

6th June, 2014.

The last few weeks have been eventful. Three weeks ago the LFF caught us all by surprise, launching a massive counterattack against the UNSFL in Lebanon. Caught off guard, the UNSFL were left scrambling to repel these attacks, launched against a wide variety of targets after the LFF had successfully infiltrated supposedly secure territory. Things looked touch and go for a few days, but eventually the sheer weight of firepower the UN forces were able to bring to bear was able to grind the LFF attacks down.

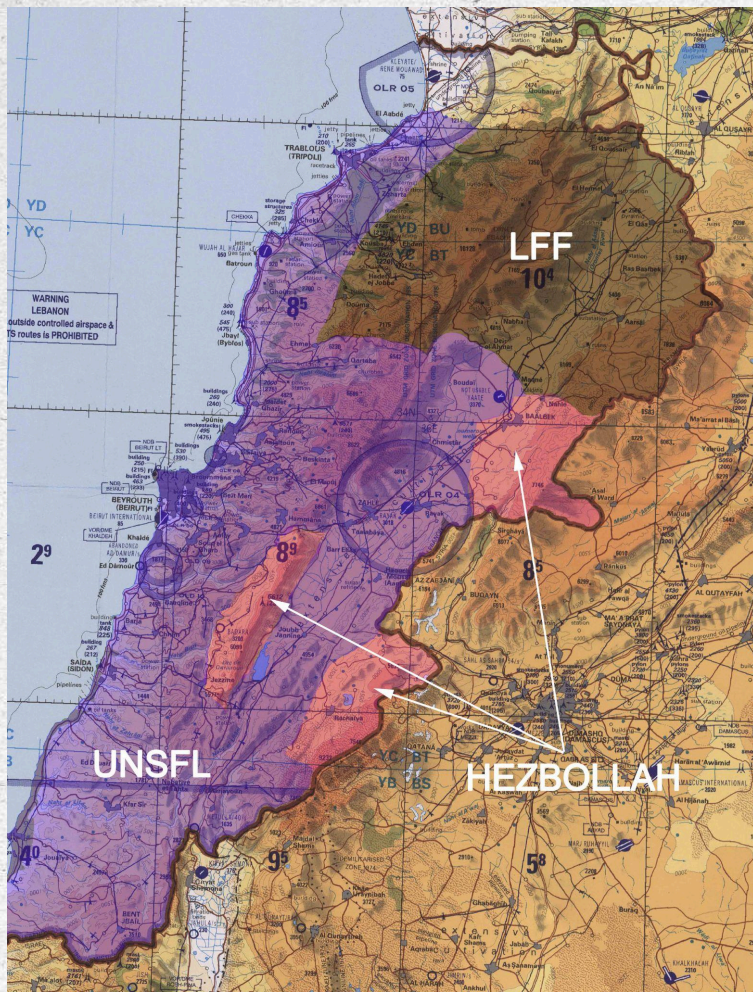
The Red Devils of course played their part in this, carrying out a significant number of sorties the past three weeks and providing CAS to the ground forces. This has been keeping us busy and morale in the squadron has been high as we've been really hurting the LFF on the battlefield. Soprano recovered from his cold and was back in the cockpit as soon as he could convince the flight doc he was fit, he got his fair share of work in the end and has been performing well in the CAS mission. I've been pleased with his progress.

I flew another patrol over Lebanon today with Soprano, the mission was quiet and uneventful, with no calls for CAS made during our vul, and after the action of the previous weeks it was a pretty boring flight. The last week has seen LFF activity start to slacken off, even more so the last few days, and it appears that the LFF offensive might finally be running out of steam, and hopefully man power. Russia has also been particularly active in northern Lebanon recently, and the western air forces have been butting heads with the Russians a little too regularly for my liking as they've been trying to dictate where we can and can't operate. Thankfully I had no run-ins with the Russians today, but this is certainly not guaranteed at the moment.

Once I had safely recovered to the boat, Soprano and I debriefed before hitting the mess for chow. After, we headed to the ready room where Soprano got some vigorous ribbing for the two bolters he experienced while trying to land. In his defense it has been windy today and we had quite a choppy sea, with the carrier moving up and down a fair bit. I trapped on my first attempt, but I'm not too proud to admit that it was more by luck than judgement, although I won't be in a hurry to share that in the ready room. Soprano took his abuse in the good nature it was intended, and the squadron hung out in the ready room, keeping ourselves occupied until Flair dropped by to inform us all a briefing would be held later this afternoon. He made it sound like offensive action was being planned against LFF targets, I sure hope so, we need to get back on the front foot.

As the time for the intel briefing arrived, Link and Major Daniels appeared, precisely on time as always. They swept into the room and Link gestured for Daniels to take the podium and begin his briefing.

Daniels began by talking about the LFF offensive. He told us that all indications were that the LFF had taken severe losses, with estimates of enemy KIA running into the hundreds, along with dozens of Technicals and other heavy weapons. LFF activity all across Lebanon is significantly reduced, with the LFF apparently exhausting themselves and their offensive gamble ultimately proving a failure. Time will tell if this assessment is correct or not. Although LFF activity is reduced across the country, there are still large pockets of LFF forces left in northern Lebanon, penned in and unable to move due to threat of air attack.



Daniels then moved onto Hezbollah. They are continuing to keep out the way, probably a wise strategy given the amount of air power we're saturating Lebanon with at the moment. Hezbollah however are still believed to be receiving supply shipments from Russia, something we're keeping a close eye on. The implications of this are still unknown, but definitely a concern.

Further south we've seen Israel engage in an increasing number of skirmishes and exchanges of fire with the Syrians, this activity increased following a series of Israeli air strikes against artillery positions in southern Syria.

Four days ago, Daniels first told us about a new offensive underway in the Damascus suburbs, with Syrian and Russian forces attempting to dislodge the SDF from eastern Damascus. Initial reports are of heavy casualties on both sides, with minimal gains made by the Syrians.

There are also reports of heavy collateral damage and civilian casualties in Damascus, something which is causing a lot of noise on the international stage as concerns are raised about the intentional targeting of civilian areas by the Syrians.

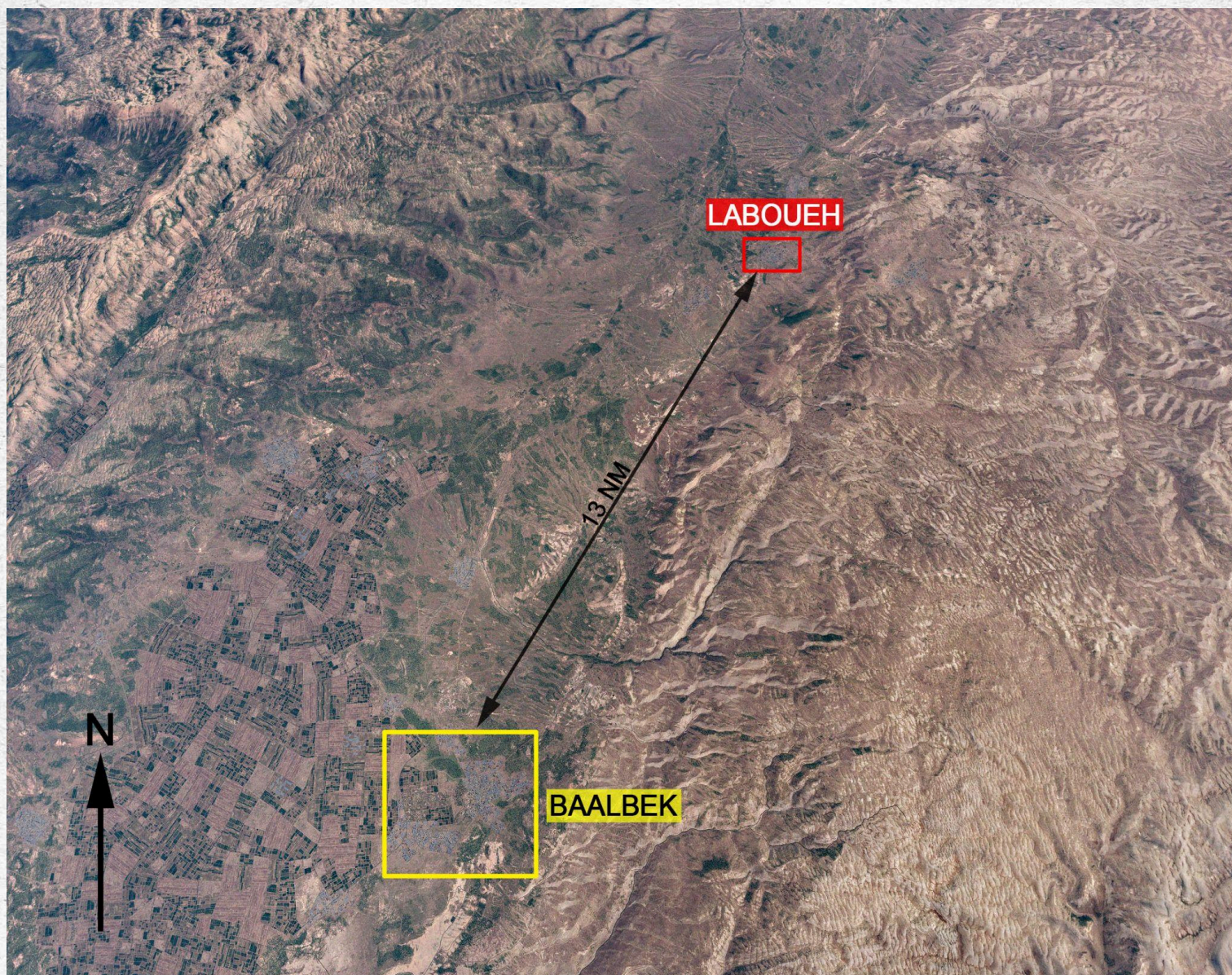
Finally Daniels finished up with discussion of Russian operations. Russian and Kazan Group forces, (at this point it's becoming extremely hard to tell the two apart) are still engaged in the Homs area. This frontline appears to be remaining stubbornly static, with all sides locked in an attritional stalemate. The Russians are also continuing to be a nuisance in northern Lebanon, operating outside of the boundaries previously agreed between the US and Russia. The Russians have been engaging the LFF in the northern Bekaa Valley, pushing south and southeast from their agreed operating area. The intel assessment is that the Russians appear to be attempting to move their ground forces further into Lebanon, most likely in an effort to open new avenues of attack into SDF held territory in Syria. As they do this they are attempting to extend a bubble of protected airspace around their ground force, which is where we're starting to run into each other. Conversations about this are ongoing but for now our guidance remains to stand our ground and not allow the Russians to dictate our operating area, and it's fair to say this is something every one of us in the squadron believes to be the right way to go about things.

Daniel's briefing then concluded, and Link stepped to the podium and began speaking.

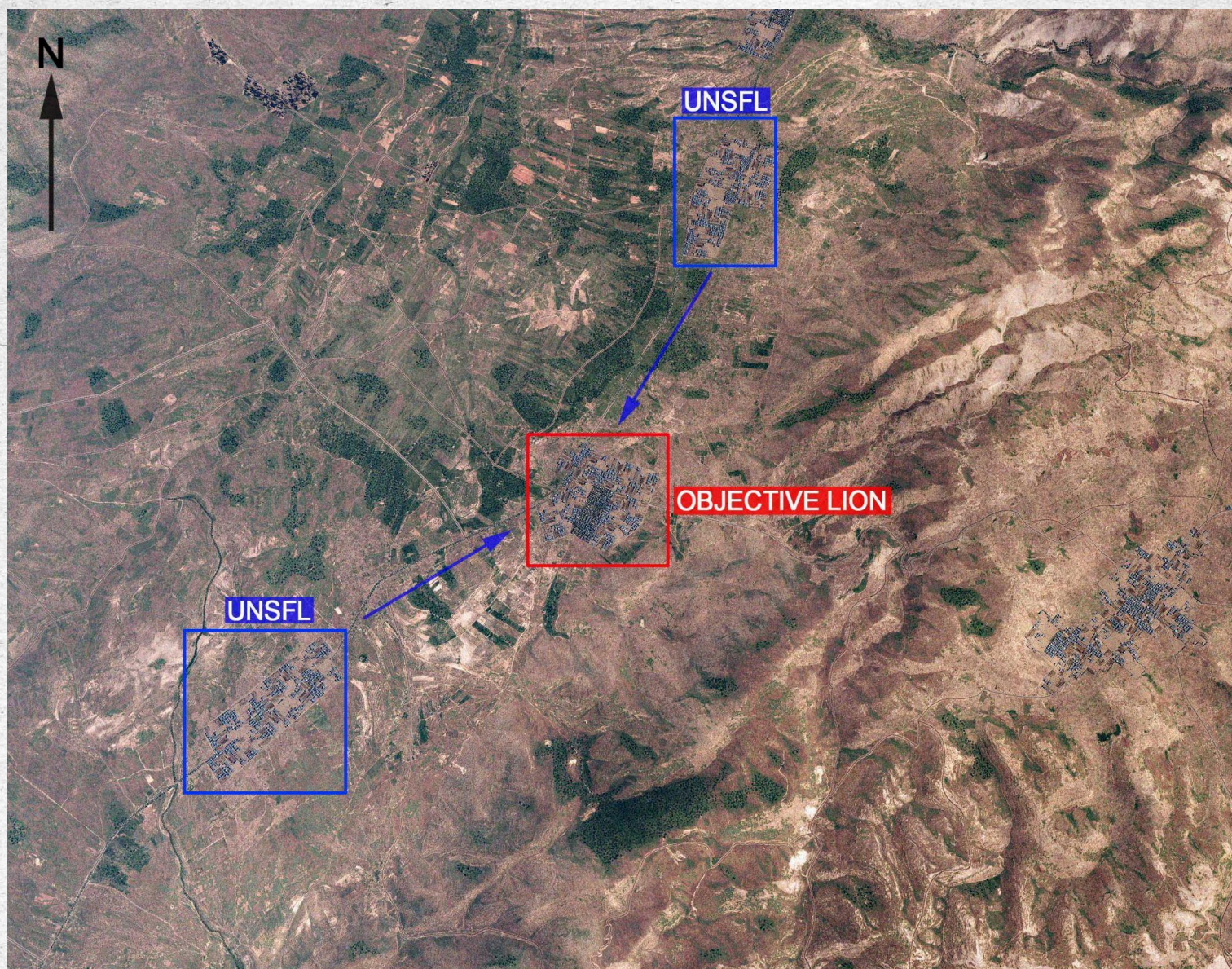
"Alright pilots, let's get down to business. As you know the last three weeks have seen us focused heavily on providing close air support to the UNSFL, and dragging them out the hole they found themselves in. As Major Daniels has told us, and as we've seen for ourselves, the LFF offensive appears to be at an end. Command wants to take no chances of it flaring up again so we're going on the offensive, and we're going in hard."

“Despite their heavy losses the past weeks, the LFF still has a strong presence in northern Lebanon, with a number of strongholds in the northern Bekaa and both the Lebanon and Anti-Lebanon mountains. The UNSFL is planning major offensives in these areas in the coming days, the Red Devils will be supporting these operations.”

Link clicked a new slide into place on the briefing screen.



“The first UNSFL operation will be targeting the LFF stronghold of Laboueh, this is objective Lion. Objective Lion lies 13 miles northeast of Hezbollah controlled Baalbek, the town is a known LFF stronghold and intel tells us that the LFF have a large number of fighters, equipment and heavy weapons trapped in these locations. This apparently includes a variety of AAA systems, and it is believed that up to four of the LFF’s surviving T-55s are here as well. The UNSFL has already set up blocking positions in the towns south and north, and by taking Lion the UNSFL aims to open up the road into the Anti-Lebanon mountains.”



“We will be supplying a series of flights over Lion in support of this offensive, so expect to be busy the next few days. Our role will be to take part in shaping the battlefield, targeting LFF fortifications, troop concentrations and weapons ahead of the main offensive. A free fire area is in position over Objective Lion and the town appears clear of civilians, so until further notice any targets you PID as LFF are fair game. We have however been asked to avoid damaging the town’s infrastructure as far as possible, so buildings are to be left alone unless you receive specific targeting instructions. I guess someone hopes that the civilians will move back in once this is all over.”

Monk then asked a question, “Sir, so are we receiving target cueing then, or is this going to be a bug hunt?”

Link responded, “I’m assured ISR will be on hand for real time targeting information, this will be coordinated through Empire, who should be available to provide targets during the duration of the operation.”

Boomer also raised a question, “What about Baalbek? Looks like we’ll be operating really close to the Hezbollah front line.”

“We will,” replied Link, “...and you are to avoid Hezbollah controlled areas. We’ve enough complications in Lebanon right now without dragging Hezbollah back into the fight. So keep a close watch on each other’s positioning and don’t end up somewhere you don’t want to be. You’ll also be close to the Syrian border so again be careful, the last thing we want is to be worrying about Syrian SAM shots over the border. Now Flair has your flight schedules so once you have your assignments start planning your missions, good hunting Red Devils.”

With that Link closed the briefing, and Flair began handing out our flight schedule. I was slated for a mission tomorrow, alongside Soprano under the callsign Devil 2. I set about planning the mission immediately.

Our scheduled departure time is 06:30Z, the weather forecast is for broken clouds at around 9,000 feet so we are expecting case 1 operations all day. Winds are expected to be light and easterly.

Once we have launched, Soprano and I will rendezvous at waypoint 1, before following a standard entry to Lebanon via Lima Alpha at waypoint 3, checking in with Sentinel as we do so. It will be important we follow Sentinel’s instructions as the airspace over Lebanon is expected to be really busy in support of this operation.

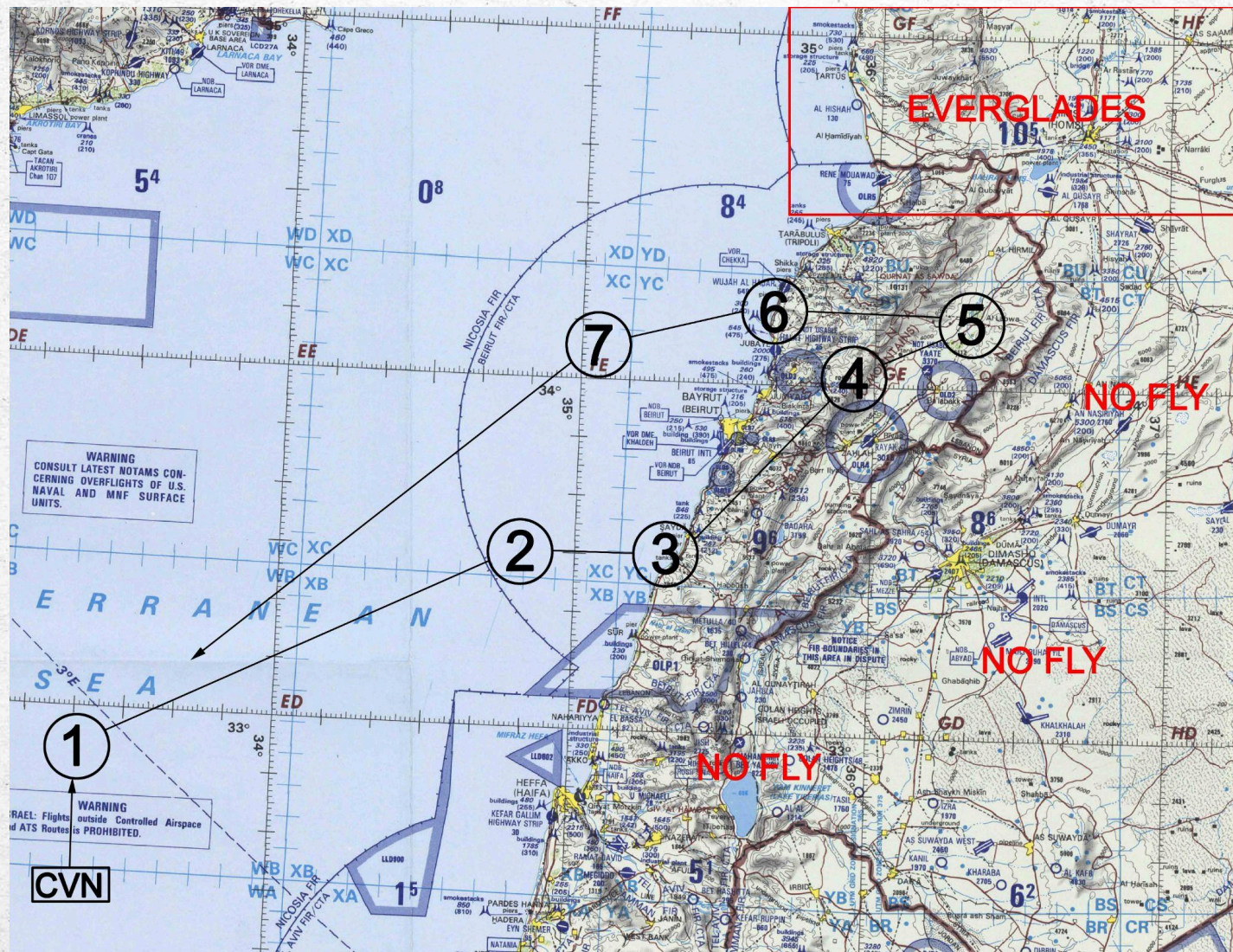
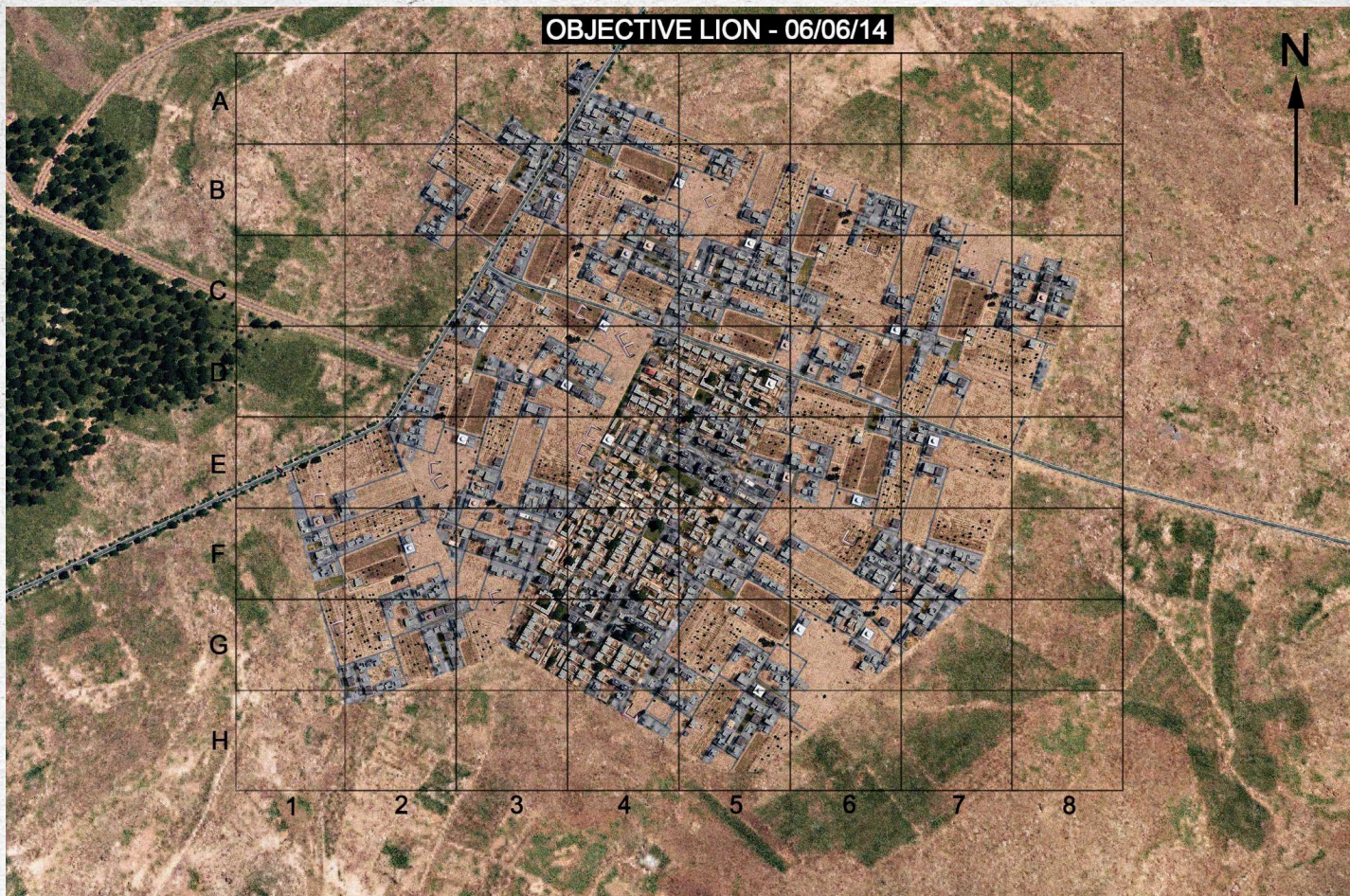
Once in Lebanon we will follow our flight plan to waypoint 4, our IP for the target area. Given the tight geography of the area, and the potential to quickly lose awareness of our position and stray into Syrian, Hezbollah or Russian territory, the IP has been set as a useful anchor point to help reorient ourselves to a safe position. Once at the IP we will check in with Empire, who will provide us with real time targeting information. The suspected T-55s are the targeting priority but any military targets will be fair game. As Link told us we should avoid attacking any buildings unless directed to do so by Empire.

We will service as many targets as we can for Empire until either winchester or bingo, at which point we will depart Lebanon through Lima Bravo at waypoint 6 and flow back to Mother as standard. Bingo fuel is 4800 lb from waypoint 5, which should give us around 40 minutes playtime. Our divert will once again be Ramat David in Israel with a minimum divert fuel of 2000 lb.

Empire has also coordinated with us to provide a map of objective Lion, so we should expect targets to reference this map if precise coordinates are not available. Waypoint 5 has been assigned to the centre of the town.

We will be carrying a heavy bomb load for this mission in anticipation of a target rich environment, with a loadout of 4 GBU-38s and 2 GBU-12s each. We are bringing GBU-12s in case we are required to attack any moving targets. Takeoff weight will be 48,850lb and I will be flying aircraft 103.

OBJECTIVE LION - 06/06/14



Objective Lion is an LFF stronghold, and as such it possesses numerous air defenses. Both S-60 and ZU-23 are known to be present in the target area and MANPADs should be assumed to be widely deployed as well. The cloud cover will also be a factor in planning our attacks as it could potentially force us into MANPAD and AAA threat envelopes so careful consideration should be given to how we engage targets and the tactics we employ.

The location of Objective Lion also brings us close to the Hezbollah territory of Baalbek (codeword Playpark), so we should take care to keep clear of this location southeast of waypoint 5. Hezbollah has been under resupply for weeks, fuelling concerns over both their intentions and current capabilities, better we keep clear at this moment then risk getting entangled with them.

We should also be aware of the presence of Russian ground forces somewhere to the north of Lion.

Once the mission was planned, Soprano and I spent the rest of the evening studying the details further, before finally retiring for the evening. As morning came we watched Flair and Slick depart for their mission over Lion at daybreak. A couple of hours later they returned, their jets stripped of all stores. We passed them briefly as we prepared to walk to the flight deck and Flair told us that they'd found a target rich environment and went to work on an LFF column that tried to leave the town and run into the mountains east of Lion. Flair also told us that there was a fair amount of AAA covering the town so we should be cautious about getting too close.

Soprano looked excited at this news, he's still eager to get in the fight, and I have to admit an opportunity to drive further nails into the LFF coffin sure sounds like a good way to spend a day. Launch time is 06:30 zulu.