

4th July, 2014.

I have never known things to be more dangerous. The events of the last few days have been frightening and unprecedented, and I am beginning to fear we are starting down a road from which there'll be no turning back. Following the alleged Kazan Group ballistic missile attacks on Israel, the US took the lead in defending our allies, carrying out a surgical strike on the Kazan missile positions. This strike was calculated in order to send a strong message, while avoiding unnecessary damage and escalation - apparently one of the reasons the US carried out the attack itself. The attack was planned so as not to provoke Russia directly - they could still save face as the attack was against Kazan and not Russia itself - but still sending the message a line had been crossed.

The plan made sense, but the Russians didn't play along. There is talk that some of the more extreme voices in the Russian military who have been advocating for more Russian involvement in Syria won out, and Russia responded to our attack by firing a wave of drones and antiship missiles at the Truman strike group. Thankfully none of the weapons hit home, with the majority shot down and the rest splashing harmlessly into the sea.

Russia very quickly announced that the attack was not targeted on our ships, but was a warning shot to show that they were willing to respond if we carried out any more hostile actions. If that was the truth or if it was an excuse to cover up a failed attack we don't yet know. I certainly hope it was the former, but I have never known things to be more dangerous.

After our intense night time strike on the Kazan missiles we got some much needed sleep before reporting to an intel briefing this morning. Major Daniels had a lot to talk about. The intel assessment on Russia's next steps is mixed, with conflicting opinions across the intelligence community. Some believe that Russia is keen to project strength and is clinging on to the prestige of it's superpower past, therefore attacks on Russia will be met in kind and they won't seek to escalate the situation any further - saving face is enough. This theory carried a lot of weight considering Russia's actual military capability versus the strong western presence in the region. Others buy into the contested Russian doctrine of 'escalate to de-escalate', in that Russia will keep escalating the situation in order to scare us off in fear of a wider conflict, which will allow them to then dominate the area. This theory seems a stretch in my opinion, in an escalating fight Russia loses, they just don't have the forces in the region. But it is certainly the more frightening one. Adding some credibility to 'escalate to de-escalate' is the unclear picture of Russian military leadership in Syria. There are rumours of strong nationalistic ideology within Kazan Group, with the mercenary organisation also wielding an outsized influence in both Syria and within the Russian Government. Which of these theories the Russian attack on the strike group fits into isn't yet clear.

Daniels gave us more information on the Russian attack on the strike group which we were not yet aware of. The attack consisted of six KH-35 anti-ship missiles, launched from three Russian TU-142 'Bears', along with over twenty drones of unknown types. The launch platform for the drones has not yet been identified, but a strong theory is that they were launched from some sort of ship, given the proximity to the strike group they appeared at. If this is the correct theory then it is concerning that Russia had this capability pre-positioned so close to the carrier.

As the Russian Bears were inbound, the Truman launched eight Hornets to intercept them, however before they were able to, our Hornets were met by four Russian Flankers out of Al Assad. After a tense standoff between the two sides several air to air missiles were launched by both the Hornets and the Flankers. No hits were recorded by either side and eventually the Flankers bugged out, but it demonstrates just how serious things are right now.

Daniels also shared an update on Hezbollah and Israel. The IAF struck Hezbollah targets in southern Lebanon overnight, Hezbollah soon retaliated with further rocket attacks against Israel. There have also been reports of Israel skirmishing with unconfirmed forces near the Golan Heights, these forces are suspected to be Kazan and Hezbollah.

Finally Major Daniels shared with us that the comms jamming over Lebanon has been dealt with by 'clandestine means'...whatever that hell that means, but we were glad of the information regardless.

The intel brief then concluded and the squadron began to tend to it's day to day duties. It's a day everyone on board's been looking forward to - Independence Day. Apparently there's going to be some special food in the mess, there were even rumours of us being allowed a 'beer day', but Flair told us the current situation means that has zero chance of happening. Our plan is to watch the movie Independence Day in the ready room tonight as well - apparently Soprano has never seen it, go figure. Our plans were curtailed however when Flair later caught up with Monk, Slick, Soprano and myself, informing us that we were being put on alert for the rest of the day. The JAOC has asked for more aircraft and aircrews to be kept at alert, another sign of the tension out there.

With the potential for flying now on the agenda we went and checked out the weather forecast. The forecast was for strong winds and there were reports of a dust storm approaching from the south, being driven by the wind. This put us all in the mindset that we would be spared any flying tonight and we could begin to look forward to an evening of entertainment.

As we hung out in the ready room, we heard news that the US President had just announced the deployment of more forces to Lebanon in order to safeguard the UNSFL mission there. The first wave will consist of a Marine unit, due in just two days. As we debated this development, and it's pros and cons, we were suddenly given the order to standby for a possible mission. The four of us on alert gathered our gear and started to prepare. Twenty minutes later we received word to get airborne.

We raced up the flight deck, met by Flair on the way. He told us which aircraft to find and gave us a very short brief - get airborne, form up the flight, head towards Lebanon and prepare to receive instructions from Sentinel enroute. My callsign will be Devil 1-1, with Slick as Devil 1-2, Monk Devil 1-3 and Soprano Devil 1-4. I scribbled a few short notes on my kneeboards as I went, noting that all the key UN facilities in Lebanon had been assigned waypoints. Flair also reminded us that the strike group was operating on high alert so to take care to follow proper air defense procedures, especially observing the 21,000 feet approach altitude when we return to the strike group.

As I emerged onto the flight deck I could see the dust already building in the air, and visibility reduced. Fighting my way across the flight deck as the carrier steamed fast into the wind I located my aircraft, noting the mix of GBU-38, Mk-83 and Mk-82s on the wings. I figured this was going to be an air to air loadout, I guess I was wrong.

Clambering into the jet I got strapped in and took a moment to calm my nerves. Part of me still hopes this is a false alarm, I doubt we'll be that fortunate.