

17th May, 2014

I wake today feeling positive, the past week has been a good one. A week ago the UNSFL was bogged down in fighting with the LFF as their ground offensive stumbled in it's initial phases. The LFF were proving to be a more effective fighting force than predicted, whereas some of the UNSFL were less effective than hoped. The Red Devils joined in with close air support operations to support the UNSFL, this was a relatively gentle introduction to real world CAS for some of the squadron, with medium altitude bombing and no critical time pressures. I coached Soprano through his first CAS strike, and once again he rose to the challenge, I've been really impressed with him so far.

I feared things would potentially get more difficult from there as the fighting developed, but so far the UNSFL mission is back on track and the past week has been noticeably quieter in terms of kinetic action. The UNSFL has now reached the planned phase line and completed phase 1 of their offensive, and now occupy a number of key routes in the western Bekaa Valley. LFF activity has subsided significantly as the UNSFL stifles their movement between the valley and the Lebanon Mountains. We expect this will change as the UNSFL starts to push into the mountains.

The last three missions I've flown have been pretty boring, consisting of us just hanging out at altitude, providing overwatch for the ground force. The only exciting moment we had was when Soprano got a little out of position near the 'Everglades' area, drawing a little more Russian attention than we wanted. It was an error quickly corrected for, with no lasting harm, and one I'm sure Soprano won't forget.

I checked in at the squadron's ready room this morning, having eaten a decent breakfast in the mess. I'm not on the flight schedule today so I planned to spend the day finishing some of the mundane paperwork and tasks I have to do around the squadron, filling time until a planned briefing, scheduled for early afternoon ahead of another CAS patrol tomorrow.

As I was keeping busy in the ready room the rest of the squadron dropped by at various times, Monk and Nomad were locked in deep conversation as usual, while Boomer regaled Flair and Slick with a story about the time he bombed an SA-11 in Syria, pretty sure he's already told me that one...but hey, a good story is a good story. Soprano also dropped in looking under the weather, he had picked up a bad cold and was off the flying schedule for a few days while his head cleared. Eventually, at 15:00, the time of the briefing had arrived and we all settled into our seats as Link and Major Daniels arrived.

Link had Major Daniels begin the briefing with his intel update. He began by bringing us up to speed on the current UNSFL situation, which appears to have not changed, with the UNSFL holding it's positions securely with little interference from the LFF. Turning to Hezbollah, Daniels had more interesting information for us, telling us about reports of the Russians allegedly transporting supplies to Hezbollah, a potentially concerning development, and one which intel were trying to find out more about. Hezbollah, for their part, are still keeping largely out of the way, with just some minor skirmishes with the UNSFL to report. Russian (or Kazan Group) forces remain active around Homs, and Russia is reportedly also sending more units to the Damascus area. Daniels revealed that it looks like Russia and Syria are preparing a renewed offensive in this area, no doubt attempting to break the deadlock with the SDF around the capital. South of Damascus, there have been reports of Israeli strikes against Syrian artillery positions that have been harassing Israeli forces near the Golan Heights. In northern Lebanon we are getting indications of clashes between Russian forces and the LFF, another reminder that we need to take care operating in that area.

Then, as Major Daniels was nearing the end of his brief, Link was called away urgently, returning a minute later to interrupt the Major and take over the briefing. This got our immediate attention, and we listened intently as Link started speaking.

“Ok Marines listen up, I have important information to share. Early this morning the LFF launched a major, widespread counter attack on UNSFL forces. Things sound like a total mess in Lebanon right now, and the UNSFL are under heavy attack in a significant number of locations. The JAOC is tasking all available CAS assets to provide support, and we’ve been put on notice to launch later this afternoon and join the effort”.

“I have very little further information for you at this point, all I know is the LFF are attacking multiple UNSFL positions across Lebanon, and the situation in some places is pretty bad. I’ve got six jets being prepared for launch as we speak, flight pairings will be Flair and Slick, Steep and Boomer, and Monk and Nomad. I want you all launching 2 hours from now and on station in Lebanon 30 minutes after that. Start planning your flights and I’ll make sure your jets are loaded, fuelled and waiting for you when you step.”

With that Link and Major Daniels left the ready room and the six of us started our flight planning, led by Flair.

Our planned launch time is 18:15 local / 15:15 zulu, the weather today has been fairly miserable, with an overcast lingering throughout the day at 11,000 feet and northeasterly winds. This is forecast to continue and we anticipate a case 1 departure. Our departure will be just under 1 hour and 40 minutes before sundown so we are anticipating a potential night recovery under case 3 conditions, but with any luck we might just make it back before we lose the light.

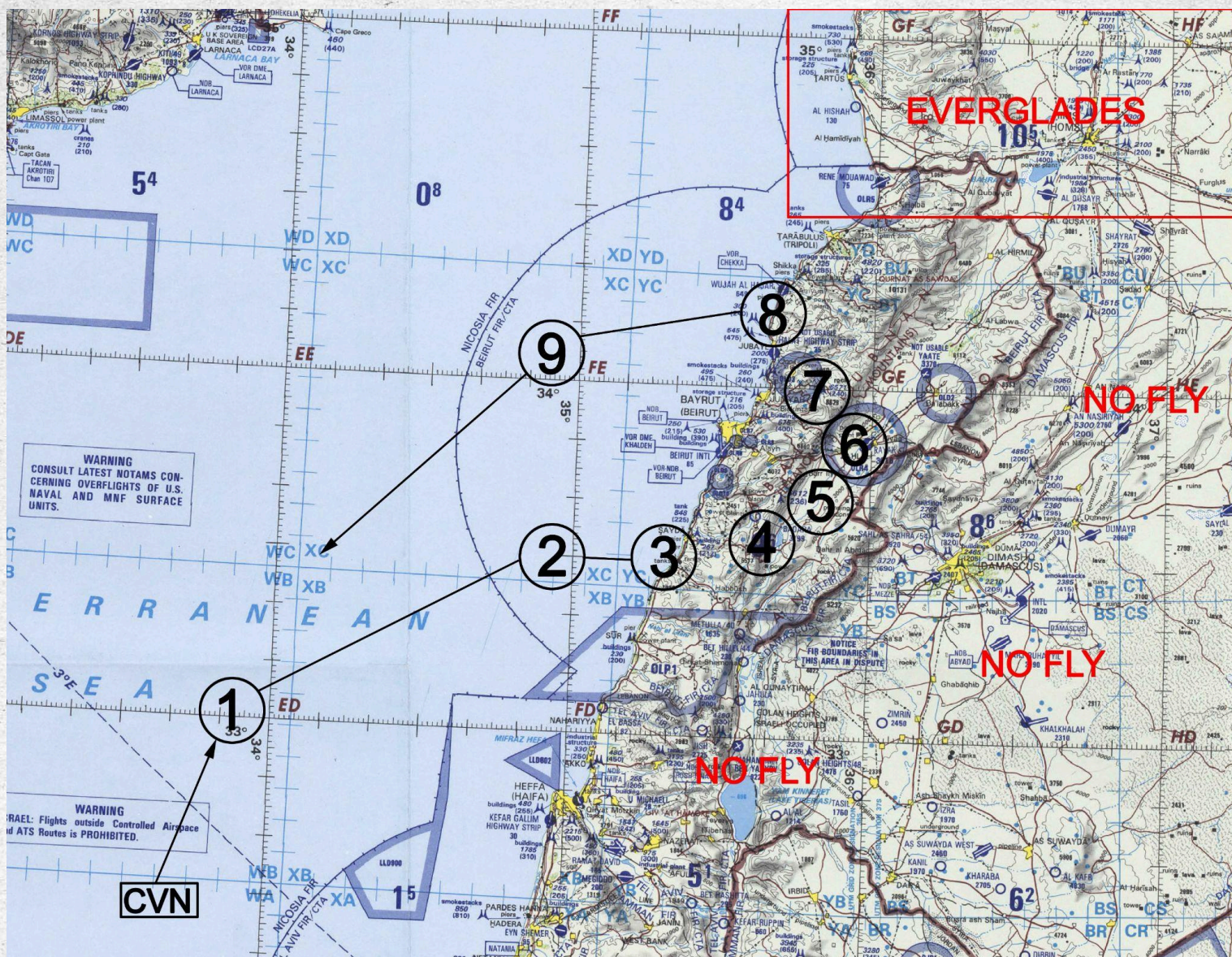
Flair allocated callsigns to each pair, with Flair and Slick taking Devil 1. Monk and Nomad were assigned Devil 2, leaving myself and Boomer as Devil 3. Devil 1 will depart first, followed by Devil 2 and then Devil 3. Each flight lead will rendezvous with their wingman at waypoint 1, before pushing on flight plan towards Lebanon. Our ingress to Lebanon will be standard, with a check in to Sentinel at waypoint 2, and entry via Lima Alpha. To aid with deconfliction we will transit at staggered altitudes.

We will operate on a common Devil flight frequency for the transit to Lebanon, to enable us to make last minute updates and share any late intel. We will then switch to our individual flight frequencies once we enter Lebanon and receive our flight specific tasking. We will receive this tasking from Watchdog who will give us instructions on where to go next and which JTAC will be controlling us. We have assigned waypoints 4, 5, 6 and 7 on the main UNSFL bases around the Bekaa Valley to aid with navigation in Lebanon. Bingo fuel is set as 4,600 lb.

Once our vul is over we will depart Lebanon through Lima Bravo at waypoint 8, then head to waypoint 9 where we will then turn back for mother on TACAN, remembering to check in with Red Crown as we do so.

The carrier is currently positioned further south than it has been previously so our available divert is Ramat David in Israel, with a minimum divert fuel of 2,000 lb.

Weapons loadouts have been assigned based on what was ready and accessible in the magazine, with limitations on the number of available precision bombs. I will be carrying a laser guided Maverick, along with 2 GBU-12s and 2 airburst Mk-82s. Boomer will be equipped with 2 IR Mavericks and 2 GBU-32s. My takeoff weight is 47,000 lb and I will once again be flying side number 107.



Discussing threats, we are anticipating the threat of MANPADs in LFF possession, which could come into play if we have to head beneath the cloud to acquire targets. The LFF also have 23mm and 57mm AAA systems in their possession, and as this counter attack appears to be well orchestrated and prepared we should assume these will also be present.

With the briefing concluded the six of us made our way to life support and started gearing up for our mission. As we did so Soprano found us and wished us good luck, I think he looked disappointed to be left behind. Soprano also passed some notes to Flair, courtesy of Link, which Flair promptly stored away in his flight suit pocket and said he'd update us in the air. Once we were fully kitted out we made the journey to the flight deck, bracing ourselves as we stepped out into the wind whipping over the carrier and walked to the jets. As I climbed into the aircraft and strapped in, I paused to think and took a moment to control my nerves.

As I sat in the cockpit I glanced over at Boomer pre-fighting his aircraft and had to admit I was glad he was on my wing today. Soprano has impressed so far, but this mission could be a real step up from anything else we've done out here up to now, we've little information to go on, poor weather and a tough, tenacious enemy committed to the fight.

Anything could happen and I need to be prepared for any eventuality, lives are counting on it.