

20th June, 2014.

Tensions continue to build. Two days ago we attacked Sayqal airbase in Syria, a planned and proportionate response to the horrific chemical weapon attack carried out by the Syrian Government. The United States targeted the production, storage sites and delivery systems of these weapons, sending a clear message to Syria that the use of these weapons will not be tolerated. The attack encountered more robust defenses than anticipated, with the Russian resupply effort appearing to have boosted Syria's battered air defenses.

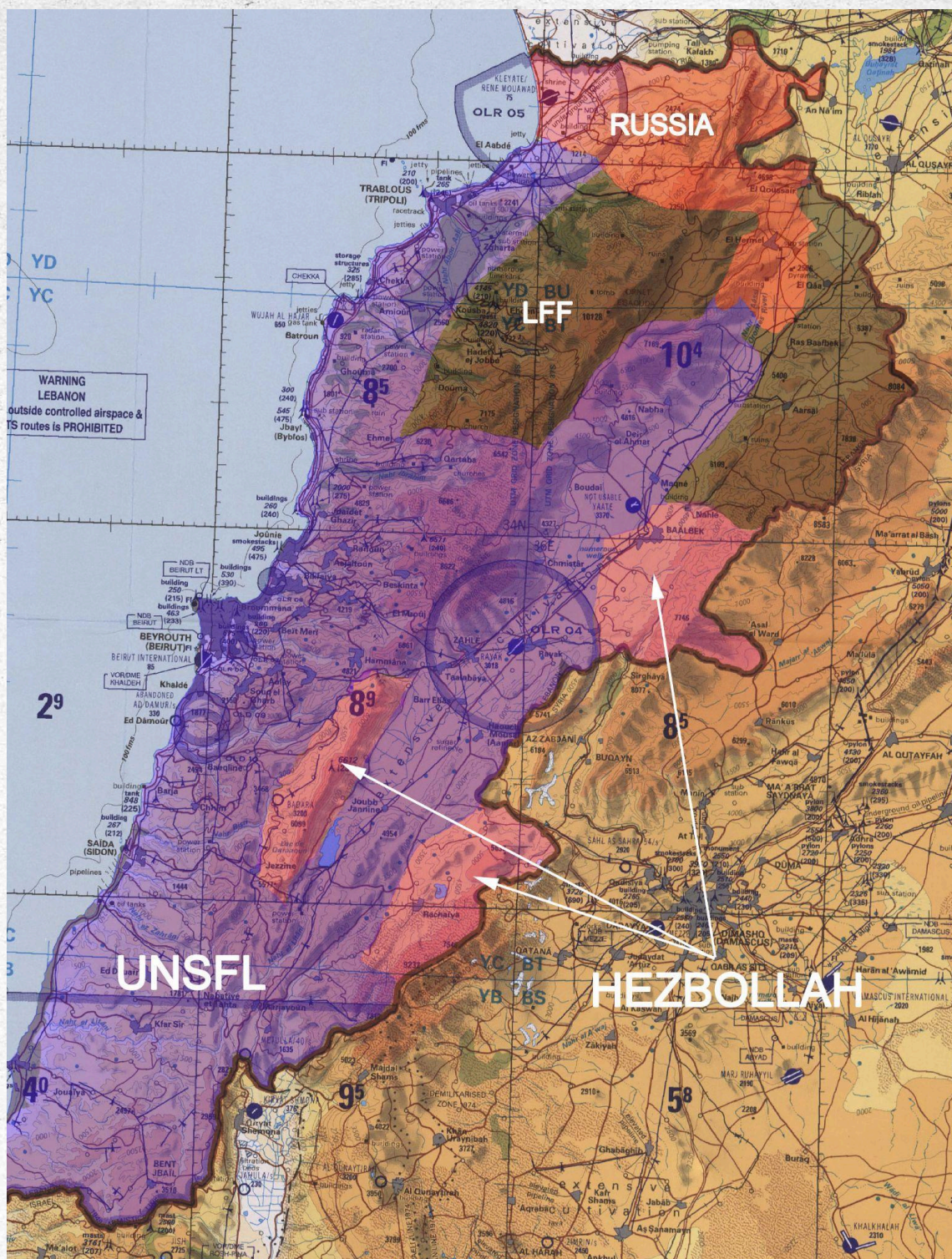
In response to US actions, Russia condemned the attack and expressed outrage over a 'dangerous escalation'. They have also claimed several Russian military advisers were killed in the strike, contributing to the heightened tensions right now. In the aftermath of the attack we saw an increase in Russian military activity in the northern Bekaa Valley, likely a not so subtle reminder that Russia is not happy with the current situation.

Our last mission was a big step up for Soprano, a large complex, night attack. He stepped up to the challenge once again and hit his targets, dealing with every complication that was thrown at us and impressing me again. He even stuck his landing on the carrier on the first attempt, never an easy thing to do at night, especially after a high stakes mission.

We spent yesterday resting and hanging out in the ready room, where talk inevitably turned to the situation in Syria and speculation over what action Russia and Syria might take next. A wide range of opinions were expressed, with some good natured arguing thrown in. The presence of the Kazan Group contractors in Lebanon was also a hot topic for discussion, especially how we tell them apart, the consensus we settled on was that if they fired on us then they were probably part of the Russian PMC. The discussion also turned to how we should handle this situation, with Monk and Nomad being quite forceful in the opinion that if we were too risk averse and kept backing off then the Russians would just keep claiming more territory.

The next day began with an intel brief from Major Daniels. The Major told us what we already knew - that the Russians were pretty upset about the attack on Sayqal, what we were more interested in was what Russia's next move might be. On this, Daniels did have more information.

Russian military units have been building up in the northern Bekaa over the last 36 hours, if they are actual Russian military or Kazan Group is yet to be determined. But whoever they belong to, they look like they are preparing to launch a second offensive in the north, with an attack south of Homs being the likely target. The Russians would have to break through the pocket of LFF territory in northeast Lebanon, after which they would be free to attack SDF positions and once again cut the main road between Homs and Damascus.



Turning to Syria, Daniels told us the Syrians are on a very high state of alert - no surprise there - but we have also seen additional Syrian SA-6s moved northwest of Damascus, closer to the border between Syria and Lebanon. Fighting between the SDF and Syria continues, with the frontlines around Homs, Deir ez-Zor and Damascus unchanged.

In Lebanon the fight with the LFF is still ongoing - easy to forget about that given all that has happened the last week. Most LFF activity is now confined to enclaves within the Lebanon and Anti-Lebanon mountains, where they are still putting up dogged resistance. The offensive capability of the LFF has been severely degraded, for now at least.

Daniels next discussed Hezbollah. Here there are more signs of remobilization following the recent resupply by Russia. Several minor rocket attacks have been carried out in parts of Lebanon in the last 24 hours, these are suspected to have been by Hezbollah, but Daniels was unable to verify that information. The official intelligence assessment is that we expect to see the reemergence of Hezbollah in Syria again soon, privately we all wondered if our latest intervention into Syria has pushed Hezbollah into re-engagement in the war even sooner.

Further south, Israel also remains on high alert, no doubt watching events in Syria and Lebanon closely. The moves made by Hezbollah will be of high interest to Israel, and the concern that Israel will be drawn into fighting in Lebanon is still present.

Once the intel brief was complete, most of us attended to our non flying duties as we had another day off from flying. The ATO has quietened down the last few days, with the majority of taskings being simple CAPs and on-call CAS patrols. Link assured us we were back on the ATO from tomorrow and to make sure we got a good night's sleep.

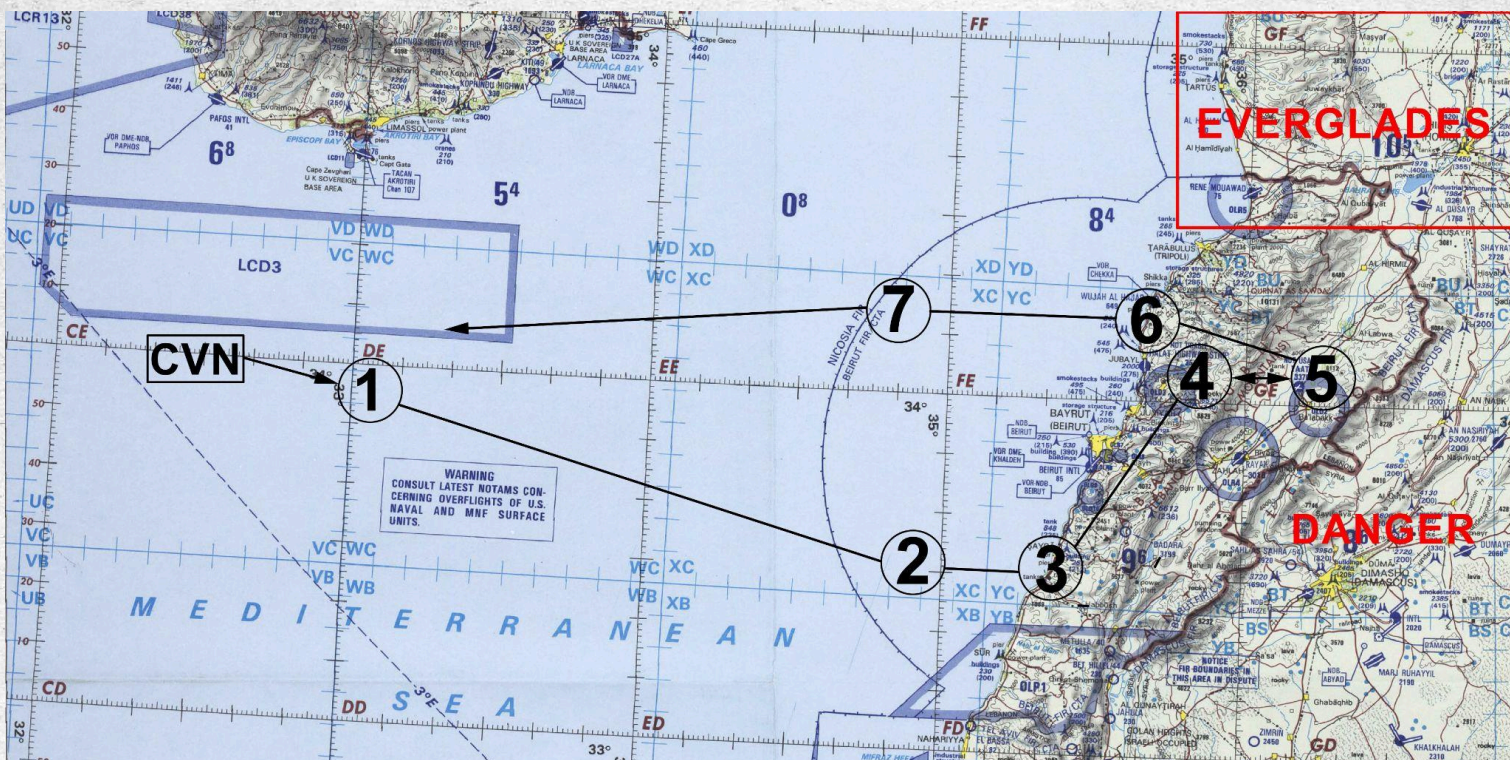
So after another uneventful day and a restful night, I rose early in the morning, eager for a new mission. Once ready to start the day I met Soprano, Boomer, Monk and Nomad in the mess hall for breakfast. When I arrived I found Monk already giving Soprano a gentle ribbing, today was Soprano's birthday and the squadron wasn't going to let him get through the day without some good natured banter, and as the junior squadron member, probably some form of practical joke. Soprano seemed to be taking it in good spirits.

Once we had finished breakfast Soprano and I reported for a briefing. On arrival we found Flair and Slick already seated and ready to begin. As we slipped into our seats Link began his brief, which was short and to the point.

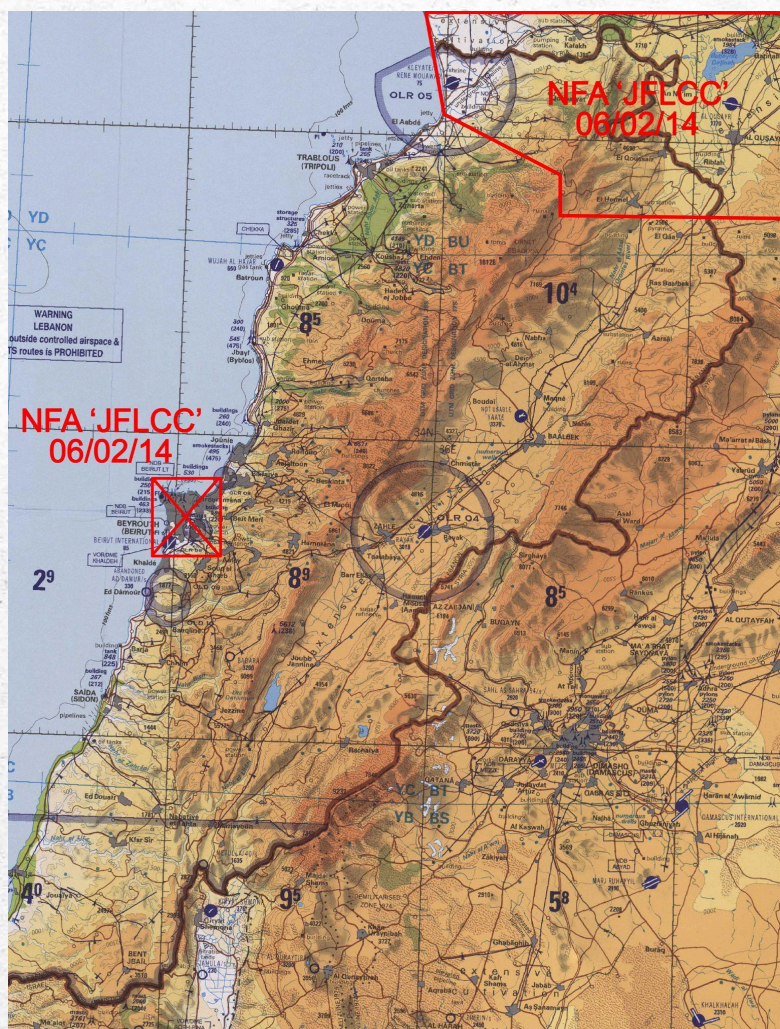
The Red Devils have been tasked to provide a series of patrols over Lebanon in support of ongoing UNSFL operations. I will be paired with Soprano as Devil 1, Flair and Slick will be taking over a later vul, under the callsign Devil 2.

Our launch time is 05:10Z, once airborne Soprano and I will rendezvous at waypoint 1 before following a standard route into Lebanon. Once on station and checked in with Watchdog we will set up in an east to west orbit over central Lebanon (waypoints 4-5) and hold in this position, ready to service any CAS requests made to Watchdog.

Once our vul is over we will follow a standard departure out of Lebanon and proceed back to Mother.



The situation on the ground in Lebanon is a complex one. Recent UNSFL and Russian advances have brought the two forces into close proximity with one another, with the LFF holding the high ground on either side of the Bekaa Valley. Due to this complex picture a blanket restricted fire area is in effect across all of Lebanon.



Today we will each be armed with a laser maverick, plus 2 GBU-38 fused for airburst and 2 GBU-12s. Bingo fuel from our patrol location is 5050 lb. Our divert is Akrotiri with a minimum divert fuel of 1500 lb.

The weather today is looking fairly decent, with high scattered clouds and light winds forecast. There is some sea fog present at the moment but this is expected to clear later and case 1 operations are expected throughout the day.

As for threats, following the deployment of additional SA-6s we need to take care anytime we're near the Lebanese/Syrian border in the Damascus area. We'll also need to take care if operating in northern Lebanon where the close proximity to Russian and Kazan Group forces will bring an additional threat, we expect that if we get so close as to appear threatening to either of these then they will defend themselves. The increase in Hezbollah activity also brings additional potential threats, especially in the Baalbek area. A MANPAD threat from the LFF should also be assumed, so it is recommended we maintain a safe altitude at all times.

We concluded the briefing shortly after and Soprano and I reported straight to life support to prepare for the mission. Once ready we headed up to the flight deck, where the early morning sun was shining brilliantly through the light morning mist. It looks like a fine day to go flying.