

7th May, 2014.

Four days have passed since my first flight back into Lebanon. Our first mission was an armed patrol over the country and the ideal mission to start breaking Soprano in with 'real world' flying. The kid did well, covering me when he was supposed to, confident enough to call me out if I did anything wrong and doing what he was told, when he was told.

The LFF were certainly active on our first mission, we responded to a potential TIC (troops in contact), and were tasked with carrying out a show of force to disperse a gathering of insurgents near Trashcan Tango - one of the UNSFL platoon houses in the Bekaa Valley. The platoon houses are fortified positions held by UNSFL forces in insurgent territory, from which the ground force can carry out patrols and project strength into the local area, while building a relationship with the local populace. Discussing these in the ready room, the pilots of the Red Devils were not convinced they were a good idea, our required show of force just supporting this argument.

While we were airborne on our first mission, a UAV on ISR also observed a large number of LFF fighters assembling alongside heavy equipment at a farm complex at the foot of the Lebanon mountains. These farms are suspected drug production sites, with the LFF having taken over much of Hezbollah's opium and cannabis production. US and RAF aircraft were tasked onto the site, making sure the LFF insurgents and equipment didn't push west into the mountains to support the ongoing fight there.

We also witnessed a Russian attack against what we assumed to be SDF forces near Homs, with a large rocket and artillery bombardment taking place from the Russian FOB at Rene Mouawad. Over the last few days more Russian forces have been reported to be arriving by air and sea, it looks like Russia isn't giving up on the fight in Syria anytime soon.

The Russians were supposed to be keeping quiet in regards to our activity, but since we arrived they have started making quite a bit of noise again, regularly carrying out intercepts, performing unsafe manoeuvres and 'headbutts' on our aircraft egressing from Lima Bravo. Boomer reported that a Russian pilot came up on guard and claimed we were violating Russian controlled airspace, and it looks like the Russians are objecting to our surge in aircraft out here. We will stand our ground however and won't let them dictate how we operate.

Since that first mission we've managed to get another couple of uneventful flights under our belts, both were routine patrols, with no drama on either other than some minor interest from both Syrian SAM sites and Russian aircraft.

We got the feeling that things were going to get more exciting when the rumours started swirling of a big operation planned for tomorrow, that was all but confirmed when a squadron briefing was scheduled for today.

The squadron started assembling in our ready room late in the morning, with the briefing kicking off at 12:00 hours. We were all seated and waiting by this time, when Link and Flair swept into the room, precisely on time.

Link quickly got proceedings underway, requesting Major Daniels begin the intel brief. Daniel's update was relatively short, with the status quo in the area being mostly maintained. In Lebanon, Hezbollah have been pretty quiet, apart from some minor skirmishes with the UNSFL.

Elsewhere, there are no changes in Israel's defensive posture on the Golan and in Syria the SDF and Syrian frontlines remain stable, although there have been reports of increased fighting out east in the Deir ez-Zor region. The most noteworthy piece of intelligence we received from Daniels was that the Russians had several more transport ships crossing the Med towards the Russian naval base at Tartus, believed to be carrying additional troops and equipment for the fight.

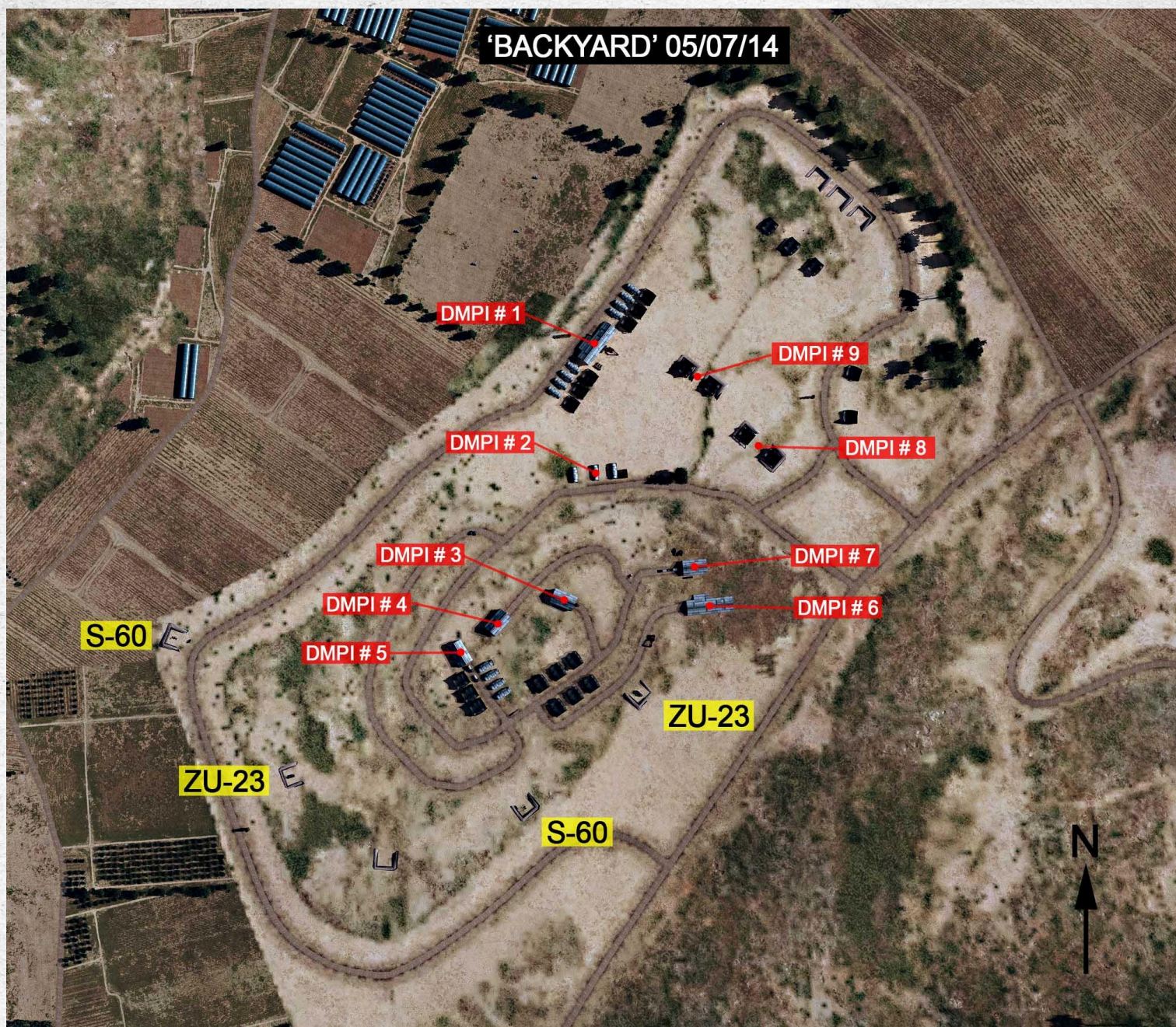
Daniels, having delivered his intel brief then departed and Link stepped forwards to begin briefing tomorrow's operation.

"Ok pilots listen up. Tomorrow will see the start of a high tempo offensive air campaign against the LFF. This operation will run alongside a simultaneous push on the ground by the UNSFL, the objective of which is to rapidly penetrate deep into LFF territory and cut off their supply lines into the Lebanon mountains. Once the LFF forces in the mountains have been isolated from the main LFF forces in the east, the UNSFL will sweep through the mountains, retaking the high ground".

"Expect to be very busy over the coming days, we have a number of pre-planned targets to strike as the UNSFL push begins, after which I expect us to be transitioning to focus on CAS as the UNSFL starts to make contact with the LFF".

"The operation begins overnight at 01:00 zulu with attacks by USAF aircraft on targets in the Bekaa Valley, and cruise missile strikes from our CSG. The Red Devils are in the second wave of aircraft, due to go in at 03:00 zulu. Our primary target is an LFF camp, located adjacent to the settlement of Yammoune on the eastern slopes of the Lebanon mountains. The camp contains large stockpiles of weapons, and appears to be a training facility for new LFF fighters. The camp codeword is Backyard".





“Yammoune settlement is only around 300m north of the camp, it is believed that the majority of the civilian population fled ahead of the LFF advance, and that it is now very likely occupied by the LFF. But with that said no targets within the settlement are to be engaged without clearance from the JAOC”.

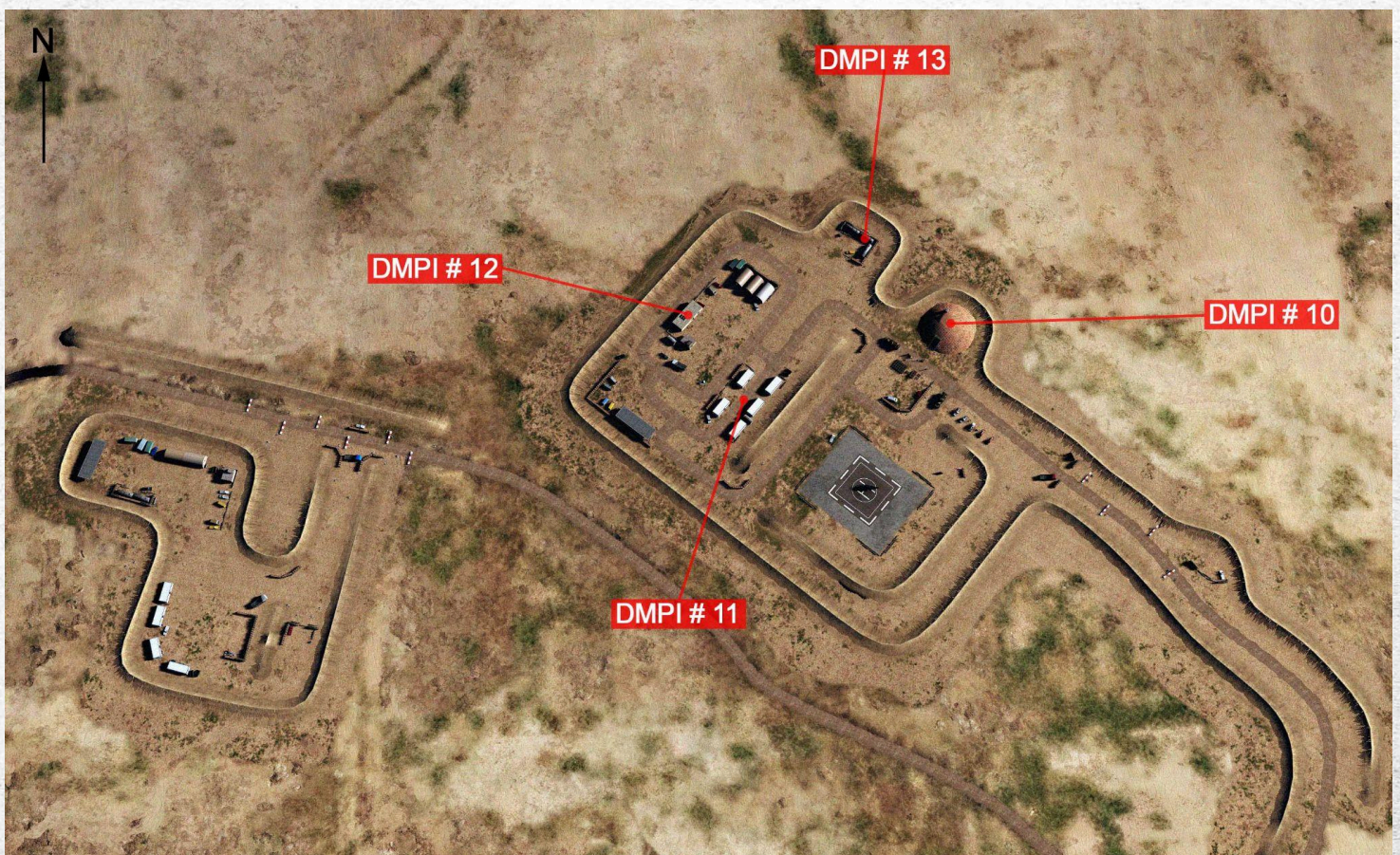
“The strike will consist of a four ship, led by Flair, with the second element under Steep. Soprano will be on Steep’s wing, and Slick will be paired with Flair. We have 9 assigned targets within the camp, precision coordinates for all DMPIs are fully listed within your packs so make sure you add them to your kneeboards. Target allocation between the flight will be assigned by Flair before you get airborne. We’ve identified two S-60 cannons at the camp, there are no other threats at medium altitude that we’re aware of”.

“We also have a secondary target assigned so once all primary targets are eliminated and if you are in a position to do so, proceed east to this LFF outpost in the Anti-Lebanon mountains...”

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“...this outpost, 24 miles northeast of Yammoune, is being used as a storage site for weapons being transported across the border from Syria. There is also intelligence to suggest the site is being used to carry out work on domestic vehicles and convert them into technicals and VBIEDs. There are a further four DMPIs at this site, note that DMPI 10 will be a hardened position so plan your ordnance accordingly. Codeword for this target is Sideswipe”.



“The outpost will take you out closer to the Syrian border so take care not to stray too far east and end up in restricted airspace. You also have Everglades 15 miles north of this target, so again, pay close attention to your position. The Russians are already acting jumpy, let’s not provoke them”.

“Once your mission is complete, egress through Lima Bravo and come on home. Airspace control will be extremely important on this mission, we will have multiple waves of aircraft striking targets across Lebanon, as well as cruise missiles lower down and UAVs holding at 30,000 feet. Sentinel will be coordinating all air traffic so keep in close contact throughout the mission”.

Having outlined the mission, Link then started to brief each component in more detail.

Launch is planned for 02:55 zulu (05:55 local), just after dawn, and with some morning fog expected so we are anticipating a case 3 departure along a departure radial of 082. The weather otherwise is looking clear, with a few scattered clouds around 6000-7000 feet and light northerly winds, with the fog expected to burn off through the morning. Takeoff weight will be 47,500 lb. As we depart we must adhere to our departure radial and planned route, we have been warned of cruise missile strikes ongoing throughout the morning, these will be launched from an area north of waypoint 1 and waypoint 2, and a minimum altitude restriction of 10,000 feet MSL is in effect in these areas.

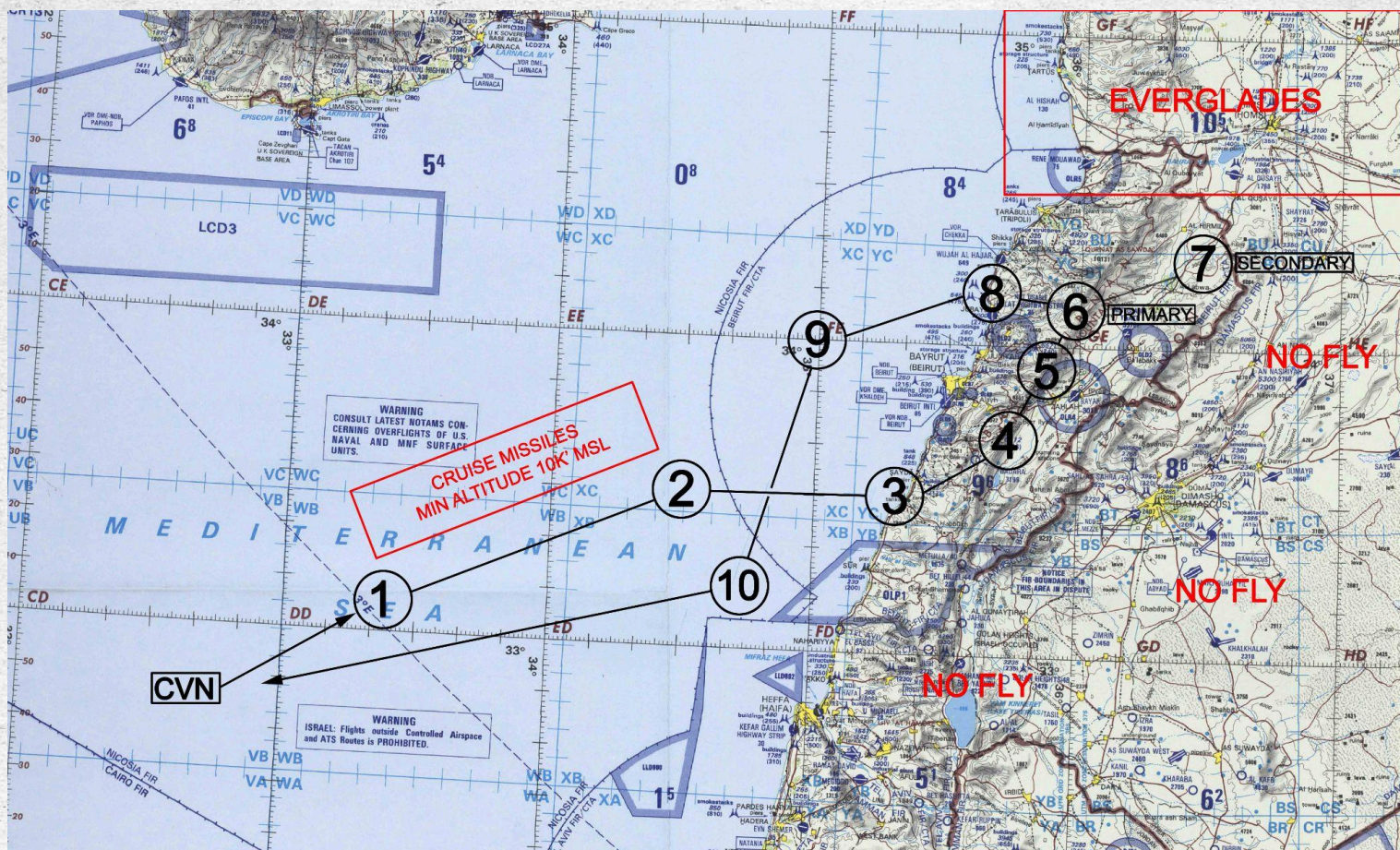
The flight will follow the departure radial until clear of the fog, at which point we will each proceed to the hold point at waypoint 1, where the flight will rendezvous and form up for the push towards Lebanon, climbing to our cruising altitude of 30,000 feet as we do so. At waypoint 2 we will check in with Sentinel, and gain access to Lebanon through Lima Alpha at waypoint 3. The airspace in Lebanon will be crowded so we must ensure we follow Sentinel’s instructions to deconflict from other flights.

Once in Lebanon we will follow our flight plan to our IP at waypoint 4, this is located 15 miles south of the Yammoune camp. We will carry out final checks on our weapons and targets as we approach the IP, before pushing and striking our assigned targets. This will be a low threat environment so we plan to make two passes over Yammoune, striking one set of targets on the first pass, carrying out a BDA and returning to the IP, before then hitting the second set on the subsequent run in. Egress from the target will be to the west. We will have the fuel to make further passes should our weapons fail to have the desired effects.

Flair allocated primary target assignments to each member of the flight, my targets will be DMPIs 6 and 7. Target 6 is a concrete building, with a corrugated steel roof. Target 7 is an open sided storage shed, with a corrugated metal roof, the target here is the weapons stored within the shed not the shed itself, so the use of fusing with some penetration may be the best choice here.

Once we are finished with our primary target we will assess if we have the capability to hit the secondary targets, and if so will proceed to the LFF outpost at waypoint 7 and strike any of the assigned targets we are able to.

Once ready to RTB, we will egress Lebanon through Lima Bravo at waypoint 8, checking out with Sentinel as we do so. Once feet wet we will proceed west towards waypoint 9 and 10, before following TACAN back to Mother, not forgetting to declare ourselves to Red Crown as we do so. The fog is expected to have cleared by this point so we are anticipating a case 1 recovery. RAF Akrotiri remains our divert field if unable to land on the boat. Bingo fuel is 6,250 lb, with a minimum divert fuel of 2,300 lb.



UN forces on the ground are expected to begin their operation at 07:00 zulu and will not have an impact on this mission.

For this mission I will be carrying a loadout of two GBU-32s, both fused for 25ms delay, along with two GBU-38s, with 5ms delays. We will also be carrying two bags of fuel apiece and the ATFLIR.

Once again this should be a largely threat free environment, so long as I follow the briefing and don't make any mistakes. Getting too low or ending up in Syrian or Russian controlled airspace will turn things dangerous pretty fast.

After hammering out all the details in the briefing, Soprano and I left to continue preparing for the mission, this one looks pretty simple on the surface, but I made sure Soprano knew not to get complacent, I know just how fast things can go wrong in combat, even on a straightforward JDAM delivery like this one.

Eventually, having exhaustively studied the targets, routes and procedures we called it a day and attempted to sleep, never an easy task with the sound of the flight deck above you and the butterflies ahead of a big operation.

Eventually I did sleep, but the wake up alarm came all too soon, time to step...there's work to do.