



October 23rd, 2009.

My name is Captain Matt Foster, callsign 'Oz', I'm an A-10 pilot with the 172nd Fighter Squadron of the Michigan Air National Guard and I find myself writing this from Kandahar Airbase, Afghanistan. I've been with the Michigan ANG for 12 years, with all of that time spent in the A-10, but as the 172nd began to transition away from the Hog and towards the C-21, myself and a few other pilots decided that flying a transport wasn't for us and took the opportunity to jump ship. The timing worked out right and we were able to find a temporary home with the 81st Expeditionary Fighter Squadron, recently established to join the ongoing and growing fight out here in Afghanistan.

The 81st EFS is what we call a 'rainbow unit', that being a squadron formed from a number of others, with both aircraft and pilots pulled from different squadrons and thus adorned in a spectrum of colors. For the 81st EFS this includes the four aircraft from the 172nd that we flew in with three days ago, alongside a Hog from the 104th FS out of Maryland and a number of jets from the 81st out of Spangdahlem.

Our journey from Michigan to Afghanistan was a long and arduous one, taking five days including rest stops. I made the journey alongside three squadron mates from the 172nd, these were; Major Chris 'Bull' Holt, Captain Zach 'Flex' Schwartz and Lt. Ethan 'Rusty' Franks. Bull has also been assigned to take on the role of XO for the new squadron. The journey ended in drama when on approach towards Kandahar my aircraft decided to throw a major malfunction, resulting in the loss of most of my avionics and instrumentation, and severe damage to my left engine. I had to make an emergency landing at Kandahar, and although I walked away from it, the aircraft is in pretty bad shape. The cause of the blow out on the jet is still being investigated, but whatever it turns out to be, that aircraft looks like it's out of action for some time.

This is our third day at Kandahar, and we're slowly settling into life on the base. This place is enormous and a small town in it's own right - some 10 square miles in size, home to 20,000 personnel from 15 nations, and right now it's the busiest military airfield in the world. We're discovering simply moving around and finding locations on the base to be a challenge, and just crossing the base from the accommodation block south of the runway to our ramp to the north requires a lengthy bus journey. Pool vehicles are available for use in the squadron, but most of us haven't been cleared to drive on the airfield (despite being allowed to taxi aircraft around it...go figure), and those that have been cleared still have to contend with the army of speed cameras deployed by the MPs on base. Guess the bureaucracy still finds us, even in a war zone.

Our accommodation on base is basic but comfortable enough, with us sharing the prefabricated metal huts that line the sandy streets of Kandahar in their hundreds. I'm currently sharing with Flex and Rusty so at least I'm bunked with friends, even if Flex's constant need to work out is proving to be a minor irritation. Away from the accommodation, the facilities here at Kandahar are extensive - a real slice of the US in the middle of an Afghan desert. At the heart of it is the Broadwalk, a raised wooden walkway lined with the comforts of home. Here we have KFC, TGI Fridays, Subway, Pizza Hut, Burger King and more, it's unbelievable. The Canadians even built themselves an ice rink for hockey. The only downside is that the bars don't serve alcohol anymore, that's an order from the top apparently. But even without alcohol life on Kandahar looks pretty good, almost like a holiday camp from what I've seen so far...although admittedly the ever present threat of rocket attack does go some way towards ruining that feeling a little. I've not yet had the pleasure of experiencing a rocket attack, but with them apparently happening once or twice a week I'm sure it won't be long until I do. It's concerning however that we can't even stop attacks on our own base, let alone stop attacks out in the rural areas where the Taliban are strong.



Another downside to Kandahar is the infamous Poo Pond. I was warned about this before coming out, and it has certainly lived up to its reputation. The Poo Pond is just that - a large sewage holding and treatment area - and it's revolting. It doesn't have the capacity to properly serve the ever growing population at Kandahar and it stinks, the Poo Pond has taken on a life of its own as a famous landmark and even has its own song, you should look it up.

Having taken a few days to recover from our epic journey and get familiar with the base I was keen to get started on operations. Thankfully our CO - Lt Colonel Austin 'Cowboy' Mills - is planning on getting us all out on fam flights over the next few days as the unit spins up ready for operations. And by all accounts we're expecting to be busy, with the insurgency currently highly active. This is of course the reason we're here, to support ISAF and US forces in the fighting with anti-coalition militias (ACMs), of which there are several, the Taliban being the most prevalent. Insurgent activity in Afghanistan has been increasing steadily over the last few years, and coalition casualties are mounting in line with this. Just three weeks ago eight US soldiers were killed in one battle at a place called Kamdesh in Nuristan province following an attack by a Taliban force estimated to be in the hundreds.

There are two main deployments of US air power in Afghanistan, with a detachment at Bagram Airfield near Kabul as well as one here at Kandahar. Strike Eagles and F-16s are currently based up at Bagram so we anticipate our main AOR will be down in the south, but from what I've heard we can expect to end up pretty much anywhere in the country if a TIC (troops in contact) situation develops.

But before we could get down the anticipated business of flying we had a couple of briefings to attend. First up was the intel briefing, so Flex, Rusty and myself set out to make the journey across the base. Enroute we picked up Bull who helped us in finding our way to the ops building, located somewhere within the sprawling mass of buildings on the south side of Kandahar. On arrival we found the briefing room, and saw a number of the squadron were already present, Bull made his way over to the CO while the three of us found a group of empty seats. Once seated we waited a few minutes for the rest of the squadron to file in, and once assembled Lt. Col Mills stepped to the front of the room.

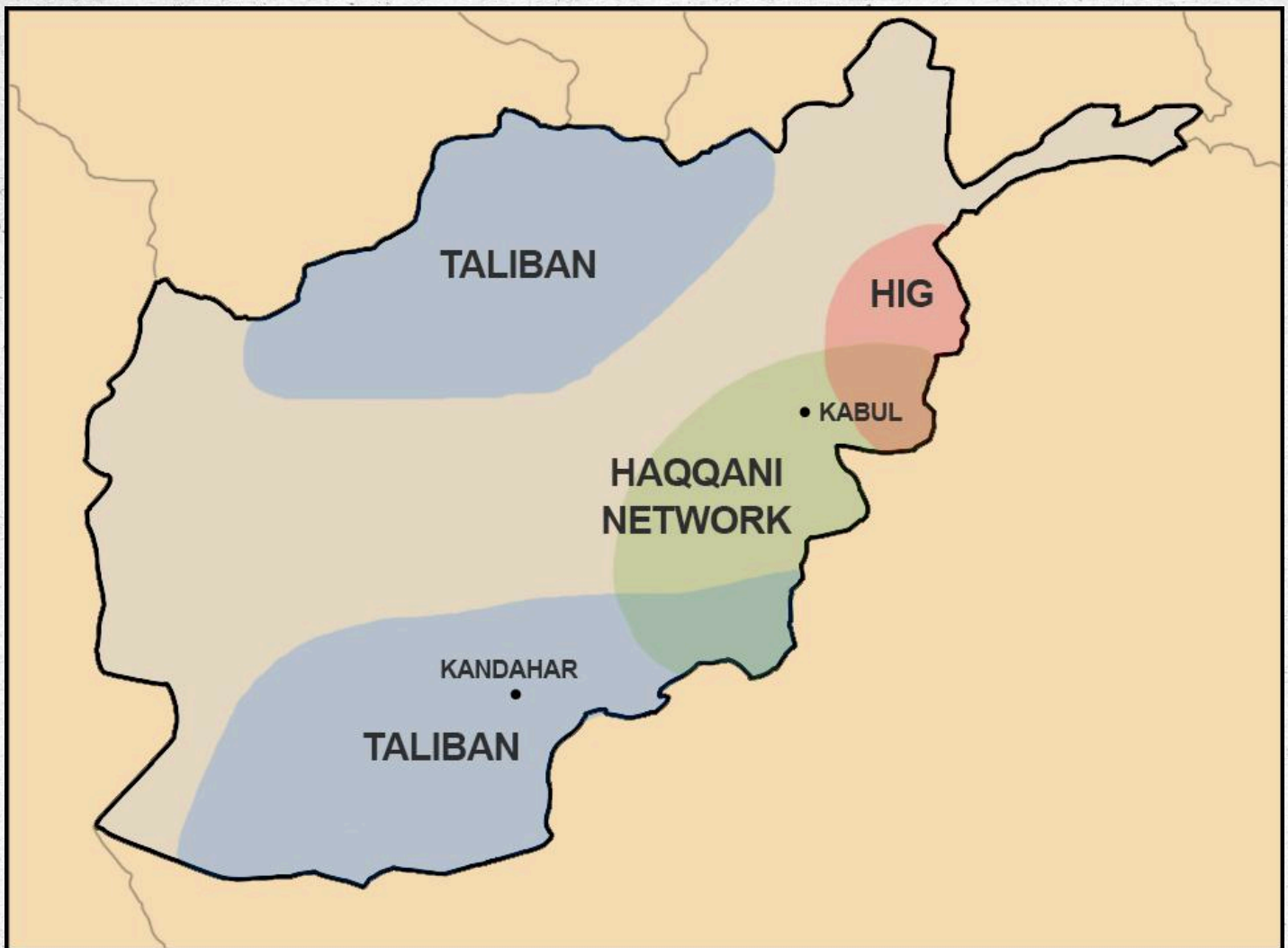
"Good morning pilots," he began, "I'll hand the briefing over to our intel officer shortly, but before I do I just wanted to formally welcome you all to the 81st EFS. As the Captain here will outline in a moment, we find ourselves in the middle of no kidding full on war here in Afghanistan. As the US air force's close air support specialists I'm sure you don't need me to tell you that our mission first and foremost is to protect our troops on the ground, it's a responsibility I know you all take with the utmost seriousness, and I want you to continue to do so. But as we carry out our mission I also need you to be rock solid in your interpretation and execution of the rules of engagement. Remember every civilian casualty is a tragedy, and every civilian casualty fuels the insurgency. Simply put, civilian casualties and collateral damage will not be tolerated. Now please let me introduce your intelligence officer."

The CO stepped aside and our intelligence officer - a stocky thirty something New Yorker by the name of Captain Wilson stepped up to begin his brief.

"Good morning everyone, my name is Captain John Wilson, and I am on the intel team based here at Kandahar. You'll be seeing plenty of me over the next six months, and it will be the job of me and my team to ensure you all have the timely intelligence and information you need to perform efficiently in your role supporting our warfighters on the ground. Now let's begin by looking at the situation here in Afghanistan."



The Captain clicked a slide onto the briefing screens located at the front of the room.



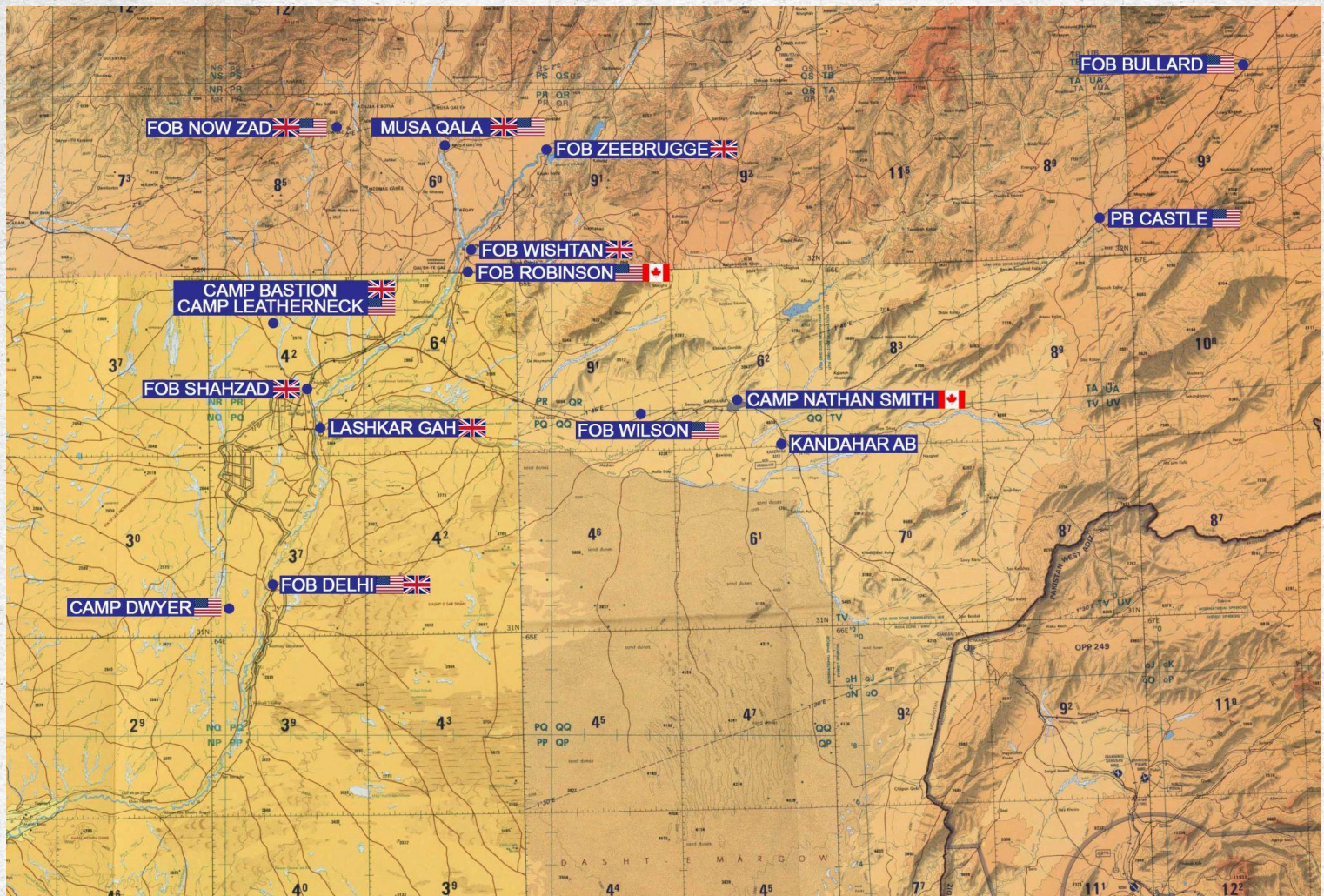
“Now hopefully you’ve seen this slide before, if not then I suggest you read the deployment handbook you should have already been supplied with”.

As the Captain was speaking I noticed Bull’s stare drilling holes in Rusty, much to the amusement of Flex and myself, and the obvious discomfort of Rusty.

Captain Wilson continued, “In Afghanistan we’re currently dealing with three primary ACM groups; HIG, the Haqqani Network and of course the Taliban. You can find more details on these groups within your handbooks. The current hotspots of fighting are down here in the south in Helmand and Kandahar provinces, as well as along most of the eastern border with Pakistan and along a large part of the northern border. Within these areas we’re currently seeing particularly heavy insurgent activity in Helmand, as well as around Khost and northeast of Kabul. Insurgent activity has been heightened over the last several months due to the Afghan Presidential election, which ACMs are seeking to disrupt. The election was held in August but has proceeded to a run-off vote between President Karzai and the main challenger Abdullah Abdullah. The election has been marred by insurgent attacks, not to mention widespread allegations of vote rigging and intimidation. The run-off vote is expected to be held within the next few weeks so we should be alert to another potential spike in insurgent activity. But for today we’re going to focus on things down south, as this is where we expect most of your operations will take place.”



Wilson clicked a second slide onto the briefing screen.



“This slide shows the major British, Canadian and American deployments in the south, but in addition to these facilities there are also dozens more small patrol bases and combat outposts. The concentration of major bases demonstrates where the most contested areas are, and as you can see, a large number of these follow the course of the Helmand River and it’s green zone. The British have recently deployed their 11th Light Brigade to the region, they took over this role about 2 weeks ago and so are just getting up to speed. The Brits deployment is focused on the northern portion of the Helmand River, with large deployments around Now Zad, Musa Qala, Sangin and the provincial capital Lashkar Gah. US Marines are also present in Helmand, with the 24th MEU operating out of Garmsir and FOB Delhi, RCT 7 based out of Camp Dwyer and the 2nd MEB deployed at Camp Leatherneck.”

“Helmand is a real hot spot right now. The area has a lot of strategic importance to the insurgency, with major crossing points from Pakistan to the south and an abundance of poppy production along the green zone, from which the resulting heroin trade is a major source of funding for the Taliban. Add to this weak governance and an abundance of cover in the green zone, and we have ourselves a very active area for insurgents.”



“Now let’s talk about the insurgent threat itself. There are typically two types of insurgents, the first is the opportunistic part timer, perhaps motivated by money or personal reasons, or strong armed into joining by the Taliban. These insurgents usually have little to no training and little commitment, and are most likely to fire a few unaimed shots at our patrols then run away. The second type however is a more dangerous prospect, the true Taliban believers, who although lacking the training we would take for granted in western militaries are a lot more capable than the part timers, but most importantly are highly committed to the cause. Suicide bomb attacks are a real possibility, and this group of insurgents are far more likely to press an attack to close range and attempt to negate the effectiveness of our air cover. The biggest threat to our ground forces however remains the improvised explosive device, or IED. This device, fashioned from mines, old artillery shells or any other explosive material has been causing havoc down on the ground. The IED threat has ramped up significantly over the last year, especially in Helmand, and we believe this is down to two factors. First, we have intelligence that indicates the Iranian Quds force are supplying weapons and bomb making equipment to insurgents, and second, it is believed that a new bomb making expert has arrived in the area. Locating and putting an end to his work is a top priority for ISAF forces.”

“In contrast to the threat on the ground, the threat to fighter aircraft is extremely low. Modern air defenses there are effectively zero, so you will be operating in a highly permissive environment, however you should still be aware of two potential threats, even if the chance of encountering them are remote. The first threat is AAA, and from time to time the odd piece of old Soviet AAA appears on the battlefield, and there have been several instances of either ZU-23 or S-60 guns in insurgent hands. The second threat is from MANPADs, specifically the FIM-92 Stinger, which were supplied to the Mujhadeen in large numbers during their resistance to Soviet occupation in the 1980s. In all likelihood, there are very few of these weapons remaining in Afghanistan in a working condition - it’s unlikely they have been maintained and cared for - but our advice would be to make the assumption that there is at least *one* working weapon out there, and that we don’t know where it is. So take all appropriate countermeasures to keep yourselves safe.”

The Captain ended his intel briefing shortly after, and the squadron soon dissipated to go about their daily business. For me this involved mission planning with the CO, who was due to accompany me on my first flight around Afghanistan later today.

Our mission today is a familiarization flight, designed to introduce me to the airspace, operational procedures and key landmarks around our expected AO in southwest Afghanistan. We will however be carrying live weapons as we will be operating around the insurgent hotspots in the south, and Cowboy was keen to emphasize that we would be available for tasking should a TIC develop in our area.

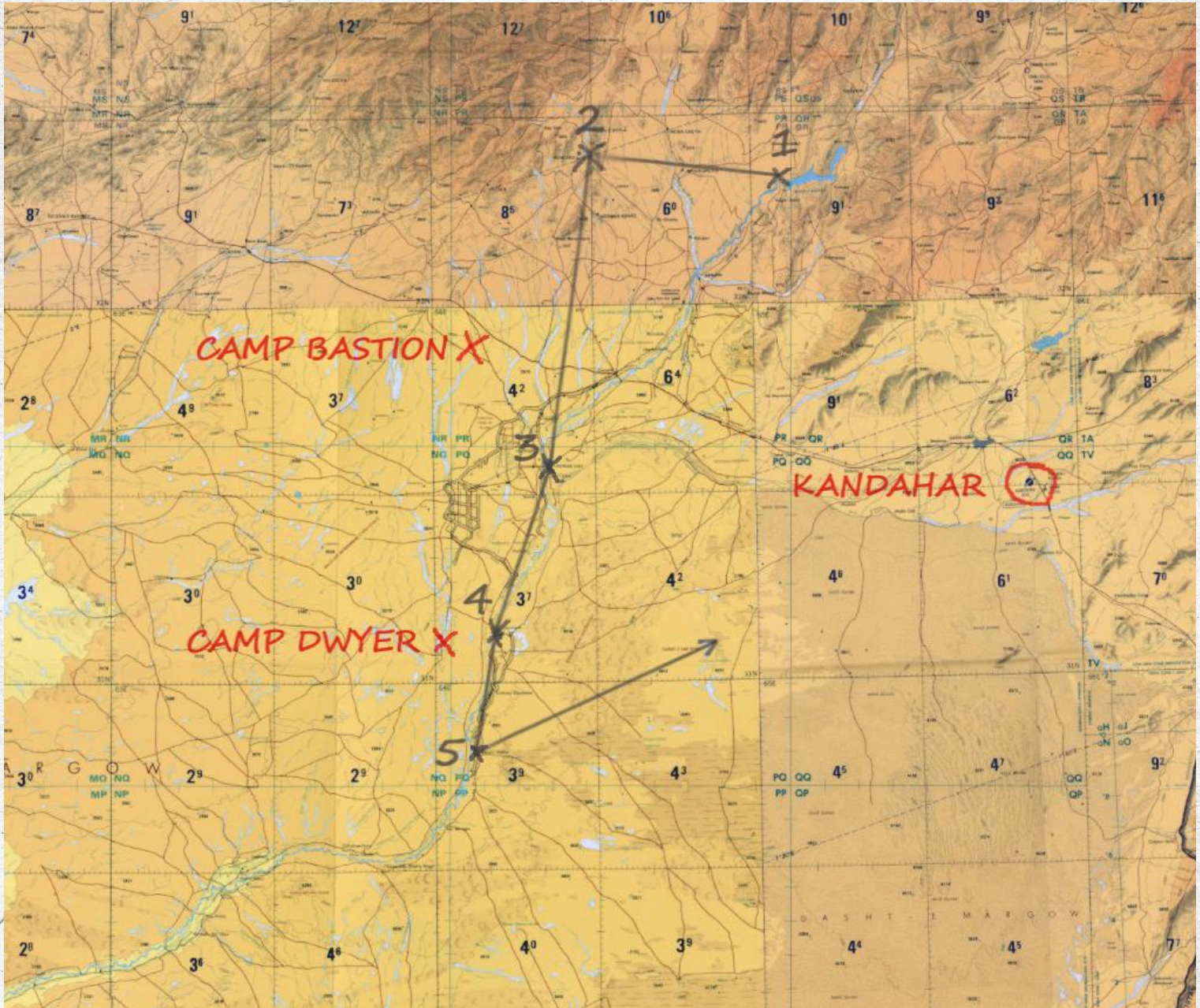
Our callsign for the mission will be Scar 3, with Cowboy taking the role of flight lead, and me as dash 2.

The CO talked me through the flight plan for the mission. Departing Kandahar at approximately 15:00 local (10:00Z), we will follow ATC instructions from Kandahar Tower until clear of controlled airspace. Kandahar is an incredibly busy airfield so it’s vital we correctly follow instructions at all times to stay safe and avoid disrupting operations at the base.

Once clear of Kandahar’s airspace we will fall under control of the theater AWACs, and so will be required to check in with Spartan, who will manage airspace across the country as well as allocate tasking as air support requests arrive.



Our flight plan will initially take us northwest from Kandahar to waypoint 1, located at the Kajaki Dam area, where the Brits are stationed at FOB Zeebrugge. From here we will head west towards waypoint 2 at Now Zad, overflying Musa Qala enroute. From waypoint 2 we will turn south for waypoint 3, located at Lashkar Gah, and as we do so we will overfly Camp Bastion/Leatherneck so should be alert to aircraft coming and going from the base. From Lashkar Gah we will continue to follow the Helmand River south, noting FOB Delhi at waypoint 4, with Camp Dwyer approximately 7 miles southwest of here. Our trip down the Helmand River will terminate at waypoint 5, from where we will turn northeast and make our way back towards Kandahar, following ATC instructions as we do so.



All comms frequencies needed for the flight are listed within my kneeboard cards.

Our loadout for this flight will be what we call the standard conventional load (or SCL), this comprises of 7 HE rockets, 2 Mk-82s fused for airbursts, 1 GBU-12 and 1 GBU-38, along with a full complement of ammo for the gun. This loadout offers a flexible set of response options to any situations that develop while we are airborne.



Bingo fuel for our return to Kandahar is 3,800lb.

The weather for our flight looks to be fairly settled, with scattered clouds around 12,000 feet and northeasterly winds in the region of 10 knots.

Once we had wrapped up our mission planning I took some time to refresh myself with the airspace control measures around Kandahar which were included in our deployment handbooks. We will be following the Juvek One departure route from runway 05 to 'Darus', north of Kandahar.

I find myself excited at the prospect of my first operational flight in Afghanistan. After all this is what we've trained for all these years, and for an A-10 pilot the opportunity to test ourselves and conduct real life close air support is something we have all sought after. But the excitement is also tinged with fear, not the fear of my own safety but the fear of failure. The fear that we will make a mistake and hurt our troops on the ground or fail to protect them. The fear that we will screw up and hurt civilians.

The insurgents are growing in strength and coalition casualties are rapidly mounting. The feeling around the squadron is that this deployment could be a tough one, with challenging combat flying in a dangerous and unforgiving country and a stubborn, determined enemy. There will be moments over the next six months where my actions will change lives, saving the lives of coalition forces, and perhaps taking the lives of our enemies. As I reflected on this, knowing that I would finally be tested to do something I was never sure I would actually have to do, I was struck by the awesome responsibility that lies with each of us every time we strap the jet on and take to the skies in support of our brothers in arms. I'm not a religious man but I found myself saying a short prayer.

"Dear Lord, please don't let me fuck up."

Amen.