

2nd July, 2014.

We're in a tough position and I don't like what's happening right now. Yesterday's mission was to provide suppression of air defenses as a large strike package attacked the Syrian Sharqiyah Mines, home to a Syrian chemical weapons facility, this alone contributed to even more strained relations with the Russians. But making tensions in the regions worse is the situation between Israel and Russia, following Israeli strikes on weapons destined for Hezbollah. Russia clearly felt compelled to retaliate, which happened yesterday morning when a salvo of theater ballistic missiles was fired at Israel.

All the missiles were shot down by Israeli air defenses but the debris from one crashed into an Israeli town, resulting in a number of fatalities. At least two American born Israelis are amongst the dead. Russia has said the attack was carried out by Kazan forces in a proportional response to an attack that resulted in Kazan casualties, and is urging Israel to not escalate the situation any further, but is standing ready to defend itself if required.

For their part, Israel is talking about a major retaliation, and with the US commitment to the defense of Israel, and with dead Americans...it puts us in a tough position. I think things are escalating worryingly fast, and between these events and the previous clash with Kazan in Lebanon I am starting to genuinely worry about us being dragged into a wider conflict with Russia out here.

The mood around the ready room has turned a little darker and I sense we're all feeling the pressure of the situation. We know that the two carrier groups in the Med will be at the forefront of whatever action the US takes next and we're just hoping that the situation cools quickly. I could tell stress levels were high when Flair chewed Soprano out over practically nothing, and reports of Russian aircraft probing the edge of our strike group again did little to help. This morning Soprano and I were tasked as the alert 30 aircrew, ready to respond to any threats to the strike group. We were given the 'go' order on two occasions, but stood down both times as we arrived at the flight deck, with whatever threat the strike group was concerned about withdrawing.

Once our time on alert was over, Soprano and I hit the mess before tending to our additional duties. A few hours later it was time for our planned intel brief with Major Daniels. As we arrived for the briefing and seated ourselves, Monk and Nomad also entered the room, having just completed their stint on alert 30. They reported a similar pattern to what we experienced, with several false starts in response to potential threats.

Once everyone was present Major Daniels began his brief. He opened by telling us that the BDA on the attacks on Sharqiyah had shown the Syrian targets had been totally destroyed. Next up was Hezbollah, with more Hezbollah fighters detected crossing into Syria and further rocket attacks made against Israel. His main focus though was on the situation with Israel and Russia - although there wasn't a great deal he had to share. The Russians and Kazan attacked Israel with six TBMs - SCUDs to be precise, the launch origin of which was somewhere in the Tartus region of northwest Syria. It was telling that Daniels then spent the rest of the briefing talking through Russian threats, discussing the capabilities of Russian ships, aircraft and SAMs. Make of that what you will.

Once the intel brief was complete, Major Daniels departed and we left to attend to our duties, but not before Link informed Flair, Boomer, Monk and myself that there would be a mission briefing for us later today. We went about our duties the next few hours with trepidation, we felt sure that whatever was being planned would be big, and that we would be a part of it. We were right.

When the time came we promptly arrived for the briefing and quickly got settled into our seats. Link wasted no time and began his brief.

“Good evening Red Devils. As you know, yesterday a series of SCUD missiles were fired at Israel resulting in a number of casualties, including two Americans. Russia has denied responsibility for the attack, claiming it was initiated by Kazan Group forces. Now we know that Russia is using the Kazan label as convenient cover when they want to avoid any blame, so on this occasion we’re going to call their bluff.”

“The United States has a commitment to defend Israel, and this is a commitment the President intends to honor. Israel of course is more than capable of defending itself, but in the interest of keeping the response proportional and measured, Israel is going to step aside and let the US handle this particular situation.”

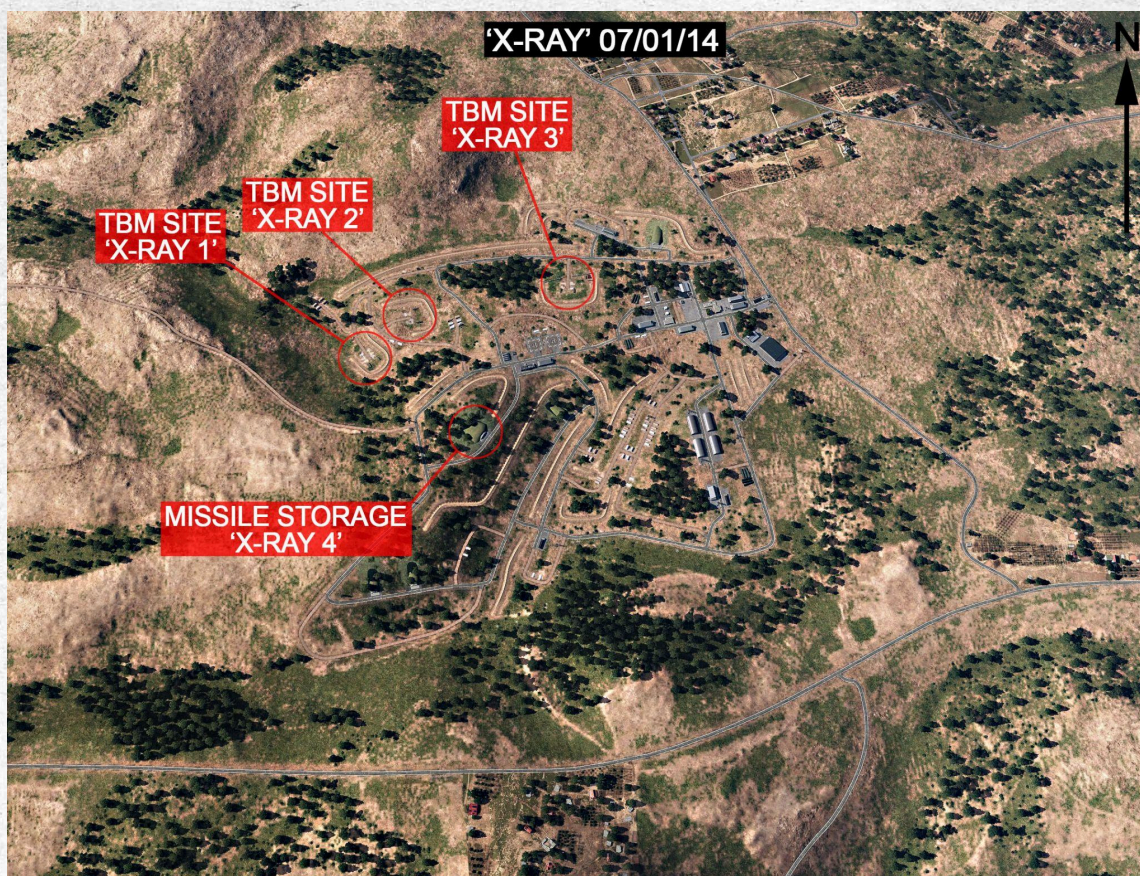
“Tomorrow night the US will carry out a strike on the ballistic missile launch site in northwest Syria - this will be a strike into the heart of the Russian Quarter.”

Silence momentarily fell across the rooms as the magnitude of the mission sank in on us. Northwest Syria is the home of Russian forces in Syria, and is well defended. The probability of a full blown engagement with the Russians could also increase dramatically if we attack into this region. Link continued.

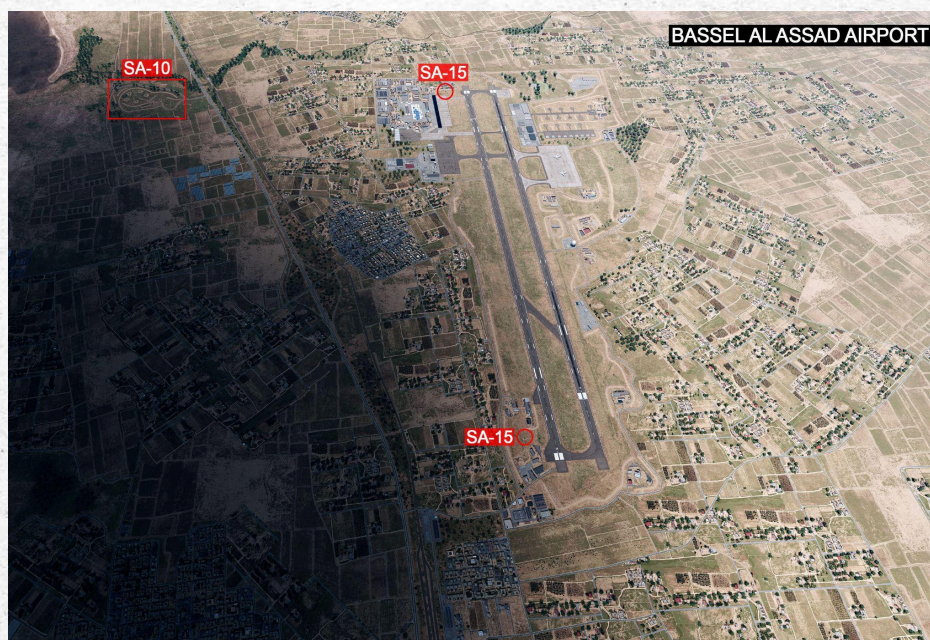
“The primary target is a TBM launch site, located seven miles southeast of Bassel Al-Assad airbase. This location is believed to be a Kazan operating base, we’ve given it the designation ‘X-Ray’. Intelligence believes that Kazan is planning another strike imminently, so the destruction of this launch site is a high priority. The Red Devils have been assigned this task.”

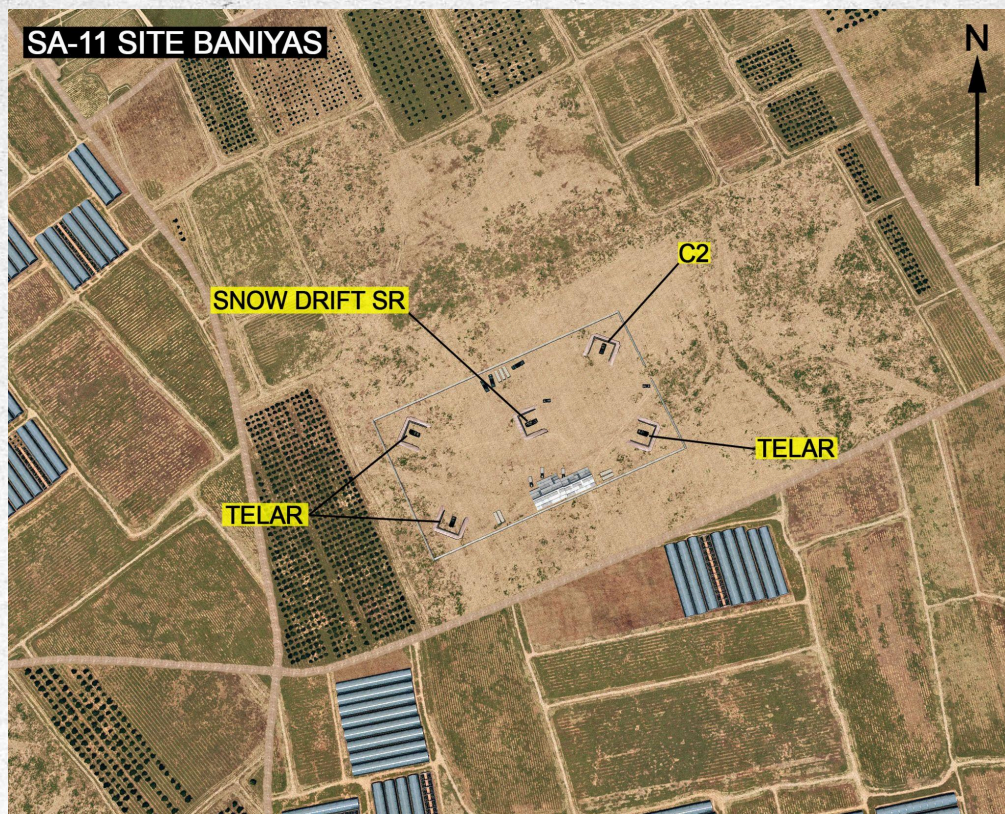
Link clicked a series of slides onto the briefing screen.





“We have four targets assigned at X-Ray. Targets one through three are launch pads and their SCUD launchers - which are still located on the pads, target four is a missile storage bunker. The presence of both an SA-10 and multiple SA-15s in the target area make a standoff attack unlikely to succeed, so Flair will lead a four ship into the target area at low level from the east, using the Nasayriyah mountains as terrain masking against the Russian SAMs on the coast of Syria. You will then each engage one target position with LGBs before egressing south. A special operations team under the callsign Snake 4 is in the area and will guide your weapons into the targets. Area air defense is provided by an SA-10 battery close to Al-Assad, with a further SA-11 position to the southwest near the town of Baniyas. To mitigate these threats Spartan will be on station with electronic attack, and we will also have HARM shooters on standby to respond should it be required, although we are hoping to avoid any further engagement than necessary.”





“The aim of the mission is to send a clear message to the Russians, but to avoid escalating things any further. It’s a fine line we have to walk, but that is why you’ve been chosen, the Marines are trusted to get the job done, no matter what. Flair has been planning the mission so I’ll leave him to brief the details, good luck.”

Link handed over to Flair, who started to brief the detailed mission plan.

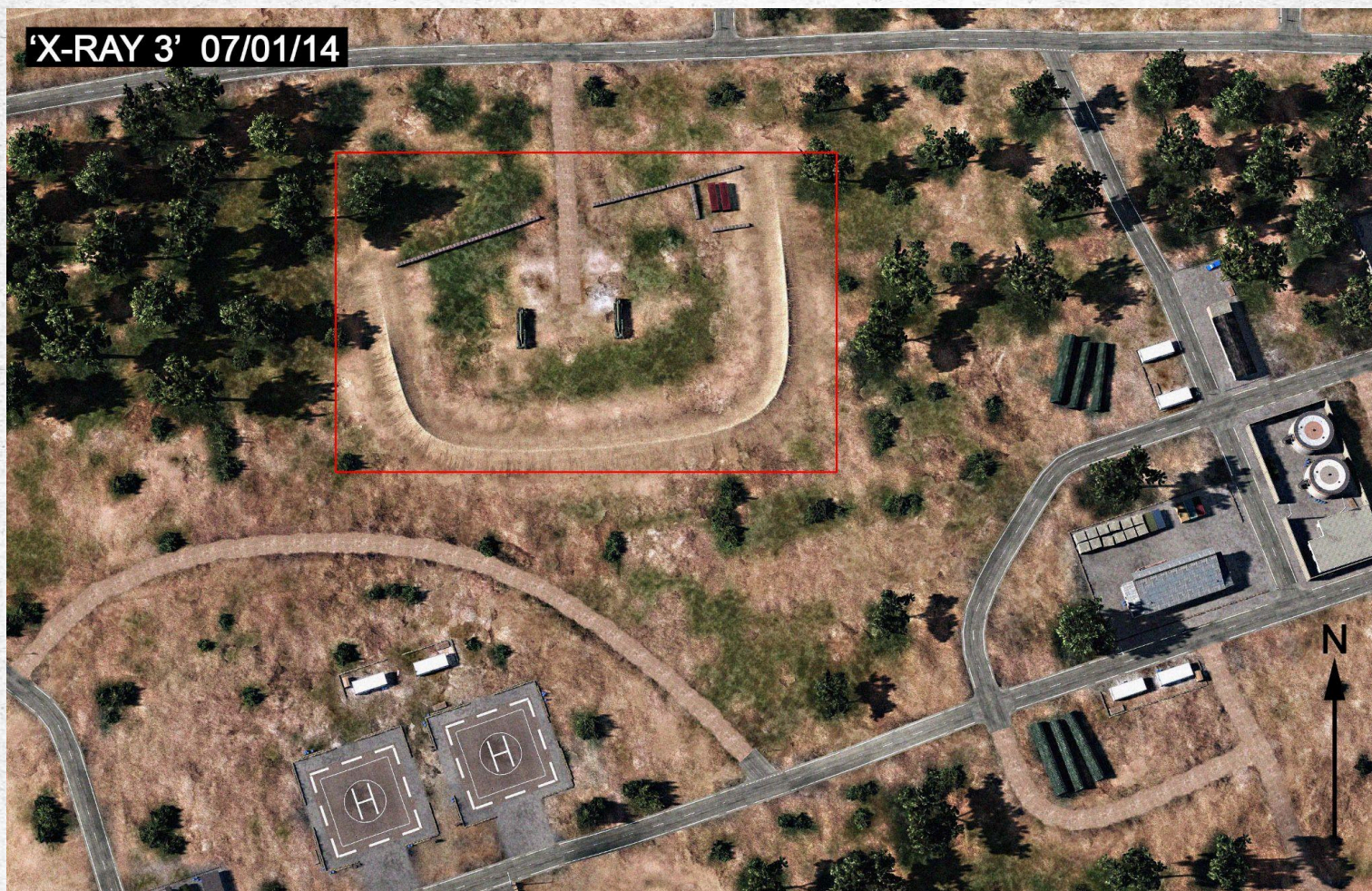
Our launch time will be 00:00Z (03:00 local). Flair will lead the flight under the Callsign Devil 1-1, with Monk taking the number two slot, and me and Boomer in the second element. This time I will take the second element lead as dash three.

This mission hinges on successful deception, the plan is to keep the Russians looking west while we attack from the east, avoiding the point defenses that will make short work of any standoff weapons (and us). After a rendezvous at waypoint one the flight will form up into a tight formation for the ingress into Lebanon, we intend to make ourselves look like just one or two aircraft on radar and will be mimicking the start of a routine patrol around Lebanon, making sure we look less interesting to the Russian radar operators than the numerous aircraft off the west coast of Syria. I will take the six o’clock position in a tight diamond formation, with Flair leading at the twelve o’clock position, I must ensure I stay as tight as possible, tucking up close and just below the rear of Flair’s aircraft. Monk, Boomer and myself will also turn off our radars during the ingress to assist in the deception and help hide our numbers.

New sets of frequencies have been supplied for Sentinel in an aim to keep ahead of any attempts at further comms jamming.

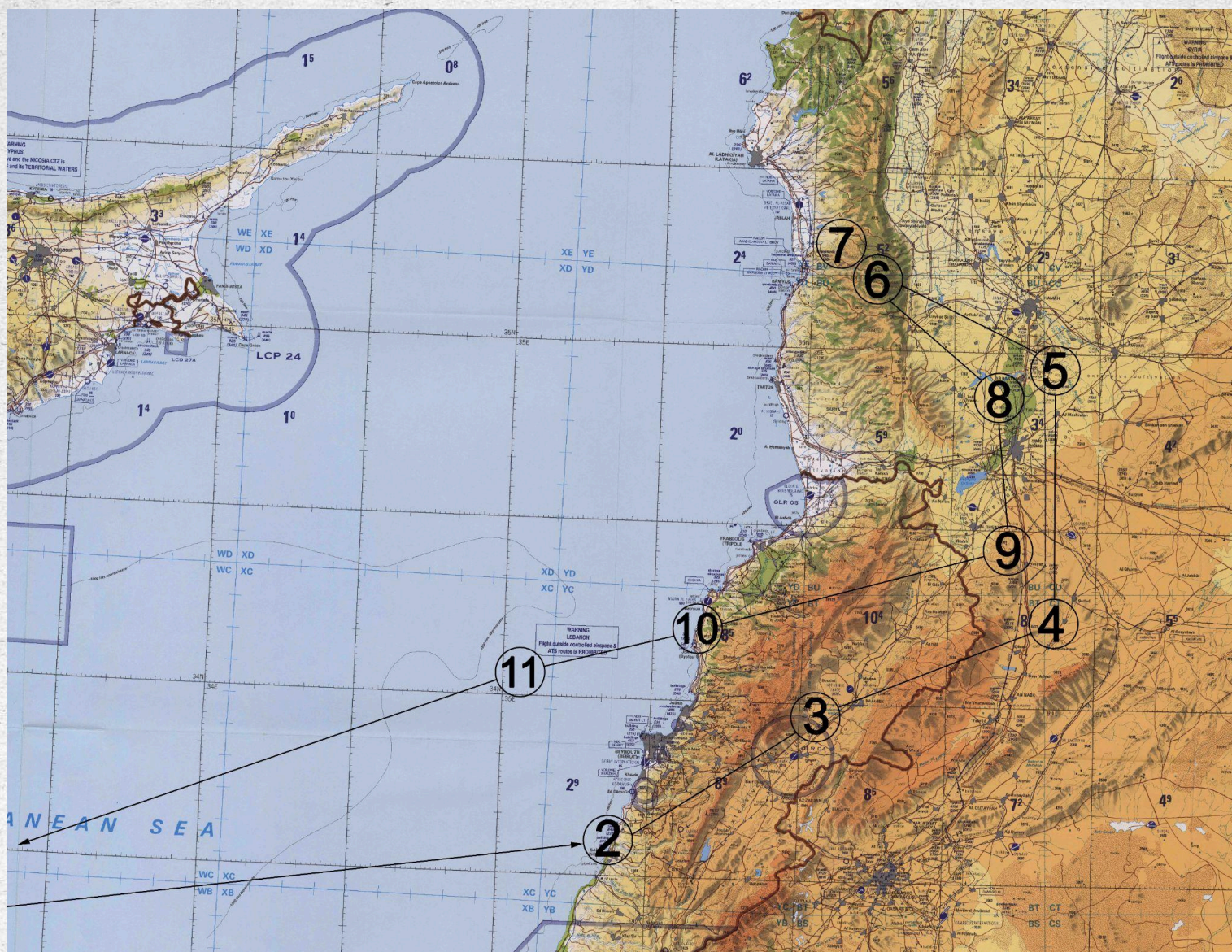
Once we go feet dry at waypoint two we will make a turn north to waypoint three, where we will check in with Strike, before continuing for waypoint four. At waypoint four we will make a rapid transition to 250 feet AGL, we will do this at 15 second intervals to aid deconfliction, starting with Flair and proceeding in flight order.

Continuing at low level, we will turn northwest at waypoint 5. As we do so we no longer need to maintain close formation as we will now be terrain masked from the Russian positions, however it will be vital that we maintain a low altitude. Our pop up point is at waypoint six in the Nasayriyah mountains, 10 miles southeast of the target, where we will make an aggressive climb before releasing our weapons. Flair will target X-Ray 1, Monk X-Ray 2, I have X-Ray 3 and Boomer will target X-Ray 4. Waypoint seven is positioned on X-ray 3, I should drop both my LGBs onto waypoint seven, where Snake will guide them into the target. My bombs are set for laser code 1688.



Our TOT for waypoint 6 is 00:42Z. Spartan will be carrying out electronic attack from 00:40Z, with a four ship of Hornets - Razor 3 - also on station during this time to provide SEAD if required. A further flight of Hornets - Buzz 2 - will also be on a CAP station 20 miles off the Syrian coast. Ahead of the strike, the navy and air force have already begun flying continuous CAPs and reconnaissance flights off the Syrian coast. This will help establish an element of routine that should buy us some time once the SEAD and EW elements arrive on station, as well as giving us real time surveillance of the target site. This surveillance will be providing real time BDA.

Once we have dropped our weapons, we will egress south at low level and high speed to waypoint 8 where we will climb out and regroup the flight. From here we will flow back through the flight plan to Mother. Due to the elevated risk of Russian retaliation, enhanced procedures are in place for approaching the strike group and all returning traffic must be at 21,000 feet to assist in friend or foe identification.



Our loadout for the mission will be two GBU-16s apiece to hit the launch pads, with Boomer carrying GBU-31s for the storage bunker.

Takeoff weight is 48,698 lb with a bingo fuel of 8,100 lb. Our divert will be RAF Akrotiri. Bullseye for the mission is set on Bassel Al Assad, codeword 'Hijack'. The weather looks set to be clear skies with calm winds.

The threat picture for X-Ray is significant, although with the correct execution of the mission we should be able to mitigate against this. The SA-10 near Al Assad and the SA-11 close to Baniyas both provide excellent area defense over X-Ray, but the combination of terrain masking and electronic attack should keep us protected against the threats long enough to get in and release our weapons. Should we get engaged by any SAMs then Razor 3 will be on station to reply with HARMs. We asked for pre-emptive HARM strikes against the SAM sites but the JAOC has refused, not wanting to risk directly striking Russian forces unless we are fired on first. We should avoid crossing west of the Naysiriyah mountains and X-Ray, this will be very dangerous. These mountains are also the frontline between the SDF and Syria and so we should expect some form of SHORAD in them.

We should also take care on our egress, northern Lebanon will be west of waypoints 8 and 9 and is still Russian occupied. We know there to be both SA-6 and SA-11 in this area.

The air to air threat is unclear. No Syrian aircraft are based at Al Assad so if an air to air threat does emerge then it will be a Russian one (most likely Mig-29 or SU-27), and likely to be better trained and better equipped than anything else we've faced in the skies of Syria so far. The big question is will the Russians attempt to intervene in this way? Our target is Kazan Group, an organisation the Russians have clearly stated is under Syrian control, this gives Russia the opportunity to avoid responsibility for Kazan actions and save face when we strike Kazan targets, which helps de-escalate the situation. It's a status quo we all know to be a charade, but it serves both sides in order to keep a lid on military confrontation so we all play along with it. If the Russians should feel the need to break this unofficial arrangement in response to an attack so close to their main operating base is as of yet unknown. Let's hope not.

This ambiguity also applies to Russia's fleet in the Mediterranean, the Pyotr Velikiy in particular is a formidable threat and would be a significant issue if it chooses to get involved. Highlighting just how tense the situation has become out here we have been told that plans are in place to deal with the ship if it poses a threat. That didn't make us feel much better.

Once Flair had concluded the briefing we spent the rest of the day going back over the plan, addressing every small detail and ensuring we had them totally committed to our memories. This strike is a big responsibility and a big challenge. We must maintain our deception, if the Russians are ready for us we will be easy picking for the SA-10 and SA-11 as we pop up above the mountains. Our flying will need to be precise, with sharp formation flying on the initial ingress, followed by low level flight. Both of these will be at night and on NVGs and will require lots of concentration.

Finally having nailed down all the details my thoughts turned to the implications of this mission. The fact that we have American casualties in Israel has made our involvement a political necessity for the US government. The attack carries a real danger of escalation, the Russians have so far hidden behind the Kazan label, this has emboldened Russian aggression in the region, but has also had the perverse effect of keeping a lid on further escalation as the Russians can easily save face. But we all know this to be a convenient charade, Kazan and Russian are pretty much interchangeable terms by this point, and we know that for all intents and purposes the ballistic missile forces are Russian, after all why on earth would Kazan be armed with TBMs?

Let's hope the charade holds, if it doesn't the consequences could be severe.