

30th June, 2014.

Things in Lebanon are crazy right now. It's been a week since we clashed with the Russian forces that drove hard into UNSFL positions in Lebanon. The Russians took the UN force in the Bekaa Valley by surprise and forced them back to the banks of Assi river, where Soprano and I were tasked with protecting them. This task was made more difficult by widespread jamming of our command and control radio frequencies.

The Russians of course denied the ground force belonged to them. Maybe it was true, maybe it was just a technicality covered up by the mercenary label, but whatever the truth, Soprano and I were soon engaged with some form of Russian force in Lebanon determined to force it's way south. The belief is that the Russians are trying to take territory that will open up additional routes through Lebanon to link the north with Hezbollah controlled areas further south. Ultimately though the attack fell short, seriously dented by western air power, especially with the Russian air force not appearing willing to come to the aid of the ground force. The gains that were made by the Russians have been held however, as the UNSFL have not attempted to retake lost territory. Hezbollah have also been active over the last week following their rocket attacks in southern Lebanon, and it is looking increasingly likely that the events of a week ago were coordinated between Russia and Hezbollah.

I would love to say that that was the extent of last week's drama, but 3 days ago the Syrians carried out a missile attack on Homs. Over 50 civilians were killed, and although there have been no further indications of chemical weapons, the way the US President is talking makes it sound like something's going to happen. For their part, Russia has warned of consequences should we do so.

So it would be fair to say tension in the region is very high right now. The arrival of a second US carrier later today probably won't help calm things either, with the USS John C. Stennis enroute to the Med at this moment, a sure sign of the seriousness the US is treating the current situation.

At the squadron level, we've been on three CAS patrols over the past week. Things in the air have also been on edge and we've been locked up by a few SAMs, although no further shots have been fired by either side. Comms jamming in Lebanon is persisting, and complicating matters, although the issue appears confined to Lebanon at the moment, with intel believing Hezbollah controlled commercial radio stations to be the source.

So it's been one hell of a week. The tension can be felt in the air, and seen in the increased readiness across the strike group. We've dealt with this in the ready room through a steady routine of practical jokes and gallows humour, much to the annoyance of Flair - who was often the victim of our tomfoolery. Getting an LSO in on the action to pretend Flair's OK landing grade was in fact a No Grade was a particular highlight. Watching Flair argue the point until blue in the face against an impassive faced LSO had us crying with laughter, until our obvious amusement tipped Flair off and the LSO finally gave him his real grade.

But it was soon time to get serious again and prepare for an intel brief planned for this morning, which we all reported to promptly. Once seated Major Daniels was invited to begin by Link, stepping to the podium Daniels began by speaking about the situation in Homs.

“Good morning everyone. As you know, 3 days ago a ballistic missile attack was launched against Homs. The widespread destruction aside, one of the main concerns over this attack was the potential for further use of chemical weapons. Inspectors on the ground in Homs have examined some of the debris and although there are no reported casualties currently attributed to chemical weapons, traces of Sarin have been found in the debris.”

“So I guess we didn’t get it all,” remarked Monk.

“Nor did we expect to,” responded Link.

“While the strikes on Sayqal were focused on Syrian chemical weapons infrastructure,” Major Daniels added, “we always anticipated there would be further storage facilities. We hoped our previous attack would serve as a serious deterrent to further use of these weapons, but clearly this has not had the desired effect.”

We all knew better than to ask further questions about the origin of the weapons and the next steps that would be taken, we knew that there was a good chance we would find our more before long.

Turning to other matters, Daniels started discussing the Russians. The Russians and their proxies are adopting a highly aggressive posture towards us right now. It is becoming ever more clear that the presence of the UNSFL and the western air forces over Lebanon is creating an issue for Russian and Syrian plans in Lebanon. The failure of last week’s attack in the Bekaa to achieve it’s objectives is believed to have caused a great deal of frustration in the Russian and Syrian commands. Daniels also shared intelligence that the lack of air cover to protect the mercenary units has caused a significant amount of friction between Russian commanders on the ground and Russian air force commanders, with the troops on the ground feeling betrayed by the withholding of air cover. We are told that within the Russian military there are divided camps over whether the air force should be utilised more in Syria and Lebanon, with calls for further action from some being dampened by appeals for caution from others. From our point of view it would be pretty hard to claim any non-Russian involvement when modern Russian air force aircraft are involved, so it would seem that for now at least there are voices within the Russian military that agree. For that we are grateful. On the ground however things are not quite so restrained, with several minor clashes between mercenary forces and the UNSFL taking place.

Daniels discussed Hezbollah next. Since their increase in activity a week ago, we’ve seen numerous skirmishes between Hezbollah and the UNSFL, with a number of rocket attacks on UNSFL positions. Hezbollah fighters are also reported to be moving back into Syria, although in limited numbers and perhaps lacking some of the heavier firepower they hoped to gain from linking up with the Russians.

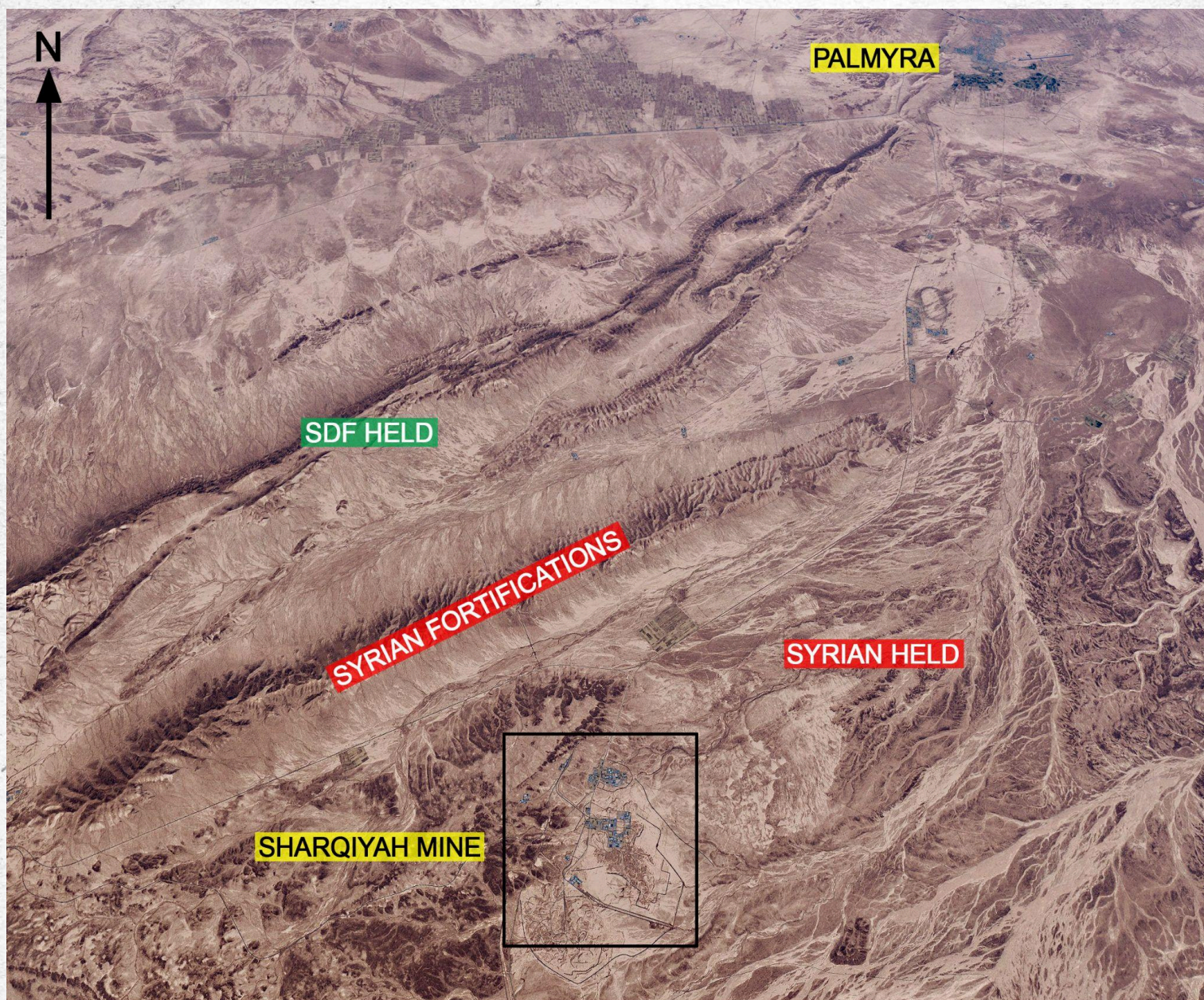
The final topic Daniels briefed on was the Israelis. He had interesting news here as well, revealing that overnight the Israelis had struck transit areas for weapons in northern Lebanon, believed to be destined for Hezbollah. It seems the resurgence of Hezbollah has not gone unnoticed in Israel - not that anyone expected it would. Daniels’ briefing concluded soon after and we were left digesting what he told us when we heard further news that the Russians were stating they would respond ‘appropriately’ to these ‘hostile actions’. What ‘appropriate’ action is, is not yet known.

So that was the backdrop against which Boomer, Soprano, Slick and me reported to a briefing later in the day. Me, Soprano and Boomer arrived together, having spent the afternoon on the hangar deck checking on maintenance progress at the request of Flair. That was our first clue that another major mission was imminent.

Once we were all seated, Link rose to the briefing podium and began to speak.

“Good afternoon Red Devils, let’s get straight down to business. As we saw earlier in the intel brief, a second attack has been carried out by Syria with chemical weapons. The policy of our government so far has been to respond whenever that line is crossed, and that policy will continue tomorrow.”

Link clicked a slide onto the briefing screen.



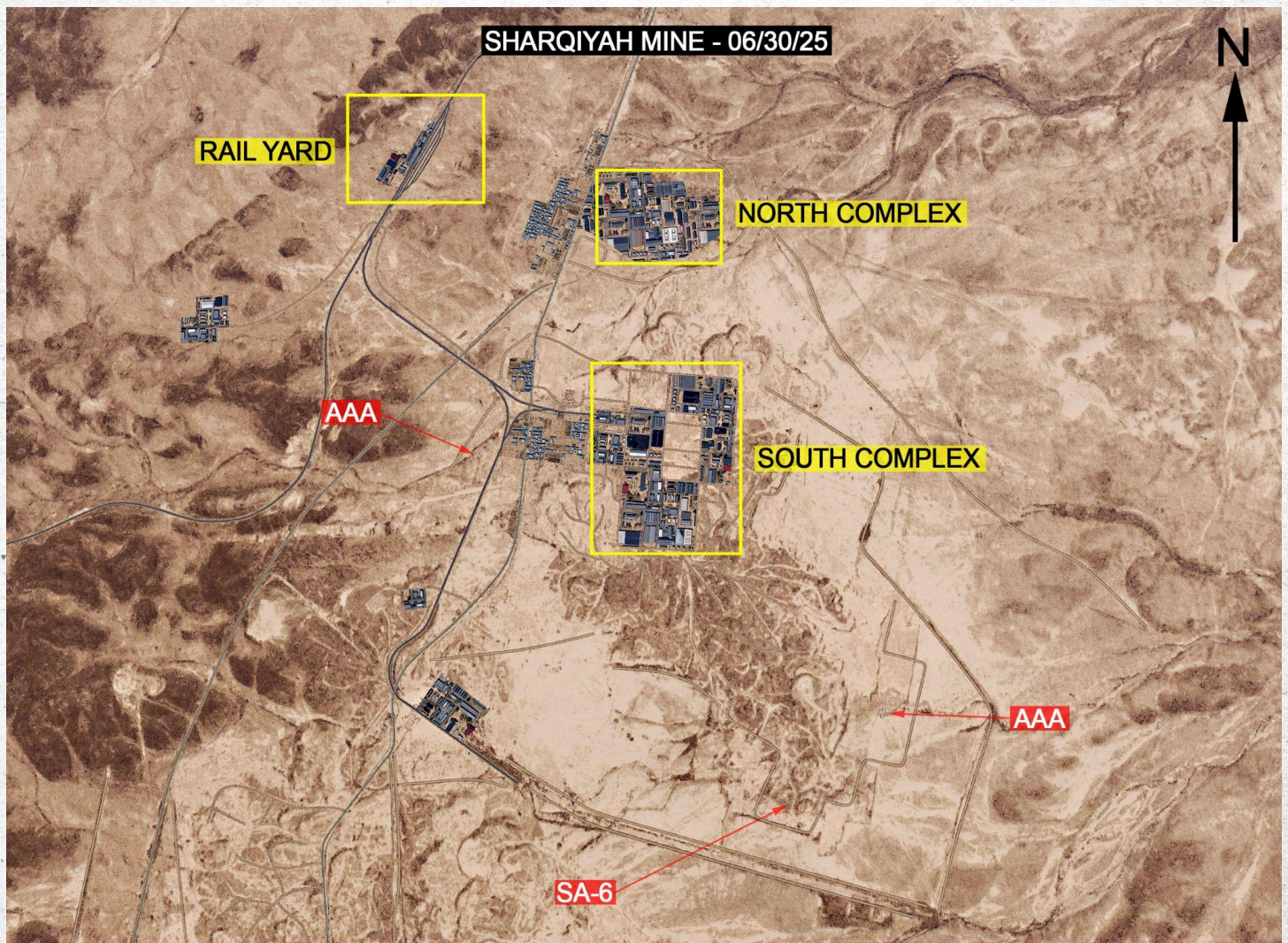
“This is the Sharqiyah mines facility, located 25 miles southwest of Palmyra. It is a major Syrian industrial site, and according to intelligence is also cover for a chemical weapons facility. Sharqiyah is located close to the current frontline between the SDF and Syrian Government forces, and as such is well defended.”

“The Sharqiyah mine complex will be targeted tomorrow morning. The air force is tied up with supporting the situation in Lebanon so this will be an all US Navy operation, with the Stennis’ air wing combining with ours to carry out the strike. The Red Devils will be providing force protection for this mission.”

“The strike package will consist of 24 Hornets, supported by 4 Growlers on electronic attack. We will be supplying a further 4 Hornets to provide force protection, this will be your task - to suppress any air defenses in the area and chase off any Syrian aircraft that may attempt to intervene.”

“The strikers will be on station between 03:05Z and 03:15Z, your TOT is 5 minutes prior at 03:00Z. Once on station you will suppress or destroy any surface to air threats that are active during this window, ensuring the strike package can engage it’s targets. Once the strike is complete you will cover the egressing strikers as the package withdraws. EW support will be on station between 03:00Z and 03:15Z. Given his past experience with the Weasels, Boomer will lead the mission, with Slick on his wing. Steep you will lead Soprano in the second element.”

Link brought a new slide onto the screen.



“The mine is split into two main areas. The strike will target locations within both the north and south complexes as well as a rail yard at the northwest of the complex. Air defense at the mines consists of an SA-6 battery at the south of the facility with at least two batteries of 57mm AAA and a battery of KS-19. The Syrians and Russians are likely anticipating an attack on this location and as such we’ve seen additional air defence units moved into the area, with a newly constructed SA-6 battery around 10 miles west of the target. An existing SA-2 battery also lies 20 miles southwest of Sharqiyah, supported by a flat face EW radar.”





Our IP is waypoint four, at the limit of SAM range. As we approach the target area we will check in on strike and then set up in two SEAD orbits to cover the target location. Boomer positioned his orbit to the northeast of Sharqiyah (waypoint 5), and asked Soprano and me to take up a station 15 miles northwest of the facility. We agreed a contract that any threats east of waypoint 5 will be Boomer and Slick's responsibility, and any to the west will be Soprano and mine's. This puts the new SA-6 site (waypoint 6) and the SA-2 site (waypoint 7) in our area of responsibility. For deconfliction all strikers will be attacking at angels 23 and above, we have unrestricted airspace below this.

Our objective here is the suppression of Syrian SAMs, with the two HARMs we will each be carrying our primary weapons for this. Boomer talked us through the various options we had available to us. A pre-emptive HARM launch on the SA-2 and SA-6 can be an effective suppression strategy, designed to keep the SAM operators from turning on their radars, and allowing the HARM to rapidly find its target should they do so. The downside to this tactic is the limited HARM supply we carry, and we cannot simply saturate the area with HARMs for the duration of our vul so careful consideration on when to use them is required. The alternative is to be more reactive with our HARM shots, waiting for emitters to turn on before we engage, this will likely increase our reaction time however so should be carefully balanced with the risk to the strike package and ourselves.

Boomer then talked us through the tactics for fighting SAMs. He advocated that whenever possible a destroyed SAM site is a better result than a suppressed SAM site, given his experience of a site shutting down to avoid HARMs but then reactivating once the threat has passed. To this end we will also be carrying 2 CBU-99 each, however the use of these weapons should be balanced against the increased risk we expose ourselves to - the objective of this mission is not to destroy SAM sites but to ensure the strike package completes their mission.

Our SEAD orbits will be supported by the two Growler orbits, callsign Spartan 1 and Spartan 2. These will provide us with some protection from Syrian SAMs, but will become less effective the closer we get to any threats, so we should always maintain situational awareness on our position.

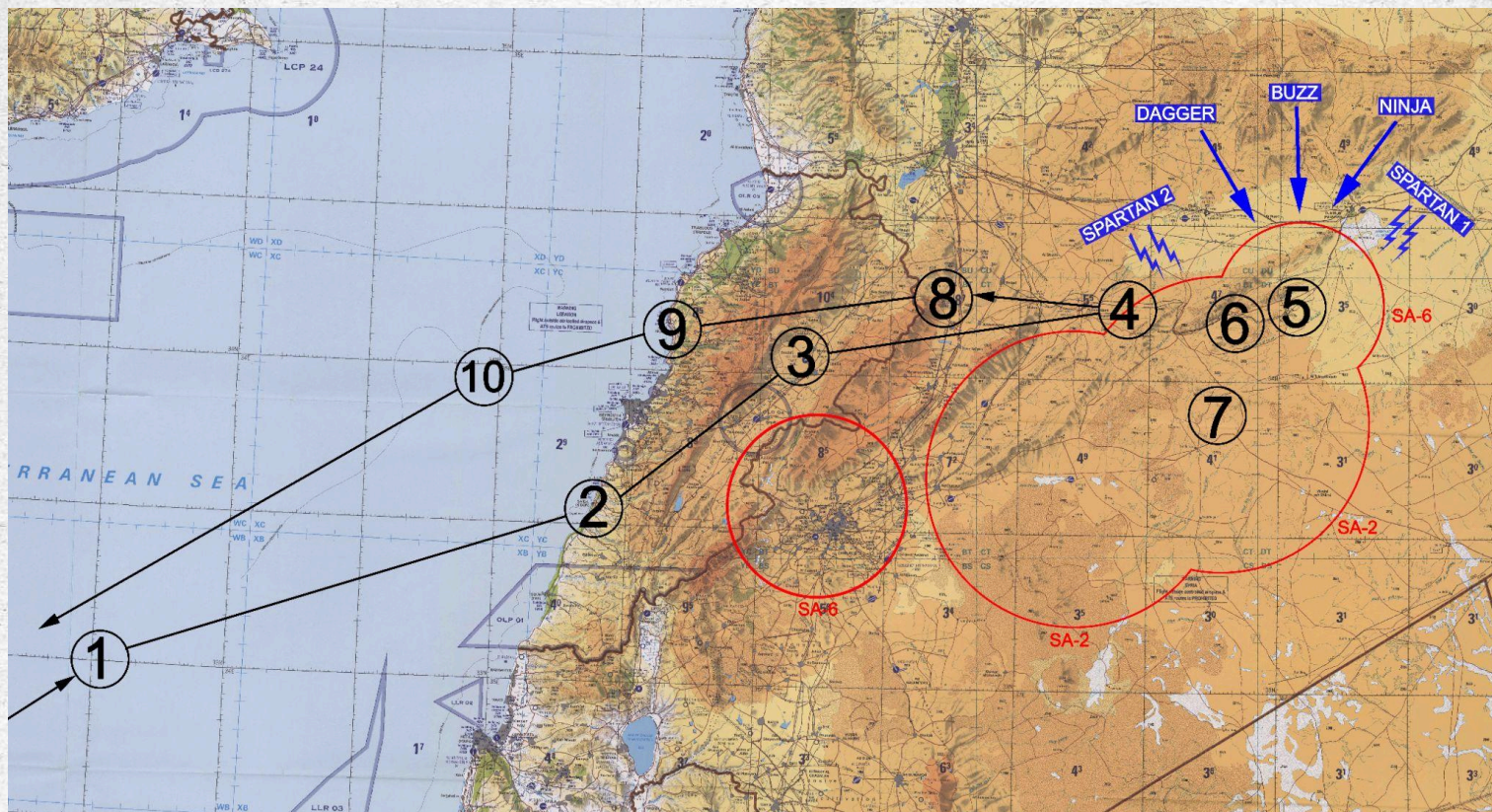
Given past experience and their current resources, the Syrian air force will likely not offer much resistance to this strike, but as the strike's force protection it will be our responsibility to handle any Syrian aircraft should they attempt to interfere.

The first wave of the strike package has a TOT of 03:05Z. They will be operating under the callsigns Ninja, Buzz and Dagger. Dagger flight will attack from the northwest, which also places them in our sector of responsibility. All strikers should be clear by 03:15Z.

Once the strike package is off target, we will cover their egress, before following them out of the target area. We will egress Syria through waypoint 8 before going Lima Bravo at waypoint 9 and flowing back to mother. The Sharqiyah mine codeword is Vagabond, this will also be the mission bullseye.

We should be mindful that the Stennis strike group will be on station on the eastern Med from tomorrow, this will make the area much busier so we should ensure we keep clear of their operating area. The Stennis will be holding station to the north of the area, with the Truman staying further south for the foreseeable future. The USS Hue City, under the callsign Red Crown, will continue to command the air defense picture and take responsibility for both strike groups.

Bingo fuel from Sharqiyah is 5200 lb. Our full weapons load will be 2 HARMs and 2 CBU-99, along with an AIM-120 and 2 AIM 9Xs each. The weather for tomorrow looks excellent, with high scattered clouds forecast, although there is the possibility of some early morning fog which may affect the conditions we recover in.



Known SAM threats consist of at least two SA-6s and an SA-2 in the target area, but we should be prepared for further undetected threats.

Alongside the SAM threat there are several batteries of S-60 AAA at Sharqiyah as well as a battery of KS-19. The KS-19 will likely be paired with a Fire Can radar and will pose a threat up to high altitude. If we decide to take on a higher risk strategy of attacking SAMs with CBUs then we should be aware of low level threats such as MANPADs and 23mm AAA.

We concluded the briefing then spent the remainder of the day rehearsing the mission and thoroughly preparing. With an early start tomorrow we all made sure we got an early night, but as usually pre-mission nerves made sleep more difficult. When we woke after a restless night it was to news of further Israeli attacks overnight, this time into the 'Russian quarter' of northwest Syria. The Russians are claiming they have taken casualties and are threatening retaliation again. I suspect it's going to be a busy day.