

FIRST IN - WEASELS OVER SYRIA



25th June, 2013.

H4 Airbase, Jordan.

As I write this account I'm sitting in a tent in the Jordanian desert. It's hot, I'm sweaty, I'm sandy and the living conditions down here are just plain awful. We'll get to why I'm here shortly, but first let me tell you who I am.

My name is Captain Dan Wilson, callsign 'Forrest' (I used to be *Lieutenant Dan*...get it?). I'm a USAF F-16 pilot with the 79th Fighter Squadron, but more importantly than that I'm also a Wild Weasel. A weasel you ask? Well you probably didn't, but indulge me. The job of a Wild Weasel is to protect friendly aircraft from enemy air defenses, we are the suppressors and destroyers of enemy SAM systems, radars and AAA. We are the first into a target area and the last to leave. We stand up and ask to be shot at, because then you aren't shooting at our buddies. We are expert hunters and we play a life and death game of cat and mouse. If you dare to come online or launch when we are around then we will come for you. It sounds crazy to some what we do - even to our own originally - our motto is YGBSM, coined by an early Weasel Jack Donovan, "you want me to fly in the back of a little tiny fighter aircraft with a crazy fighter pilot who thinks he's invincible, home in on a SAM site in North Vietnam, and shoot it before it shoots me, *you gotta be shitting me!*".

But we know our craft, through 50 years of development of the Weasel mission, with lessons forged in Vietnam, then honed to deadly perfection in Desert Storm - where we were so revered and feared that a single radio call on an open freq could shut down Iraqi SAM sites. It is on these lessons and tactics that we now operate, stalking the modern battlefield as hunter killers. We understand intimately the threats we face, we know how to defeat them and through training, courage and guile we will prevail.

So how does a group of Weasels end up in the Jordanian desert? Well it started with the Arab spring in 2011. This led to a number of ramifications throughout the middle east, most notably the civil wars in Libya and Syria and the violent repression in Iran which ultimately led to Operation Persian Freedom and the invasion of Iran. Syria, frankly, is a mess. The civil war grew out of the Syrian government's brutal crackdown on anti regime protests. As the crackdown intensified and the bodycount grew, large parts of the Syrian armed forces defected, coalescing into a guerrilla insurgency known originally as the Free Syrian Army before morphing into the more credible Syrian Democratic Force. The SDF now controls a large part of northern Syria and with our support are fighting the Syrian Arab Army for control of the city of Homs. Now when I say civil war, it might conjure up the thought of two sides fighting for control of the country, the SDF against the Syrian government. Well sorry but in modern day Syria things just ain't that simple. First of all we need to throw in the Syrian Islamic Army, or SIA. The SIA is an insurgent extremist group, with origins in Iran that migrated and grew in the void of the western Iraqi desert. As the Syrian state deteriorated, the opportunity presented itself for the SIA to embark on a lightning campaign, carving out territory along the Euphrates river valley all the way up to the city of Raqqa, the capital of their 'new caliphate'. The SIA have subjected millions of people to a brutal, fundamentalist rule and life under them is a terrifying prospect.

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Next we have the YPG, a Kurdish militia from northern Syria and a highly effective light fighting force. The YPG have proven to be an invaluable force in helping curtail the march of the SIA. So the SIA are bad guys and the YPG are valiantly keeping them in check, therefore we all want to support the YPG right? Well wrong, this is Syria remember. Our NATO ally Turkey views the YPG in the same light as the rebel Kurdish group the PKK - that is as terrorists. So while we are supporting the YPG in their fight, our ally is doing it's best to wipe them off the earth, and of course to complicate things we share a base at Incirlik, Turkey.

So where are we up to...we've got the Syrian Government, the SDF, the SIA, the YPG and Turkey. Who else could there possibly be you're probably asking...well how about Hezbollah? This is the Shia organization that has de facto control over large parts of Lebanon. Originally founded by Iran, Hezbollah has grown and evolved over the years to become a sophisticated political and military organization, and one that is supporting the Syrian government.

Anyone else? Well how about the Russians! Yes the Russians! If this whole scenario wasn't complicated and dangerous enough already, now we add the Russians into the middle of it. The Russian Federation is a long standing ally of Syria, the two have strong economic links and Russia has strategic interests in the region, mainly it's only Mediterranean naval facility at Tartus. The Russians surprised everyone when they unexpectedly deployed to Syria and have begun to lend both material and direct military support to the Syrian government, including air strikes on SDF and SIA positions. And yes if you're reading between the lines that means we now have both US and Russian forces operating in the same theater, with conflicting aims - this is not good.

To top this all off, Israel is the last major player that may yet have a role to play. Israel has so far stayed out of the ever spiraling Syrian civil war. But as things become more unstable in Syria, and the SIA, Hezbollah and any other groups that threaten Israel become more prominent, I don't think anyone really expects Israel to sit by and do nothing...that's not their style.

And this brings me back to Jordan. A reliable ally in an unstable theater. Jordan isn't involved in the Syrian conflict, but it does watch with concern at the disruption that threatens to seep over the border. The Jordanians might not want to get directly involved, but they're certainly lending their support to our operations.

So who are the 'we' I keep referring to? That would be the Joint Syrian Task Force, or JSTF. We are a multinational force, composed mainly of US, UK, French and German forces, and we are here for Operation Cerberus North.

Operation Cerberus North is the name given to the UN approved mission here in Syria. The mission is to protect SDF and YPG controlled areas from Syrian airstrikes, while simultaneously supporting the fight against the SIA. To achieve the first of these objectives we have established two no fly zones in Syria, these will prevent the Syrian air force from threatening rebel military positions and civilian areas. The second objective is expected to be achieved through kinetic action against the SIA. OCN began several weeks ago, the no fly zones have been established and although the Syrians have probed them, no major incursions have yet been achieved.

SAMs though are a real problem in the no fly zone. The Syrians aren't about to sit back and let us just dictate what they do in their country. No fly zone Sierra has multiple SAM systems deployed along it, which means that the reality is that we have a no fly zone that we have difficulty entering.



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This is where the Weasels come in.

Our det from the 79th FS has been assigned to OCN as the specialist Weasel support. It will be our job to handle any Syrian SAMs that threaten the JSTF's operations in the Syrian Theater of Operations. If the Syrian air defenses decide to get involved then we will be watching and we will be ready. Likewise as the JSTF goes after the SIA, we will be ready to support. The SIA air defenses are barely worth mentioning when compared to the Syrian's...but they still have them and therefore are still a threat we take seriously. Finally, although the Weasel role is our primary duty out here, we still expect to be called upon for other tasks too, and if we are...again we will be ready.

So this is how I came to be writing this from a tent in Jordan. We have been stationed at H4 airbase, around 30 miles south of the Syrian border. Man is it quiet out here! The facilities at H4 are bare bones, some hardened shelters, some maintenance buildings and then for our det, some tents. Just south of the base is the town of Ruwashed, once an important location due to it's pumping station for the Mosul to Haifa oil pipeline, but now it's just a quiet town in the middle of an empty desert. Not that we'd really know however as we are not permitted to leave the security of the airbase.

H4 is not a large base, along with limited facilities there is limited ramp space. H4 is already home to a Jordanian squadron so we have had to make some modifications to fit our aircraft and equipment on the base, our engineers have worked around the clock to deliver this. The base is also being used as a staging point for US Army special forces, we assume they are Delta, but of course no one will say. Accompanying them are the 160th SOAR with their Blackhawks and Chinooks. We expect that from here we will see raids launched into SIA territory in eastern Syria. Rounding out the crowded base is a ramp full of drones, OpSec here is really tight and no-one will talk about the drones, which makes us all pretty curious about their purpose.

Our detachment arrived into H4 a few days ago, the det's personnel immediately set to work setting up our infrastructure here at the base, and working on making sure our aircraft are in top condition for the weeks and months ahead of us. We've spent this time patiently waiting for our first flight out here, and finally that day has come. Our first briefing at H4 took place this morning, the briefing room has been set up within one of the small engineering sheds close to our detachment's tents. Present were all six pilots of our detachment; our CO Lt. Colonel Gary 'Popeye' Doyle, Major Tom 'Tank' Porter, Captain Kevin 'Ghost' Buster, Lt. John 'Rotor' Spiers, Lt. Ed 'Bug' Donovan and of course myself.

As we all settled into our seats in the briefing room, Popeye rose to his feet. A stocky, gruff character, Popeye is a veteran pilot, with combat tours in both Operations Iraqi and Persian Freedom. He has a reputation amongst the F-16 community as a great pilot, and amongst our squadron he is tremendously respected as a leader.

"Ok pilots," he began, "Welcome to H4 and Operation Cerberus North. I'm pleased to say that we're finally in a position to get you back in the air and the det's ground personnel have been working around the clock ahead of our first scheduled operational flight tomorrow. However before that takes place I wanted us to get one last training flight in and also to take the chance to familiarize ourselves with the airspace down here. But before we get to that we have Captain Johnson here to deliver the met brief as well as an intel brief from Major Norris. Captain, the floor is yours".

Popeye returned to his seat and a wiry, red haired Captain stood to take his place. Captain Johnson briefed us on the expected weather for the day ahead, as well as the typical weather for

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this part of Jordan at this time of year. Northeastern Jordan is a very dry place, you only have to look around the landscape to see that. At this time of year rain is virtually non-existent, cloud cover is generally low, although we expect to see more as we push north into Syria. Temperatures tend to sit in the 30°C range during the day, dropping to the low twenties or high teens at night. And we see 14 hours of sunshine a day. This weather pattern is exactly what we're looking at today, with a few scattered clouds at around 8,000 feet and a southeasterly wind. It's also going to be hot, with temperatures peaking at around 37 or 38 °C.

After completing his met brief, Captain Johnson left the briefing room and Popeye invited Major Norris to begin the intel brief.

"Thank you sir" said Norris as he took up position next to the large screen at the front of the room. A tall, athletic Texan, Norris spoke with energy and enthusiasm. "Now I hope you've all read the intelligence assessment that my team put together for you, there's a lot of valuable information in it. However, things in this theater move fast and we've had a number of developments the last two weeks so let me bring you up to speed".

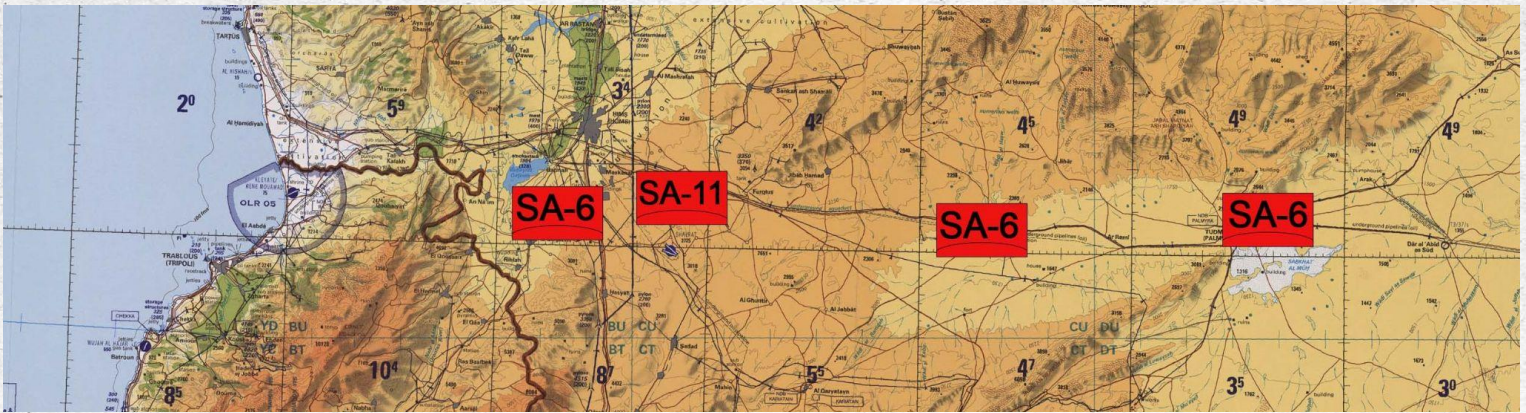
"First of all let's look at the no fly zones. Things have been pretty quiet around Whiskey, all we've seen here are Russian flights passing through the no fly zone on their way to hit SDF targets. Unpalatable as this is, the Russians are of course outside of our purview and there's nothing we can do about it, militarily at least. No fly Sierra on the other hand is a different matter, here we've seen the Syrian Air Force make repeated flights at the no fly zone, likely probing our defenses and also likely trying to draw our aircraft into SAM range. They seem keen to demonstrate that they still have plenty of teeth over the no fly zone themselves".

Kevin 'Ghost' Buster spoke up, "Do you think the SAM operators realize how dangerous a game they're playing now we're in theater?". He was met with chuckles by all the detachment pilots.

"Well Captain, I'm sure they'll soon learn soon enough," continued Major Norris, "We expect the Syrian Air Force probes to continue, which means you should be prepared to face both air to air and surface to air threats if in the vicinity of either no fly zone".

"Onto the Syrian SAM network. The primary threat around Sierra is the line of SA-6s and SA-11s, extending from Homs out to Palmyra. South of here, as I'm sure you're aware, are numerous SAM batteries, but for now we are operating outside their threat rings. Three days ago we obtained new intelligence that the Russians are in the process of reinforcing the Syrian SAM inventory, with more modern systems such as SA-11s being brought into the country in greater numbers. Russian strategic assets, such as Bears and Blackjacks have also started to make appearances in the last few days, bringing more standoff, precision attack capability with cruise missiles. Given the lack of precision munitions in the Russian inventory, this is quite an important development. We're extremely confident in saying that the Russians have really upped their support to the Syrian government recently and are clearly in this to bring about a quick Syrian victory".

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"Away from the no fly zones, the SIA are on the back foot in northern Syria. Operation Jackal kicked off yesterday and JSTF aircraft started striking SIA positions around Raqqa in much greater numbers. This is a result of the shortening of the kill chain by our command, allowing more strategic target selection. We're finally going after the SIA where it will hurt them - logistical, economic, and C3 targets for example. This more aggressive air campaign, in support of a YPG advance from the north towards Raqqa has put the SIA on the defensive in this region. They do however still possess thousands, likely tens of thousands of fighters in their territory and remain a significant threat".

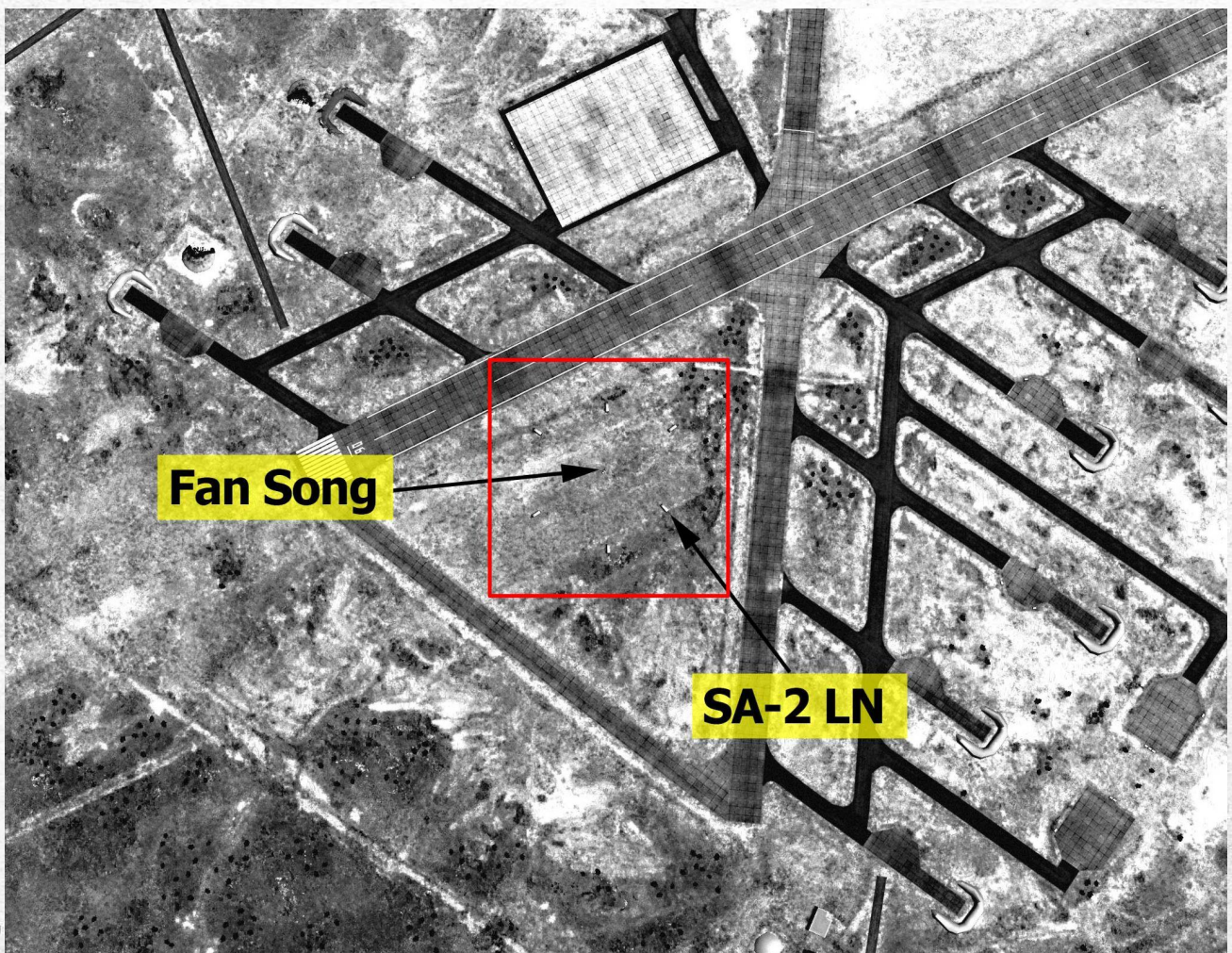
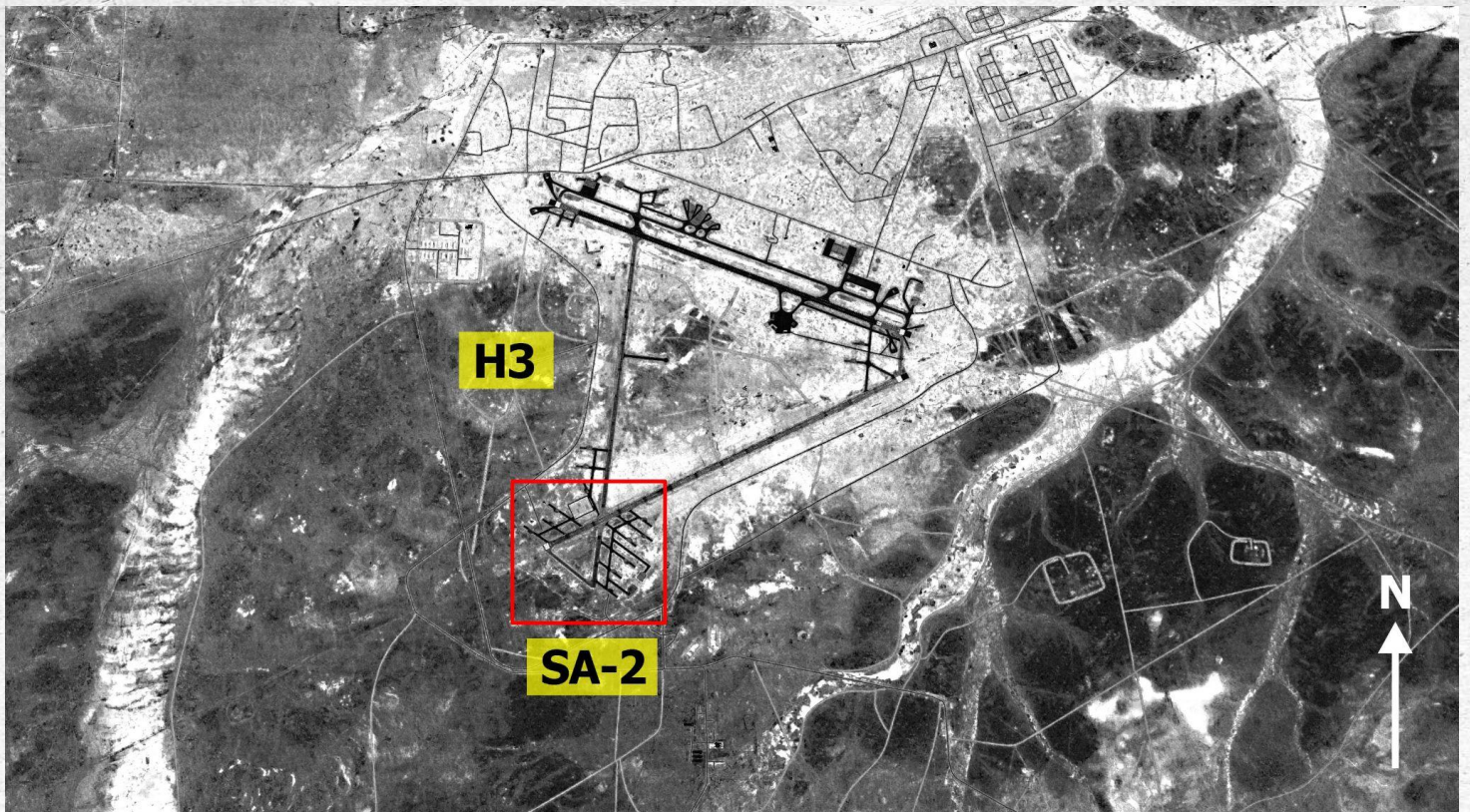
Wrapping up his intel brief, Norris departed soon after. It was then the turn of Lt. Col Doyle to brief today's training flights. Returning to the front of the room he began his brief.

"Ok then, let's get to it. Today's flights will act as part fam flight for H4 and it's surrounding area, and part training flight, as we go back over some of our tactics and attack profiles when doing what we do best, killing SAMs. We will be operating over the SWARTC today, going after a simulated SA-2 site. Here we will work on our tactical maneuvering at the flight level when evading SAMs as well as some good old fashioned gunnery skills as we work our way into and put bombs on the target".

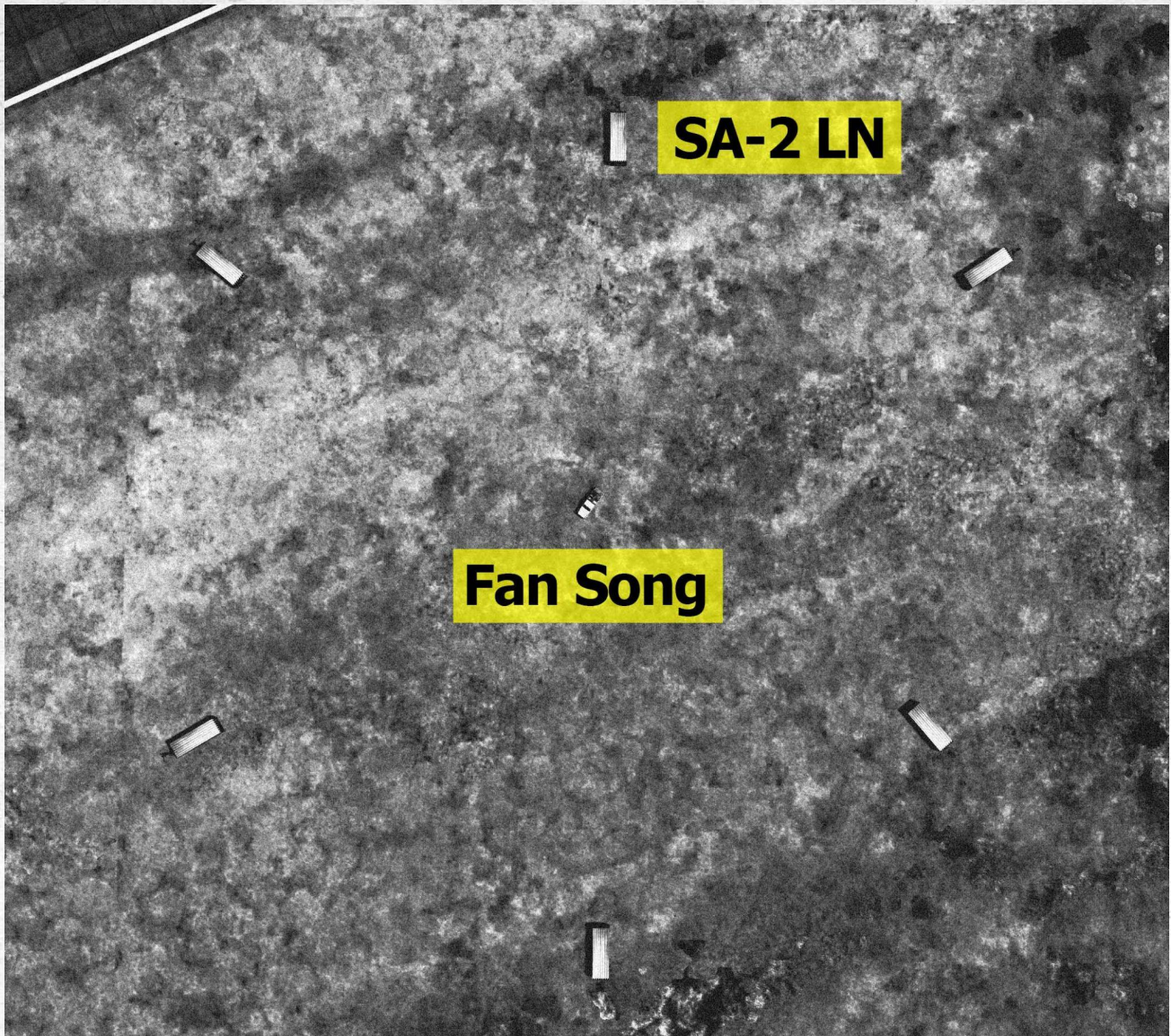
"The first flight will be a four ship, led by myself, with Rotor as my wingman. Forrest will lead the second element, with Bug on his wing. We will make a standard departure out of H4, so make sure you take one last opportunity to familiarize yourself with the SPINS here and know which ATC frequency you should be on and when. Once clear of H4 controlled airspace we will rendezvous at waypoint 1 at angels 20. Once the flight is formed up we will push to 25,000 feet and head northeast, above H4CA and along the Jordanian/Syrian border. At waypoint 2 we will turn southeast and proceed to the Iraqi border at waypoint 3. Here we will check in with Gamesmaster before we enter the SWARTC. Once cleared by Gamesmaster, we will approach H3 airbase, where a simulated SA-2 is located at waypoint 4. The range equipment will replicate an SA-2 emission, so you should see this indication on your RWR, likewise the use of smoke rockets will simulate a missile launch, but of course there won't be any actual missiles coming up to meet us. However we will still need to respond as if there were, and Gamesmaster will be calling out hits and kills if we fail to maneuver appropriately".

"The target is located on the southern tip of the old H3 base, it's in an easily identifiable position, within the triangular area formed by the taxiways. An old technical is standing in as the Fan Song radar, containers are taking the place of the launchers".

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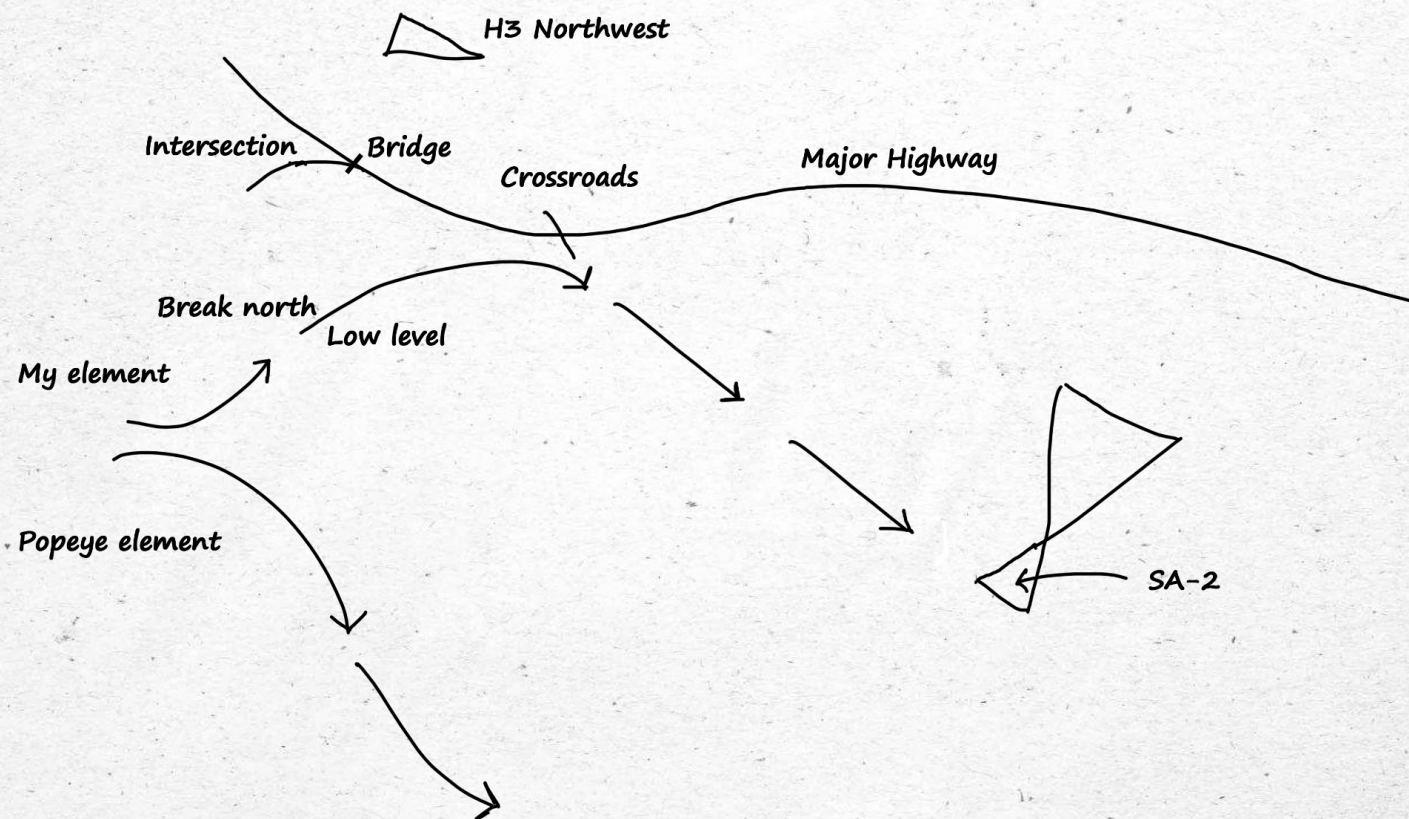
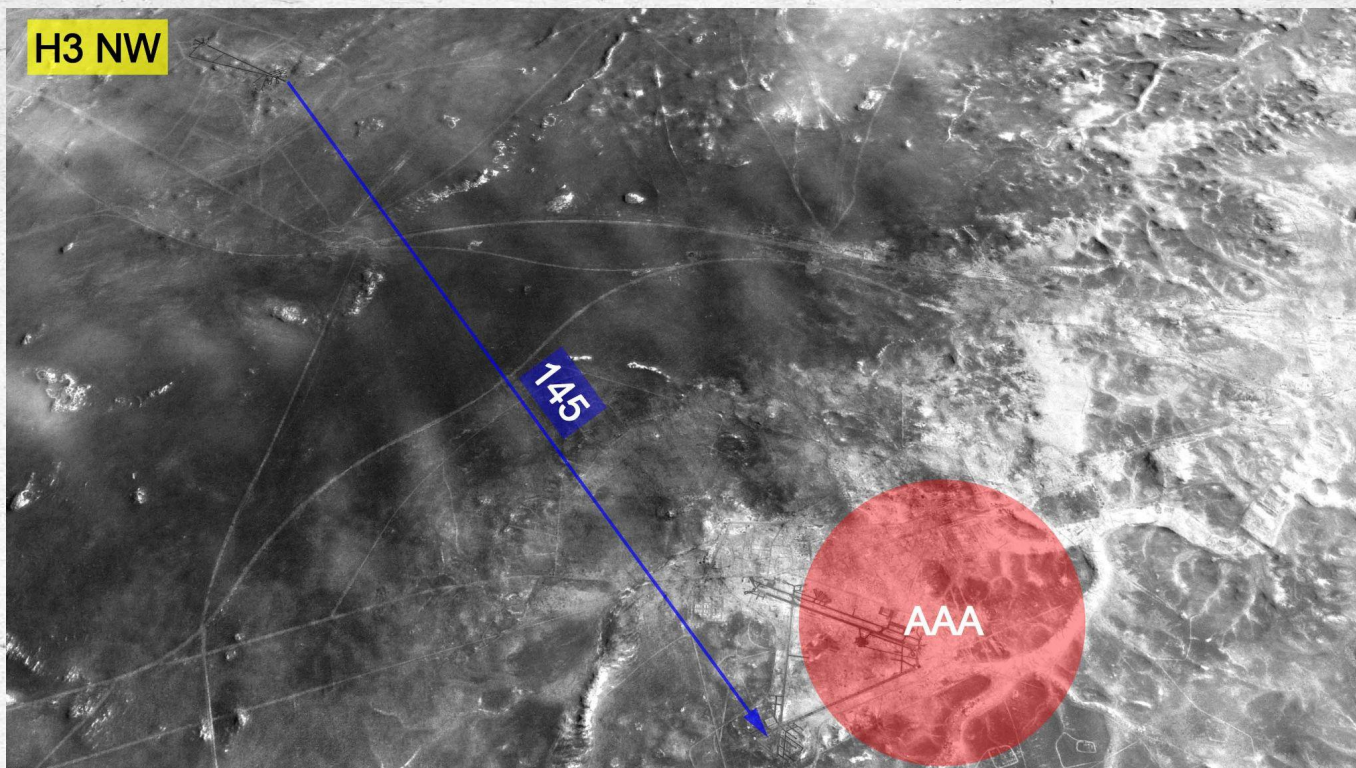


"We will approach the target with our jamming pods set to noise barrage mode as we work our way in towards the target. At some point we can expect the SA-2 to burn through the jamming, if this happens and we are engaged we will execute a tactical maneuver to defeat the radar and use one element to distract the radar operators while the other element goes in for the kill".

Popeye went on to describe the maneuver we would execute if the SA-2 attempts to engage us. The two elements of the flight will break 90 degrees in opposite directions, so as we are heading east towards the target Popeye will break his element south, while I lead my element north - this will put the missile at 90 degrees to our aircraft. At the same time my element will dive for the deck and Popeye will keep his element high, and after defeating the shot will loiter at the edge of the SA-2's engagement range. This split level tactic will be very difficult for an old system like the SA2 to handle as it's operators struggle to manually track multiple targets or targets at low altitude.

While Popeye holds the attention of the Guideline, me and Bug will work our way north and hook round to attack on a heading of 145, this attack axis is important so as to avoid a significant AAA threat north and east of the H3 site. Gamemaster will be monitoring our positioning and will record a kill against us if we enter the threat envelope of the AAA.

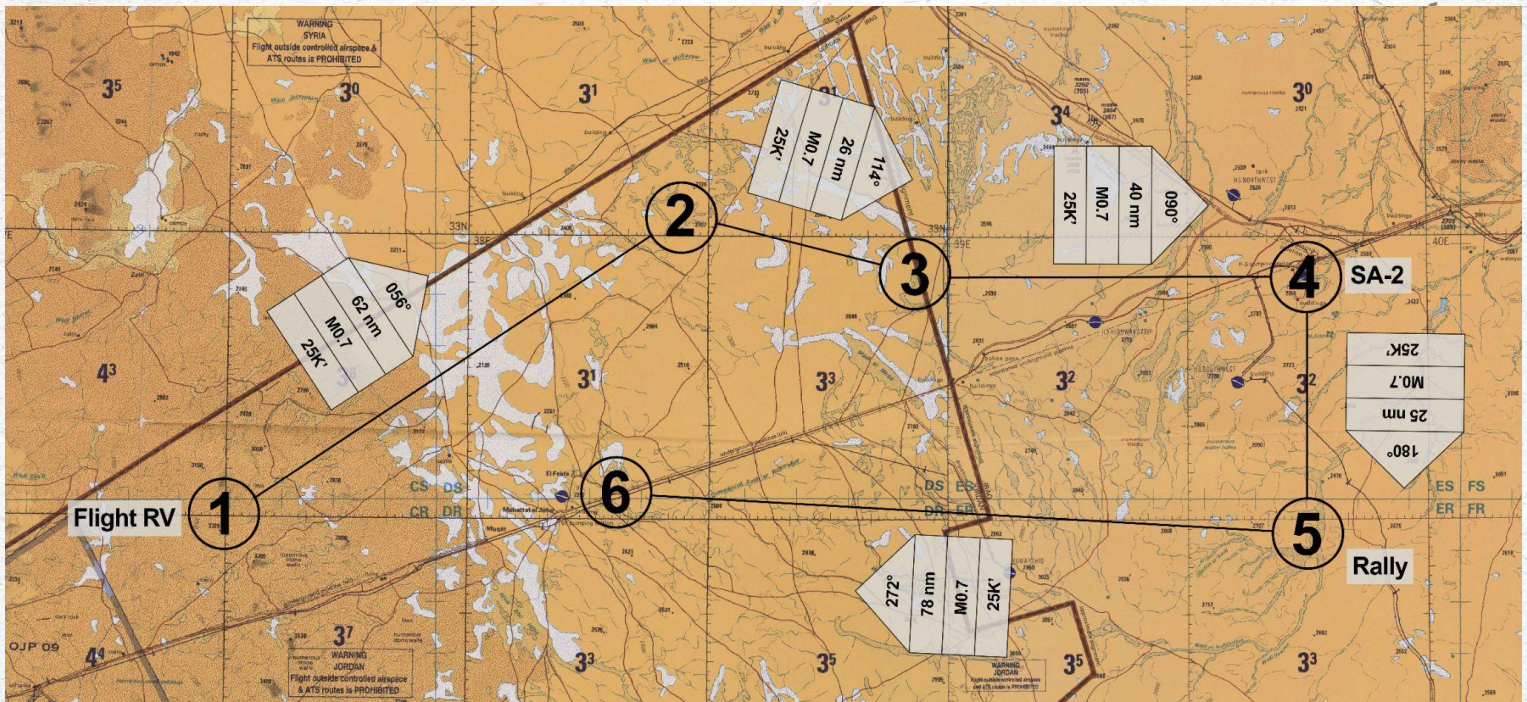
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When we break north we should look for the main highway running west to east about 3 miles south of the H3 Northwest air base site. The crossroads on this highway will act as our IP for the target and is located 7.5 miles from the SA-2 position. As we approach the target I will perform a pop up attack on the position, dropping a CBU-87 on the SAM site before egressing south at high speed and low level.

The Fan Song radar is the primary target. The pop maneuver will minimize the time exposed to enemy fire but I should only make one pass on the target, after the first pass you can guarantee that the local air defenses will be fully alert and any re-attack will be highly dangerous. I should also take care to avoid the AAA during my pop maneuver by offsetting away from the danger area. Once clear of the target area the flight will rendezvous at our rally point, waypoint 5, before heading back to H4.



Our fuel usage has been calculated and recorded in our kneeboards. The plan is to arrive in the target area with just under 9900lb, with bingo being set at 3400lb. This allows us approximately 6,500 lb of fuel over the target, which should be more than enough, although of course this will quickly deplete if I rage around at low level in afterburner too much.

Popeye finished up by describing the procedures for re-entering H4 controlled airspace. Once inbound back on H4CA (30 miles from H4) we must declare ourselves to H4 Approach, who will assign us an altitude at which we should enter H4CA. Once we reach the 30 mile perimeter of H4 airspace we will switch to H4 Arrival and make contact, and we will then be assigned either approach Alpha or Bravo, which use the nearby wind farm and shale oil plants as reference points for approaches from either the east or west. From Alpha or Bravo we will then be directed to a pattern altitude until the tower is ready to bring us in for landing. Once directed, we will leave the pattern and contact the tower before performing an immediate landing.

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We will be carrying a full combat loadout for today's flight, with two bags and 2 CBU-87's as well as a mix of Amraams and Sidewinders for self defense as we will be skirting the Syrian border. This loadout tops out at just under over 39,000 lb.

The briefing concluded with a discussion of the threats we will see today. We split these into actual and simulated threats. Actual threats are limited in the area we will be operating in, there will be no surface to air threats but there is the unlikely possibility of the Syrian Air Force trying to crash our party, the most likely aircraft we will see in the south of Syria are the Mig-21's based out of Khalkhalal and Tha'lah airbases, although the possibility of Mig-23 or 29s also remains. Simulated threats consist of course of an SA-2, along with a mix of low and medium altitude AAA - ZU-23, S-60 and ZSU-23-4. Popeye reminded us of the importance of studying the threats we will face, knowing their engagement envelopes and vulnerabilities is a crucial part of our role. There is no such thing as the perfect weapons system and everything comes with tradeoffs, our expertise is avoiding their strengths and exploiting their weaknesses. We fight on our own terms.

After taking questions and confirming everyone's understanding of the plan, Popeye ended the briefing. Leaving the briefing room we walked back to our tents, excitedly talking about the flight ahead of us, the energy amongst the group was high and it was clear we were all relishing the opportunity to get out there and start Weaseling around, even if it's only against simulated targets. Returning to our tents we put our heads back into our notes from the briefing and went over the details again and again, studying the terrain, landmarks and target photos. This might only be a training flight but our professionalism and pride won't allow us the possibility of screwing it up, and even though the threats are simulated, hitting the ground is still a very real danger.

We step to the jets at 12 noon local, takeoff will be at 13:00.