

July 13th, 2014.

Well things are definitely not calming down. We attacked Al Assad airbase five days ago, alongside a number of other Russian targets in Lebanon and Syria, a set of damaging strikes designed to force Russia to backdown - it has not worked. In response to our attacks Russian air came out to fight for the first time and in the ensuing fight Slick was shot down, but thankfully ejected successfully and was rescued. He sustained some fairly serious injuries on ejection however so while he survived, he's certainly out of the fight for the time being. For their part, the Russians lost a significant number of Flankers, which we hope will make them think twice about getting airborne again, although with the influx of further Russian reinforcements to the area we're not particularly optimistic about that outcome.

The Russians appear to be doubling down on their position, and seem to be in no mood to negotiate a peaceful end to the current conflict. Over the last four days we've received reports of further Russian air and ground forces arriving in Syria and Lebanon, and perhaps most concerning, naval reinforcements as well. The latter has caused the most concern within NATO, given that Turkey allowed the passage of several major combat ships of the Russian Black Sea fleet to transit the straits of Bosphorus and join a Russian naval blockade of Lebanon. As it stands we cannot access Lebanon from the Med without flying over ships highly dangerous to aircraft - and we have tried - with two Hornets from our air wing already lost in an attempt to circumvent the blockade. Both pilots survived and were promptly rescued.

But the Russians aren't the only ones reinforcing, yesterday the USS Abraham Lincoln arrived in the eastern Mediterranean, bringing the number of US carriers in the region to three, it's getting very crowded out here.

With the arrival of the Lincoln, rumours of a major operation started to spread, and so it was no surprise when a mass briefing for the air wing was planned in CVIC for early afternoon. The briefing began with a thorough update from the intel shop, detailing Russian forces in Syria and Lebanon.

The intel department told us the US strikes carried out five days ago were deemed to be successful in destroying stockpiles of Russian equipment and ammunition, although they were ineffective in that they failed to force Russia into negotiations. However, the Russians have pulled aircraft back from Al Assad, where it's coastal proximity made them more vulnerable.

Russia appears intent on continuing it's A2/AD strategy, with a significant number of Russian SAMs still present in Lebanon. These SAMs sit behind a formidable naval blockade, consisting of ships from both the Russian Mediterranean fleet and the Black Sea fleet. The northern end of the blockade is anchored by the Russian cruiser Moskva, with the Pyotr Velikiy sitting at the southern end. A further eight smaller Russian ships (Krivak, Neustrashimy and Grisha class) are patrolling off the Lebanese coast. This Russian deployment is preventing us from accessing Lebanon, and due to the closure of Jordanian and Turkish airspace for combat missions is presenting a significant problem.



Behind the blockade, Russian forces are attempting to recover from our previous strikes, with further reinforcements being flown into Damascus, from where they have been making the short journey into the Bekaa Valley, as well as reinforcing Syrian government forces around the capital.

With the denial of Syrian airspace to US aircraft, the Russians appear to be attempting to intensify their air strikes against SDF positions, with over a dozen air strikes on SDF positions reported over the last 48 hours.

Switching topics, the briefers informed us that the US pulled off a significant intelligence coup after successfully seizing the converted container ship the Russians had been using as a drone launch platform. This ship had been hiding amongst merchant shipping in the Mediterranean, enabling it to launch drones at the strike group from close range. The captured crew have been identified as Kazan Group operatives, with the line between Russian private and state forces being ever more blurred.

We were told the crew failed to destroy significant amounts of intelligence before their capture.

The intel briefing then turned to Russian intentions in Lebanon. We were told there was strong intelligence that Russia was making preparations to attempt to remove the Lebanese government and assist Hezbollah in seizing full control of the country. This in turn would allow the Russian presence in Lebanon to be legitimised, an outcome that would be highly beneficial to Russian and Syrian interests and help push the west out of Syria and Lebanon. The continued deployment of Russian forces in strategic locations around Lebanon appears to support this intel.

Russia has so far resisted western attempts at a diplomatic solution, they appear to be determined to see their current course of action through to the end, driven - we were told - by their perception that the west is weak and have no stomach for the fight. In short they believe they can outlast us once the casualties begin and just wait for us to withdraw, achieving their strategic goals in the region despite an inferior military position. The local Russian and Kazan leadership certainly appear fully determined to maintain this course of action.

Turning to Syria, the intel briefing looked at the situation in the country, where the ongoing Syrian offensive in Damascus appears to be failing, with high casualty and desertion rates amongst Syrian forces. We received new intel from what we understood to be a Syrian defector, who reported that the situation within the Syrian military is dire, and without the support of Hezbollah and Russian/Kazan forces risks failing altogether. This provided context as to why the Russians have accelerated their plans in the region, and the intel assessment is that Russia will continue to aggressively defend its position in Lebanon and Syria.

Once the intel brief was complete the CO of our air wing - Captain Tony Romano - stepped forwards and began to brief the coming operation.

“Good afternoon everyone. As the intel brief has just highlighted, Russia is attempting to strengthen its hold in Lebanon, and we have credible intelligence that Russia is planning to interfere directly within the elected Lebanese government. Allowing Hezbollah and Russia to exert control over all of Lebanon would have serious long term ramifications for the region, drawing Israel into a potentially major conflict with Russia *and* Hezbollah, and potentially tipping the scales in Syria against the SDF. In support of the elected Lebanese government the US has resolved to not allow this to happen.”

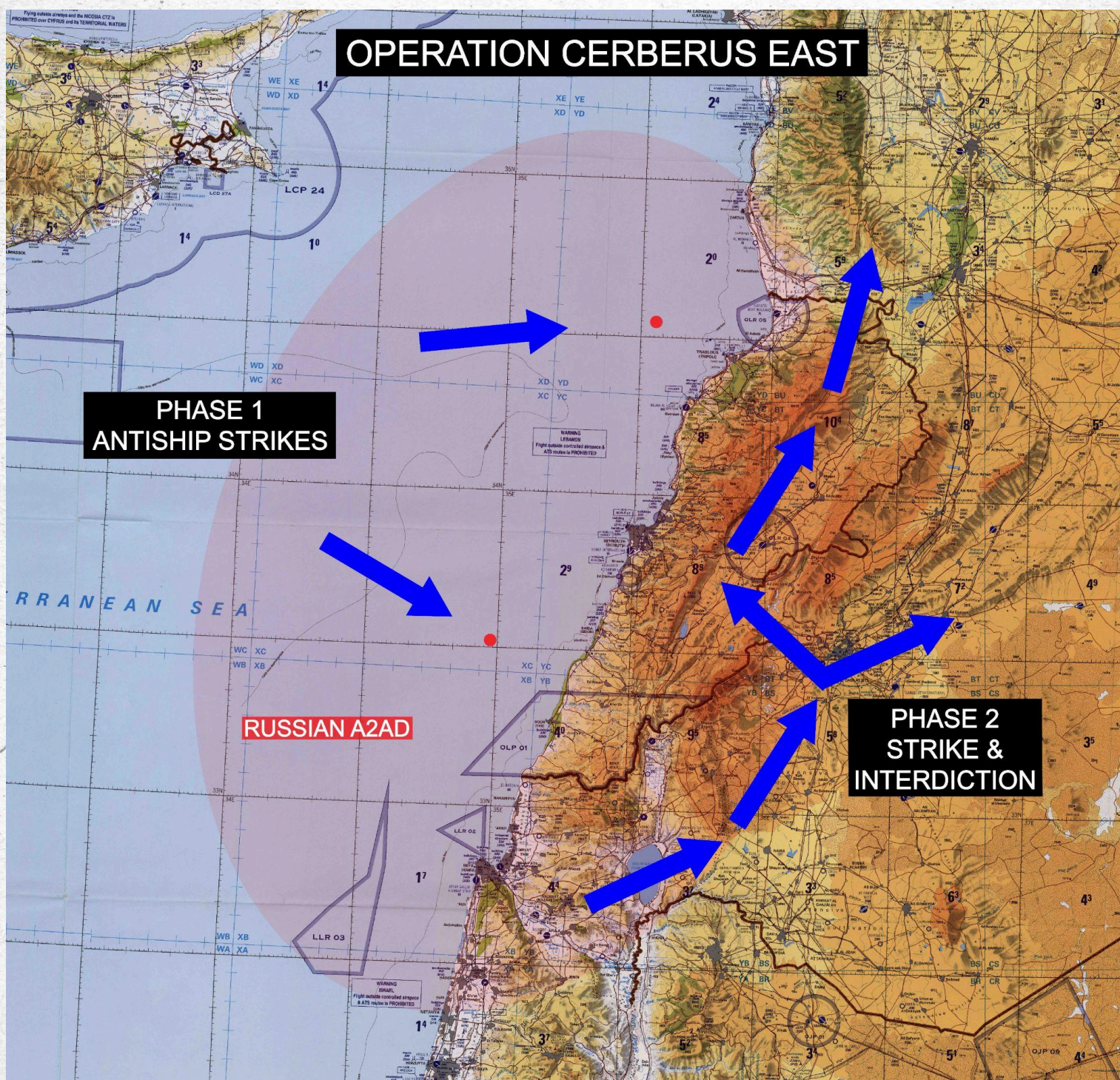
“I’m sure I need not remind you that we are in unprecedented territory, the US and Russia are standing toe to toe on the battlefield and have engaged openly in direct combat with each other for the first time. Russia has been issued an ultimatum to remove its blockade of Lebanon, the deadline for which has now passed.”

“Russia is counting on us losing our nerve and backing down through fears of further conflict, but if we back down now and allow Russia to dictate our next moves it will set a dangerous precedent. Our job is to force Russia back to the negotiating table and limit the spread of this conflict. We must walk a fine line and break the Russian ability to fight in Syria and Lebanon while simultaneously avoiding starting a major war. It will not be an easy task, but it is one I am confident you are all up to. Now let me brief you on Operation Cerberus East.”

You could have heard a pin drop in CVIC as we listened intently to Captain Romano, the gravity of the situation sinking in on us all.

“The objective of Cerberus East is to disrupt Russian plans in Syria and Lebanon and force the Russians to a peaceful settlement. To achieve this goal, the US will carry out a series of strikes, utilising overwhelming firepower to seriously degrade the Russian ability to operate in the region. It is the belief of our government that it is only by bringing our military strength fully to bear that we can force the Russians to back down.”

“Cerberus East will consist of two stages. First, US naval aviation will break the Russian blockade off the Lebanese coast, removing the A2AD barrier. Using these reopened air corridors we will begin moving US Navy and USAF aircraft into staging areas in Israel. The second phase will see these aircraft launch a series of wide ranging strikes on a series of Russian, Kazan and Hezbollah military targets in Syria and Lebanon. We will attack with overwhelming firepower and by the end of phase two we aim to have broken the ability of these groups to take meaningful offensive action.”





“Phase one will target the Russian naval blockade and A2/AD umbrella over the eastern Med. The Russians have ignored repeated requests to stand down their illegal blockade and so we will have to break it by force. This force will be focused on the two major Russian surface combatants - The cruiser Moskva and the battlecruiser Pytor Velikiy. I’m sure you’re all familiar with the Velikiy by now.”

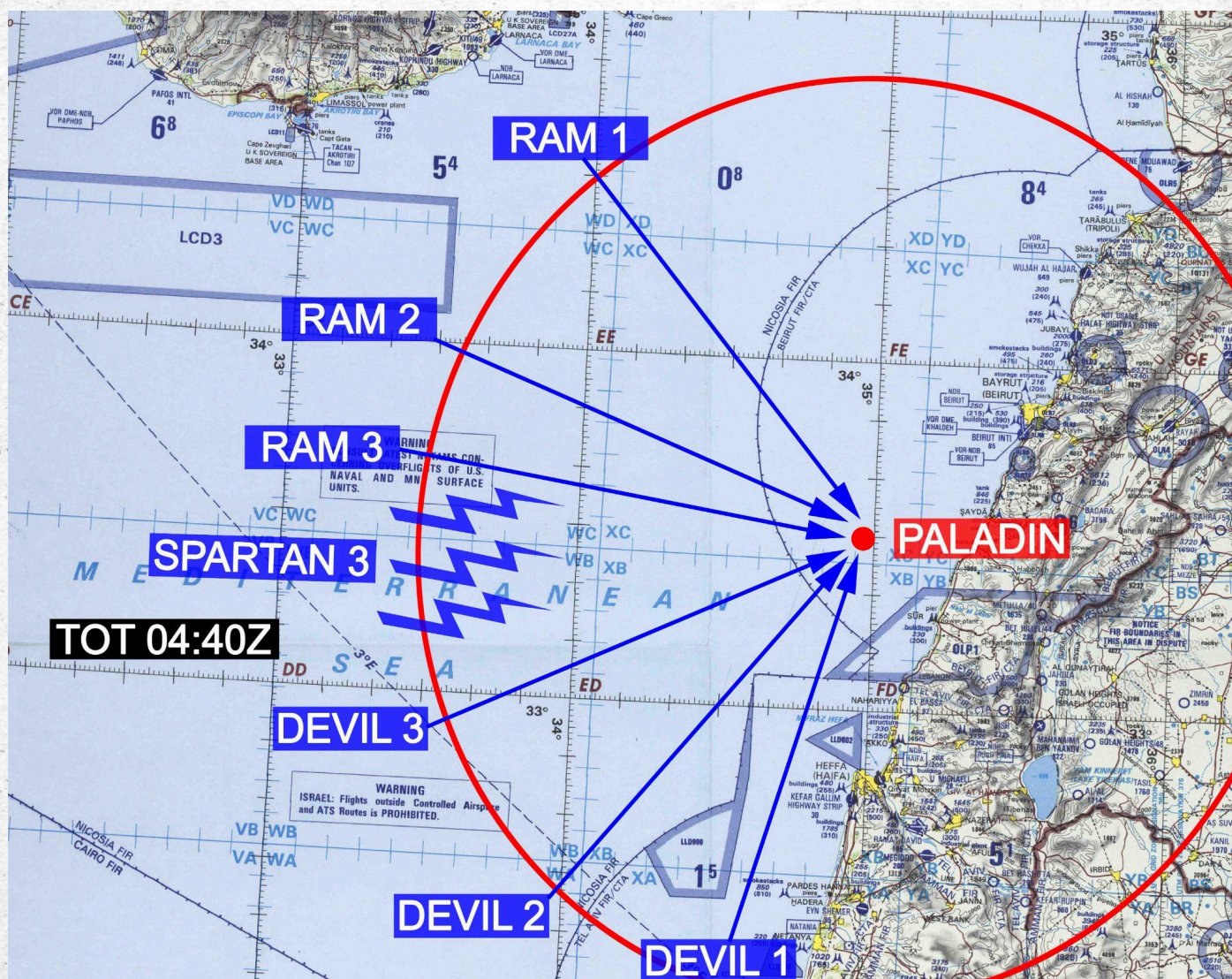
“The Stennis’ air wing will be targeting the Moskva, our air wing to go after the Velikiy, with the aim being to knock both ships out of the fight, we’re not looking to sink them, but if we do then so be it. The Lincoln’s air wing has aircraft on standby should any follow up strikes be required, but if they’re needed then we didn’t do our job correctly. Now this is not a task to be taken lightly, the Velikiy carries the naval version of the SA-10 and SA-20 and is capable of reaching out to over 80 miles. Close in, it contains a version of the SA-8, along with six CIWS comparable to the SA-19. All in all, a highly potent threat, capable of dealing with not just our aircraft but incoming missiles as well.”

“Sir, can’t we just torpedo it with a sub?” asked Nomad.

“I asked that same question Nomad,” replied Link. “Considered and rejected as too high risk for the subs, I don’t know why.”

“We’re more expendable Nomad...especially you” quipped Monk to light chuckles around the room.

Grinning, Link clicked a new slide onto the briefing screen and continued.



“The attack will rely on brute force and we will need to overwhelm the Veliky with missiles to break through its defenses. For the attack to be successful, two key elements are required - a multi axis attack combined with very specific timing of our shots. We need a large number of Harpoons to arrive on target from multiple directions simultaneously. If we get this wrong then the Velikiy will be able to knock missiles out of the air one at a time with ease.”

“We will be putting up six Hornets as our contribution to the attack, with another six joining us from VMA-83. Each Hornet will be releasing two Harpoons each for a total of 24 Harpoons. VMA-83 will be attacking from the northwest and west, we will be striking from the southwest and south. Each flight will have a specific launch point and attack axis, so you need to ensure your shots are on axis and on-time - the release time for all weapons is 04:40 Zulu. The Velikiy is operating in a known, predictable location, in fact all Russian ships are operating in a fairly small static box, a questionable tactic for sure.”

“To support your attack a Growler - Spartan 3 - will be performing a stand off jam against the Velikiy. I'm sure I don't need to remind you that we've already lost aircraft to these Russian ships so do not approach them while they still pose a threat. We also recently saw the Russian air force get involved with us for the first time, now if they are willing to do so again remains to be seen, but you should assume you will have to fight your way to your launch points. If this is the case, make sure the Russians regret getting airborne.”

“Once the Velikiy is out of action, you will push east into Israel, where the Israelis have agreed to accommodate us at several of their airbases, for us this will be Ramat David. Here you will await the arrival of our support crews, along with various USAF assets that are going to be supporting phase two. These assets are being prepositioned in Spain, Italy, Qatar and Bahrain and will already be enroute by the time the Velikiy is taken down. While you are on the ground, phase two will commence with Wild Weasel and OCA operations undertaken by the airforce. You will then get airborne and begin operations to locate and destroy Russian, Kazan and Syrian military targets. You will receive additional briefing material and targeting information on the ground in Israel.”

With the mission outline briefed we started to break it down in more detail.

Our launch time is 04:15Z. Due to the increased threat to the strike group the Truman is operating further west than usual.

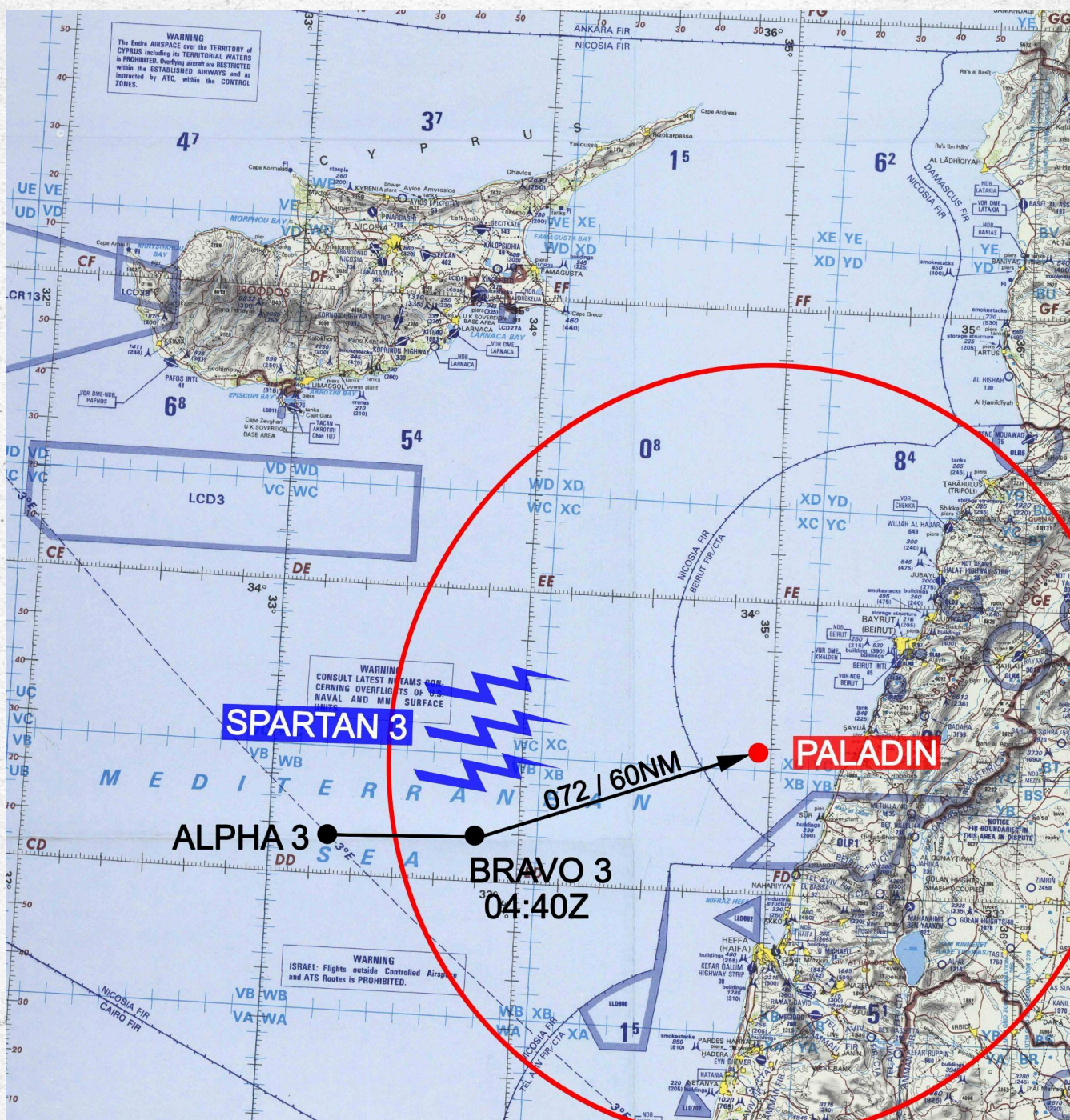
We will be supplying three two ships to the operation. Flair will lead Devil 1 alongside Boomer, Monk will lead Devil 2 with Nomad on her wing and I will lead Soprano in Devil 3.

Each flight will launch and rendezvous at waypoint one before pushing to 'Alpha' - our hold points at waypoint two - checking in on strike as we do so. We will each hold at our Alpha point until our push time of 04:36Z, at which time we will push to 'Bravo' at waypoint three. Bravo is our release point for our attack, from which each aircraft will release two AGM-84D Harpoons at the Velikiy, which has been designated the codeword 'Paladin'.

For Soprano and myself, Bravo 3 will be 60 miles southwest of the Velikiy, for an attack axis of 072 and a weapons release time of 04:40Z. Both my shots should be away within 30 seconds of our TOT to maximise effects on the Velikiy. The launch point has been chosen to be far enough out to ensure Spartan's jamming protects us, but close enough to give less time for the Velikiy to react. Waypoint four is located on the last confirmed position of the ship, and given the Russian's largely static deployment is anticipated to be very close to the target.

We should take care to not stray into missile range of the Velikiy, it is not a threat we should take lightly. Weapons are expected to hit the Velikiy at approximately 04:47:30Z.

Once the Velikiy is confirmed as out of action, we will push east into Israel to Ramat David airbase, positioned at waypoint five. Once on the ground we will park up as directed and await the arrival of the second wave of aircraft and phase two. During this period our aircraft will be prepared for our next mission and once we have received our targeting packages we will rejoin the fight.



The prospect of comms jamming over the coming missions is a concern following our attack on Hijack, where we once again experienced comms jamming over a range of frequencies. To mitigate this we have prepared 'chattermark' procedures, where upon experiencing degraded comms all aircraft will switch to the next frequency in the chattermark sequence. These are listed as the 'Charlie' frequencies in our kneboards.

Our loadout for phase one will be two Harpoons, 1 laser Maverick, three AIM-120Cs and two AIM-9Xs. Bingo fuel from Bravo 3 to Ramat David is 2,100lb. We opted to take the Maverick in case of the need to carry out precision follow up attacks.

The mission bullseye is set on Damascus International Airport, codeworded 'Grapevine'.

Our primary threat during phase 1 will of course be the Velikiy, but we should be conscious of the other ships patrolling as well. Latest intel puts these ships patrolling west of the Velikiy making the low level environment west of the target more dangerous, as a result we should ensure we attack above 25,000 feet. These ships consist of Krivak and Neustrashimy class frigates, along with Grisha class corvettes, which between them carry naval versions of the SA-8 and SA-15s. To the north the Moskva also carries the SA-10 equivalent and we should be conscious of our position in relation to this. The chance of Russian aircraft intervening to defend their ships is high, in which case we can anticipate threats to include Mig-29s, Mig-31s and SU-27s. We will be self escorting against these threats.

Once we go feet dry we should ensure we keep clear of the Golan Heights area, where Israeli forces remain on high alert.

Once the briefing was complete we went on to receive the Met report. The weather for tomorrow looks set to start poorly, with considerable cloud cover around 1500 feet, but this is expected to clear as the day progresses. Case 2 operations are expected at the outset.

Once the briefing had concluded, much of the rest of the day was spent preparing for and rehearsing the mission. We took a brief interlude to visit Slick in the infirmary, who was in good spirits despite his obvious discomfort. The visit appeared to give Slick a boost, but it had the opposite effect on me. Despite a solid plan I was feeling nervous about the coming mission, and the sight of Slick reminded me how dangerous this job can be. I've lost comrades before, Mono and Poodle still weigh upon my mind at times and although Slick made it, it was a close run thing. But Soprano's still a rookie, and sure he's done well so far, but the events we're likely to face over the next 24 hours are going to be very dangerous, I hope I can keep him safe.