

LAST OUT - WEASELS OVER SYRIA II

August 16th, 2013.

We end the day with sobering news. Although it remains just rumor at this time, there is widespread talk around Akrotiri that there has been a fatal shootdown of a JSTF pilot this afternoon. A group of us approached Popeye to find out what, if anything, he knew...but he wasn't sharing and we were sent scurrying away again empty handed, with Shade chastising us as we did so. We'll have news when there is news to give.

If these rumors are true they serve as a reminder of the serious nature of our mission out here, and I'm still amazed that our Weasel detachment has yet to lose anyone. Our mission out to Palmyra yesterday was another high intensity mission, with a number of potent threats facing us, but by luck, skill or maybe even divine intervention we all made it through unscathed again. That doesn't apply to Shade of course, we're pretty clear on why he emerged unscathed...but that's not something I want to get dragged into if I can help it.

The situation in Syria keeps escalating however, and that is causing me far more concern right now. We learned in an intel briefing this morning just what it was that got the Russians so worked up yesterday, and in short...it was Israel. Turns out the Russian Foxhounds that raced south into the Bekaa Valley were responding to an incursion into Lebanon by the Israeli Air Force. The IAF were believed to be targeting Syrian positions in the Bekaa Valley. One of the Foxhounds was subsequently damaged by fire from an IAF F-15E, forcing the Russians to withdraw, and sparking a large deployment of Russian air power in response. It would be fair to say that relations between Israel and Russia right now are 'strained'.

So this powder keg was the backdrop to the briefing we attended late this afternoon, ahead of our missions slated for tonight. As we arrived we noticed Popeye and Major Norris deep in conversation, both with concerned looks on their faces. "That doesn't fill me with confidence," remarked Rotor as we took our seats.

Once the detachment was all in attendance, Popeye kicked things off by inviting the Akrotiri OMT to deliver the met brief. The news for tonight was good, with just a few scattered clouds around 6,000 feet and relatively calm winds, likely to be in the 5-10 knots range.

After the OMT had departed Popeye invited Major Norris to deliver the intel brief. Taking the podium, Norris began by addressing the rumors that had consumed our attention all afternoon. He confirmed that a JSTF pilot had indeed been shot down and killed, the identity of the pilot was currently being withheld pending notification of the pilot's family. This however was not the news which concerned us most, after all we all know this is a real risk of the job we do. Instead what really shocked us was the information that this pilot was shot down during departure from Incirlik, apparently struck by a MANPAD as they were taking off. The perpetrators - an SIA cell that had infiltrated Turkey - were killed shortly after by Turkish security forces. This was the sort of threat we anticipated at H4, close to the Syrian border, but to see it happen deep into Turkey was truly disturbing...as Major Norris put it, "Despite their many setbacks it appears the SIA threat remains severe". Popeye was keen to stress at this point that the CO here at Akrotiri was supremely confident in the protection provided in and around the base by the RAF regiment and that security around the base on both land and water was being enhanced even further.

Moving away from that troubling news, Norris started to discuss the other major events in the STO.

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Starting with the Israelis, the Major told us the IAF had been confirmed as attacking Syrian armored targets in the Bekaa Valley. The Syrians appear to be attempting to re-establish a foothold in the Bekaa Valley and are believed to be linking up with Hezbollah forces in the area. In support of this activity they are also deploying air defense units in Lebanon. It is believed that the IAF attacks are in direct response to these deployments, which are causing Israel concern. The JSTF and in particular the US are concerned about the dangers of escalation here and are putting pressure on the Israelis to stand down. "Bet you anything we'll be back in the Bekaa before long" Bug muttered to me. He's probably right.

Moving to the SDF, the attack on Palmyra is now underway, with the SDF reporting good initial successes in the east. In the south, fighting amongst the SDF and Hezbollah remains fierce, and the SDF here remains under real pressure - although JSTF air power is keeping them in the fight for the time being. The presence of Syrian forces in the Bekaa Valley is a worrying development that threatens the SDF's positions between Homs and Yabrud.

Finally, moving to the Russians, Norris discussed that Russian activity has spiked over the last two days - a consequence of their clash with the IAF. The Pyotr Veliky has been reported as putting to sea again, and has been tracked heading south towards the Israeli coast - believed to be a show of force in response to their recent clash.

Once Norris had completed his briefing and departed, Popeye stepped to the podium to deliver our mission briefing.

"Ok pilots, I'm sure this won't surprise you but we're going back into the Bekaa Valley". Bug threw me a sly grin as Popeye spoke and I did my best to ignore it and not give him the satisfaction.

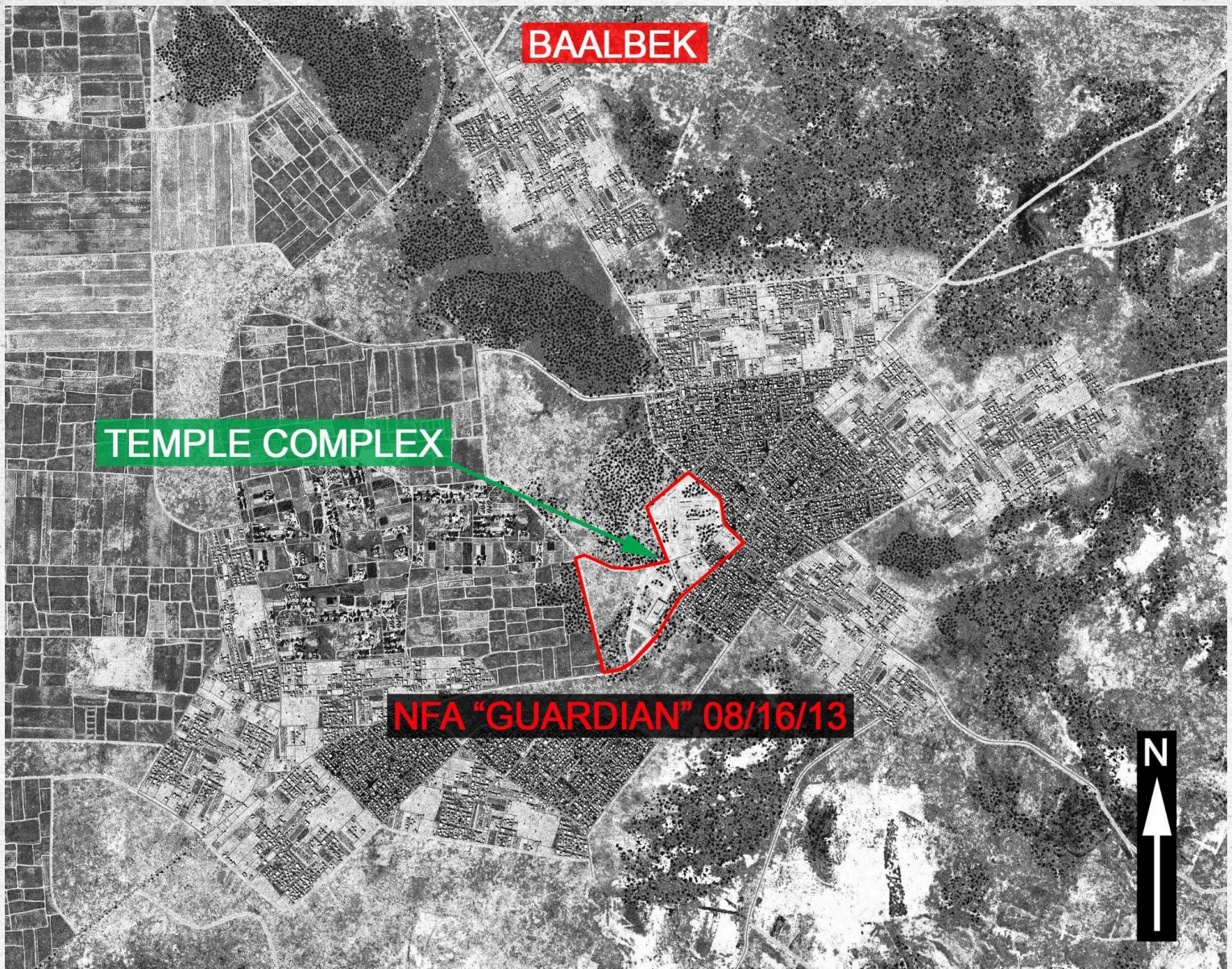
"As Major Norris was saying, Hezbollah attacks along the Homs to Yabrud road are causing major problems for the SDF, and while our air power is preventing the SDF position from collapsing it is by all accounts a close-run thing. Part of the problem is the strength of Hezbollah in the Bekaa Valley, from where they are able to maintain a strong logistics train and position many of their long range rockets - which are proving to be particularly damaging to the SDF. Both of these are well protected by the natural defense of the valley".

"In reply the JSTF intends to carry out a series of missions in the Bekaa Valley to search for and hunt down Hezbollah rocket positions, ammo and fuel dumps and any other valid targets we can get our hands on. Preventing this from occurring is a heavy concentration of air defenses in the valley, with the deployment of new Syrian SAMs reversing the losses we've already inflicted on Hezbollah".

"Now as you might have already guessed, our role will be to go back into the Bekaa Valley and flush out and kill any SAMs the Syrians or Hezbollah have operational in there. All intel points to these being a mix of SA-6, SA-8 and SA-11. For those of us that have already flown in the Bekaa once already, we know that there is a heavy AAA presence there as well, and for that reason we will be going in at night...so don't forget your NVGs".

"It's also important to remember that the Bekaa Valley is quite a tight space, at times only around 5-6 miles wide, with valley walls up to 8000 feet in places. Needless to say, make sure you keep your situational awareness and avoid doing something dumb in the dark...such as smashing yourself into a valley wall".

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"Now as you go about your business make sure to keep a close eye out for the Russians. They're pretty pissed right now and I wouldn't at all be surprised if they try to interject themselves into our business, so if they do I want you to do everything you can to ignore them, avoid provoking them and carry on with your mission".

"Easier said than done sir" Rotor replied.

Ignoring him, Popeye continued, "And finally, it's important that you avoid getting too close to Damascus, which is a risk when in the southern areas of the Bekaa. There's still a lot of active Syrian SAMs in that area and I don't want you taking any unnecessary risks".

Once Popeye had finished briefing an overview of the mission, we started to break down the mission into more detail. There will be a number of Weasel missions into the Bekaa tonight, the first of which will be myself and Boomer as Sword 2.

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Departing Akrotiri with a planned takeoff time of 01:00 local / 22:00 Zulu, Boomer and I will proceed to waypoint 4, where we are scheduled to link up with our Growler support - Spartan 2 - at 22:13 Zulu. We will then proceed together to waypoint 5, where we will fence in and enter the Silver corridor.

We will then proceed through the corridor to waypoint 6, which is located further west than usual. Once at waypoint 6 we will be cleared to turn south and depart the corridor, pushing into the Bekaa Valley. We will then push south through the valley, searching for SAMs as we do so. This is a mission type I'm used to by now but it will be the first time Boomer has had to bait SAMs in quite this way so we spent some time discussing viable strategies...such as loitering over Hezbollah positions and making sure we could be seen and heard by flying at lower altitudes. This will be high risk of course as it risks exposing us to the heavy volumes of Hezbollah AAA so we will need to be smart about how we employ these tactics. One tactic we've also used in the past to good effect is to start putting bombs on hostile targets to wake up air defense radars, this will be another option available to us, but as Popeye liked to remind us, can waste valuable weapons so should be considered carefully.

The two Hezbollah strongholds are located at waypoint 7 (Baalbek) and waypoint 8 (Rayak). Waypoint 9 is positioned on Joub Jannine, the Syrian occupied area of the Bekaa. These are the areas we should focus our SAM hunting efforts on, and we should expect the threat to get more severe the deeper into the valley we push.

Once we have expended our fuel and weapons we will push north out of the valley and back to waypoint 6, where we will then flow back through the Silver Corridor and back to Akrotiri.

When operating in Lebanon we must take care not to cross the Lebanon mountains at the west of the valley - we are still not cleared to overfly the western, coastal region of the country.

We will be loaded out with our standard hunter/killer combo that has served us well up to now, with Boomer carrying two HARMs for suppression and myself carrying two GBU-38s and two IR Mavs. As ever, Popeye was keen to emphasize his preference for killing a SAM radar over suppressing it, lest it pop back up on you or a follow on flight at an unfortunate moment. Given the shorter travel distance to our AOR, fuel looks generous with just under 5,000 lbs available in the target area. Bingo fuel is set at 3,350 lb from waypoint 9.

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We concluded the briefing with the threat assessment. SA-6s and SA-8s are threats we are well experienced with and shouldn't have too much difficulty overcoming so long as we keep our cool and our SA. The potential for SA-11s is more concerning though, with every tangle I've had with these more modern systems being a lot more challenging. Should I locate an SA-11 I will need to act fast to neutralize the threat.

The heavy AAA within the valley shouldn't cause me any great issue providing I keep my lights off and avoid highlighting myself to those on the ground - darkness will be my friend here. I should however be alert to any Firecan guided KS-19s or to any ZSU-23-4s, likely to be co-located with the Syrian formations in the south of the valley, the dark will not be of any help against these systems. I should expect the threats to get denser as I push towards Joub Janine in the south, reports are that the Syrians are securing border crossings from Damascus around here and thus fortifying the area as much as possible.

Once the briefing was over, Boomer and I retreated to another room to hone our plans and understanding of the mission. Boomer seemed excited to be going SAM hunting, but my excitement was tempered by the memories of my last Weasel mission at night, during the 'Talon Red' CSAR operation.

It's very easy to get disoriented when trying to evade SAMs in the dark, we'll need to keep sharp on this one.