

LAST OUT - WEASELS OVER SYRIA II

August 15th, 2013.

Yesterday was another eventful day in the Syrian Theater of Operations. Our Weasel detachment was kept busy hunting Hezbollah SAMs in and around the Bekaa Valley and Anti-Lebanon mountains. At the village of Al Jarajir, Bug and I were tasked with finding and killing an SA-6, which as it turned out was accompanied by an SA-8 as well. We also learned that the Syrians appear to be present in the southern Bekaa Valley as well as using the valley as a route through which to mount air attacks on the SDF. All of which was information our intel section were very interested in.

Today will no doubt be just as eventful, there seems to be no quiet days at the moment in the STO. Arriving at the briefing room, we said good morning to the rest of the detachment before getting ourselves seated. Popeye then kicked the briefing off by having the OMT deliver the met brief. The OMT told us that the left over cloud from the storm is still lingering, with broken clouds around 16,000 feet. We will however only have relatively low winds to worry about.

Once the OMT had departed, Major Norris gave us a short intel update. The Major had little new information for us, but did report that early indications were that our time spent hunting Hezbollah SAMs yesterday was very effective, with very few reports of SAM activity in that area since we carried out our missions. Reports of Syrian SAMs within the Bekaa Valley are still being worked through and Major Norris hoped to have an update for us soon.

Norris then concluded his brief and Popeye began to brief today's mission.

"Ok pilots let's get to it...I think you're going to like what I'm about to tell you. At 15:50 Zulu today a large strike package of Vipers and Strike Eagles out of Incirlik will be attacking Palmyra airbase and nearby SAA positions. We will be providing 6 Weasels as force protection for the attack, supported by a flight of Growlers".

"Alright!" exclaimed Rotor, "About time we finally get to go after that SA-6".

"Hell yeah" replied Bug, "That thing's been allowed to live for far too long".

"Thought you'd be pleased" said Popeye, "But don't get too excited, this will not be a simple mission to execute...there's some...uuuh...*complications* we have to work through, but we'll come to those shortly".

"The Palmyra complex is the last Syrian stronghold in the northern half of the country and as such the Syrians - supported by the Russians - have reinforced the area heavily. The targets today are in two locations. First the Vipers, under the callsigns 'Mongrel', will be attacking the SAA's 550th Brigade, the 550th has a significant number of armored fighting vehicles - BMP-2s - as well as being a chemical weapons storage area. The Vipers will be targeting both the armor and chemical weapons bunkers. The Strike Eagles, under the callsign 'Hammer 3', will attack the airbase itself. They will be targeting fuel and ammunition storage, along with any remaining aircraft parked at the base".

"Our role will be force protection, dealing with any air defenses threatening the strike package along with any air to air threats that may attempt to join the fight. This role will be somewhat complicated by the presence of the ancient ruins at Palmyra".

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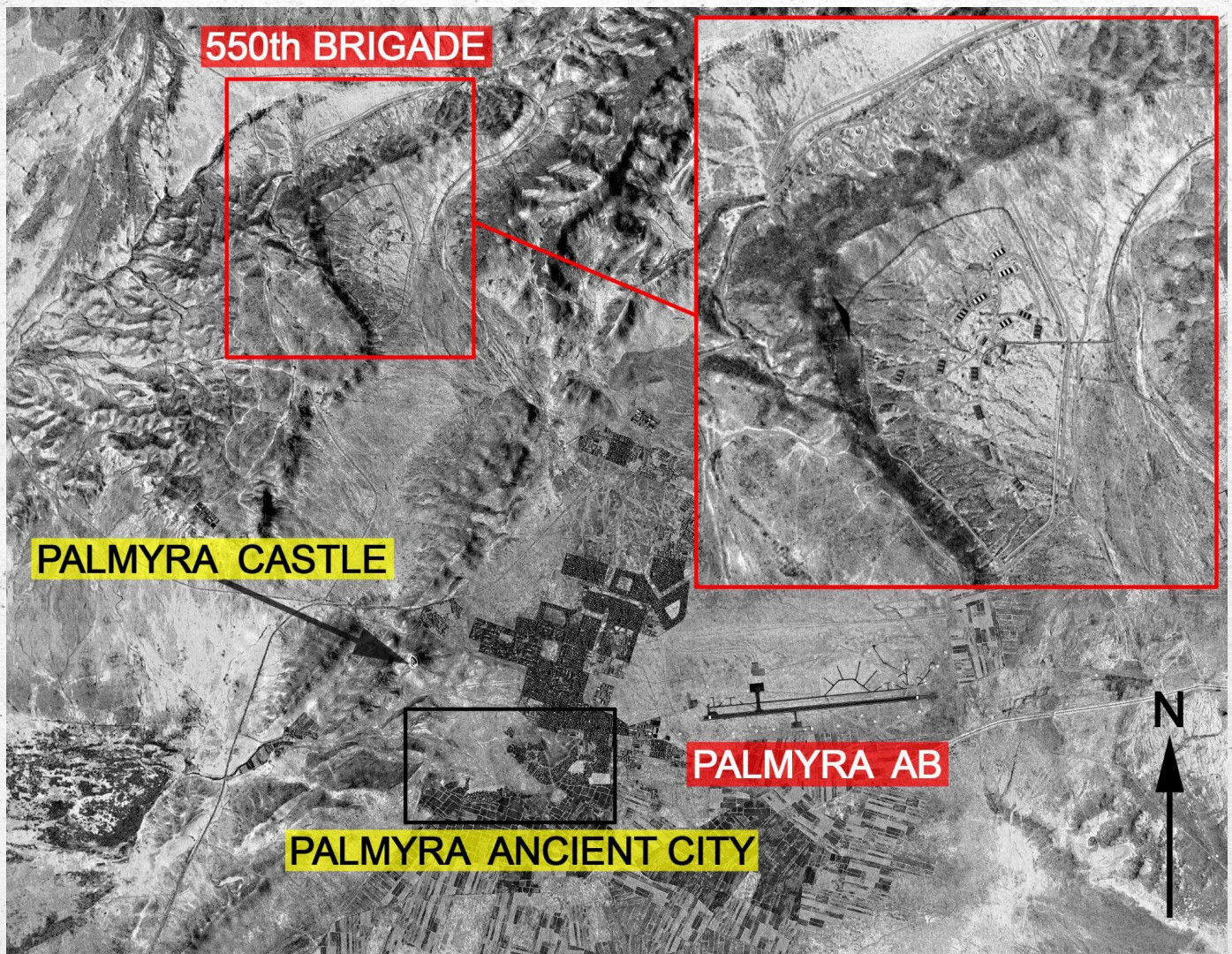
"These ruins are a world heritage site and of a highly significant cultural value, as you know this is one of the main reasons the CAOC has restricted our activities in this area up to now...you don't need me to tell you the shit storm that would descend upon us all were we to accidentally blow up a world heritage site. The SDF however are going to be attacking into Palmyra soon, and have been promised our support in pushing the Syrians out, so we've now been given the green light for operations in this area...but with one important restriction...no HARMs, no JDAMs, no Mavs, no CBU's...it's LGBs *only*, we need to remain in control of our weapons and their effects at all times".

Boomer spoke up, "SAM hunting without HARMs? Unbelievable..."

"If the radar shuts down then those things can end up anywhere" Popeye replied, "We had an incident in Allied Force of a HARM hitting an apartment building when it lost it's target radar so there is precedent for this concern. Besides I've no doubt six Weasels with LGBs are a clear overmatch for an SA-6".

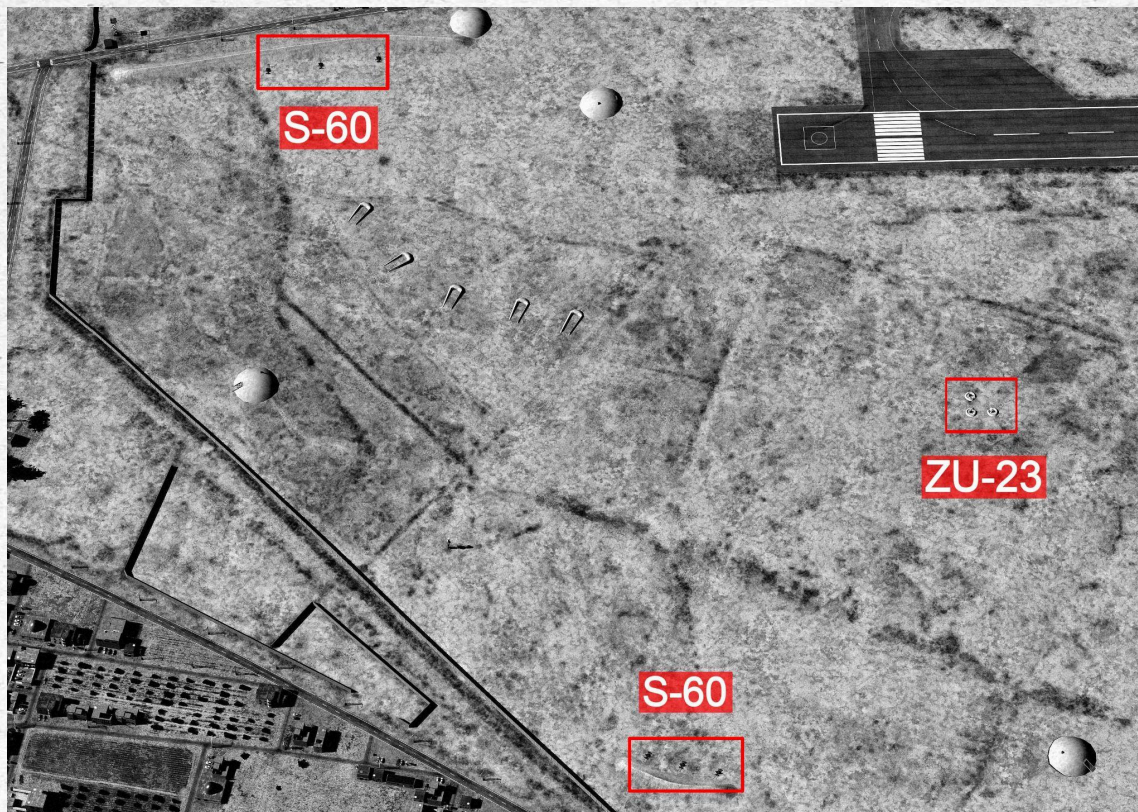
"What's the problem with JDAM?" asked Rotor.

"Well as you're aware, laser guidance is more precise than JDAM, and there's concern over GPS jamming so the CAOC is taking no chances on this mission. Now of course using LGBs means you also will be more vulnerable during the delivery, especially when working under the cloud, so good teamwork will be vital".



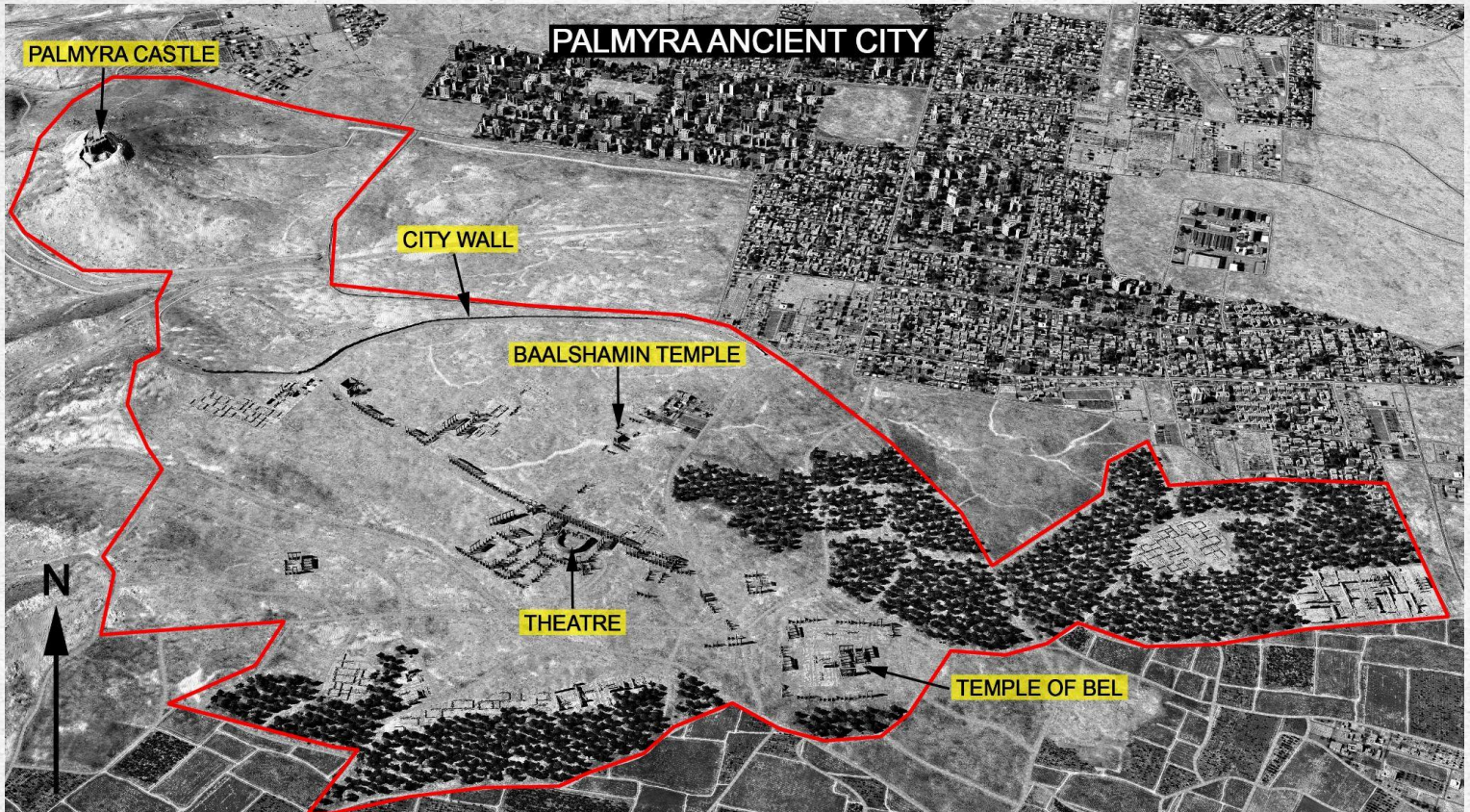
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"This location is believed to be protected by an SA-6 and 2 SA-8s. Most recent intel puts the SA-8s within the airbase, while the SA-6 is believed to be south of the city, somewhere in the vicinity of ancient Palmyra. The entire area is also very heavily protected by AAA, with probably the heaviest concentration we've yet seen in Syria outside Damascus. AAA consists of emplaced ZU-23s, batteries of S-60s, a battery of KS-19 with Fire Can guidance and at least two ZSU-23-4s".



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"The ancient city lies to the southwest of the airbase, and let me be clear, you are not cleared to engage targets within the red lines marked here without express permission from the CAOC beforehand. We don't believe the Syrians will attempt to conceal any equipment amongst the ruins...this site is highly significant to them as well...but on the chance that they do, don't make any rash decisions. Instead mark the target location, call it in and await further guidance".



After confirming our explicit understanding, Popeye continued.

"You will be operating as three two-ship flights. Sword 1 will consist of Shade and Boomer, Sword 2 will be Forrest and Bug, and Sword 3 is Tank and Rotor. Shade will also be taking on the role of mission commander for the entire strike package. Your TOT over the target is 15:35 Zulu, with the strike package due to arrive 15 minutes later at 15:50 Zulu".

Having briefed an overview of the mission, Popeye then began to break down the mission details.

The six of us will depart Akrotiri, rendezvousing again at waypoint 4, before pushing into Syria through the Silver Corridor. We will fence in before entering Silver and should remain alert to any SAM threats from the Bekaa Valley. The recent Russian airlift activity has slowed considerably and we no longer have any restrictions in flying to eastern Syria. So once clear of Silver we will continue on flight plan to waypoint 7, where we will switch our UHF radios to the strike frequency and will link up with our Growler support - Spartan 3 - before pushing onto our IP at waypoint 8.

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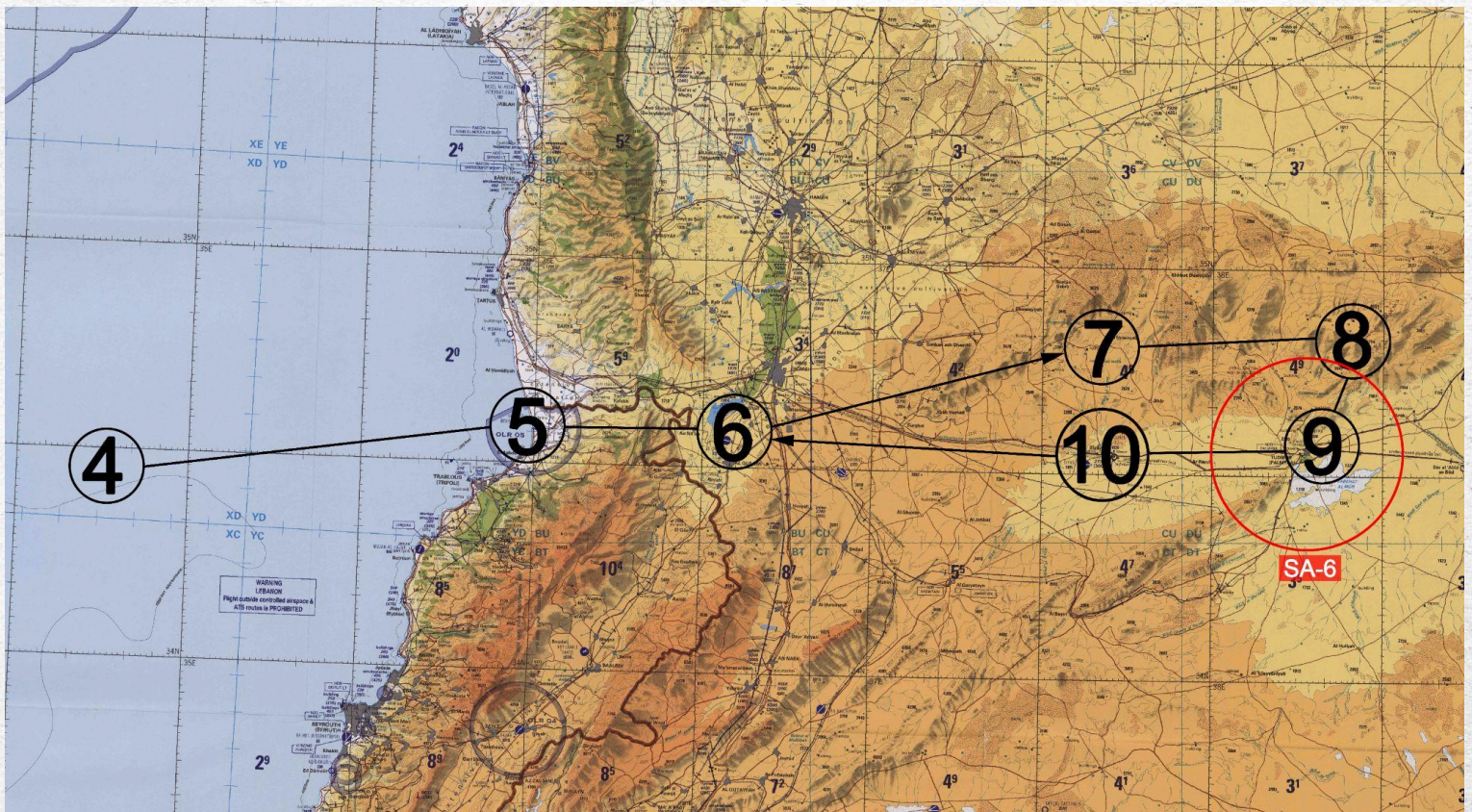
Our IP is located around 20 miles north of Palmyra, which keeps us clear of the Syrian/SDF frontline, and the air defenses in this area. This includes the Sharqiyah mines, 25 miles southwest of Palmyra, which are presently believed to once again contain an SA-15 as part of this strategically important site's considerable SHORAD.

As we approach the IP we will begin to search for threats in the target area (waypoint 9 is Palmyra airbase). Sword 1 will keep high and monitor the radar for air to air threats with AWACS support from Magic, my flight will search for the SA-6 in the vicinity of the ancient city (southwest of waypoint 9) and Sword 3 is tasked with locating the SA-8s within the airbase. For deconfliction we will proceed at separate altitudes below the cloud, Sword 2's assigned altitude will be 15,000 ft MSL.

Once the targets are located we will push in from the IP and engage. Given the lack of HARMs for SAM suppression, then should the SAMs go active we will need to work as a team to distract and overwhelm the SAMs in order to get in close and put bombs on target. The exact method for our attack will need to be worked out on the fly, depending on the tactical situation we find at the target.

Once the SAM threat is eliminated and the strike underway at 13:50 Zulu, we will continue to provide cover during the strike package's vul period, once the strikers are clear we will egress the area via our rally point at waypoint 10, before proceeding back to Akrotiri through the Silver Corridor.

Loadout for this mission will be 4 GBU-12s along with all the usual tanks and pods. Bingo fuel is set at 3,500 lb from the target area.



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The briefing ended with a detailed threat assessment. Palmyra contains considerable AAA defenses with the full range of calibers defending the airbase and 550th Brigade, and given the cloud coverage and the necessity to use LGBs on this mission there is an increased threat to our aircraft from AAA. We should therefore keep our speed high and avoid flying predictably to help throw off their aim, making changes to heading and altitude as much as possible.

SAM threats should be no more serious than the two expected SA-8s and the SA-6, along with the usual anticipated IR SAM threats. We are well versed by now in handling these threats, although the loadout restrictions enforced upon us will increase the need for teamwork in safely striking the targets.

Palmyra also houses both Mig-21s and SU-24s. The former are the most likely threat should the Syrians attempt to get airborne in defense, although as we've seen up to now this has been a fairly rare occurrence. Sword 1 is tasked with air to air protection on this mission.

Finally, we should take care not to stray too far south of Palmyra. Here we will find the Syrian/SDF frontline and the Sharqiyah mines, all of which are well defended by SHORAD, not least an SA-15 at the mines.

The briefing was then concluded and Bug, Tank, Rotor joined me in departing the briefing room to further study our role in the mission. Inevitably our talk turned to two subjects, the restrictive weapons loadout enforced upon us and Shade's assignment as mission commander. Neither were popular choices but as Tank reminded us, we still needed to get the job done so we need to suck it up and concentrate on what we could control.

Easier said than done when it's your ass on the line. Takeoff is 14:45 Zulu.