

FIRST IN - WEASELS OVER SYRIA

16th July, 2013

It's been two weeks since we escorted the rescue mission south of the no fly zone. For our detachment the last two weeks have been relatively quiet, as the demand for our services has reduced in line with the diminished SAM threat in the north. This has allowed us a few days rest, although the lack of stimulation here at H4 hasn't necessarily made this an experience to remember.

Our flying days have seen us on Weasel patrols, supporting the CAPs being flown across Sierra. These have remained uneventful for us with just the SA-6 at Palmyra defiantly surviving our recent SAM killing efforts. Popeye tried to make a case with the CAOC to go kill it, but it's proximity to a UNESCO site and a chemical weapons storage facility means the CAOC is vetoing any attacks in this area at this time.

While things have been quiet for the Weasels, this is not the case for all the JSTF. A week ago a pair of Syrian Mig-21s were shot down by two JSTF F/A-18s, turns out that 'Poodle', our guide into Incirlik, was the flight lead. We'll have to try and get the full story out of him one day. This was the start of a renewed push by the Syrians to violate the no fly zone and attack SDF targets around Homs. They had some initial success, including the striking of an SDF convoy which killed several US SOF members who were assisting the SDF, however the JSTF soon wised up to the Syrian tactics and the Syrian successes quickly dried up.

With the no fly zone finally fully enforced and the SDF now free of interference from the air, the SDF were able to break through the deadlock at Homs and rapidly pushed south. Shayrat and Tiyas airbases are now cut off and under attack by the SDF. This success by the Syrian breakaway forces gave momentum to a fresh uprising in the town of Yabrud, 30 miles north of Damascus. This uprising funnelled SDF forces into the fight, able to travel down the now open Homs road. The Syrian government responded with major attacks on Yabrud from both the air and ground. The attacks on Yabrud have been massive and indiscriminate and civilian casualties are reported as being extremely heavy. The JSTF have issued a stark warning to the Syrian government forces to cease these attacks on civilians, none of us expect it to be heeded and our mission here seems to be escalating by the day.

It was against this backdrop that we attended a briefing this morning.

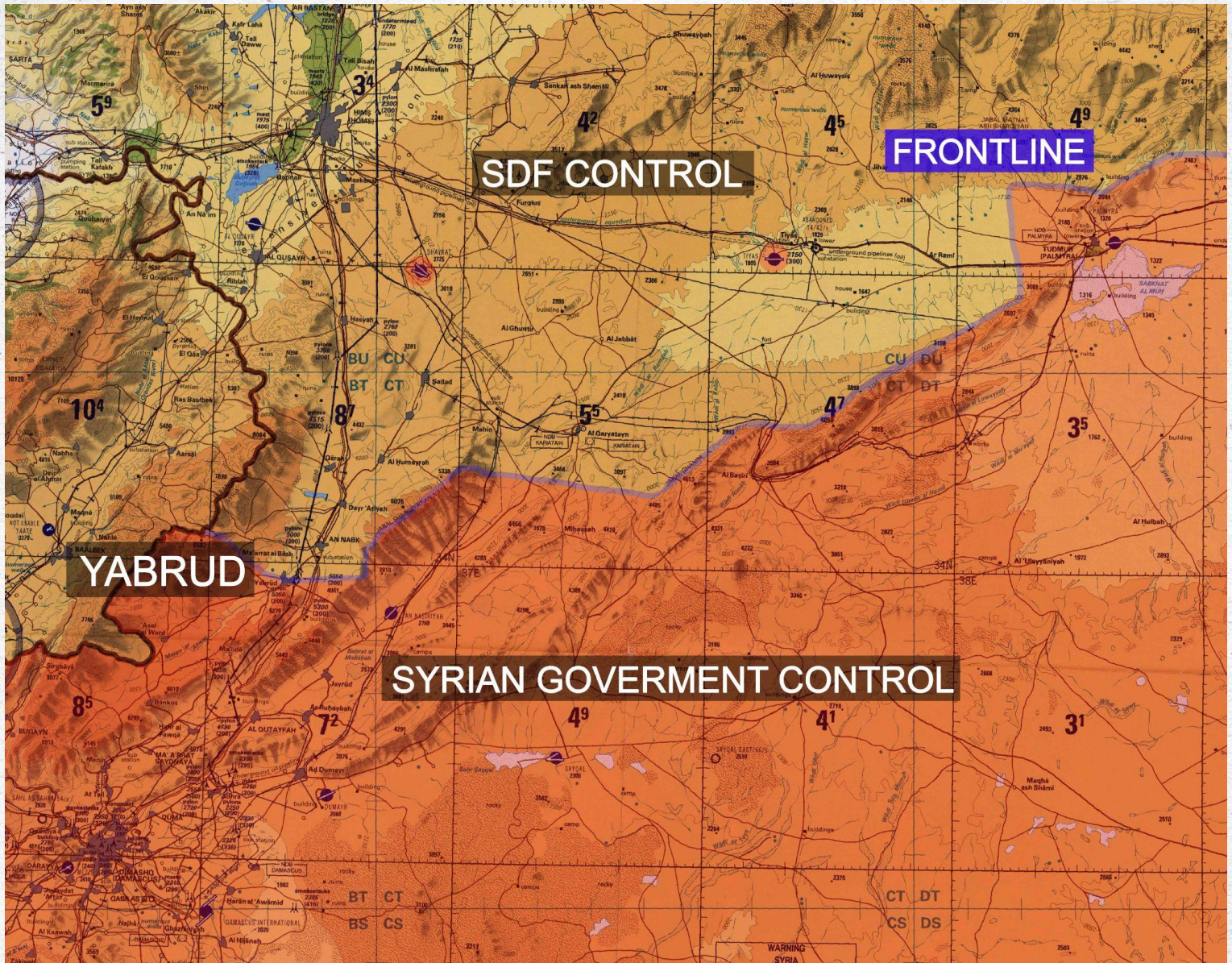
The full detachment was present, alongside the usual supporting briefers. Captain Johnson went first, beginning the briefing by updating us on the weather. The last two weeks have seen a spell of particularly fine weather, and this is expected to continue for at least another week. Today we are looking at light scattered clouds at around 10,000 feet, very light winds and temperatures of around 38°C.

Major Norris then began to deliver his intelligence briefing. He began by updating us on the activity on the SDF frontline at Yabrud, here the SDF are holding firm, despite the massive bombardment they are enduring from SAA artillery. The SAA are believed to be pushing additional forces into the area and build ups of Syrian forces are being seen in the adjoining SAA positions. Yabrud is rapidly becoming the new focal point of the civil war. To the north, both Shayrat and Tiyas airbases remain besieged, effectively neutralizing their use by the SyAAF due to the presence of mortars, artillery and MANPADS within range of the bases. The Russians are mostly keeping clear of the current situation, limiting themselves to operations in the east of Syria against the SIA.

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In the north of Syria, the SDF and YPG advance has succeeded in pushing the SIA all the way back into Raqqa, and the final fight for the city looks set to begin.

Norris concluded his intel brief with information that got everyone's attention. Reports of significant Hezbollah mobilization in the Bekaa Valley, what comes of this will remain to be seen.

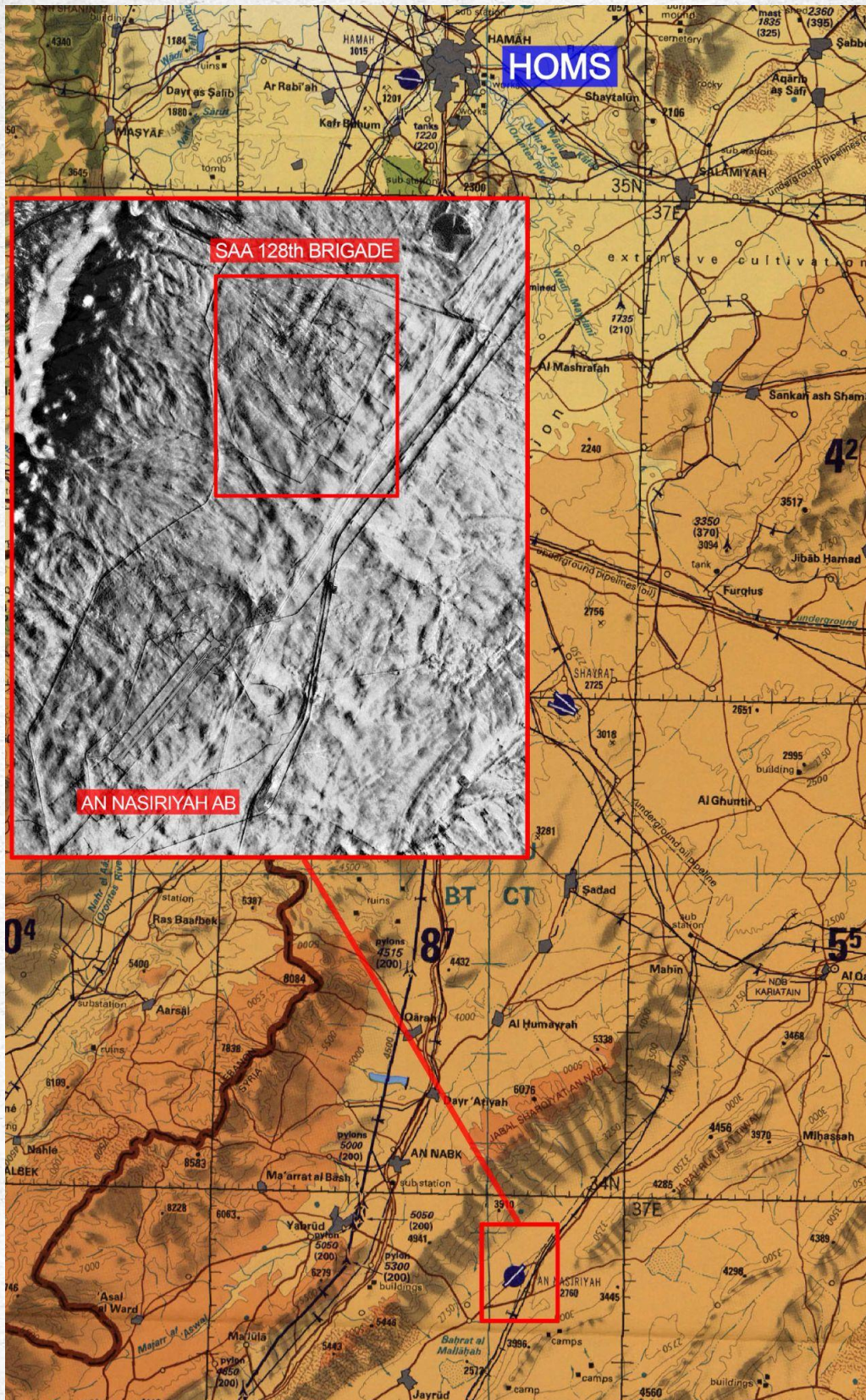


Popeye then stepped up and began to brief our mission.

“Alright then, let's get to it. Our mission today is to provide a lane SEAD operation in support of a B-1 strike on SAA artillery and rocket positions. The B-1's will be hitting targets that are firing upon Yabrud, the destruction of which the CAOC has designated as a high priority. This one comes direct from Guardian himself”.

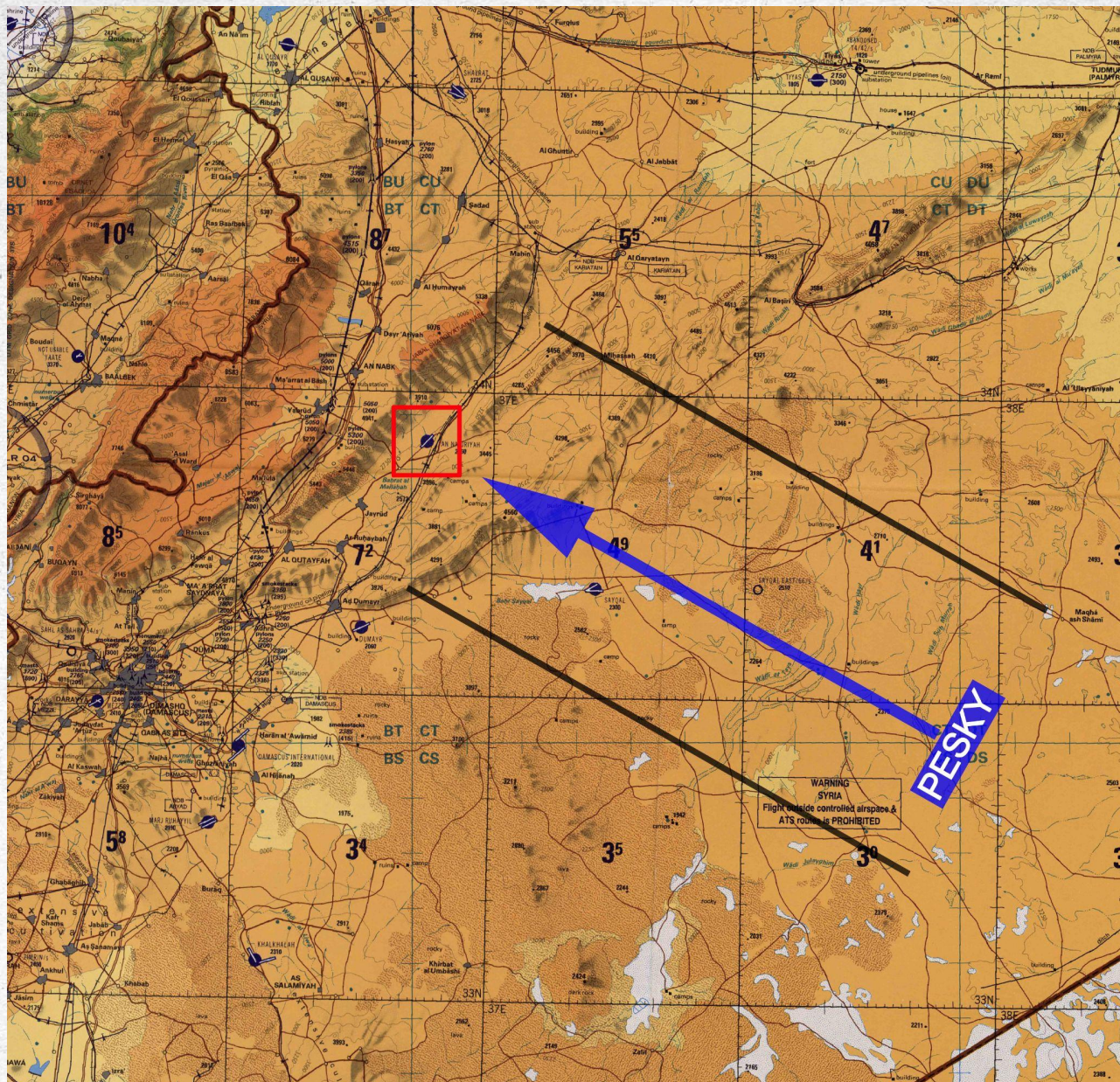
Gesturing at a map on the screen, Popeye continued. “The targets are located here, close to the positions of the 128th Brigade, co-located with An Nasiriyah airbase”.

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"The two B-1s, callsign Pesky, will ingress through a corridor from the southeast".

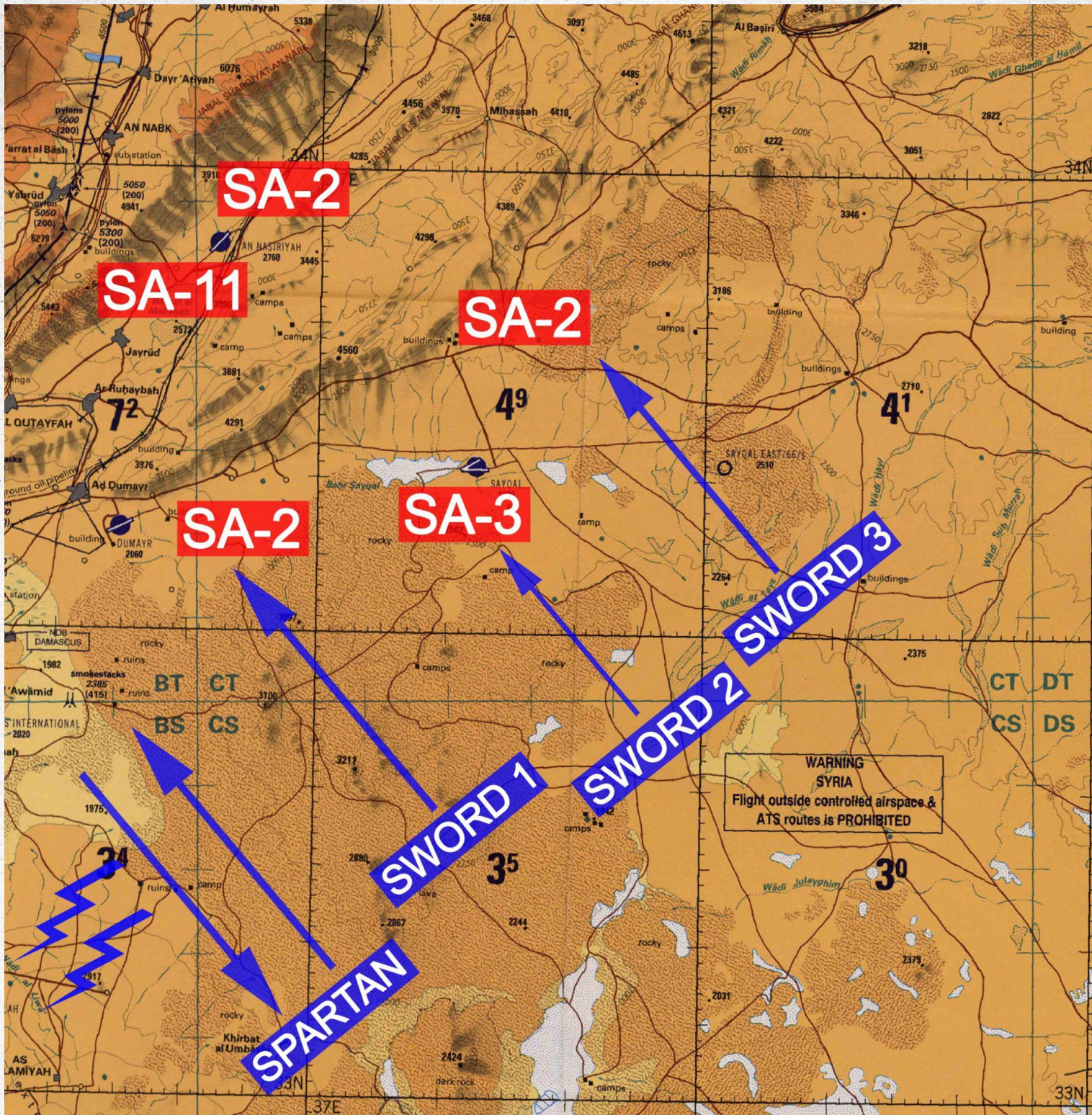
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"This route has been planned to avoid the SDF/SAA frontline, which is currently an unpredictable mess with a sky full of artillery shells and rockets, as well as home to SHORAD systems present with the SAA units. However it will mean bringing the B-1s in through a belt of SAMS, this of course is where we come in".

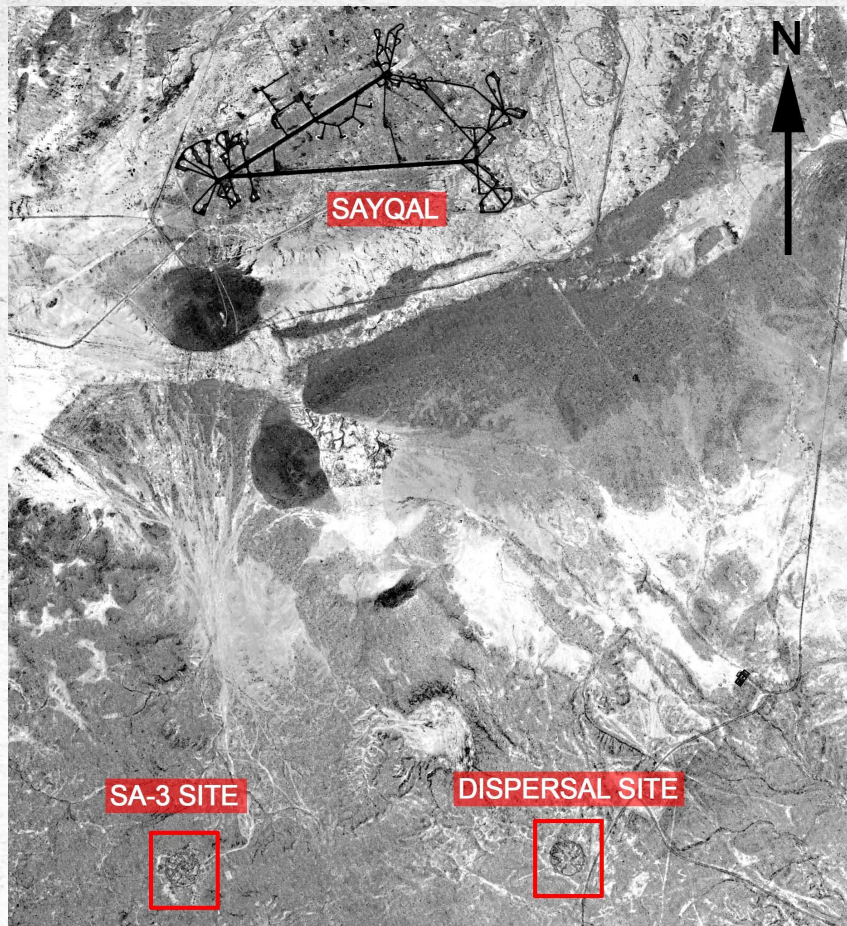
"All six of us will be going up for this one, operating as three two-ships. Myself and Ghost will be Sword 1, we will focus on clearing an SA-2 on the west side of this corridor. Sword 2 - Forrest and Bug - will neutralize an SA-3 in the center of the corridor, close to Sayqal airbase. Finally Tank and Rotor - as Sword 3 - will target an SA-2 to the east of the corridor. Our primary goal is to make sure the bombers get in and out in one piece, but the CAOC has expressed it's desire for us to destroy these SAM sites if possible, that way they can keep the option of providing CAS to the SDF at Yabrud on the table. Once each flight has dealt with it's primary target it will hold position ready to support SAM suppression at An Nasiriyah if required during the bomber's time over target".

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“There is also the possibility of mobile SAM systems within this corridor so we should be prepared to react should any pop up threats come online. This is increasingly likely on the northern edge of the corridor, near the SAA frontline. Electronic support will again come from Spartan 3, who will set up a standoff jam against the Damascus SAMs from the west of the ingress corridor”.

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"Our TOT is 11:25 Zulu, which will put us in the target area 20 minutes ahead of Pesky's arrival time of 11:45 Zulu. We will need to have sanitized the airspace by this time. Finally a flight of F-15s, callsign Bear 1, will be close behind us providing top cover in case any Syrian aircraft attempt to interfere with the mission. Bear will RV with us at waypoint 2".

Having given an overview of the mission, Popeye then delved into the details with us.

Departing H4 in our flight pairs, the six of us will then rendezvous at waypoint 1 before proceeding to our IP at waypoint 2, where we will be met by Bear and Spartan. Here we will switch to the mission frequency - Pink 1. All three Sword flights will then push into the target area simultaneously in order to sow maximum confusion in Syrian air defense command. Push time is 11:25 Zulu. As we push, each flight will close with and suppress (but preferably destroy), its assigned SAM site.

All three SAM sites will need to be off the air by 11:45 Zulu, when the B-1s enter threat range. Any pop up threats that emerge in the target area will also need to be knocked down again before Pesky's arrival. Our assigned target is the SA-3 battery located at waypoint 4. This is 5 miles south of Sayqal airbase, located at waypoint 3.

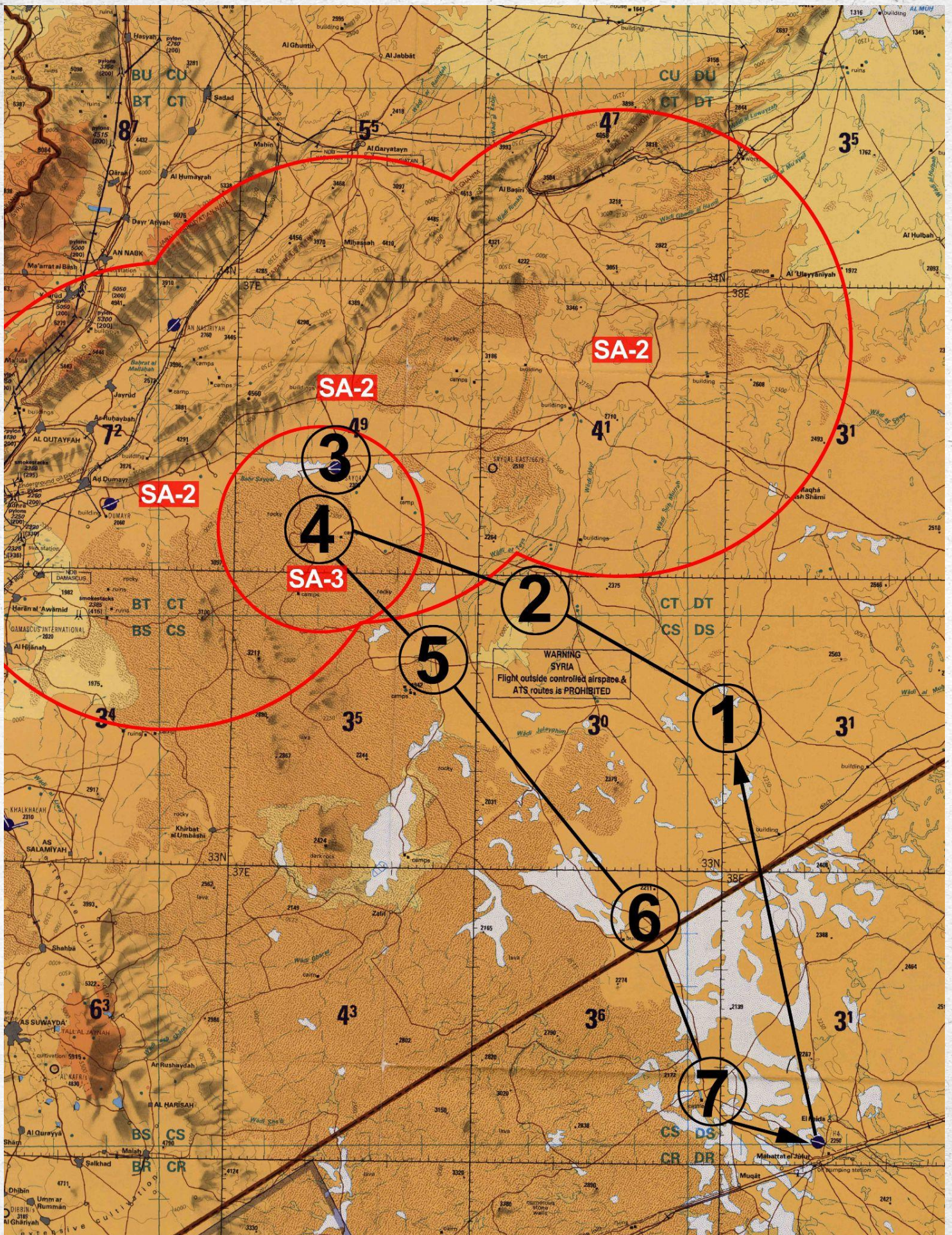
Pesky will be flying high and fast, delivering JSOWs onto the target. This means they should be releasing weapons before entering the range of SAMs at An Nasiriyah. However once we have defeated our assigned SAM site, we will hold in the ingress corridor, ready to support if Pesky is threatened.

Once the B-1s have successfully released their weapons, we will egress the target area via waypoint 5.

Loadouts for this mission will consist of a suppression and killer team once again. In my flight Bug will be carrying two HARMs and I will be loaded with 4 CBU-87s. I asked for WCMDs but the answer was no...preserving stocks apparently...and "Anyways there is no wind today" said Popeye...

Go figure...but at least we trained to this recently. The target location means this mission is pretty close to home for us, so Bingo from waypoint 4 is 3,200 lb, giving us 6,500 lb of fuel over the target. There will be no tanker tracks available to us in this location.

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We finished looking at threats. Our main threats today are older SAM systems - SA-2s and SA-3s - however we should be prepared for the full gamut of mobile systems as well - most likely SA-6 and SA-11.

Our target is only 5 miles from Sayqal airbase so we should give careful consideration to our position in relation to the base. We can expect the full range of SHORAD at Sayqal, that is all calibers of AAA, IR SAMs and potentially SA-8 or 15 as well.

Our target SA-3 battery is also likely to contain some SHORAD elements as well.

The target is firmly in Syrian held territory so we should expect AAA throughout the target area.

The Syrian Air Force has begun to show more intent to challenge us in the skies recently, so we should be alert to any potential air to air threats.

The briefing then drew to a close. We spent the rest of the morning preparing for the mission ahead of us, studying our map and charts and committing the targets and surrounding landscape to memory. This mission will be under close scrutiny from the CAOC and the elimination of the Syrian artillery near Yabrud is of maximum importance to the JSTF. However this isn't what weighed upon us the most, instead we understood that success in this mission could provide vital respite to those civilians trapped in Yabrud.

We will not fail them.

*** NOTES TO PLAYER ***

Should you expend all your weapons during this mission, it is a viable strategy to offer yourself as bait to SAM sites when the B-1 strike force is threatened. To do this simply place yourself between the strikers and the SAM site, but of course be ready to evade SAM shots.