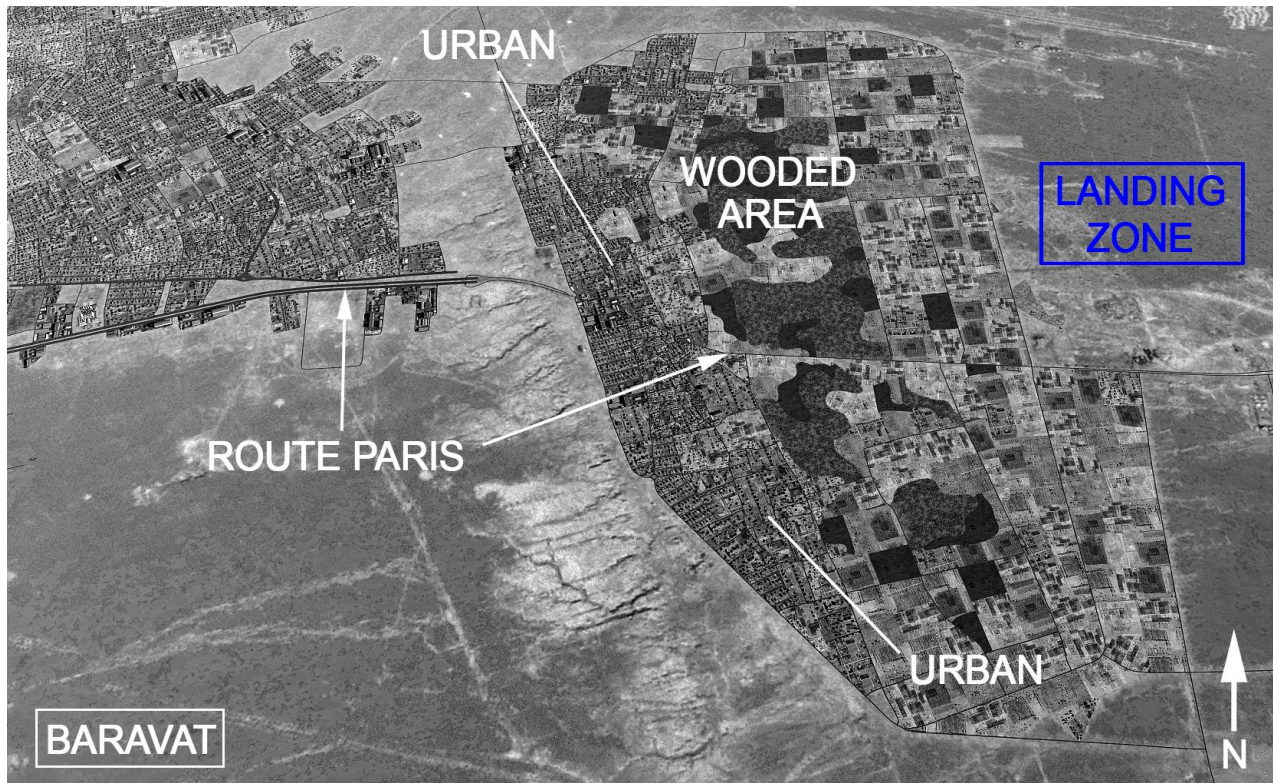
Shaw continued, “As you would expect we will also have fire support available from our self propelled batteries, the Forces Fire Coordination Centre, or FFCC, is Steel Rain. All incoming fires will be coordinated with Chieftain as well, so if notified of an inbound strike you will need to ensure you are above 13,000 feet MSL to ensure you are above the trajectory of incoming rounds”.



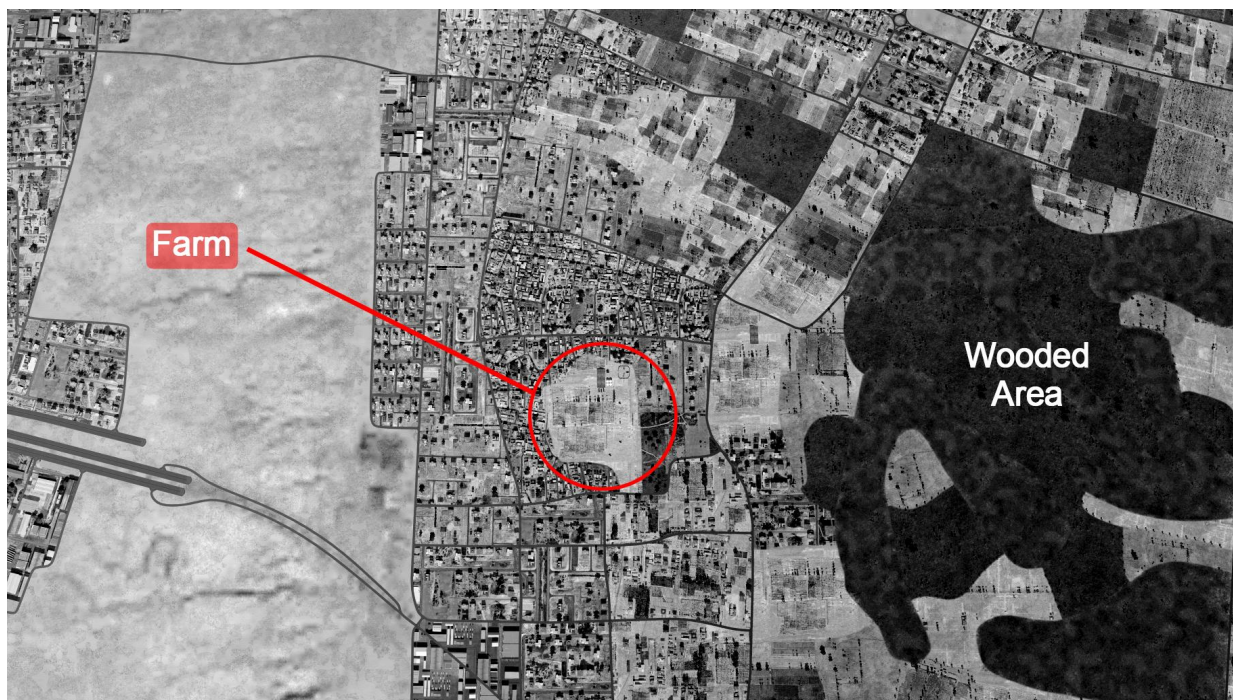
“The BCL is set on the mountains dividing the Halil valley from the Bam plain. The FSCL is set on the river bordering the northern side of Bam. This means that except for pre-defined targets, all strikes within this area will be under the control of a FAC”.

As Shaw concluded his briefing, he stepped aside allowing Mother to resume briefing our mission.

“As I said earlier,” he began, “Mike-Mike and Noble will be preparing Baravat for 2nd Battalion's arrival. They are scheduled to land just to the east of Baravat at 06:55, the helo callsign is Hunter”.

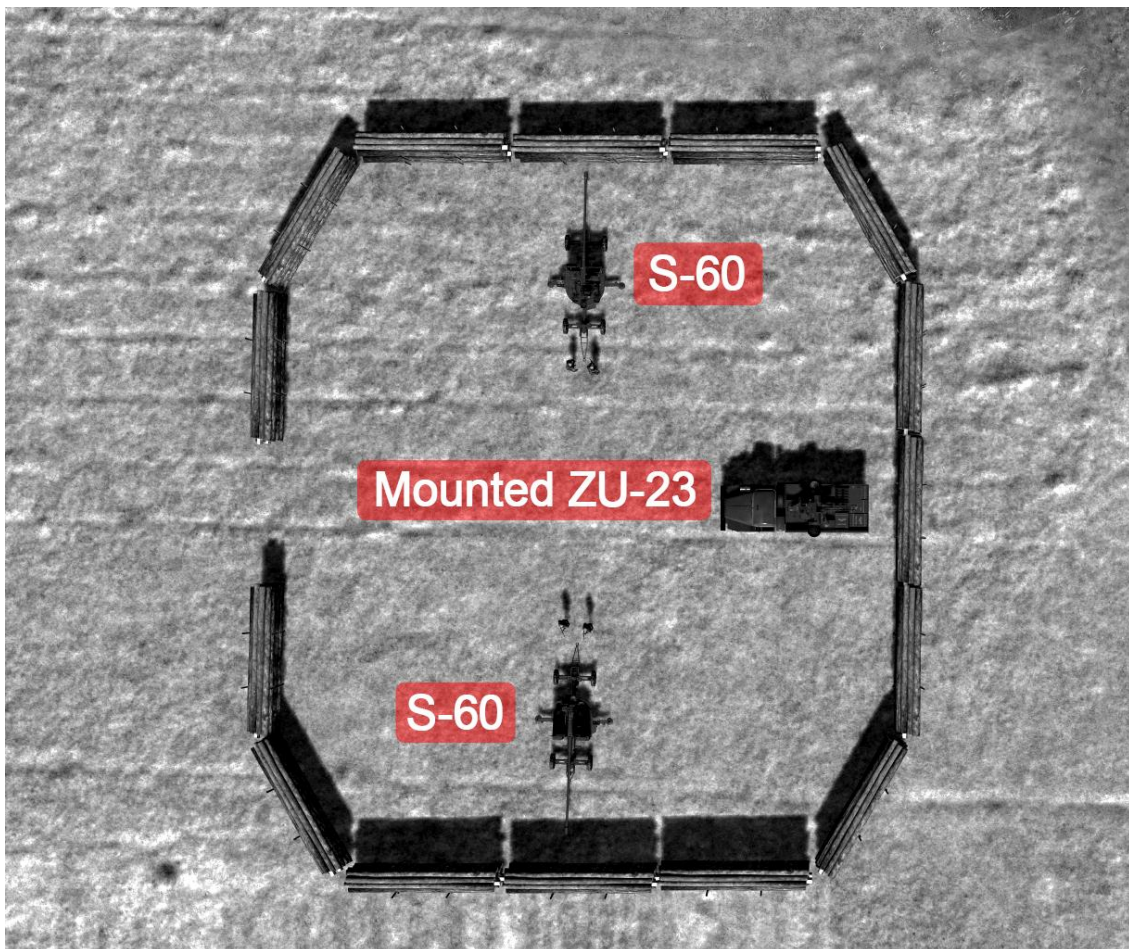
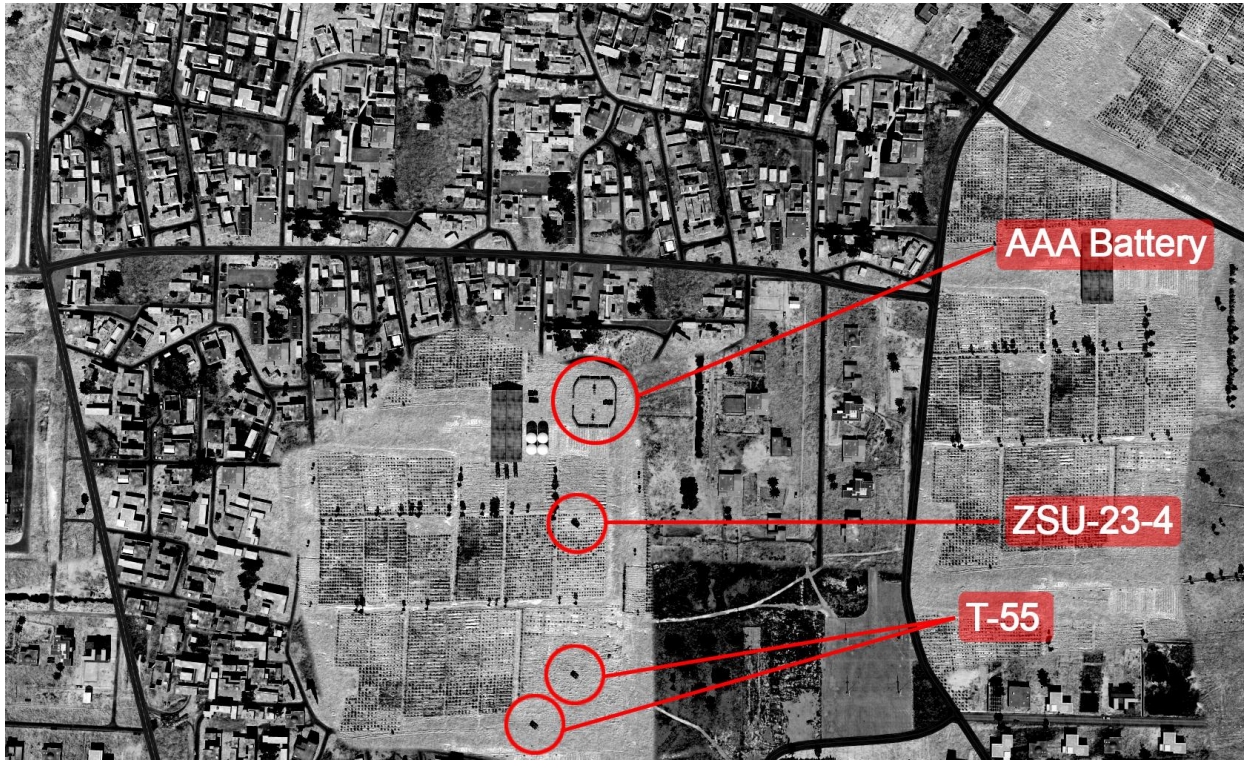


“The agricultural belt lying between the LZ and the wooded area appears largely undefended, however more defences lie to the west of the woods. The most significant threat to the helicopter force lies at a farm that has been occupied by the Iranian Army”.



THE KERMAN CAMPAIGN: MISSION 3

"A large AAA battery is located at this farm, consisting of a mix of S-60 and ZU-23. A ZSU-23-4 has also been spotted at this location, along with at least two T-55s. The AAA and armour must be eliminated before the arrival of the helicopter assault".



"Mike-Mike you are tasked with the destruction of the AAA and the Zeus, Noble you will take out any armour in the vicinity of the farm".

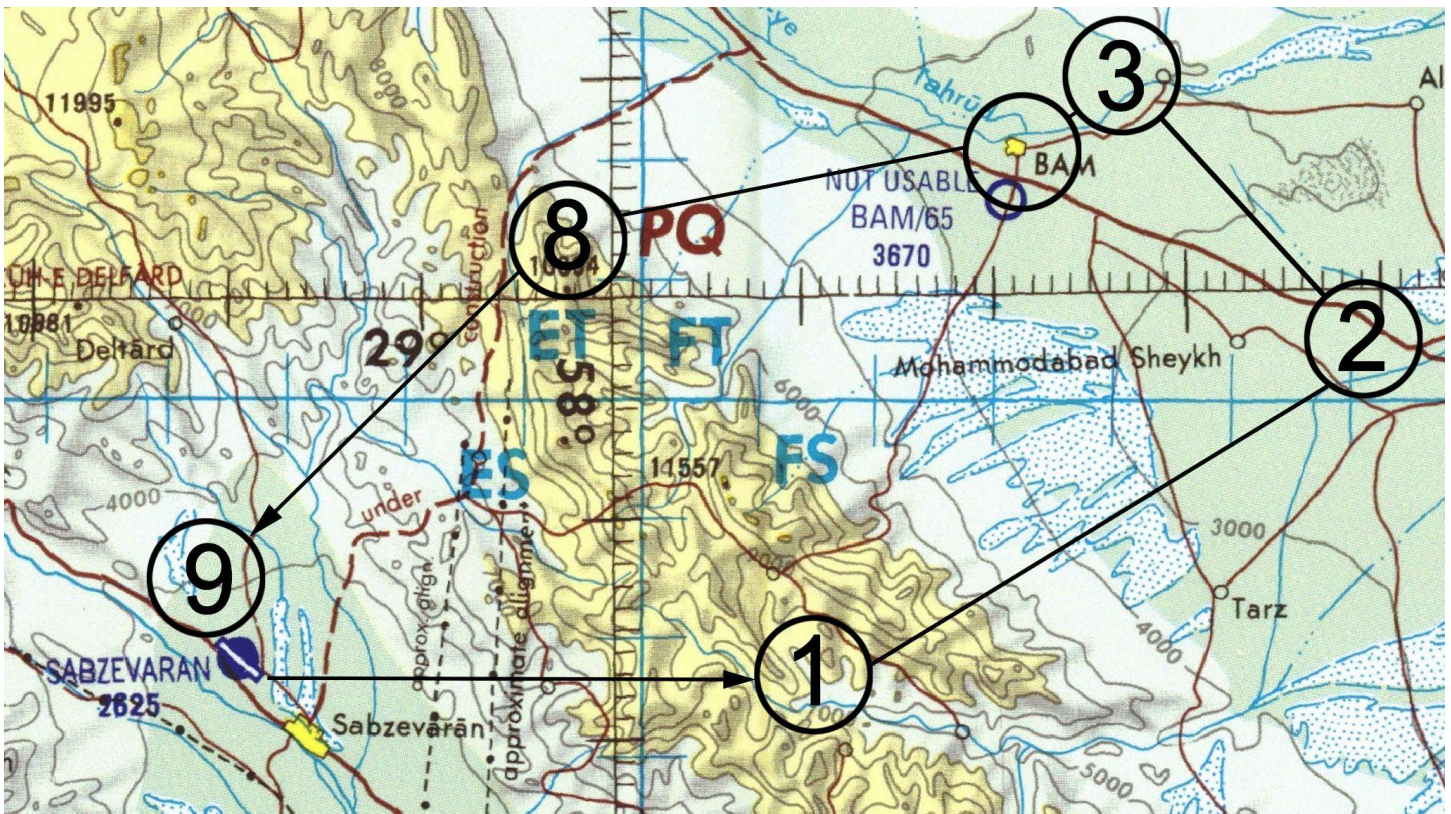
"Loadouts on this mission will be 2 Laser Mavs plus 2 GBU-12 for Noble, and 2 GBU-12 plus 2 pods of APKWS for Mike-Mike. In addition to this you'll be hauling a Litening pod, the gun, and to ensure you can remain on station to provide CAS, fuel tanks. Once the assault force is safely on the deck, you will enter the CAS stack above Bam and await further tasking from Chieftain".

Mother continued to outline our mission flow. "Once airborne your flights will form up at waypoint 1, angels 25. From here you will push east of Bam, to ensure you are clear of the intended strike route that the Hornets are using. Hold at waypoint 2 until the Navy has dealt with the SAMs, the TOT for the SEAD and EW flights is 06:40 so do not approach Bam before this time".

"Once you are given the all clear, proceed to your IP at waypoint 3. From your perch here you should be able to acquire your targets, located at waypoint 4, with your pods. Ensure your targets are eliminated before Hunter arrives at 06:55. Hunter will be approaching Bam along the route from waypoint 2 to waypoint 3, if the targets are not neutralised before Hunter's arrival they will be forced to divert to a secondary LZ".

"After you have eliminated the defences at waypoint 4, Chieftain will stack you up over Bam, ready to assist with any air support request that are made to the DASC. Waypoints 5, 6 and 7 are set on the Citadel, power station and radio mast to assist with rapid pod acquisition".

"Bingo fuel is 2300 pounds, which gives us around an hour of loiter time over the city, obviously less if we have to go kinetic".





"Any questions so far?", there were none.

Mother moved on to discuss the threats we would be facing, reiterating what Major Daniels discussed. The HQ7 battery shouldn't be a factor providing we keep our distance from Bam until it is eliminated. The most significant concentrations of AAA will be dealt with as part of the initial strikes but we will likely still see small pockets of fire around the city, so altitude and speed will be essential to keep us safe. Anytime we are around 10,000 feet we should be really alert to the MANPAD threat.

It is unlikely we will see any air to air threats but a Hornet CAP will be up for the duration of the operation.

The briefing rumbled on for a few more hours as the rest of the squadron's flights were discussed in detail. Once it finally drew to a close we headed straight back to the mess for lunch, where as a treat they were serving hamburgers and fries, a lot of the Marines were pretty excited about that, although if truth be told we were not hungry...a mix of nerves and excitement took care of that. We spent the rest of the day preparing for the mission, studying the attack plans, threat details and so on. As darkness closed in we heard the mighty roar of hundreds of engines jumping to life as the RCTs started moving out. Eventually, despite the noise, despite the nerves and despite the adrenalin, I managed to sleep.

Takeoff time is 06:30.