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JUNE 2002 \$3.50
NAVY LEAGUE OF THE UNITED STATES
"Citizens in Support of the Sea Services"
www.navyleague.org

Special Report

Navy P-3 Operations in the War on Terrorism

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Since the terrorist attacks of 11 September, the United States has been at war with organized terrorist organizations worldwide. Most of the military operations in that war have focused on the landlocked country of Afghanistan. Since the beginning of combat operations against the Taliban and al Qaeda forces in Afghanistan, however, the Navy's maritime patrol aircraft, especially the P-3 Orions, have been heavily involved in the war effort.

Patrol Squadron Nine (VP-9) was one of the Navy's first aircraft squadrons to respond after the 11 September 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. VP-9 had been on a relatively uneventful Persian Gulf deployment when word of the attacks reached the squadron, which had been operating 10 P-3C aircraft from three different sites—Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean, Bahrain, and Masirah in Oman—as part of the unit's normal support of U.N. sanctions against Iraq.

One mission on that deployment was the conduct of Maritime Interception Operations to stem the flow of illegal Iraqi oil exports. These operations usually included the detection and investi-

gation of merchant ships in and around the Persian Gulf. In this mission, Navy P-3s transmit real-time imagery of suspect vessels to destroyer squadron commanders, who assign naval special warfare units to intercept and board the vessels.

After 9/11, VP-9's P-3s began littoral surveillance missions to provide operational commanders a clearer picture of enemy positions in Afghanistan. VP-9's support was key to the success of the first strikes launched by the United States and its allies on 7 October. Navy P-3s also participated in the initial night of attacks, firing approximately ten missiles—reportedly AGM-84H Standoff Land-Attack Missiles—Extended Range (SLAM-ERs)—against Taliban and al Qaeda targets. It later was reported that a number of buildings and an SA-13 missile control center were hit by the missiles. In 1999, Navy P-3s fired AGM-84E SLAM missiles against Serbian targets in Bosnia.

The P-3s also flew post-strike, battle damage assessment missions to provide operational commanders the options they needed in planning re-strikes or new strikes against the Taliban and al Qaeda positions.

Once air supremacy over Afghanistan was established, about 17 October, by the U.S.-led coalition air forces, the VP-9 Orions—augmented by P-3s from VP-46—began overland surveillance missions to give ground commanders a

day/night view of the U.S. Special Forces operations, on the ground in Afghanistan, to dislodge the Taliban and loyalist al Qaeda fighters. VP-4 later replaced VP-9 in theater.

In the battle for Tora Bora, the Navy's P-3 Orions provided reconnaissance of the cave complexes where the Taliban and al Qaeda fighters were hiding, transmitting real-time imagery to the operational commanders coordinating the U.S. Air Force B-52 and jet fighter strikes on and into the caves along the rugged mountainsides. The P-3s also flew target-recognition missions in other regions of Afghanistan in an effort to locate senior al Qaeda members seeking to escape over the border into Pakistan.

The P-3s also transmitted "force protection" real-time imagery to ground task force commanders, when U.S. Marines arrived in country and set up forward operating bases. The ability to provide real-time overhead imagery to Marine ground commanders allowed them to see well out beyond their positions—giving them an early warning against Taliban attacks on the Marine ground units.

These and other missions (many of them classified) established the P-3 as a key surveillance asset to coalition and U.S. ground commanders in Afghanistan as well as to battle group commanders at sea. The P-3s also have been engaged in antiterrorist reconnaissance operations in the Philippines. With its capabilities in such high demand, the P-3s seem guaranteed to play a major role in the war on terrorism, whenever and wherever they are needed. ■



An AIP (Antisurface Improvement Program) version of the P-3C, assigned to Patrol Squadron Four (VP-4), rests on the tarmac of Kandahar Airport in Afghanistan.