

P-3 Operations in the War on Terrorism

by David Reade

Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, America has been at war with organized terrorist organizations worldwide. The majority of the military efforts have been centered on the Central-Asian country of Afghanistan and a terrorist organization called Al Qaida, supported by an Islamic fundamentalist sect called the Taliban - who all pledge allegiance to a man named Osama bin Laden.

Since the very beginning of the combat operations against the Taliban and Al Qaida forces in Afghanistan, known as Operation Enduring Freedom, Maritime Patrol Aircraft have been involved, especially the US Navy's P-3 Orion.

US Navy Patrol Squadron Nine (VP-9) was one of the first Maritime Patrol Squadrons to respond after the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington DC. VP-9 had been on a peaceful Persian Gulf Deployment when word of the attacks reached them. The squadron 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 their normal deployment to support ongoing United Nations-imposed sanctions against Iraq.

Squadron P-3s, as part of their normal deployment, had been conducting Maritime Interception Operations to stem the flow of illegal Iraqi oil exports. These missions usually included the detection and investigation of merchant-ship traffic in and around the Persian Gulf. In this kind of mission, Navy P-3s transmit real-time imagery of suspected vessels to Destroyer Squadron Commanders who, in turn, send Naval Special Warfare units to intercept the vessels. Once the vessels are intercepted, boarding parties are sent to search the ships for contraband goods. One mission was further complicated when a US Navy boarding party, searching a UAE-flagged oil tanker, was lost at sea when the ship suddenly sank. A P-3 from VP-9 was called in to search for the five-man boarding party. Only three members of the Navy interdiction team and several crewmen of the ship were located and rescued.

After 9/11, Patrol Squadron Nine's P-3s, began littoral Maritime Surveillance Missions to provide operational commanders with a clearer picture of the enemy positions. This support was followed by the quick and decisive response issued by the United States and its allies on October 7, 2001. Navy P-3s participated in the initial night of attacks on Afghanistan. The P-3s

fired approximately ten extended-range AGM-84H stand-off, land-attack missiles (SLAM-ER), striking Taliban and Al Qaida targets within Afghanistan. It has been reported that a number of buildings and an SA-13 missile control center were hit in the P-3 strike. Navy P-3s first fired AGM-84E SLAM missiles in Bosnia, in 2000, against Serbian targets.

The P-3s were further tasked with



providing post-strike, real-time battle-damage assessment to operational commanders in order to plan re-strikes or new strikes on Taliban and Al Qaida positions.

Once air supremacy over Afghanistan was established on or about October 17, 2001, by the US-led coalition air forces, VP-9 Orions and augmenting P-3s from VP-46, began over-land Surveillance Missions. The Navy P-3s provided ground commanders with a day/night view of Special Forces operations, on the ground in Afghanistan, to dislodge the Taliban and loyalist Al Qaida fighters.

In the battle for Tora Bora, the mountainous region in the Milawa Valley, US P-3 Orions provided reconnaissance of the cave complexes where the Taliban and Al Qaida fighters were hiding. The Navy P-3s transmitted real-time imagery to operational commanders coordinating US Air Force B-52 and Jet Fighter strikes into the caves along the rugged mountainsides. The P-3 aircraft went on to provide additional Taliban and Al Qaida Target Recognition (identification) in other regions of the country in an effort to locate senior Al Qaida members escaping over the border with Pakistan.

The Navy P-3s further provided Force Protection real-time imagery to ground task force commanders when US Marines arrived in-country and set up forward operating bases at Camp Rhino and at the airport in the southern region of Kandahar. This mission involved providing real-time

overhead imagery to ground commanders allowing them to see well beyond their positions - giving them early warning of Taliban attacks on Marine ground troops.

Simultaneously, Navy P-3s continued to support the Maritime Interdiction operations in the Persian Gulf. These missions were enhanced to include Armed Carrier Group Protection and Maritime Surveillance for the whole battle group task force. This encompassed providing protection from surface and sub-surface attacks. The P-3s were armed with Maverick missiles. This has been an added mission to US Navy P-3s in recent years as the maritime missions of the carrier-borne S-3B Viking have been reduced.

As weeks of the war went on, fleet P-3s, support by Navy EP-3Es, began surveillance missions out of Oman, searching for high-profile Al Qaida leaders and Osama bin Laden who might attempt to escape from Afghanistan by sea. The P-3s were employed to survey large areas of ocean for unusual shipping traffic, thus blocking the escape routes for terrorist leaders after a worldwide Navy Bulletin was issued on December 1, 2001 warned of this possibility. As it turned out, a worldwide ocean and port search ensued for a fleet of 23 merchant vessels believed to have been owned by Osama bin Laden.

Air Surveillance in Afghanistan subsequently became a multi-layered operation with the skies just teeming with sophisticated surveillance aircraft. US Navy fleet and Special Projects P-3 Orions operated at stand-off altitudes just out of weapons ranges. Special Projects P-3s had been involved in operations in Afghanistan from the first, supporting air strikes by locating and identifying targets. US Navy EP-3Es participated in the war in Afghanistan as well, operating at higher altitudes, creating an electronic view of the battlefield. The EP-3Es were involved in monitoring particular frequencies in coordination with carrier-based EA-6B EW jamming aircraft.

British Nimrods have also been participated in Afghani operations, supporting maritime surveillance missions out of Diego Garcia and conducting EW signals intelligence-gathering to locate Taliban hideouts. The EW configured Nimrods operated over Afghanistan monitoring Taliban radio communications. They had Arabic and Pashlu speaking translators on board to support interception of enemy radio communications, the analysis of sig-

nals and passing of vital information on to coalition ground commanders.

Australia was another coalition country that contributed Maritime Patrol Aircraft to the war on terrorism. On October 17, 2000, the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) deployed two P-3C Orions and a detachment of seventy-five aircraft-support personnel to Bahrain - as a component of the 1550 personnel in the Australian Defense Force contingent to Afghanistan. The RAAF P-3s were assigned maritime reconnaissance missions in support of task force maritime interdiction operations.

Canada also recently contributed two CP-140 Aurora aircraft and three crews to the US-led Coalition. Based in the United Arab Emirates, the Canadian Auroras provide maritime surveillance in the Arabian Sea for US Carrier Battle Groups. The Auroras are also providing surface and sub-surface protection to the battle groups, freeing up US Navy P-3 aircraft for increased surveillance missions over Afghanistan.

The Netherlands has proposed committing four of its Navy P-3 Orions to support the maritime surveillance mission in the Persian Gulf. Their proposed missions will encompass monitoring and intercepting maritime shipping traffic. The Dutch P-3s, equipped with advanced electro-optics and infrared sensors, may even provide reconnaissance over southern Afghanistan to track refugees crossing the boarder with Pakistan, and in support of humanitarian relief efforts. Since early January, US Navy EP-3Es, British Nimrod R1s and French Atlantique Maritime Surveillance Aircraft have been flying missions over Somalia, looking for known Al Qaida terrorists groups and monitoring suspected terrorist training camps. Somalia has long been suspected of harboring Al Qaida terrorists, and many of its ruling war lords possess strong ties to Osama bin Laden. Somali rebel units are on the US List of Terrorist Groups that the Bush Administration has said it will eradicate in this war on terrorism.

The US Government has already stationed warships off the Somali coast to interdict suspicious vessels. It is currently looking to base surveillance aircraft and naval vessels in the Somali port of Berbera, in the north of Somalia, near the Red Sea. The surveillance aircraft would support anti-terrorist operations in the region, prompting many to speculate that Somalia and Yemen will be the next to feel the brunt of US resolve.

In early December 2001, VP-9 returned to its home base in Hawaii. All totaled, over 7500 surveillance and maritime-interdiction patrols were flown by the

squadron by the end of its assignment - doubling the mission hours flown in a normal deployment. The Orions supported the interdiction of over forty vessels believed to be smuggling illicit oil contraband from Iraq, and protected the coalition battle groups from attack. This deployment sets a record for the most missions flown by a maritime patrol unit since the Vietnam War. P-3 aircraft from VP-4 have now deployed to the region to replace VP-9 and assume the challenge of the war on terrorism.

The Navy P-3 has established itself as a key surveillance asset to coalition and US ground commanders in Afghanistan as well as to battle group commanders at sea. With its capabilities in high demand, the P-3 is guaranteed to be involved in the war on terrorism, no matter where it might occur.

P-3 Surveillance Capabilities

As operations continue in the war on terrorism in Afghanistan, US Navy P-3 Orions are once again demonstrating their capabilities to quickly adapt to non-standard missions, to become a key asset.

The recent implementation of the Avionics Improvement Program (AIP) upgrade to the US Navy's fleet of P-3s has paid off. The AIP P-3s real-time surveillance sensors and communications interoperability have been in high demand by operational commanders in this war on terrorism. The AIP-equipped Orions have been providing real-time surveillance-and reconnaissance imagery for targeting strikes, as well as force protection of combat troops on the ground.

The AIP upgrade encompasses the installation of a new multi-mode imaging radar with both ISAR and SAR radar modes, which are ideal for targeting and target identification. Additionally, the upgrade program includes advanced infrared and electro-optical surveillance sensors. These are advanced-generation imaging sensors that provide long-range, stand-off surveillance capabilities. AIP P-3 also possess an upgraded ESM system, improved C4I communications capabilities (via SATCOM) and the OTCIXS combat tactical link networks.

The AIP program also upgrades the P-3 weapons capabilities for the targeting and launching of Maverick and SLAM-ER missiles. The Maverick gives the P-3 a new low-cost anti-ship missile in support of Armed Carrier Group Protection missions. The SLAM-ER, is a land-attack variant of the P-3's inherent Harpoon missile system and, as the name suggests, provides for a stand-off, land-attack capability that has been proven in Bosnia and now in Afghanistan.

Still more AIP improvements provide for the increased survivability of the aircraft: a missile warning system, missile counter-measures (chaff/flare) dispensers, and explosive suppressant foam in the fuel tanks. Published accounts report efforts by the Taliban and Al Qaida forces to shoot down Navy P-3s with anti-aircraft artillery (AAA) fire and some SAM (surface-to-air-missiles). Despite their low-altitude operation envelope, no P-3 has been damaged in Afghan operations.

There are plans to further upgrade the AIP P-3 in the near future. Improvements proposed include the addition of a moving-



target indicator (MTI), SAR radar system, Link 16, enhanced ESM with selective emitter indicator(SEI), and a dynamic video downlink to better transmit real-time imagery to operational commanders.

The Orion's sensor management, integration and dissemination of organic and inorganic data are positive aspects, and should be the basis for any future MMA aircraft.

About the Author

David Reade is the Manager, P-3 Business Development, International Marketing for IMP Aerospace located in Halifax, Nova Scotia Canada. He is also a freelance Journalist who has written numerous informative articles on the P-3 Orion, its systems, missions and capabilities for over ten years as a staff writer associate with Lockheed Martin's ASW Log and Airborne magazines. He has also been a regular contributor to VP International's Maritime Patrol Aviation magazine since 1989. David has flown P-3s all over the world and is considered a leading authority on the aircraft. It is this experience and knowledge that led David to write the Book "The Age of Orion" detailing the development history, roles, missions, capabilities and systems of the P-3 Orion.