3rd May, 2014.

I am Flight Lieutenant David 'Steep' Hill, as I write this I'm floating somewhere in the eastern Mediterranean, embarked on the US carrier Harry S. Truman. It's not my first time in this part of the world, although this time I've had to learn to deal with seasickness.

I am an RAF pilot currently on exchange with the United States, flying the F/A-18C Hornet with VMFA-232 (the Red Devils) of the US Marine Corps. I'm already a veteran of Operations Persian Freedom and Cerberus North and it's fair to say I've seen more then my fair share of action over the past three years.

My time with the Red Devils in Cerberus North was somewhat eventful. Initially flying out of Incirlik last June, we were part of the Joint Syrian Task Force (JSTF), tasked with establishing no fly zones in northern Syria in support of the breakaway Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) as well as combating the march of the insurgent Syrian Islamic Army (SIA). The SIA were eventually defeated, for the most part anyway, as they still posed an asymmetrical threat throughout our time in theatre. The rest of the mission experienced significant mission creep however, and by the end of August we were widely engaged with Syrian forces, Hezbollah (who joined in support of the Syrian government) and bailing out a failed Israeli attack into Syria. During the operation our squadron hit it's fair share of targets in Syria, as well as in parts of Lebanon, where Syrian forces occupied the Bekaa valley.

When the JSTF eventually pulled out late last year, things in Syria were still a mess, with Israel holding part of southwest Syria and the Russians getting more involved by the day as they fought to support their Syrian ally. The SDF and Syrians were bogged down in heavy fighting around Damascus and the Syrian air force was largely spent as a threat, and so there was little left to do regarding air support outside of the unattractive prospects of engaging Russian forces or bombing civilian neighbourhoods in Damascus. The no fly zones were eventually abandoned, being unenforceable on the Russians and unnecessary against a badly mauled Syrian air force.

After the Red Devils were sent home from OCN we enjoyed a short break before resuming our normal duties back at Miramar. As 2013 became 2014 and spring approached, we began to get rumblings of a new deployment happening soon and eventually received orders to begin work ups for a carrier deployment. This meant going through carrier qualification (CQ), something new to several of us, including me. At times it was a traumatic experience…but I lived to tell the tale and eventually CQ'd.

And now we're heading back towards Syria.

So why are we going back?

Well during and since Operation Cerberus North we've seen a lot of disruption happen in Lebanon. A massive influx of refugees has taken place and parts of the country occupied by Syria, resulting in attacks by Israel and the JSTF. Hezbollah also got involved in the fighting, resulting in even more attacks into Lebanon. Notably Hezbollah also took heavy losses in fighting with the JSTF, Israel and SDF. All of this resulted in a large amount of instability in Lebanon, this instability turned to infighting and against a backdrop of domestic conflict, desperate refugees and a porous border, the remnants of the SIA were able to take root in eastern Lebanon. Over a short time the scattered SIA fighters were able to quickly coalesce and dominate in the border regions, finding new leadership, new manpower and eventually emerging as a new 'organisation of concern' - The Lebanese Freedom Front (LFF).

The LFF is bad news for Lebanon. Their ideology is all too familiar to us by now, being very similar to that of the SIA - which is to say barbaric and extremist. The LFF quickly moved to attack Hezbollah controlled areas, achieving some major victories against the much weakened organisation and spreading across east Lebanon to take control of large parts of the Bekaa valley. From here they have pushed west into the Lebanon mountains, making large gains and are now in a position to potentially threaten cities like Beirut and Tripoli. Well financed through taking over the Bekaa valley drug production sites and well armed through captured equipment, the LFF is highly committed and a serious threat to the future of Lebanon.

As a result of the rise of the LFF, and with the situation in Syria still highly unstable, the US has started to re-deploy in strength again in the eastern Mediterranean. This deployment is part of what has become known as Operation Cerberus West.

Cerberus West's main objective is to provide air support to the newly formed UNSFL, otherwise known as the United Nations Stabilisation Force in Lebanon. The UNSFL is an international coalition, deployed under the UN banner at the request of Lebanon's government and tasked with aiding the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) in defeating the LFF insurgency, securing the country's borders and disarming it's various armed militias. The US, UK and France are all involved in supporting the UNSFL operation from the air.

However we are all very mindful of the fact that the Syrian Civil war is still ongoing and Israel is still occupying the parts of Syria it captured in it's offensive last year. Given that we almost certainly still have special operations forces on the ground in Syria as well, there's a strong feeling in the squadron that we're not quite done in Syria yet. There's a pool going on the date the first strike back in Syria happens, it's currently sitting at $600, I hope I win it.

Against this complex picture sits one more complication, Russia. Relations with Russia are strained, as the JSTF and Russia have found themselves supporting opposing sides of the Syrian civil war. The potential for flashpoints is high and we have had to work hard to deconflict. In the months since Cerberus North ended Russia has doubled down on it's mission in Syria, deploying a brigade sized force to the country, alongside an estimated 15,000 Russian mercenaries from the Kazan Group PMC. The Russians have also occupied part of northern Lebanon, using this territory to support their attack on SDF held Homs.

This is how I ended up on the Truman. As we sailed for the Med I've had to adapt to life on a ship. This is the first time I've spent at sea, and after overcoming some initial seasickness I've just about got used to it, although the lack of booze on the ship is a major oversight in my opinion. The layout of the carrier also took some getting used to, with its labyrinthine series of seemingly identical corridors.

When I awoke this morning I was informed we were having a major briefing later today. Given that we are now only around 500 miles west of Cyprus I figured we're finally getting ready to start operations. So with a familiar mix of apprehension and excitement I reported to our squadron's ready room. I arrived at the same time as one of my squadron mates, Lieutenant Adam 'Soprano' Jackson. Soprano's on his first deployment and is a likeable young pilot who I've already started to bond with. As I got seated Soprano slid into the seat next to me, remarking that he was glad we were finally getting down to business. I agreed with him, a few weeks at sea trapped below decks soon gets tiresome.

I looked around the ready room, noting that a lot of changes had occurred since the squadron's last deployment. The guys I had flown with regularly were all gone, having moved onto other assignments, or in some cases, sadly lost. Looking to the front of the room I saw the squadron CO, Lt. Colonel Thomas Lincoln, 'Link' was still our commander, a fine leader in my opinion and I was glad he was still with us.

Seated to Link's right was our new XO, Major Rick 'Flair' Anderson. Flair is tough and pushes us, much like Poodle before him, but is respected as a highly competent aviator. Behind Flair sat Monk and Nomad. Monk is Captain Monica King, and is great friends with Lt. Bruno 'Nomad' Garcia, with the two often found together. Monk is a lively character and keeps us all in good spirits, while Nomad is an incredibly chilled out and calming person to have around, I've gotten to know Monk and Nomad pretty well and they're both great people to have around.

As I scanned the room two more pilots arrived, entering the room in deep conversation. First through the door was Lieutenant Brandon Thompson, callsign Slick. I'd struggled so far to get on with Slick, he was a little too impersonal for my liking but hey, you can't be friends with everyone. Alongside Slick was Captain Glenn 'Boomer' Robinson. Boomer is the newest member of the squadron, having just returned to the Marines after an exchange tour on the F-16 with the USAF. Boomer has been a Weasel with the air force and as such had gained a lot of valuable experience over Syria last year. His experience in killing SAMs has given him a reputation boost ahead of his arrival, and so alongside myself and Link is considered one of the 'old guys' when it comes to combat, we hopefully all have lessons to pass on.

Once the squadron was assembled and seated, Link stepped to the front of the room and began to speak.

"Good afternoon Red Devils, welcome to the eastern Med. We'll be in position to start flight operations into Lebanon tomorrow so the agenda for today is to receive an up to date intel brief and then I'll brief our set of missions".

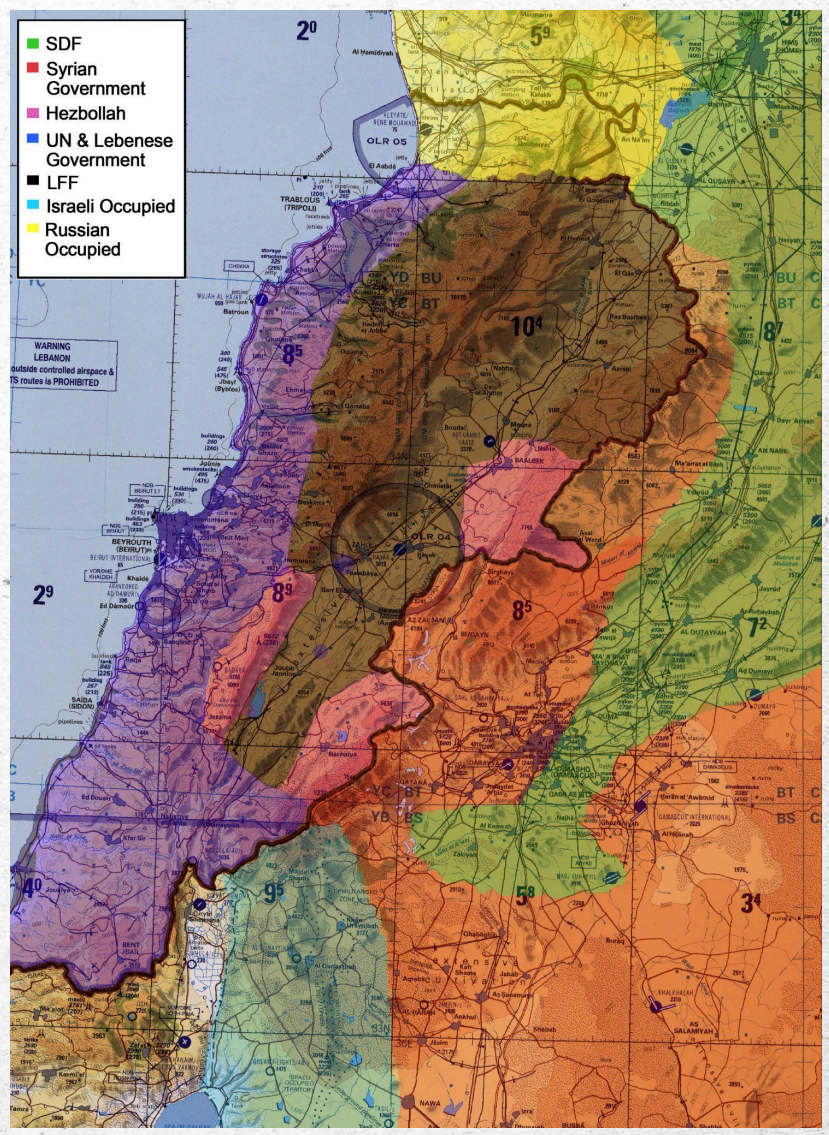
"You all know Major Daniels by now, Major over to you".

Link returned to his seat and the squadron intel officer, Major Daniels, got to his feet.

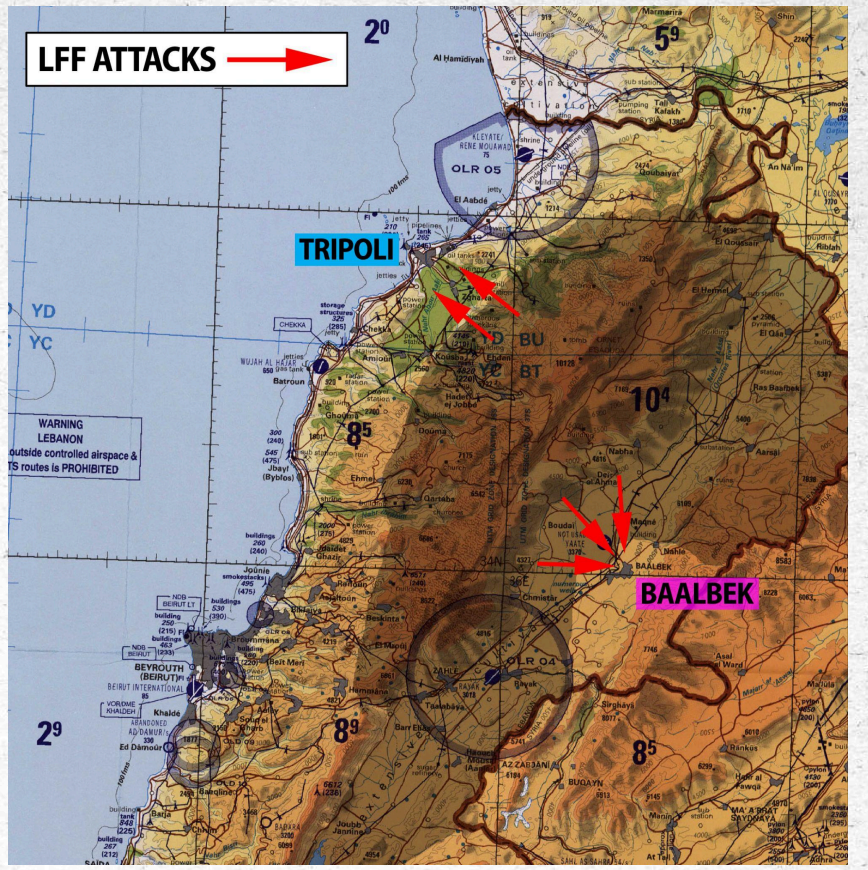
"Thank you sir" said Daniels as he took position and clicked a slide onto the screens positioned across the walls at the front of the room.

"Let's start by taking a look at the situation in Lebanon. As you can see the LFF have capitalised on a diminished Hezbollah and weak LAF to take a lot of territory in a short amount of time. Apart from a few areas in which Hezbollah is still holding out, the LFF now controls most of the Bekaa Valley and Lebanon Mountains. Southwest and west Lebanon remains under the control of the Lebanese government, supported by UN forces."

Daniels switched the slide on the briefing screens.



"The LFF are continuing to attack both Lebanese and Hezbollah positions, with recent attacks moving towards Hezbollah controlled Baalbek and government controlled Tripoli. We've also seen the LFF engage in skirmishes with UN forces further south in the Bekaa Valley, these have been limited in size but we are seeing casualties amongst UN forces, especially through the use of IEDs and suicide tactics. VBIEDs especially are a concern."



"The LFF are otherwise relatively low tech in the threat they pose, consisting mostly of dismounts, with the usual array of weaponry such as AK series rifles and RPGs. They also have a steady supply of Technicals carrying heavier weapons such as surface to surface rockets, and DHSKs, as well as reports of some 23mm anti air systems. There are also reports of limited numbers of light armour and APCs."

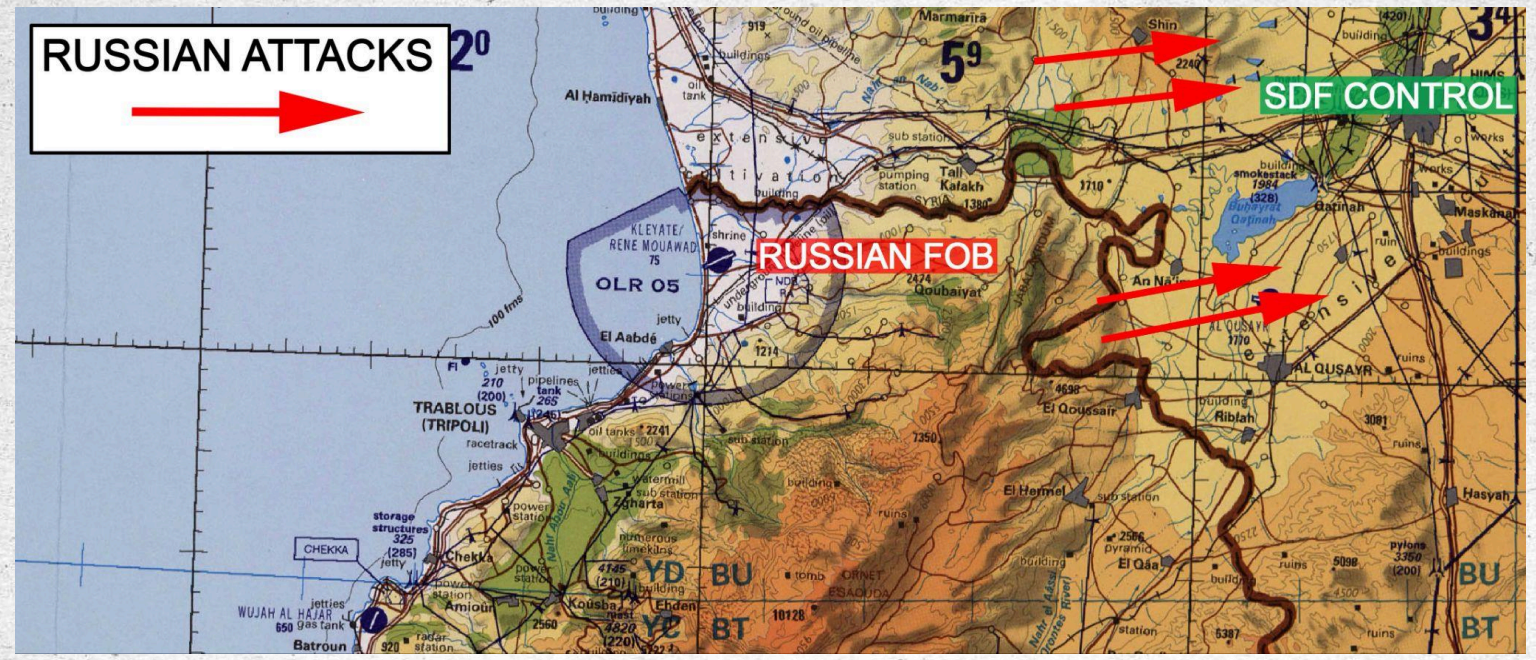
"In terms of air defence expect 23mm AAA and MANPADs to be a threat at lower altitudes, along with an S-60 AAA threat at medium altitudes. The complication here is that Hezbollah had a lot of capability in this area, and we just don't know what fell into the hands of the LFF as they kicked Hezbollah out."

"Damn, you leave anything behind Boomer?" Monk asked Boomer to a series of laughs around the room.

"Just AAA" replied Boomer with a grin. "We went after Hezbollah's SAM hard, pretty sure we got them all."

"Speaking of Hezbollah" Daniels interjected, retaking control of the conversation, "Hezbollah has been hit hard in recent months, weakened from fighting in Syria and then being rolled over by the LFF. They are most certainly not the threat they were, but they still do pose a threat. As the Captain just said we're confident the Hezbollah SAM threat is gone, aside from MANPADs of course. But as with the LFF expect a AAA threat at low and medium altitudes. On the ground we don't expect Hezbollah to just let the UNSFL operate with impunity, the UN is holding ground Hezbollah considers it's own and if given the opportunity will attempt to fight back".

"Now looking at the north of Lebanon is where things get a little more problematic."



"The Russians have occupied the north of the country, seizing control of the airstrip at Rene Mouawad and using it as a FOB to support their ongoing operation to take Homs from the SDF. The use of northern Lebanon has allowed the Russians to open a southern front against the city. The Russians have committed heavily to supporting Syria, with up to 20,000 Russian soldiers or mercenaries now in theatre. The Russians have also brought more advanced equipment with them, deploying T-90 MBTs, and KA-50s amongst other more high end assets. The Russian fleet in the Mediterranean was also reinforced last year, with the arrival of the Battlecruiser Pyotr Velikiy, a highly dangerous ship you should stay well away from."

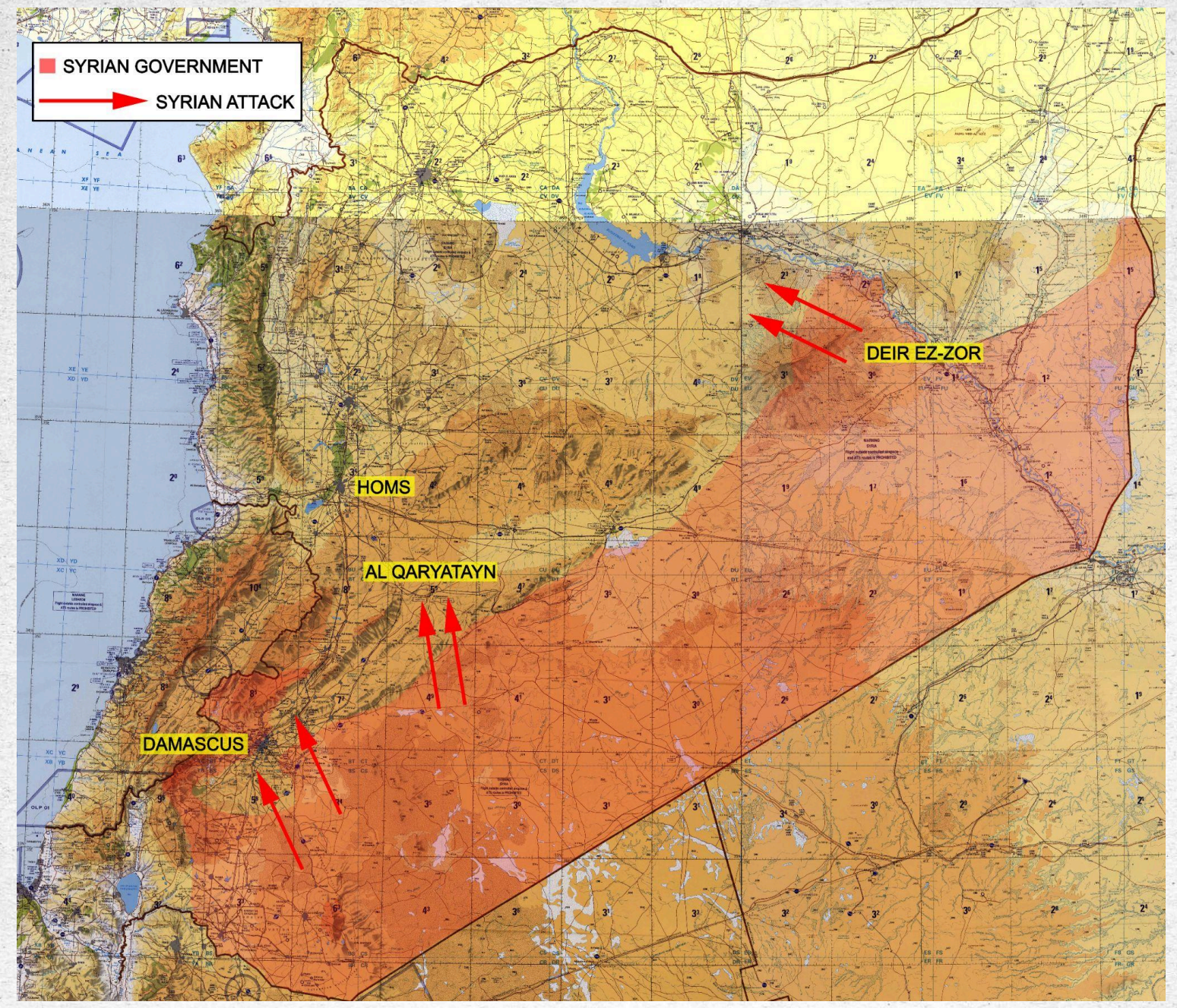
"The Russians of course will leave us alone, so long as we deconflict from them, something I'm sure Lt. Colonel Lincoln will discuss with you in detail. This gets more complex however when we talk about the Kazan Group. All indications so far are that Russia considers it's mercenary forces in theatre as under contract to the Syrian government. As such we believe they may be a little more free with their rules of engagement, including against us. This may mean we have the potential for the more advanced Russian systems, operating under the control of Russian nationals, being used against UN or US forces. Such a situation wouldn't constitute an attack by Russia though, it would be by Syria."

"Major, I'm assuming they will be very difficult to tell apart?" asked Nomad.

"That's correct Captain," replied Daniels. "Like I said, a little more problematic".

There were some solemn looks and subtle shakes of heads as Daniels was saying this. Daniels then turned to the subject of the ongoing Syrian civil war.

"Now let's look at what's going on in Syria".

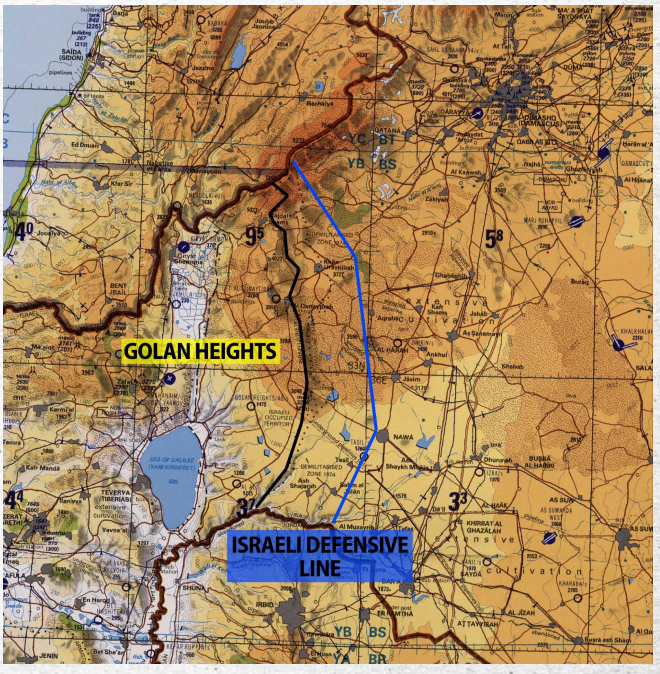


"The Syrians are on the offensive in several parts of the country. Out east the Syrian Army, supported by what we believe to be Kazan Group, is attacking SDF territory from the Deir ez-Zor region. The Syrians have retaken this area in the last 3 months, re-capturing it's sizable oil fields. In the southwest, offensive action continues around Damascus, with a further attack currently underway against the town of Al Qaryatayn".

"The Syrian military machine has been badly hurt in the last year through combat losses, defections and desertions. But Russian re-supply efforts have gone some way to stabilising their forces and has put them in a position to start these recent offensives. The Syrian IADS has been heavily damaged over the last year, with the destruction of almost all of Syria's strategic SAM systems. One SA-2 and several fixed SA-3 sites remain intact, and a number of SA-6 batteries are deployed to provide area defence, but otherwise the Syrian air defence network currently consists of predominantly shorter ranged systems such as SA-8 and SA-19. AAA ranging from 23mm all the way up to 100mm radar guided systems remains widespread however".

"The Syrian Air Force has been equally hard hit, with maybe no more than a couple of squadrons worth of fighters left, believed to be a mix of Mig-21, Mig-23 and Mig-29s. Current active air bases are Mezzeh, Damascus IAP, Sayqal, Tha'lah and Khalkhalah."

"And finally let's turn to Israel. The Israelis are holding a defensive line in Syria approximately 10 miles past the original Golan Heights border, this has given them a further buffer zone to help push any threat to Israel further back. Since establishing this line the Israelis have seemed content to hold this position and have not taken any further offensive action on the ground. We have seen limited Israeli airstrikes however, striking mostly Hezbollah and LFF targets in theatre."

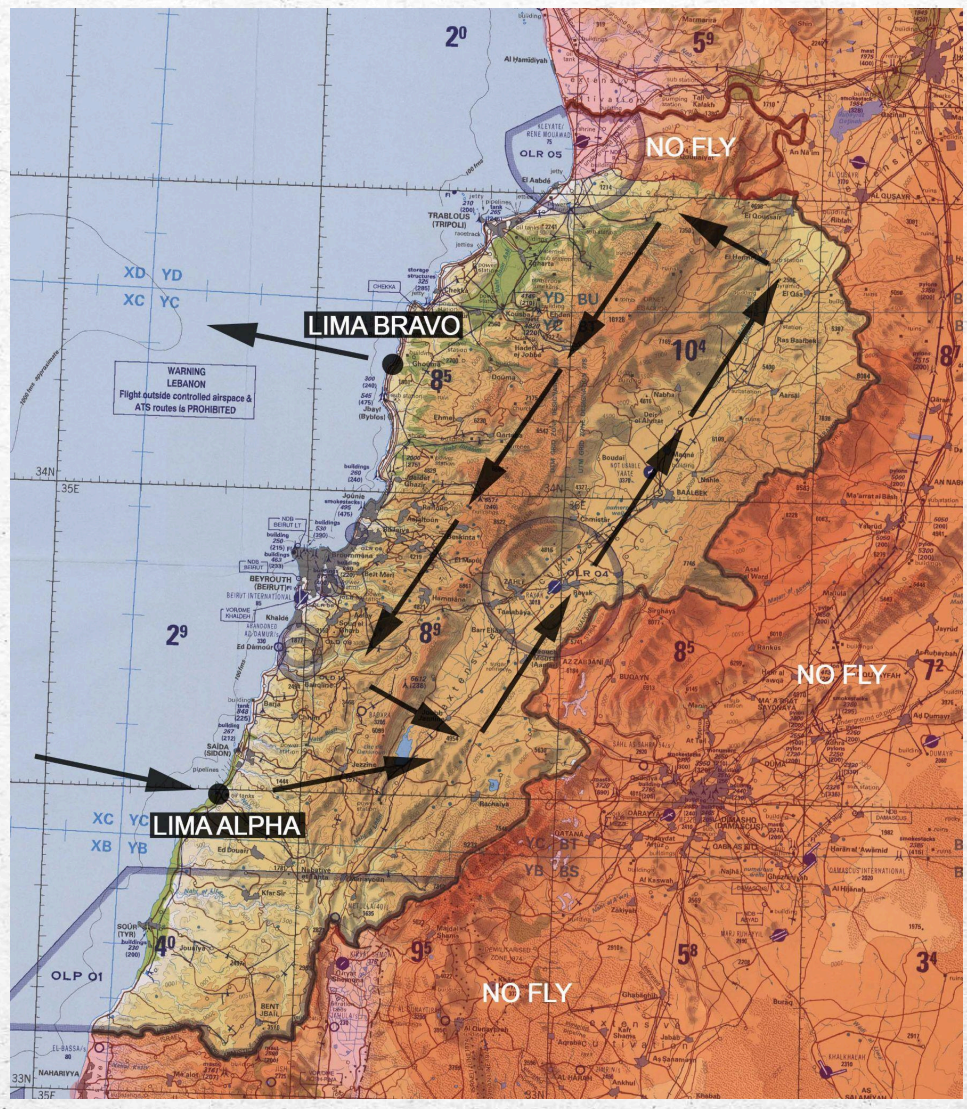


Daniels then concluded his brief, reminding us all to make sure we studied the intel pack his team had put together. As he left the room Link stepped back to the front and began to address us once again.

“Ok, let’s get down to business. As I said earlier we will be moving into a position to start operations in theatre tomorrow. We’re on the ATO and will be carrying out a number of armed patrols over Lebanon. I want to use this as an opportunity to get everyone familiar with theatre procedures, the terrain and operations in a combat zone. Each two-ship we send out will be led by a pilot with previous operational experience.”

“Our route will bring us into Lebanon through point Lima Alpha, from where we will merge into an anticlockwise flow over the country. You won’t be the only aircraft overhead so make sure you follow the instructions given by the ABCCC to ensure you deconflict from other platforms. While over Lebanon we will be ready to respond to any UNSFL requests for support. At the end of your vul, egress Lebanese airspace through point Lima Bravo and come on home. Remember that the CSG will be operating full air defence procedures so do not forget to check in with Red Crown as you return”.

“While over Lebanon you’ll need to pay close attention to your position. Lebanon has quite confined airspace, we’re talking about a box only 100nm long and as narrow as 25nm in places. To the south is the Golan Heights and Israel’s lines with Syria, to the east is Syria and the bulk of it’s air defences, and in the north, the Russian operating area. You are not cleared to enter any of these areas at this time without explicit authorisation from the JAOC. That’s doubly true in the north with the Russians.”



"The first set of flights tomorrow will be Monk and Slick, followed by Steep and Soprano, with Boomer and Nomad last out. I've prepared a package for all flight leads, so break out into your pairs and start briefing your individual flights. The JAOC has also distributed a list of geographic codewords, these are in your packs so make sure you get your heads around them before your missions."

Link closed the briefing at this point and I told Soprano to follow me as we found space to start planning tomorrow's mission. Monk, who had experience in OPF, and Boomer who took part in OCN also split off with their junior wingmen to start planning their missions.

This should be a relatively straightforward mission. The priority is to successfully break Soprano into real world operations and get myself re-oriented with the area, as well as being on alert to support the UNSFL if required. I'm no stranger to Lebanon - last time I was there Woody and I were going after an SA-10 - but things have moved on and the picture on the ground has changed a great deal.

Under the callsign Devil 4, Soprano and I are scheduled for a 05:15Z / 08:15 local launch. Expected conditions will be case 1, with a takeoff weight of 47,000lb. Once I go off the front end of the ship I will follow case 1 procedures to 7nm before making an unrestricted climb for waypoint 1.

At waypoint 1 Soprano will rendezvous with me, joining on my wing. We will then proceed together towards waypoint 2, climbing to a cruising altitude of 30,000 feet. As we egress the carrier controlled area (CCA) we will check out with Red Crown - the Ticonderoga class cruiser controlling the strike groups air defence.

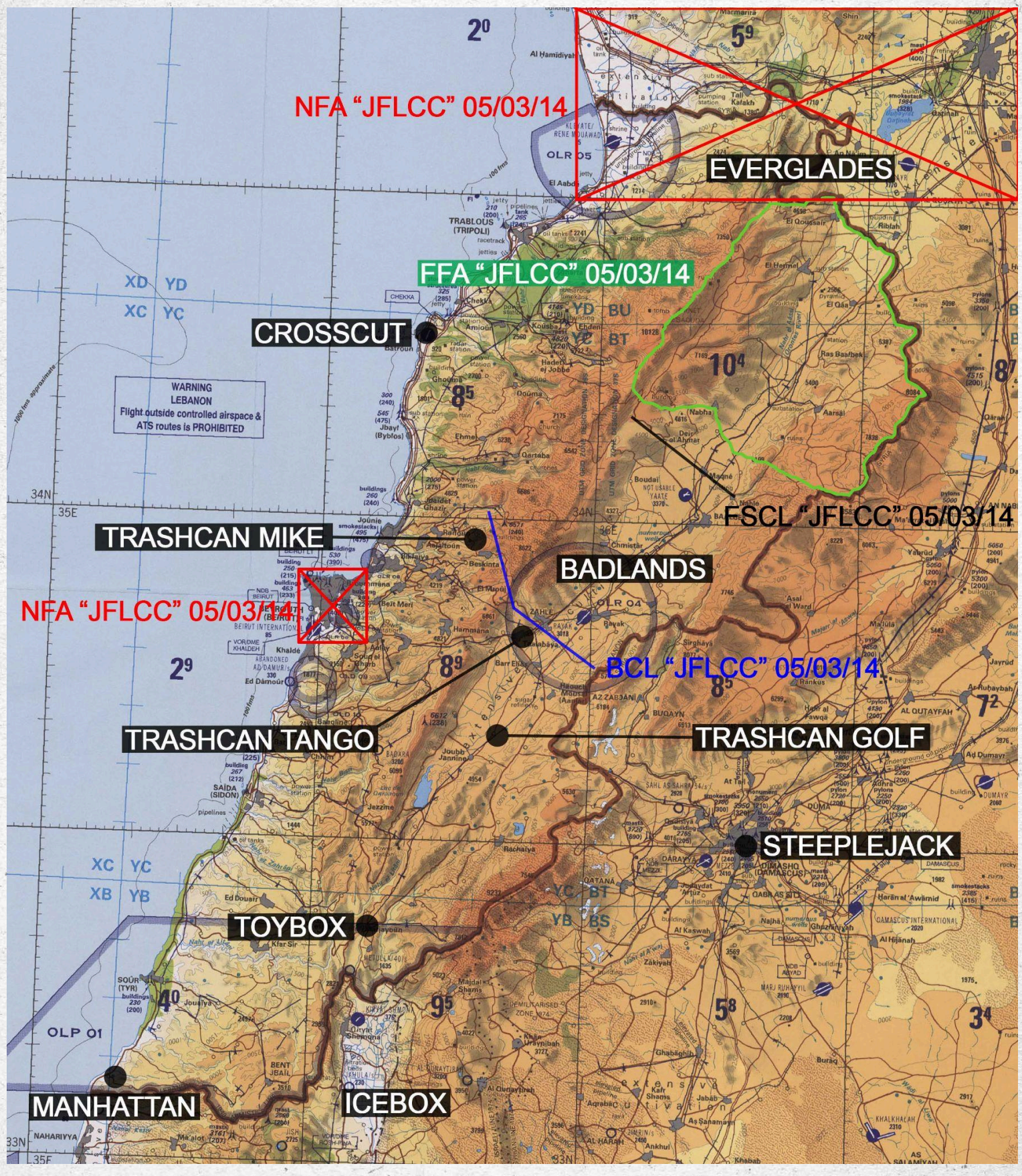
Once we arrive at waypoint 2 we will announce ourselves to the theatre ABCCC, Sentinel. Sentinel will clear us into Lebanon through point Lima Alpha at waypoint 3, assigning us an altitude block as we do so. We will hold this altitude block throughout our patrol in Lebanon, being mindful of the congested airspace. We also expect to see UAVs operating at 30,000 feet, the drones will be hard to spot and slow moving and are a real collision concern. As we enter Lebanon we should ensure all countermeasures and RWR gear are operational. Our TOT for Lima Alpha is 05:40Z, where we will be relieving Monk and Slick, callsign Devil 3, from their patrol.

From Lima Alpha we will proceed to waypoint 4, located on 'Toybox' - the UNSFL FOB at the southern end of the Bekaa. Following our route anticlockwise around Lebanon we will overfly waypoint 5, positioned on 'Trashcan Golf' - one of the UNSFL platoon houses from which patrols are carried out in contested territory. Waypoint 6 is in LFF territory, and from here we should ensure we turn northwest to avoid entering Syria. Waypoint 7 marks the furthest north we can fly in Lebanon, north of here is Russian held territory, codeworded 'Everglades'. Clearly, entering this area will be a bad idea. From waypoint 7 we will turn south for waypoint 8, located at 'Whitewater' - the LAF/UNSFL base at Beirut Rafic-Hariri IAP. From waypoint 8 we will return to waypoint 4 to make another circuit over Lebanon, with a vul end of 06:20Z.

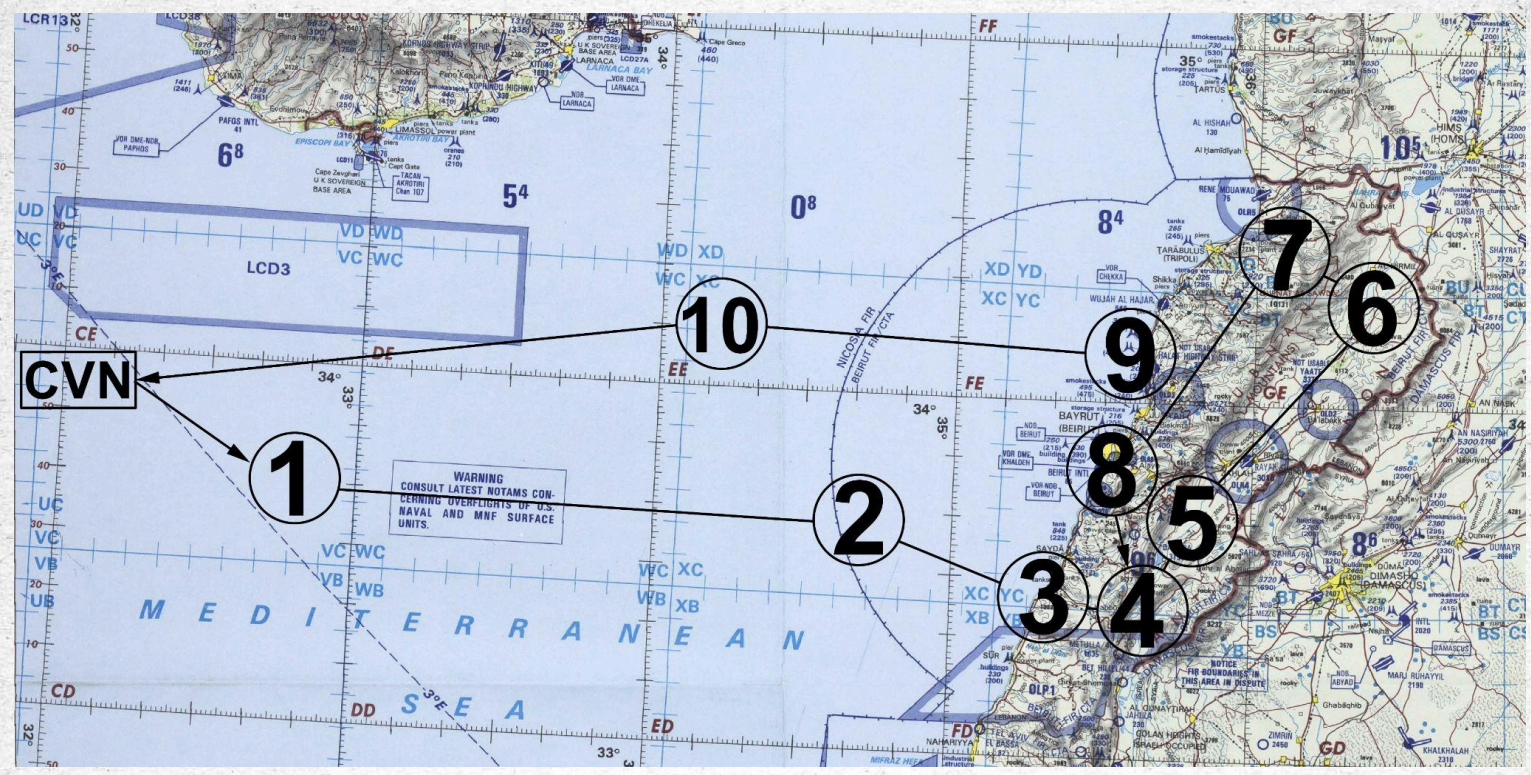
As we patrol over Lebanon we should stay on the frequency for Sentinel, who will pass words as required. This will be an armed patrol so there is the possibility of us being called into action to provide close air support to UNSFL ground forces. Link provided an up to date Air Support Chart in our briefing packages, this shows the operating area of friendly forces, noting the no fire and free fire areas. In line with theatre ROE all locations not marked are assumed to be restricted fire areas, requiring JTAC control to strike targets. A number of ground patrols will be carried out tomorrow in the Bekaa Valley through LFF held territory, originating in the platoon house in Taalabaya (Trashcan Tango) and terminating north of Baalbek.

I filed a full list of the theatre codewords in my kneeboards.

Once we reach our vul end or hit bingo fuel of 6,000lb, we will check out with Sentinel and egress Lebanon through point Lima Bravo. The Arco and Shell tanker tracks are both available west of Lebanon if required.



As we transit back towards Mother we must ensure we check back in with Red Crown as we enter the CSG's air defence identification zone (ADIZ), 100 nm from the carrier. A case 1 recovery is expected, with VMFA-232's assigned pattern altitude tomorrow being 2,000 feet. Our available divert is Akrotiri, with a minimum divert fuel of 1800 lb. The recovery tanker, callsign Bloodhound, will be on station at angels 12 above the carrier during recovery operations.



Bullseye for tomorrow is set as Roadhouse (Rayak airport in the Bekaa Valley). My armament will be 1 GBU-32 fused for airburst and 2 GBU-38s with a programmable FMU-152 fuse. Soprano will be carrying a pair of GBU-31s. This will give us a flexible range of attack options, capable of dealing with a number of scenarios. I have been assigned tail number 104, maintenance says it's a good jet, I hope they're right.

The weather in Syria looks decent tomorrow, with scattered clouds at around 8,000 feet and easterly winds in the 10-15 knot region.

The threat picture should be relatively benign for our patrol. At altitude there shouldn't be any threats to us so long as we follow our flight plan. However should we get low over contested territory in Lebanon we risk exposing ourselves to AAA and MANPAD fire. If we find ourselves out of position and in Syrian or Russian territory then the threat to us will ramp up significantly as various SAM systems come online. The biggest threat to us is a potential mid-air collision in what can be congested airspace, so it's essential we follow instructions and stick to our flight plan.

After Soprano and I completed our briefing I had time to reflect on the mission ahead. This is far from my first operation, but it is my first from a carrier, and as such I was feeling more nerves than I had become accustomed to. I also know Syria and Lebanon pretty well by this point, but in the time away it feels like the region has changed massively, and I can't help but feel we're re-entering what could turn out to be a very chaotic theatre of operations. I kept these feelings to myself of course, Soprano's just a rookie, and I don't want any concerns of mine to transmit to him. So follow the plan, keep the kid safe and come home again. That's all we need to do.