



SPRING 1995

Airborne LOG

THE MAGAZINE OF NAVAL SEA CONTROL AND MARITIME PATROL

The Versatile Viking
— *Still Stretching Her Wings* —

Interview with
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Royal Thai Navy Orion Owner and Operator

BY DAVID READE

On 6 February 1995, the first P-3T was transferred to the Royal Thai Navy during a formal ceremony at the Naval Aviation Depot in Jacksonville, FL. The second P-3T roll out followed shortly after that, and both aircraft were flown back to Thailand on the 16th of February. The third of five, a UP-3T, will be ready by mid-summer.

The use of Maritime Patrol aircraft in Thailand is nothing new; the Royal Thai Navy took delivery of 10 Grumman S-2A Trackers in 1966 for use in maritime reconnaissance and ASW, and had other aircraft employed for SAR duties. What *is* new and a rather interesting observation, is that as the U.S. shifts more from a blue water to a brown water navy, Thailand is conversely moving toward a blue water navy, with the combination of the Orion and a number of frigates ordered in 1988.

The Royal Thai Navy recognizes, along with many other nations, that the P-3 will serve as a means to expand and enhance their maritime patrol capabilities. The plane's multi-mission capabilities offers a certain degree of insurance against possible future regional instabilities. With their history of like operations, the RTN will have no trouble adapting the P-3 into their mission requirements.

Thailand's program began in the fall of 1993, when, after several years of preparation, a Foreign Military Sales case was signed with the U.S. Navy. This initiated the delivery of two P-3As to the RTN in Thailand (for use as maintenance trainers) and the induction of the first P-3A into the NADEP Jacksonville mod shop. Two additional aircraft were delivered to Jacksonville that summer.

The mod program consists of special rework and depot level maintenance to bring the three Orions up to full mission capability. The first two, redesignated P-3T, are basically TAC-NAVMOD configurations that will receive improvements in navigation, communication and avionics. New radar monitor displays and provisions for an infrared sensor and Harpoon missile system will be included.

The third Orion is undergoing a utility conversion to be designated a UP-3T. This modification incorporates stripping the airframe of all sensor stations, ASW equipment and associated sonobuoy system gear. The aircraft's floor is to be strengthened with tracks installed to accommodate space for cargo and passenger seating. New interior lining and trim will also be fitted. The UP-3T configuration is



unique in that it retains a limited surveillance mission capability through the addition of a SENTAC station. The SENTAC, developed by NADEP, incorporated elements from both the Sensor Station No. 3 and the TACCO station. It will be located forward on the port side, originally, the radio operator's station. Thailand will eventually refurbish the aircraft for VIP transport service. All three aircraft will have commercial color weather radar.

The Thai P-3s will operate under their Navy's Air Wing One located at RTAFB, Utapao. The Wing is composed of four maritime patrol squadrons flying the Dornier 228, Fokker F-27 and the Grumman S-2.

Mission tasking will include coastal patrol and surface surveillance with capabilities for antisurface warfare and antisubmarine warfare.

Training of the flight crews and maintenance personnel began last September with 50 students at the Naval Aviation Maintenance Training Group Detachment and 15 students at Patrol Squadron 30, both at NAS Jacksonville.

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Thailand's P-3s

| BUNO | TYPE | LOCATION |
|--------|-------|-----------------------------|
| 152142 | P-3T | 101 Squadron |
| 152153 | P-3T | 101 Squadron |
| 152163 | P-3A | Wing One |
| 152177 | P-3A | Wing One |
| 152184 | UP-3T | NADEP JAX (101 Squadron) |

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