

17th June, 2014.

It's been a hell of an interesting week, with a major development underway in Syria.

10 days ago we hit the LFF hard at the town of Laboueh, aka objective Lion. The LFF had entrenched themselves in the town, with cover provided by a concentration of AAA and MANPADs and a hastily put together smoke screen. Ultimately though it didn't help them and with nowhere to run the LFF positions were relentlessly pounded over several days.

The LFF have taken a really heavy hit over the last few weeks and are looking decidedly weakened. Attacks have continued on the remaining LFF positions across the Bekaa valley and in the Anti-Lebanon mountains, although this has become a more fraught process as the western air forces have had to contend with the presence of Russian forces in the Bekaa valley, as well as Hezbollah controlled pockets of Lebanon.

The Russians certainly remain a problem for us in Lebanon, as they keep attempting to expand their area of influence in the north of the country. The presence of Russian aircraft over Lebanon is becoming a common sight, with the unsafe interception and harassment of our aircraft becoming all too common as well. Russian mercenary forces are also increasingly becoming an issue, and have also deployed in northern Lebanon in support of Russian/Syrian operations around Homs. There have been several incidents of Kazan Group controlled SAMs taking shots at any aircraft that have strayed too close to their positions. Things have become increasingly tense in Lebanon.

As all this was happening we continued to receive reports of the ongoing fighting around Homs and Damascus, where a Syrian/Russian offensive was underway. Then, four days ago, we started to hear the first reports of further events in Syria. A suspected chemical weapons attack had been carried out on an SDF controlled Damascus suburb, the number of casualties was not yet known but the news was pretty disturbing. If this turned out to be true, and Syria had indeed carried out a chemical attack in the country, then we all knew that it would be a red line crossed and our thoughts immediately turned to what the US response would be.

Syria and Russia immediately issued denials over the use of any chemical weapons, and Russia put out claims that the whole situation was faked by the SDF to gain further western support. Russia was also quite clear that should the west get re-involved in Syria then there would be consequences.

So that was the situation when we attended an intelligence briefing yesterday. During this briefing we were told that it was the conclusion of US intelligence that chemical weapons had been deployed in SDF controlled areas of Damascus. The weapon used was Sarin, delivered by an SU-24 of the SyAAF. The findings of this investigation are expected to be made public later today, with the US president set to make a statement about the situation. In the ready room we discussed what we felt might happen next, the consensus was that military action was highly likely, after all this was the US administration that launched Operation Persian Freedom based on similar circumstances.

And so last night the Pentagon gave a briefing to the press over the confirmed use of chemical weapons in Syria. The US have stated that there will be consequences for this horrific attack on civilians, details of which have not been revealed, but we all had the feeling we would be finding out soon enough.

As expected, the Russians objected strongly and repeated their warnings of potential and dangerous escalation should the west become involved in Syria again.

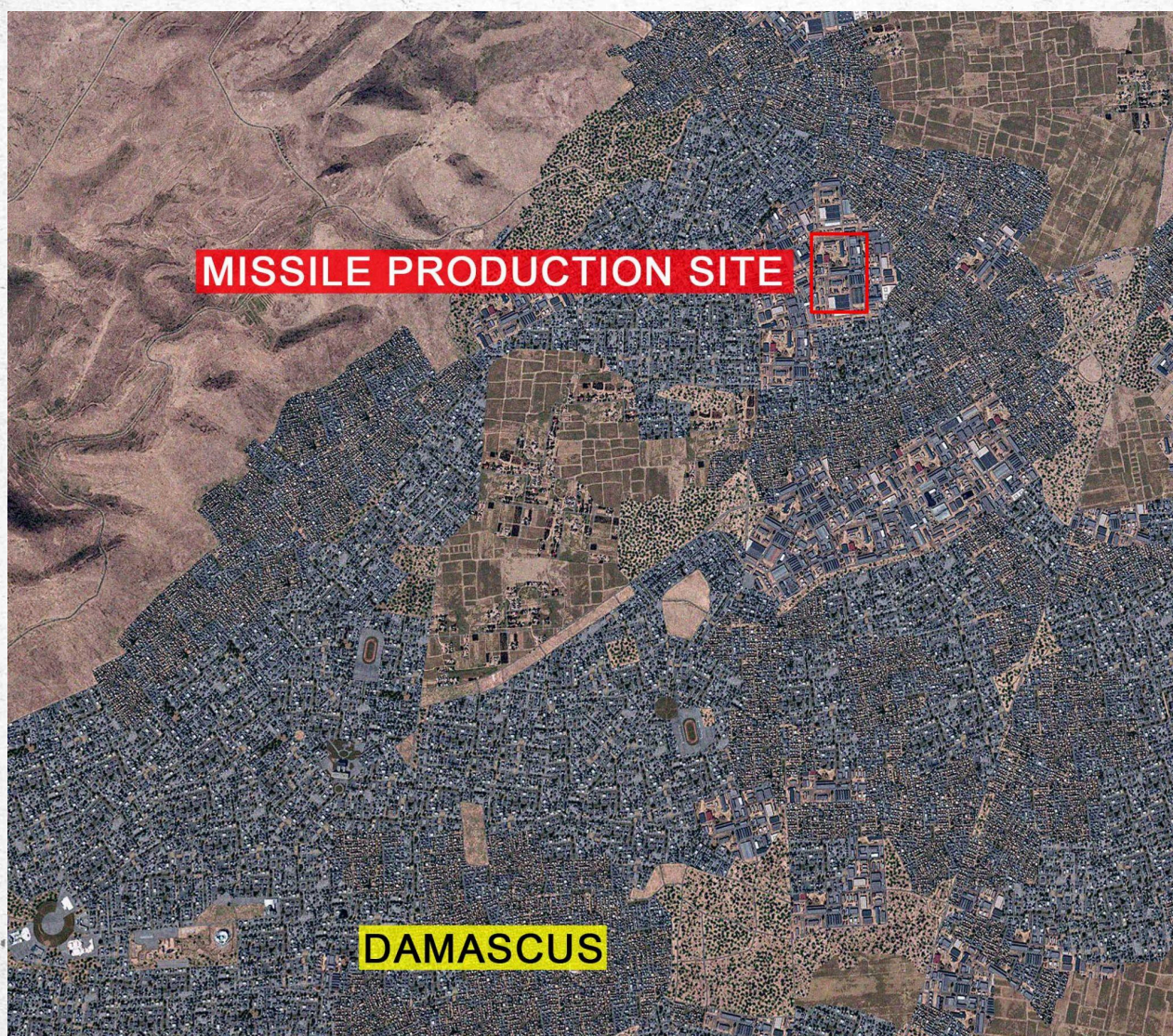
And that brings us to today, where a briefing had been called for early morning. We were fully expecting to receive interesting news, we were not disappointed.

Once the squadron was assembled and seated ready for the briefing, Link stepped to the podium and began to brief.

“Morning Red Devils, the last few days have seen some frantic activity behind the scenes while we worked to verify events in Syria. As you all know already, it has been concluded that this was a Syrian instigated chemical attack on an SDF held area of Damascus, and as you probably expected, there will be a military response.”

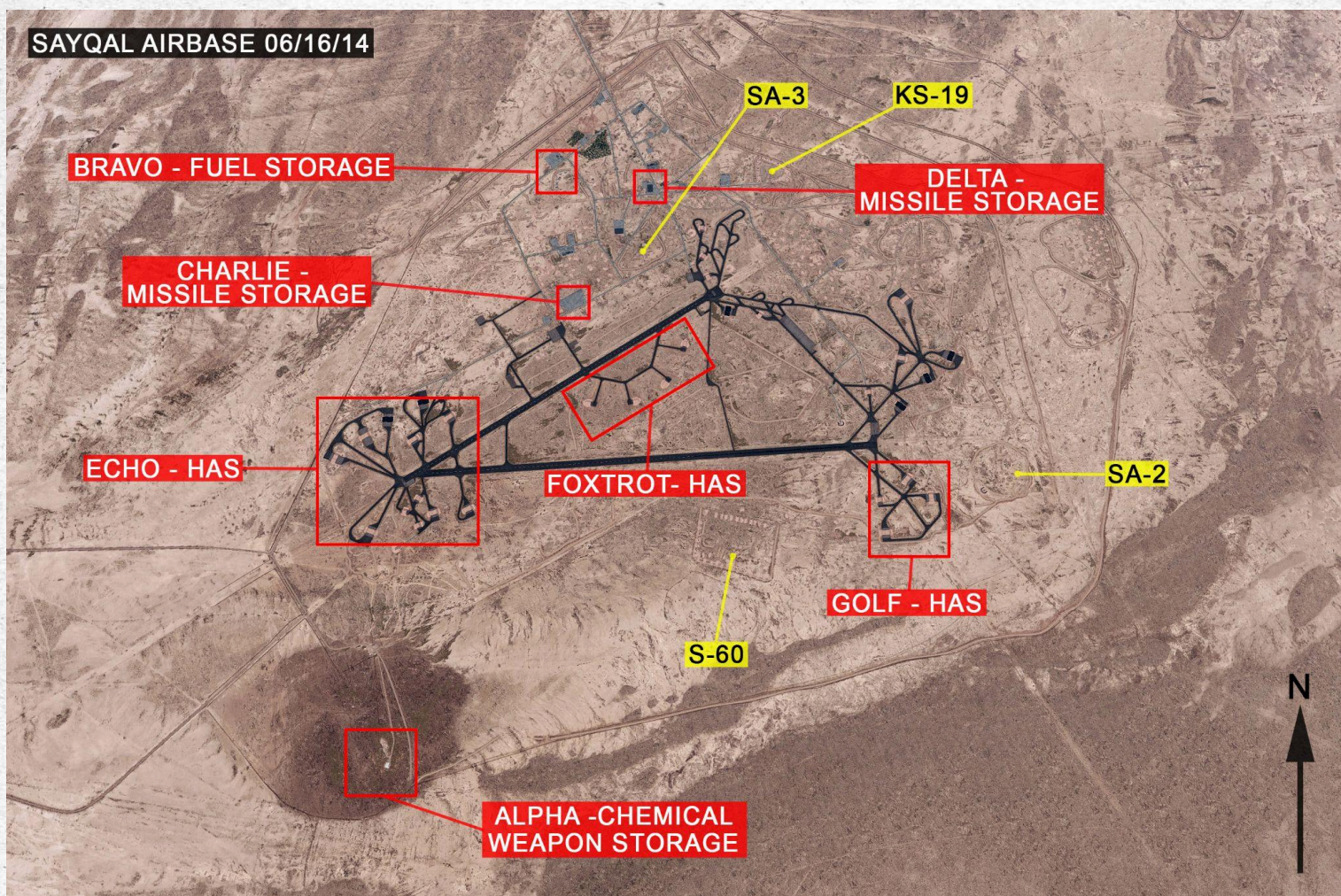
“Now the US has no desire to get dragged back into the fighting on the ground in Syria. Unlike in Iran and with Persian Freedom, there is already a major insurgency underway in Syria. We intend to allow the SDF to continue their own fight, however we will not tolerate the use of these weapons and so the order has been given to carry out a series of strikes against targets related to the production, storage and delivery of chemical weapons in Syria.”

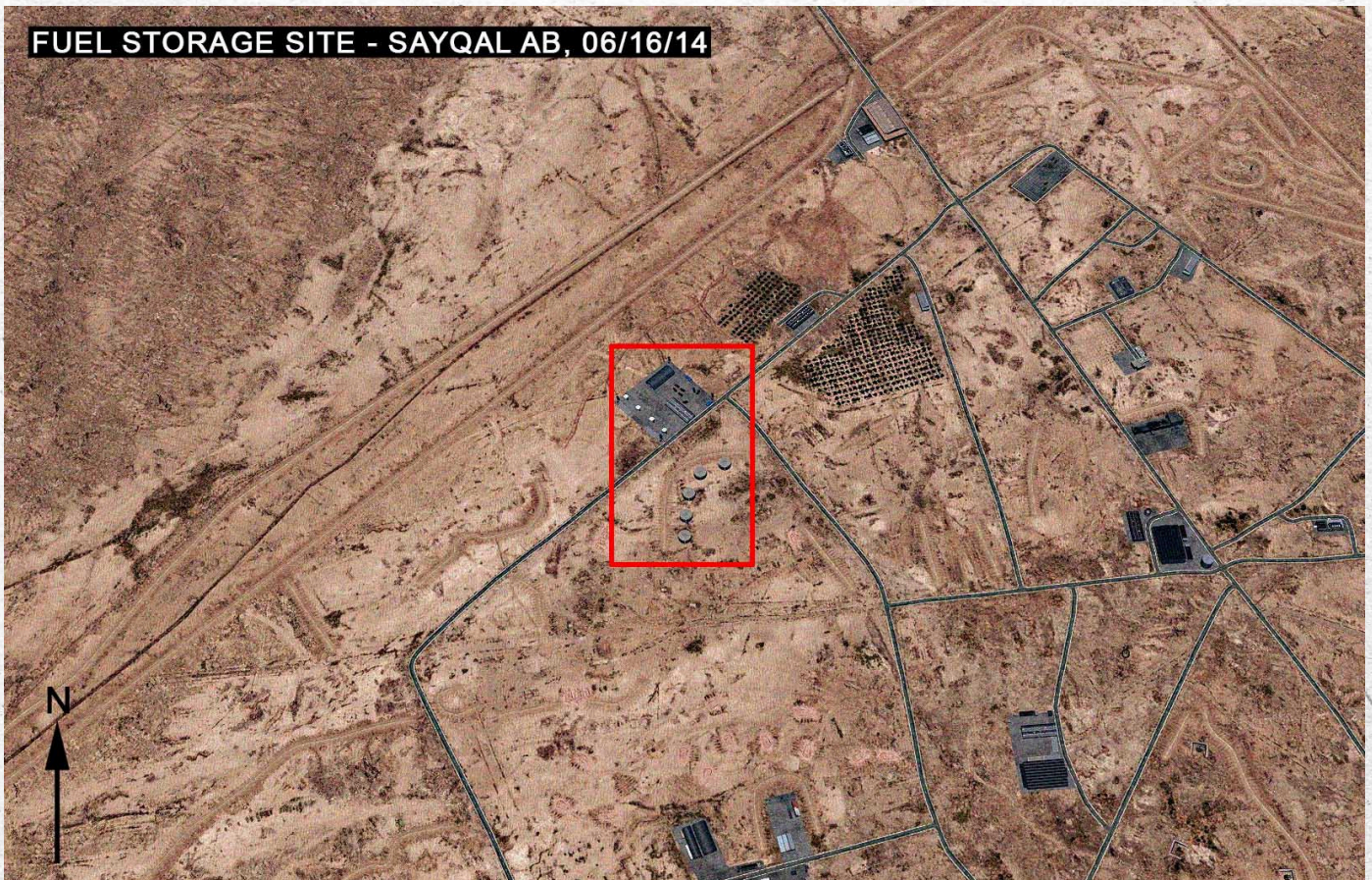
Link clicked a slide onto the screens around the room.



“The US response will be focused around two targets. The first target will be this missile production site north of Damascus, this location specialises in mating chemical payloads to missiles and rockets. This facility falls within the Damascus MEZ and will be targeted by ship-launched Tomahawks from the Truxton and Gravelly.”

“The second target is Sayqal airbase, this is the base from which the attack originated. The targets here are the hardened aircraft shelters, base fuel dump, missile storage facilities and the chemical weapons storage facility in the southwest corner. As you can see Sayqal is defended by an SA-2 and SA-3 battery, along with a battery of Fire Can equipped KS-19 guns. There will also be considerable other SHORAD assets present at the base.”





MISSILE STORAGE SITE "CHARLIE"
SAYQAL AB, 06/16/14

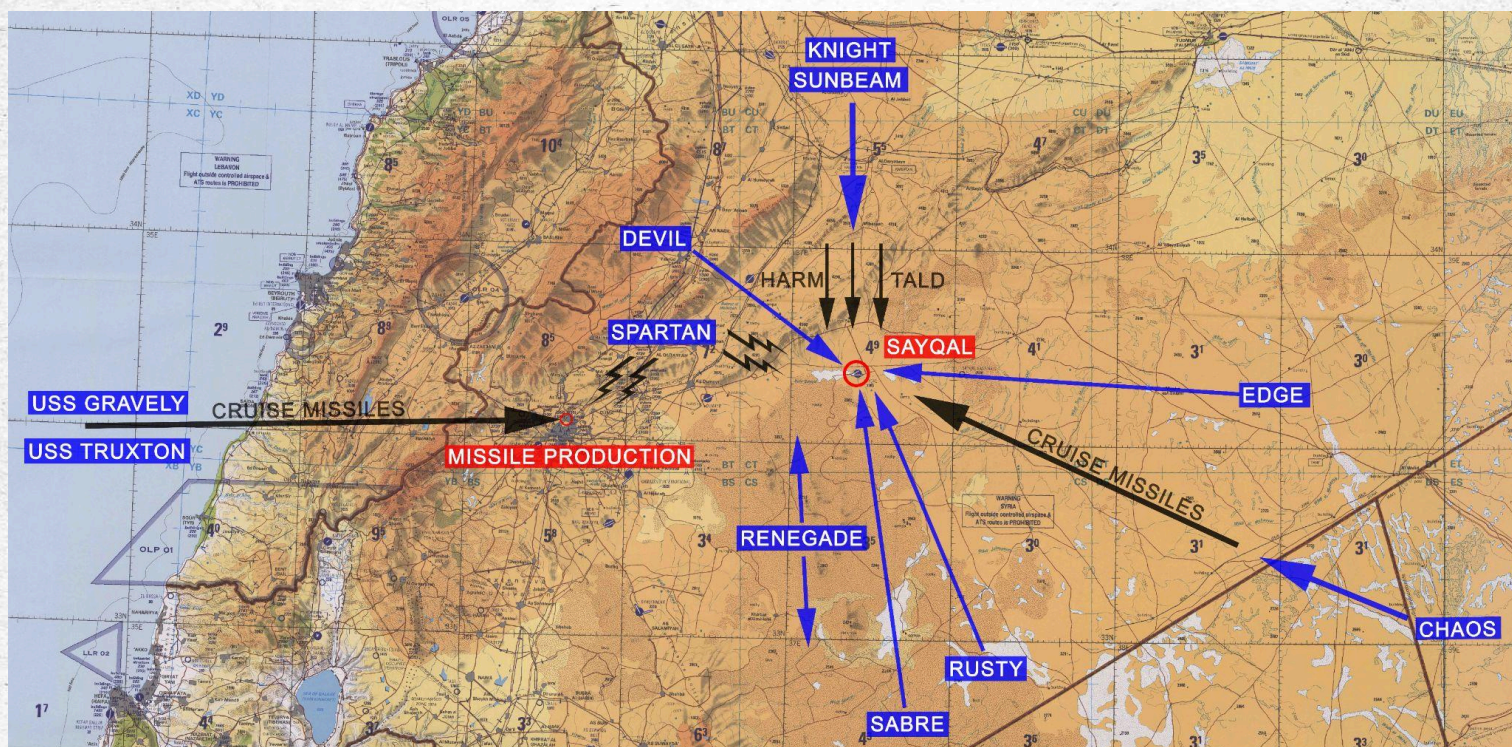


MISSILE STORAGE SITE "DELTA"
SAYQAL AB, 06/16/14



Link continued, “The attack on Sayqal will be multipronged. First, B-52s, callsign Chaos, will approach the Syrian border in the southeast and launch a salvo of ALCMs, targeting Sayqal’s fuel dump. As the missiles are enroute, Hornet flight Sunbeam 3 will approach from the north of Sayqal and launch a number of decoys to stimulate the airbase’s defences. Behind the TALDs will be a second flight of Hornets, callsign Knight 2, who will follow in as the SEAD element, targeting any active radars with HARMs. Our Growlers - Spartan - will be on station west of Sayqal to provide electronic attack against both Damascus and Sayqal.”

“The strikers will consist of four elements. Edge 1-1, a B-1, will attack from the east, targeting the southeastern aircraft shelters. Rusty 1, Rusty 2 and Rusty 3 flights will be F-16s targeting the central and southwestern aircraft shelters. Sabre 1 is a flight of Strike Eagles, who will be targeting the chemical weapons storage site with bunker busters. Finally, Devil flights will be targeting the missile storage sites and suppressing AAA sites around the base. A flight of four F-15Cs, Renegade 4, will carry out a fighter sweep ahead of the strike package, before setting up a CAP station between the target and Damascus. TOT for all strikers is 23:30Z, with all flights to be egressing by 23:40Z when the vul time of all supporting assets ends.”

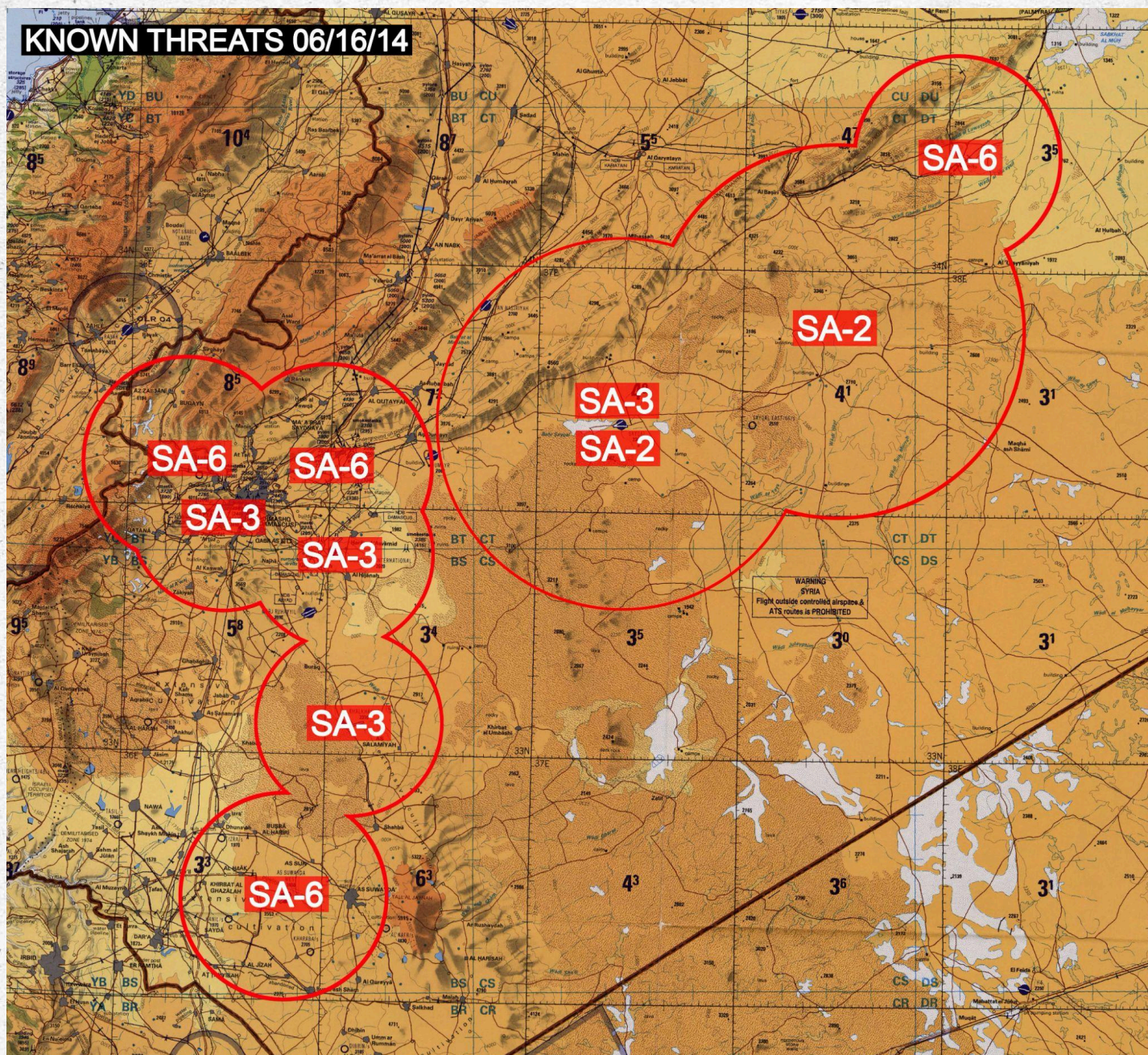


“We will be supplying three separate two-ships to the strike. Devil 1 will be Flair and Slick, targeting the AAA positions to the south of the base. Devil 2 will be Boomer and Nomad, going after Delta - the northernmost missile storage sites. Devil 3 will be Steep and Soprano, who will target Charlie - the southern missile storage sites.

“As for air defense, Syrian defenses are not what they were during the early days of Cerberus North, when the JSTF went after them hard and inflicted significant damage on the Syrian IADS. Since then however the Russians have helped Syria rebuild some capability in this area, although the Syrians have a distinct lack of more modern SAM systems in their inventory.”

Link pulled another slide onto the briefing screen.

“These are the known threats in Syria, although I would expect there to be some more systems we’re not aware of, so be alert for these. Damascus is defended by a mix of SA-6s and SA-3s so keep clear of this area. Sayqal is covered by an SA-3 and SA-2 combination, with SHORAD at the base believed to contain both SA-8 and SA-15 as well. A second SA-2 site is located 30 miles northeast of Sayqal.”



At this point Flair raised a question, “Sir, this attack has been fairly well signposted, are we concerned that the Syrians might be ready for us, and that the Russians might work to bolster the Syrian air defenses even more?”

“Yes that is a concern,” answered Link, “the timetable for the attack has been moved up because of exactly this reason. There is also some concern over Russian or Syrian interference in Lebanon, through which we’ll be transiting to Syria, so I want everyone fenced in and ready to react as soon as you go feet dry. Now start planning your individual mission, good luck.”

Link then concluded the briefing and I started planning the mission in more detail.

Paired with Soprano as Devil 3, my launch time is 01:55 zulu. This will be a night operation and so will be carried out under case three conditions.

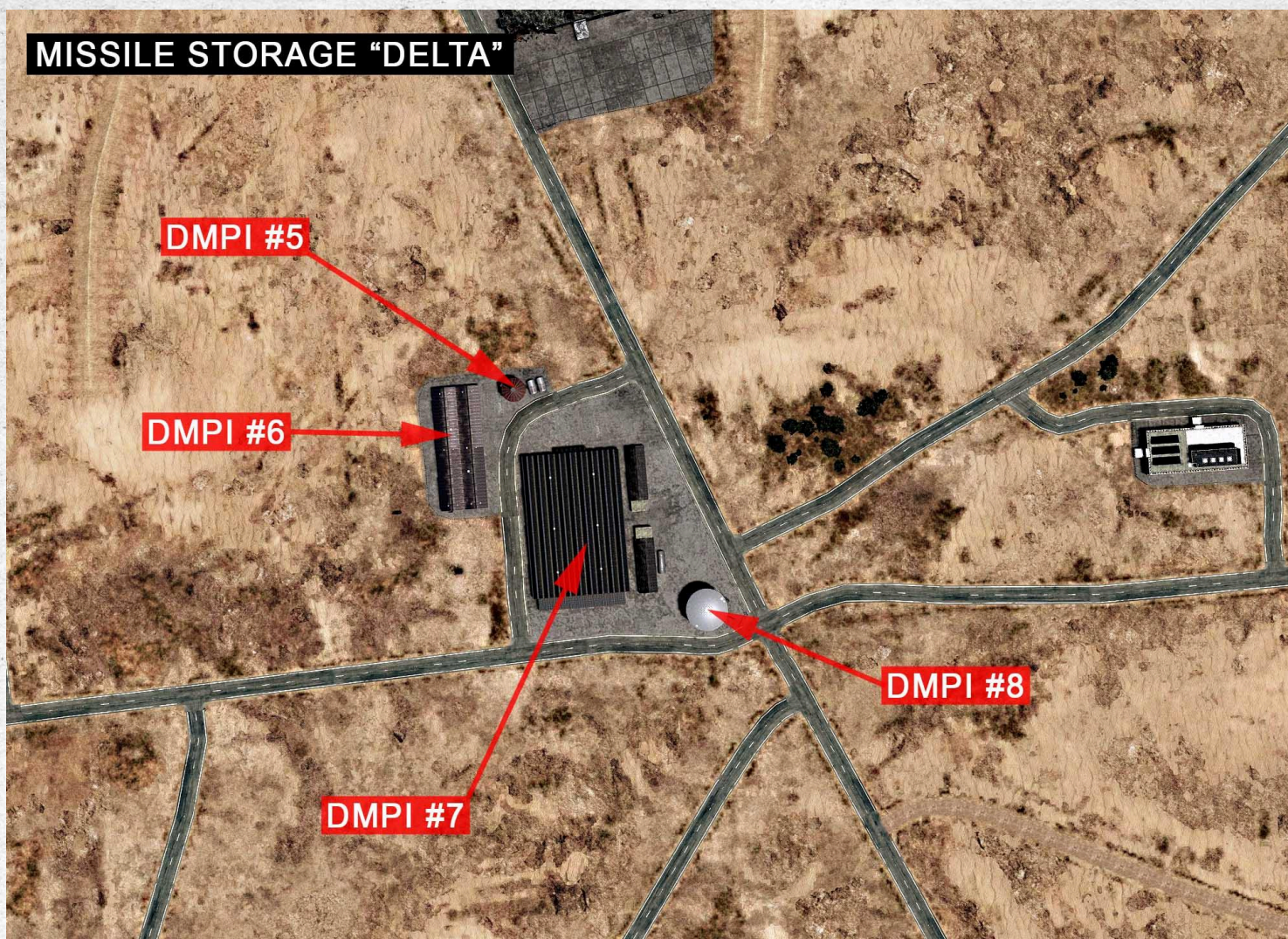
Once airborne and clear of the carrier's airspace, I will rendezvous with Soprano at waypoint one before climbing for waypoint 2 for a standard entry to Lebanon at Lima Alpha. As we go feet dry in Lebanon we will fence in, and be prepared in case of any interference as we transit the country. The concern here is the presence of Russian, Kazan Group or even Hezbollah SAMs in Lebanon, that might disrupt our plans to reply to Syria's chemical attack.

From Lima Alpha we will travel northeast across Lebanon to waypoint three, checking in with Strike as we do so. Once we have received final clearance to proceed from the mission commander Sabre 6, we will proceed east to our IP at waypoint five. For deconfliction each flight has been designated a specific altitude for their transit, we have been assigned angels 26.

The IP is located 22 miles northwest of Sayqal, designated by waypoint five. The IP is set over An Nasiriyah airbase, which is now held by SDF forces. The ridge lines south of An Nasiriyah mark the front line between the SDF and Syrian Government forces.

Soprano and I are to target the four storage buildings at the southern missile storage site of the airbase, this is target Charlie. We have split the targets between us, with Soprano taking DMPIs 3 and 4, leaving DMPIs 1 and 2 for myself. Precise targeting coordinates will be included in my kneeboards. Our time on target is 23:30Z.





As we attack we should pay careful attention to our position. This will be a large strike package, and we expect a large number of aircraft and weapons to be converging on the target at the same time. Our operating corridor is to the northwest of the base, which should remain clear of other aircraft, but we should bear in mind that Knight's SEAD orbit will be to the north of Sayqal and any incoming HARMs will be from that direction. A stand off attack from high altitude will likely be the most effective way to carry out the attack, but I should be prepared to vary my attack plan should the conditions dictate it. Electronic attack will be on station from 23:30Z until 23:40Z, after which remaining in the area will probably be a bad idea.

Once our targets have been destroyed, we will egress northwest to waypoint six and then push west back through Lebanon to Lima Bravo, before returning to mother via waypoint eight.

The bullseye for the strike will be set on Sayqal, using the codeword for Sayqal - 'Jackhammer'.

Bingo fuel from Sayqal is 5,400 lb, our divert field will be Akrotiri with a minimum divert fuel of 1,800 lb. Our loadout will be three GBU-31s each, with one bomb planned for each target, we will also be carrying a spare weapon each for contingency. We will therefore be heavy, with a takeoff weight of just over 50,300 lb.



The weather for the strike looks good, with light winds and minimal cloud cover.

The threat picture at Sayqal is significant, although lacking in high end SAM threats. The SA-2 and SA-3 combination can be very dangerous, but the presence of our Growlers should mitigate against this, providing we keep our distance from the threat emitters. SHORAD systems such as SA-8, SA-15 and IR guided SAMs can be overflown, but will become dangerous should we allow ourselves to get dragged into their engagement envelope. The wild card will be the presence of any mobile threats, primarily SA-6s. Should these threats pop up on us then Knight 2 will be on station to engage with HARMs. The Syrian air force is not expected to intervene, but Renegade will be on station to handle them should they do so.

With the mission planning complete, Soprano and I rehearsed it again and again, going over our ingress route, targeting data, expected threats and how we would handle any surprises. I wanted to make sure Soprano had every detail committed to memory, and was ready for every eventuality, this will by far be the biggest, most complex operation he's participated in, and with the added complication of night operations to contend with.

And with that we were ready, we made sure to get some sleep during the day - or at least attempted to - I found that the level of noise combined with the usual nerves ahead of a major strike hindered that endeavour. As I lay in my bunk I pondered the consequences of striking back into Syria. It was clear that the US intention was to make this a limited operation, one designed to neuter a specific threat and send a clear message. But, as I've had first hand experience of, events can gain a momentum of their own, and with the very close presence of Russia in this theater nothing can be predicted with any certainty. This mission is a calculated gamble, I hope it doesn't backfire.

But whatever happens, at least I am \$657 better off. Turns out I was only 3 days out in the pool, beating Slick by two days. Let's hope my luck sticks around a bit longer.