

10th May, 2014.

It's been two days since our mission to strike insurgent targets as we kicked off offensive action against the LFF in Operation Cerberus West. Our target was an LFF training camp at the foot of the Lebanon Mountains, we heavily damaged the camp and judging by the sheer volume of aircraft and missiles in the air throughout the day it looks like we hit the LFF hard. The UNSFL ground operation is now in full swing, and the hope is the ground force can make good progress in pushing through the Bekaa Valley and eliminating the LFF presence there. We've yet to receive any word however on how things are progressing.

Not everything went completely to plan though, during the mission Slick developed a hydraulic issue on his aircraft and had to abort early. He ended up diverting into Akrotiri with Flair, and they were stuck there overnight awaiting a fix for the aircraft. Eventually Slick and Flair returned to us late yesterday, looking pretty happy, apparently having enjoyed the hospitality on offer at Akrotiri. I have to say the rest of us were quite jealous, Akrotiri can be a fun place and sure beats being stuck on a boat.

Asides from Flair and Slick's return to the boat yesterday, the rest of the Red Devils had the day off from flying as we weren't tasked on the ATO. This gave the squadron maintainers a chance to work on our aircraft, checking that the hydraulic issue that affected Slick was an isolated incident, and hopefully preventing any other issues appearing while we are in the air. I was a victim of that back at Incirlik, and I can't say I would relish the idea of a similar experience when trying to land on the boat.

A late afternoon briefing was scheduled for the squadron, so during the course of the afternoon we started drifting back to our ready room in small groups. I was one of the last to arrive, coming on my own straight from the hangar deck, where I went to check in with the maintainers. Monk and Nomad were in the corner laughing hard, with Nomad appearing to entertain Monk with some questionable story about god knows what he got up to on leave, by the sounds of it I'm better off not knowing. Boomer was sat with Flair and Soprano, telling a story about his exploits in Cerberus North, something to do with an SA-11 and several SA-6s. Soprano looked like he was hanging on to every word and I knew from experience Boomer had some stories to tell from his Weaseling days. Slick was sat alone, studying some briefing documents, and I slid into the empty seat next to him. He gave me a curt nod of the head, but didn't have much to say, typical Slick, focused on business as usual.

Once we were all assembled, Link entered the room and taking position at the front, began the briefing.

"Good afternoon Red Devils, first of all welcome back to Slick and Flair, I hope you two didn't enjoy your little vacation too much. The Red Devils are back on the ATO for tomorrow so Major Daniels will begin with the intel brief and then I'll take us through the planned mission. Major, over to you."

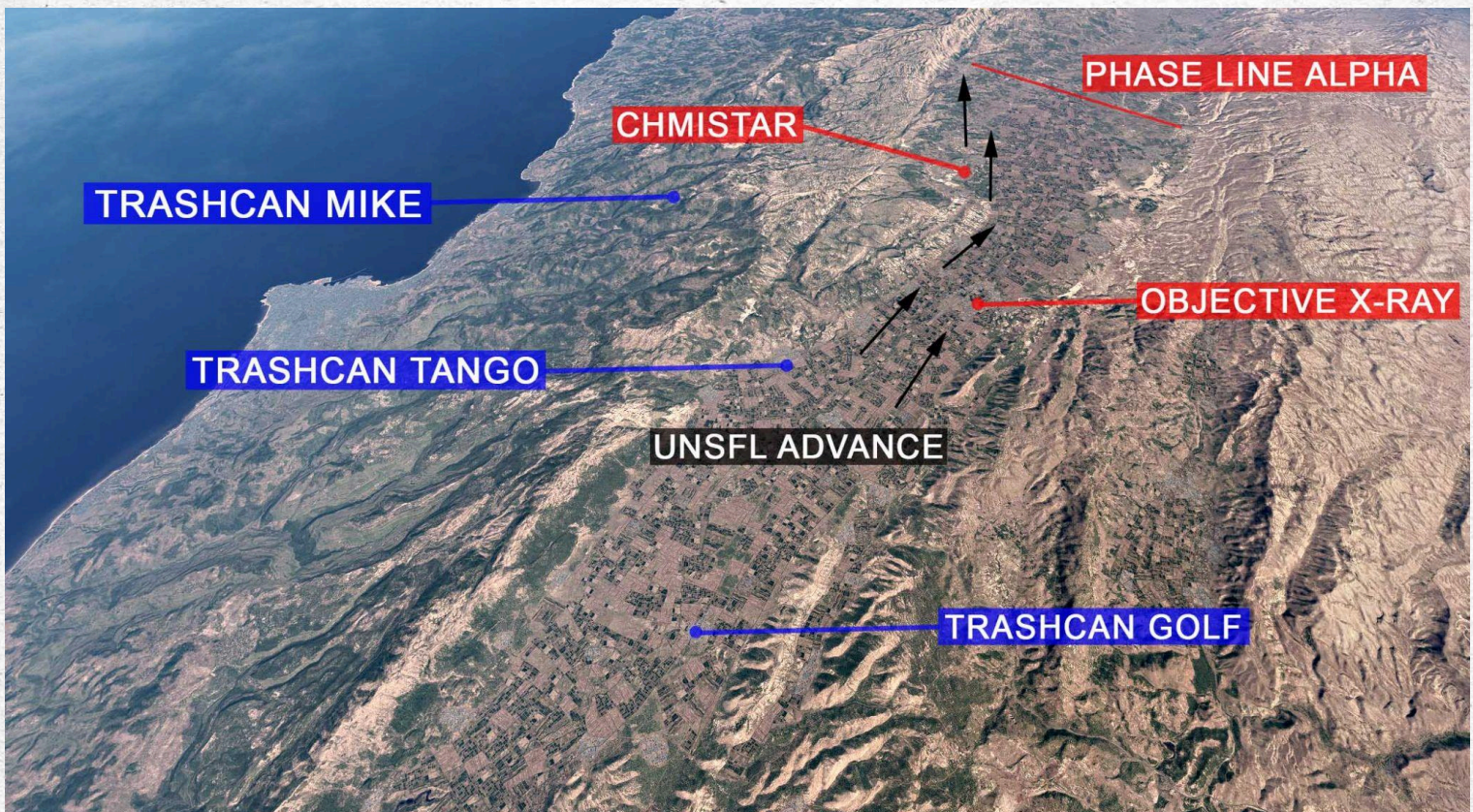
"Thank you sir," replied Major Daniels as he stepped to his feet.

"As you know, offensive operations against the LFF commenced two days ago. The initial waves of strikes were successful, destroying a significant number of LFF targets all across Lebanon. These were followed by the start of offensive ground operations by the UNSFL, however things are not going as well as hoped."

"Never saw that coming," I muttered to Slick. He gave no indication he'd heard me.

Daniels continued, “The LFF are fighting far more effectively and far more organised than expected. Conversely, some of the UNSFL units are reportedly *not* performing as expected, and the UNSFL push has been disjointed and uncoordinated, with the LFF being able to spring some effective ambushes on advancing UNSFL units and slow them down with an IED threat. Some of our international partners in the UNSFL apparently abandoned their positions under heavy LFF attack yesterday, leaving several British units cut off in the Bekaa. It was only through a large sustained close air support effort that they were able to withdraw successfully. A number of MANPADs were also reported as being fired at a flight of A-10s, so take that as a reminder about the dangers of getting into a MANPAD envelope.”

Daniels clicked a slide onto the briefing screens.



“The ground attack is already behind schedule. The initial plan called for a rapid push north to seize Objective X-Ray, aka Rayak airport, and secure the main road through this area, before pushing onto phase line Alpha and taking control of all the major routes into the mountains between here and X-Ray. From these blocking positions the UNSFL can then stifle LFF movements into these parts of the Lebanon Mountains, ahead of a push by the LAF to secure them. X-Ray was taken after relatively light fighting, but since then the attack has stalled badly around the towns of Chmistar and Taraiyya and the UNSFL are still around 9 miles short of phase line Alpha. The focus of ground operations currently is to stabilise the situation around these towns and get the attack back on schedule.”

Having briefed the situation with the UNSFL, Daniels turned his attention to events in the rest of Lebanon and Syria. He told us that Hezbollah have so far remained quiet during the UN offensive, but our forces are in close proximity to Hezbollah territory so we should remain vigilant against the threat of any Hezbollah involvement. Around Homs, the Russian and SDF fighting continues, and there are reports of more skirmishes between the Syrians and the SDF in eastern Syria. The frontlines in both areas remain static at this time. Daniels also told us of some exchanges of fire between Syria and Israel around the new Israeli/Syrian border, another reminder that we should keep clear of this area.

The last piece of news from Major Daniels was that a Chinese destroyer had transited the Suez canal and was now in the eastern Mediterranean. It was likely heading towards north Africa, where China has been investing time and money in building relationships and presence on the continent, all part of the current trend of Chinese expansion across the developing world. One of our Perry class frigates, the USS Kauffman has been assigned to shadow them as they pass south of the strike group.

Daniels then concluded his briefing and departed, and Link stepped back up to begin his brief.

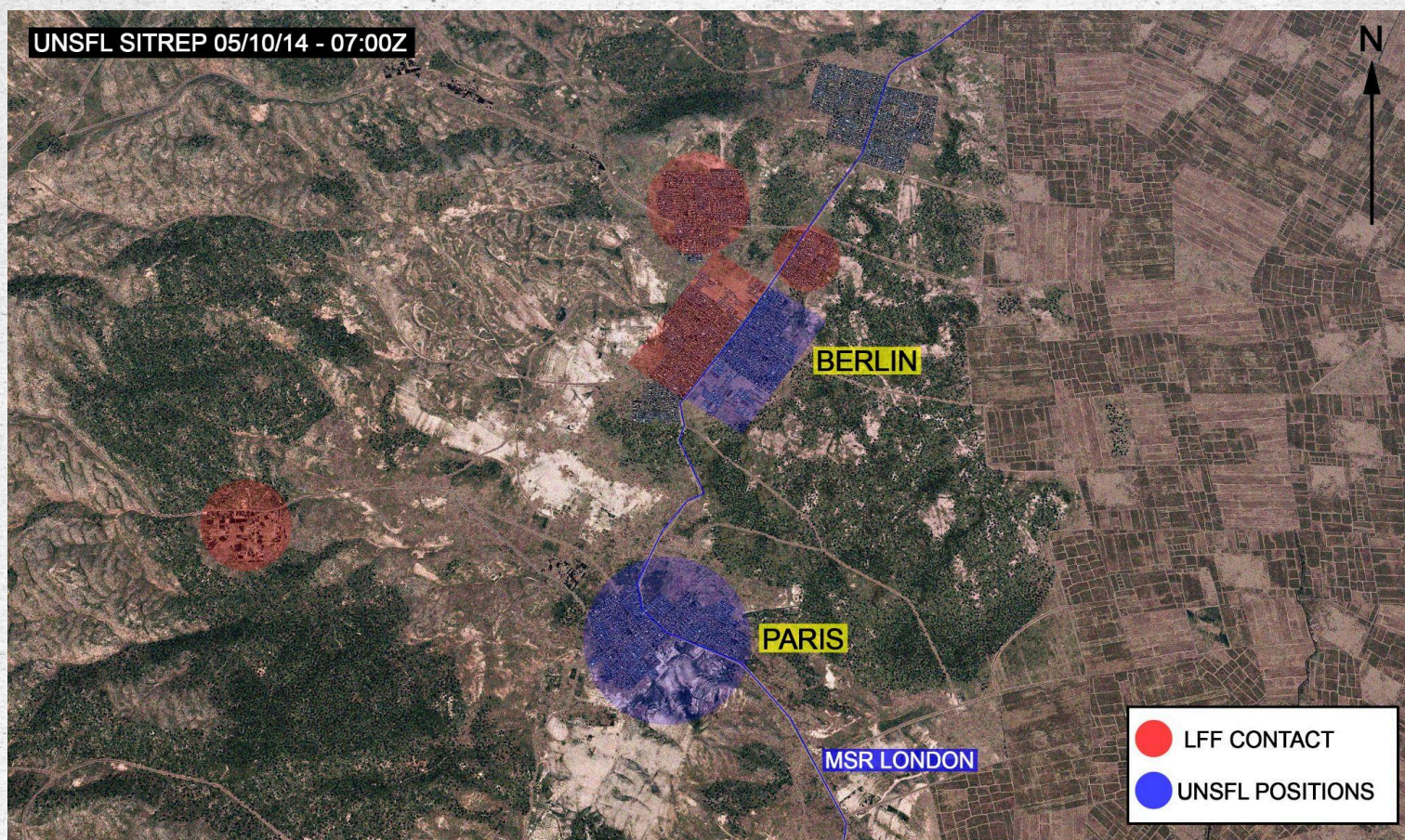
“Ok then let’s get down to business. Our tasking for tomorrow will be to carry out a number of patrols over Lebanon, holding overhead to provide on-call CAS as required by the UNSFL. We will be supplying a two-ship for each vul, flight pairings will be Monk and Nomad, followed by Steep and Soprano, then finally by Flair and Slick.”

“Watchdog, the Air Support Operations Center, will be coordinating all air support requests from the UNSFL so check in with the ASOC once on station over Lebanon. Now as you can probably imagine, the situation on the ground is complex and fast moving, the JFLCC has provided the following charts, so make sure you study them and get a grip on the situation in the area.”

Link clicked a series of new slides onto the briefing screens.

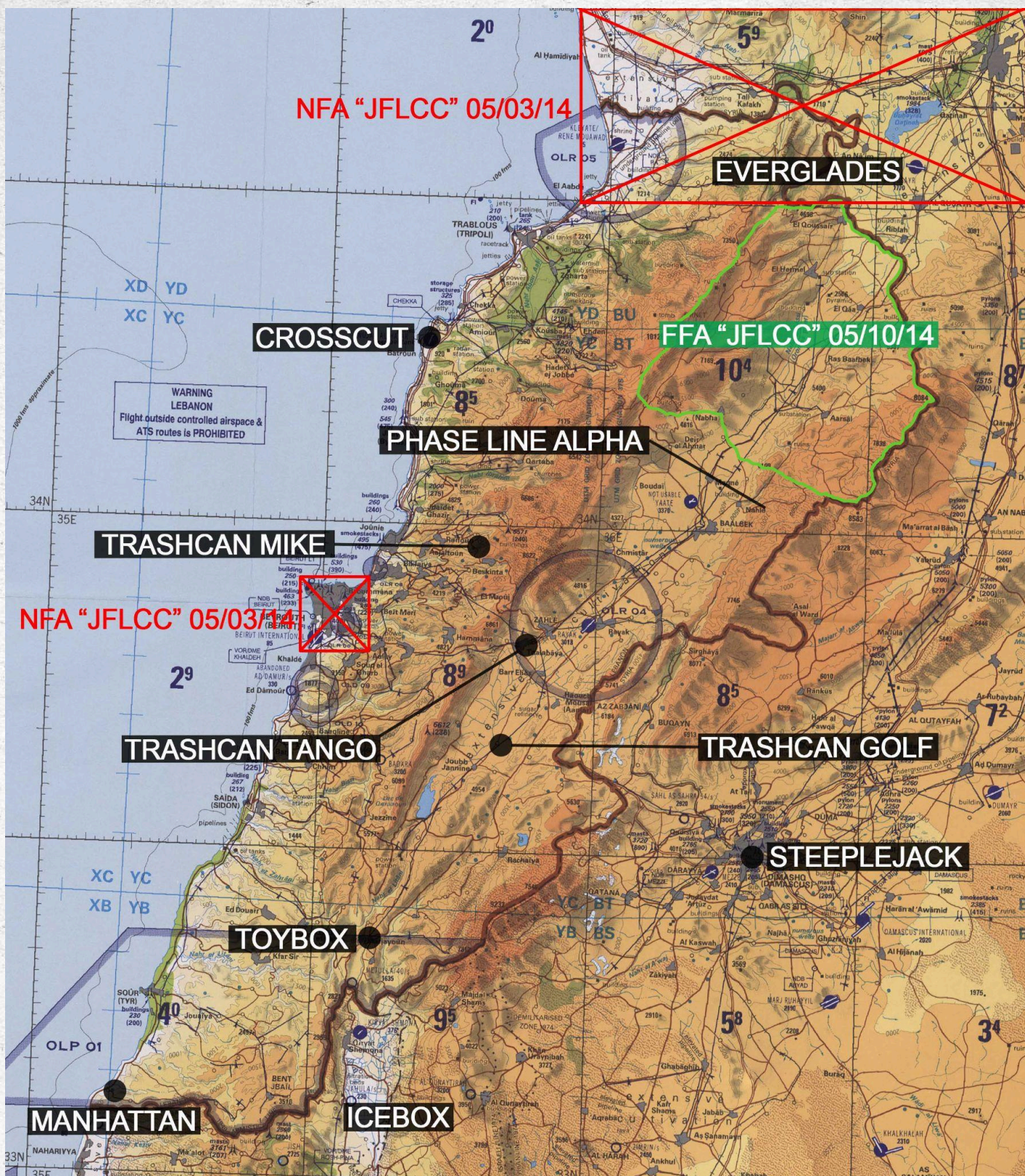


“On the initial push to phase line Alpha, the UNSFL had two main objectives, to secure the towns of Chmistar - objective Paris, and Taraiyya - objective Berlin. The main thrust of this attack is along the main road in the area, MSR London. Note that to the east we have Baalbek, which is a Hezbollah controlled location, The UNSFL aims to keep clear of here for now...only one fight at a time.”



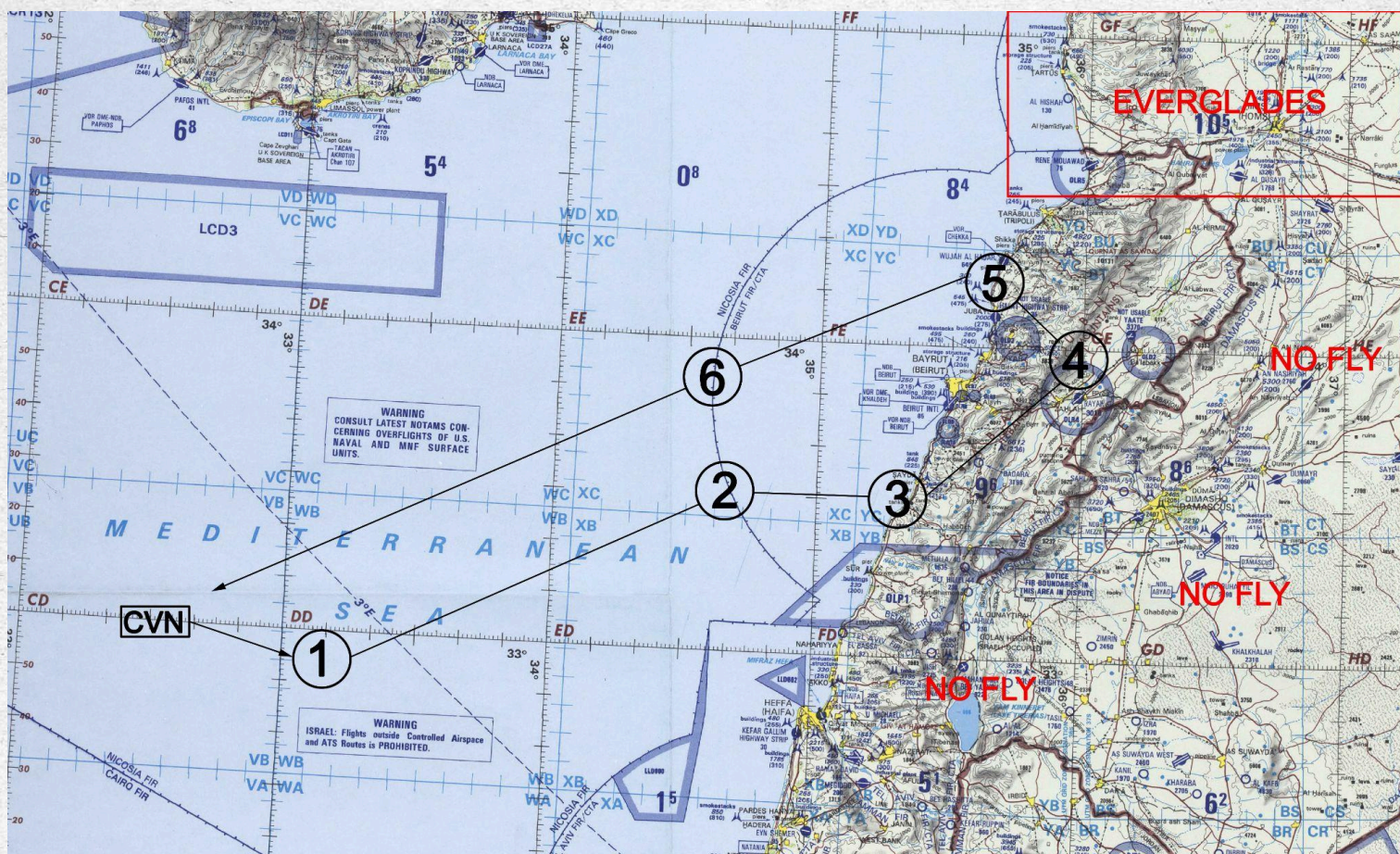
“The UN forces are currently bogged down around Paris and Berlin. They are reporting Paris as clear of LFF activity but are at present attempting to engage a significant LFF force holding a village around 2 miles west of Paris. This village overlooks Paris and MSR London, and the LFF are bringing accurate fires down on the UN forces from this position. In Berlin, UN forces are reportedly holding the town east of the MSR, but are in heavy contact with the LFF west of the MSR and on the northern outskirts.”

“As for the air support chart, the northern Bekaa Valley has a free fire area in place, north of phase line Alpha, the southern boundary of which is marked by the road running east to west. Note that there will be UN forces spread out across the entire southern Bekaa, so a restricted fire order remains in place for the rest of Lebanon, meaning we can only engage targets under the control of a JTAC or FAC(A). No fire areas remain in effect in Beirut and Everglades.”



The weather tomorrow looks favourable for CAS, with relatively calm winds and scattered clouds around 8,000 feet, so visibility should hopefully be decent. We can also expect case 1 operations around the boat, with a launch time of 10:05 zulu.

Once airborne and clear of the carrier, I will rendezvous with Soprano at waypoint 1, where we will form up as Devil 2 and proceed towards waypoint 2, climbing to cruising altitude as we do so.



At waypoint 2 we will check in with Sentinel and get cleared into Lebanon through Lima Alpha, at waypoint 3. Once in Lebanese airspace, we will take over X-CAS duties from Devil 1 (Monk and Nomad) and contact Watchdog to check in with the ASOC, with a vul start of 10:30 zulu. If there is no immediate tasking given by Watchdog we will hold overhead waypoint four, located on Chmistar and fly a max conserve profile, monitoring Watchdog and being ready to respond should the ground force require any support. While holding in Lebanon we should once again pay close attention to our position and take care not to end up in Syrian, Israeli or Russian airspace.

Once our vul ends at 11:10 zulu we will check out with Watchdog and Sentinel, then egress Lebanon through Lima Bravo (waypoint 5) and onto waypoint 6 before pushing back to Mother on TACAN.

Bingo fuel from waypoint four is 5,100 lb. Our divert will once again be to Akrotiri, with a minimum divert fuel of 1,800 lb.

For this mission I will be loaded out with 2 GBU-32s and 2 GBU-12s, both on variable FMU-152 fuses. I will also be carrying 1 GBU-38 fused for airburst. Takeoff weight will be just over 48,000 lb. I have been assigned aircraft 107.

Soprano will be in aircraft 106, this was Slick's aircraft from the other day, but the maintenance team have assured us it's back in good working order. He will be carrying two GBU-31s. Our range of weapons will give us a decent set of firepower options, and allow us to handle a range of potential TIC scenarios.

MANPADs are reported in the Chmistar/Taraiyya area so we should be cautious about descending below 20,000 feet, given the mountainous terrain close by. The AAA threat should be low, but there may be the occasional S-60 position in the Bekaa Valley, or possibly 23mm systems mounted on technicals in proximity to LFF forces.

As we finished our mission planning we retired back to the ready room where the conversation in the squadron was all about the mission tomorrow. Those of us with real world experience of close air support were keen to pass on our lessons, and the conversation was dominated by talk of CAS procedures and nine lines. I was eager to make sure Soprano was ready and prepared for supporting troops in contact tomorrow. This is his first time doing CAS for real, as a Marine he may already be well trained, but training is just training and doing it for real and under pressure will be more demanding than anything he's done so far.

For his part, Soprano appeared confident and ready, I know he'll rise to the occasion. Let's hope I do the same.