

FIRST IN - WEASELS OVER SYRIA

1st July, 2013.

The last few days have certainly been eventful. The northern section of the Syrian IADS has taken a pounding, with further strikes being carried out yesterday and overnight by a wide array of JSTF aircraft.

Yesterday our Weasel detachment supported strikes on Tiyas airbase, as we protected a strike package targeting the base's early warning radar, aircraft, hardened shelters and weapons dump. That was our seventh mission in six days, including two yesterday, and the pace of operations is beginning to show in our fatigue levels. Adequate sleep has been hard to come by, and although we've not yet flown at night, the late planning sessions combined with the noise of the base has done plenty to hinder our rest.

So it was grudgingly and wearily that we dragged ourselves from our tents at dawn today and made our way to the briefing room. The ever annoyingly chipper Popeye was ready and waiting for us.

"Morning pilots!" he greeted us, a muffled and mumbled "Morning Sir" was the best reply we could muster. We all made a beeline for much needed coffee, before settling into our seats, indicating to Popeye that the briefing could begin.

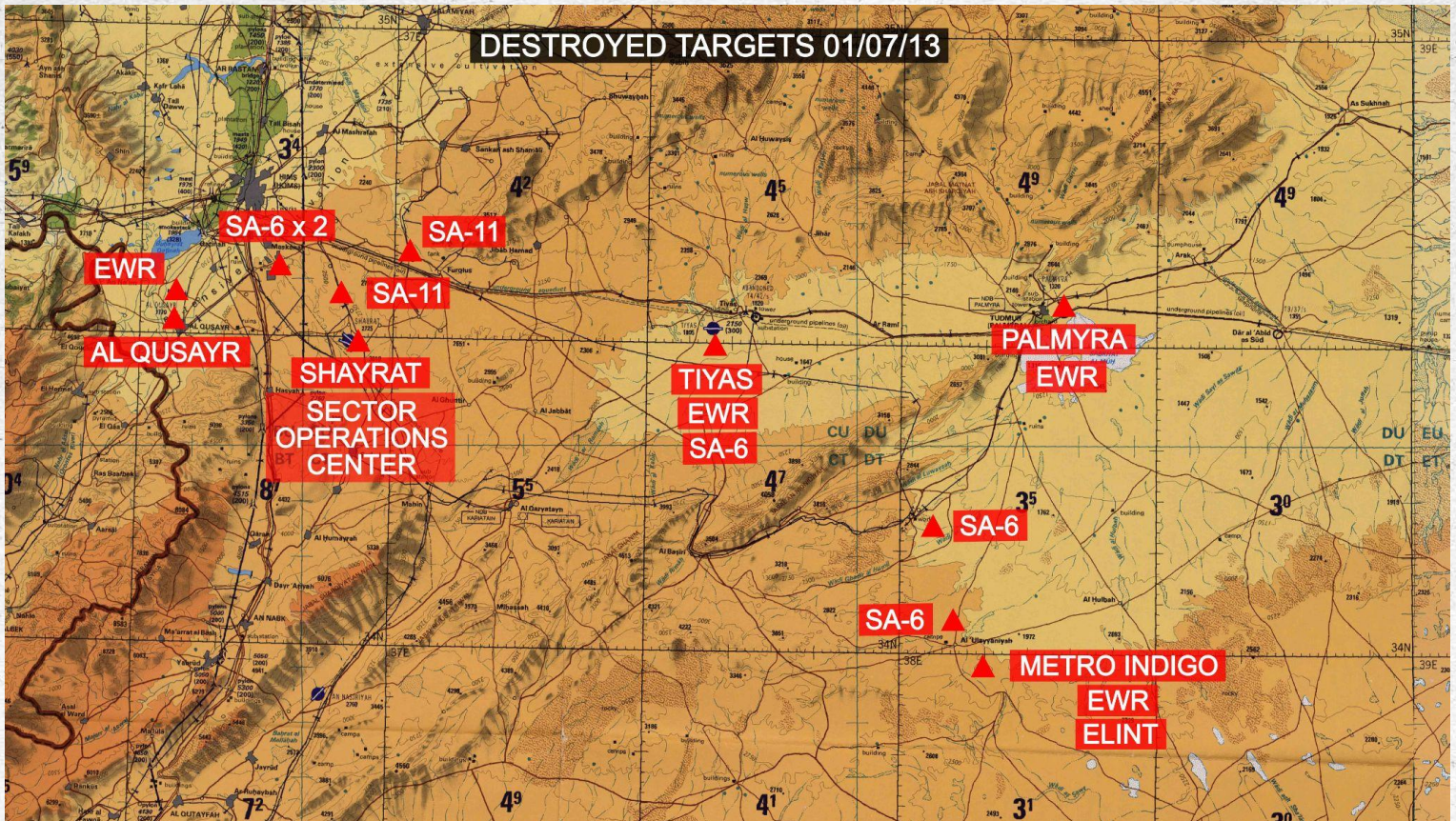
It began as ever with Captain Johnson's met brief. The Captain informed us that the cloud we saw arriving yesterday had continued building throughout the night and that there was now a mostly solid overcast over Syria and northern Jordan at around 11,000 feet. The winds have also settled down a little, meaning the clouds are expected to linger throughout the day.

Once Captain Johnson had departed, Major Norris rose to deliver his intel brief. He began by talking about the state of the Syrian air defenses.

"The last 2 days have seen significant pressure put on the Syrian IADS. The northern sector of the Syrian's defenses has been heavily damaged and we estimate a very significant degradation in their operational capability. Up to now we have confirmed the elimination of early warning radars at Al Qusayr, Tiyas, Palmyra and the Metro Indigo site, along with 5 SA-6 batteries, two SA-11 batteries and numerous aircraft, hardened shelters and weapons and fuel dumps. Communications nodes have also been destroyed, along with the sector operations center for northern Syria, located adjacent to Shayrat airbase".

"This is a significant setback for the Syrians in the north and seriously hampers their ability to challenge us around no fly Sierra at this moment in time".

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“However the Syrians have attempted to replace their losses by deploying additional SAMs from the south. A picket line of SA-8s and Dog Ear radars has been established north of Shayrat and Tiyas. We also have further intelligence that additional SA-11 batteries may be moved into position over the next 48 hours”.

“More targets for us then...” remarked Rotor.

The Major continued, “But even with these reinforcements, our ability to enforce the no fly zone is greatly improved”.

Norris then turned his attention to Syrian air activity. “While we’ve seen a reduction in SyAAF activity around Homs over the last 48 hours, most likely a result of the amount of aircraft we’ve had in the air around Sierra, we have also seen an increase in sortie generation from Syrian bases in the south. None of these aircraft have yet found their way north to Sierra or challenged us in the air, but that doesn’t mean they won’t”.

“The Russians are a different story though, here we’ve seen a real drop off in air activity. We believe they’ve started a big maintenance push, the Russian’s aren’t particularly experienced in expeditionary operations and the pace of their operations might be starting to take their toll. This has the added convenience of keeping themselves out of the way while the Syrians and JSTF are contesting the airspace around Sierra”.

Norris finished up by discussing the situation with the SIA. The SIA in the Euphrates valley have now been cut off from Raqqa by a combination of JSTF special forces and the SDF, Raqqa itself is now fully encircled by a combination of SDF and YPG forces, and the attack on the city itself is expected to commence soon. The frontline between SIA and Syrian forces remains fairly static.

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Norris then concluded his intelligence briefing and departed, and Popeye began to brief today's mission.

"Ok pilots, I know we're all tired but we're in demand once again by command so I need you all to dig deep and get ready to go again later today. As Major Norris said, the Syrian air defenses in the north have been significantly degraded which opens the possibility of further supporting the SDF on the ground against the SAA, although at this point we're stopping short of providing CAS or engaging the SAA directly. However, the CAOC has requested additional intelligence on SAA movements in the vicinity of Homs. The cloud has really set in the last few days, disrupting reliable satellite intelligence, so a photo recon flight has been tasked to push south from Sierra. They will reconnoiter SAA troop locations on the southern side of Homs, along with movements along the MSR running north to the city and suspected artillery positions south of Shayrat. The recon flight will be carried out by the Brits, a flight of two GR4 Tornados, callsign Action 2".

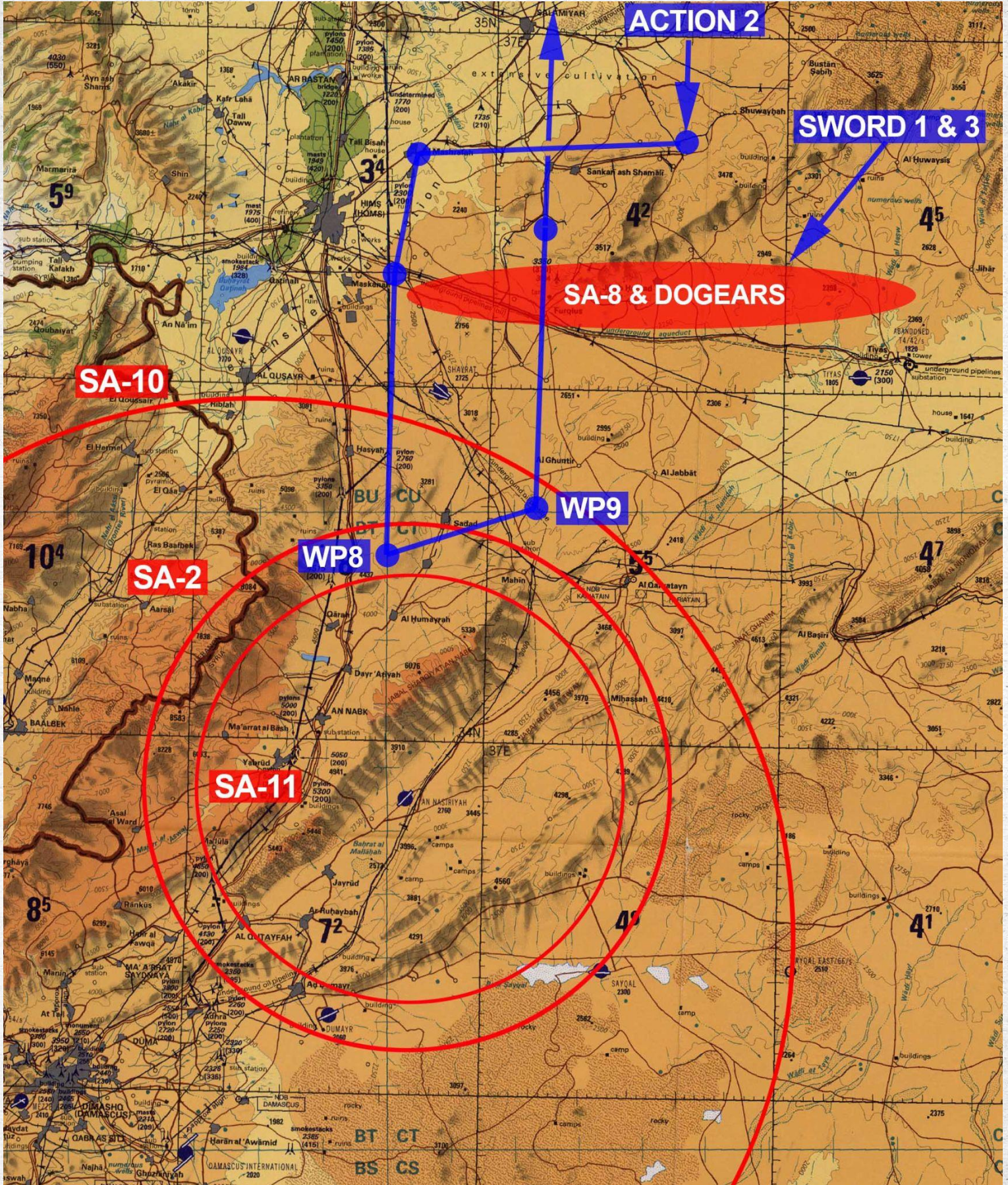
"Action's route will take them 25 miles south of Homs, so this will bring them into range of a number of Syrian SAMs located further south. To counteract these threats Action will be provided with an escort jam by two Growlers - callsign Spartan 2, alongside a Weasel two ship that will suppress any SAMs that threaten Action's route. Forrest and Rotor you will be providing the Weasel escort. The rest of us will be carrying out attacks on the SA-8 and Dog Ear positions ahead of your ingress".

"What threats are we looking at boss?" asked Rotor.

Popeye responded, "Action's route will bring them into range of the SA-2 at An Nasiriyah, but more critically they will also be within engagement range of the SA-10 battery at Damascus IAP. The SA-11 battery at An Nasiriyah should remain just out of range providing it stays put in its current location. Now the escort jam should be enough to protect Action from engagement from any of these positions, so our main concern is from a pop up threat".

"As Major Norris has already mentioned, the Syrians are attempting to replace losses in the north with reinforcements from the south. This opens up the possibility of either SA-6s, or more likely SA-8s or 11s transiting the area. The danger of stumbling across one of these mobile SAMs is why you're going in with the recon flight. Should you detect any threats upon Action's route, you will need to assess the risk it poses and if called for suppress or kill it. However you will need to be conscious about your positioning in relation to the electronic support, leaving Spartan 2's protection is not advisable within the SA-10s MEZ. Spartan will be set up on TACAN on frequency 103 X-Ray".

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Having laid out the basics Popeye then began to go through our mission flow in detail.

This mission will see me pairing up again with Rotor. Departing H4 we will proceed on our flight plan at angels 27. As we head north we should ensure we stick to our flight plan carefully to avoid any threats from the SIA/SAA frontline, the SA-2 and SA-3 south of Tiyas and any SHORAD still present around Tiyas itself.

We will descend to angels 15 at waypoint 4, here we will switch to Green 2, our common mission frequency, and rendezvous with Action and Spartan, keeping a close watch for any active SA-8s in this area. These should already have been dealt with by Sword 1 and Sword 3 but we will need to stay vigilant. Once our group is formed up we will push west for waypoint 5, descending to 9000 feet MSL and below the cloud deck. Turning south at waypoint 5, Action will begin it's assigned mission, with ourselves and Spartan in support. Action will fly the planned route at 9,000 feet MSL and M0.8, our escort will end at waypoint 10, where Spartan and Action will egress north, and we will turn south for home.

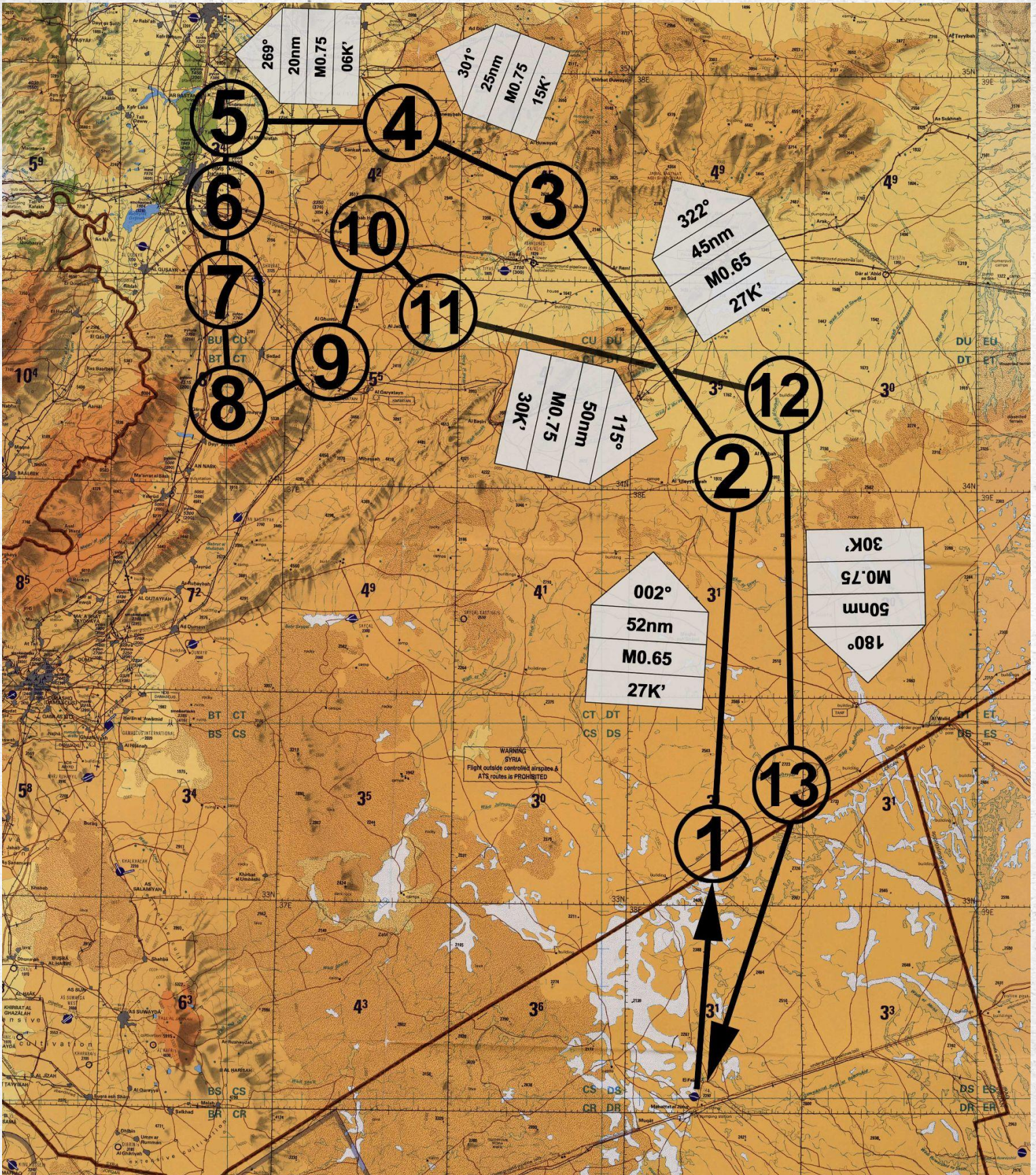
Spartan will be holding close to Action throughout the mission, ensuring they are protected electronically. So long as we are also in close proximity to Spartan we will enjoy the same protection, but should we venture too far from their protective bubble we will expose ourselves to the Syrian radars.

The presence of Spartan will prevent the threats already identified from engaging Action. Our role will be to identify and engage any additional pop up threats we may encounter during our incursion south. As Popeye stated these are most likely to be Gainfuls, Geckos or Godflys transiting north. Should we encounter any additional threats we will need to quickly determine the risk it poses to the Tornados and decide on a course of action. This will be a dynamic situation where quick decision making will be vital, getting behind in our thought process will endanger Action, and potentially risk them scrubbing the mission if they feel the threat to them is too great. However peeling off to handle a threat risks exposing ourselves if we end up straying too far from Spartan. Our decision making will need to be on point for this one, there's a lot at stake.

My loadout today will be 1 HARM, alongside 2 EO Mavs, plus the usual pods and fuel. Rotor will be carrying two HARMS. This mix will give us decent ability to suppress radars or target precise threats from standoff distances, vital given our need to keep moving with Spartan and Action.

Bingo fuel is 4,200 lb, however the estimated fuel remaining when we split from Action at waypoint 10 is 7,000lb, leaving us with 2,800 lb for dealing with any issues we may encounter on mission. Should we require AAR during the mission, Texaco's tanker track will be located about 50 miles north of waypoint 10.

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The primary threats on this mission will be the aforementioned known SAM systems, SA-2, 10 and 11, with potential pop up threats from, most likely, SA-8 or SA-11. We've yet to tangle with an SA-10 or 11 since our arrival in theater but we know from our intelligence briefings that these are highly capable, with no obvious vulnerabilities. Jamming, terrain masking and simply staying clear of their MEZ are our best defenses against such systems...of course as Weasels we also believe that offense is our best defense. Popeye was keen to remind us about the SA-11s radars. The search radar is the Snow Drift (SD on our RWR), each TELAR however also contains the Fire Dome engagement radar (11 on the RWR), and can still engage you if you get close enough even without the search radar operational.

In addition to these primary threats, we should be vigilant for AAA and IR SAM threats. Action's requirement to get beneath the cloud layer means we will typically be around 5,000 to 6,000 feet AGL in hostile territory. This will be mitigated somewhat by high speed and a short time in the threat area, but we should keep our heads on a swivel and lookout for smoke trails and tracers.

Action's route has been planned to thread itself between a number of threat locations so we should try not to deviate from this route. South of Homs and several miles west of our route is an air defense site (Air Defense academy), this was home to two now destroyed SA-6 batteries, however it is likely that a significant amount of AAA and IR SAMs remain, including SA-13. Our route also loops around Shayrat airbase. This was visited overnight by JSTF strikers, no SAM threats remain however the base is still well defended by SHORAD, so again expect the full range of AAA and IR SAM threats.

Air to air threats are not expected to interfere with our mission, we plan to be in and out the threat area too quickly for that, however given the Syrian increase in air activity to the south, this is something that will be carefully monitored by Sentinel and our AWACS.

The briefing concluded shortly after and myself and Rotor broke out to study the mission plan some more. Although the mission appears relatively straightforward on the surface, what we're concerned about is the known unknowns...we'll need to keep our wits about us on this one. Takeoff is set for 17:30.