

P-3 World Wide Anti-Terrorist Operations

by Mr. David Reade



Crew members assigned to the "Screaming Eagles" of Patrol Squadron One (VP-1) approach a P-3C Orion patrol aircraft to conduct a reconnaissance mission over the Arabian Gulf. (USN PHOTO)

In the War On Terrorism, recent operations in Afghanistan have underscored the importance of particular assets, capabilities and platforms. As the Pentagon evaluates the lessons learned during the first phases of Operation Enduring Freedom, looking at what went wrong, they will also look at those things that went right. One of those things that went right encompasses the creative use of systems and platforms. The Navy P-3 Orion maritime patrol aircraft, is one of those platforms that went right and has played a pivotal role in the Afghan War on Terrorism and now elsewhere in the world.

Afghanistan is not the only place that US Navy P-3s are engaged in the fight on terrorism. Navy P-3s have also been performing anti-terrorist reconnaissance operations in the Philippines. Even before 9/11, the Philippine Government had been asking for help from the United States to provide military support to wipe out Islamic extremists known as the Abu Sayyaf bandits. It has been determined that this Islamic fundamentalist group has potential links to Al Qaida terror networks.

Just after 9/11, the Pentagon dispatched over 660 US Military personnel to the Philippines as part of a counter-terrorism military exercise: Balikatan. The US Forces supported the Philippine troops in training and advisory roles. They provided new equipment, including Blackhawk helicopters, a landing ship, C-17 transport, UAV and P-3 Surveillance aircraft. Night-vision gear and modern communications and surveillance equipment were also provided.

This action by the United States has also been rumored to be a result of recent

intelligence information that Osama bin Laden had sought to move his headquarters from Afghanistan to Indonesia just prior to the 9/11 attacks. Indonesia has a very large Islamic (Muslim) population and lacks uniform internal security. Since 9/11 the US has provided hundreds of millions of dollars to the Philippines for anti-terrorist programs. The money has been used to train police, create counter-terrorism units and train the Indonesian Army in anti-terrorist tactics. The Abu Sayyaf terrorist rebels have congregated on the southern island of Basilan in Balikatan province. The group is suspected of murder, assassination and the kidnapping of over 100 foreign hostages for ransom (2001 /02) including American Christian Missionaries and a Filipino Nurse.

By April of 2002, the US had sent 2700 additional troops to the Philippines to join the ongoing exercise and support the counter-terrorist operations. The Navy P-3s, operating from Subic Bay, jointly with the Republic of the Philippines Air Force, were again the key surveillance platforms in the region, conducting daily six hour missions. Flights at night utilized infrared sensors. Many of the ensuing clashes between US supported Philippine forces and the Abu Sayyaf rebels were preceded by US surveillance flights directing ground units and strike aircraft. UAV's were also employed in the Philippines and were used to augment the other P-3 surveillance aircraft already in the region. A number of high-profile accidental crashes of UAVs, in the waters around the islands, established the Navy P-3 as the principle surveillance platform in the region.

With help from the US Surveillance planes, the Philippine Army and Special Operations troops were able to track the terrorists through the thick, jungle-covered, rebel-dominated island and locate their hideouts. This prompted a number of engagements leading to heavy casualties among the terrorist group. Subsequently, even their leader, Abu Sayyaf, was killed along with two hostages: Martin Burnham and a Filipino Nurse. In fact, the search for Abu Sayyaf's body was called off by the Philippine President Arroyo after viewing

video taped surveillance footage of the battle. The footage apparently showed the rebel leader falling into the sea, becoming lost and was presumed dead.

In July of 2002, the US and Philippine Governments declared their extended Joint anti-terrorist operations a success despite failure to wipe out all the Abu Sayyaf Guerrillas in the South. However, with the senior leadership eliminated, and hope of the island returning to some form of stability, the two governments declared the end of the six month operation, but continued with plans for new exercises scheduled for the fall of 2002.

In November 2002, a mutual logistics support agreement was signed between the Republic of the Philippines and the United States, providing for permanent equipment-basing rights, as well as the sharing of communication technology to support new large-scale bilateral exercises that began in early 2003. Currently there are over 300 US Troops in the Philippines providing security to a joint Filipino - US counter-terrorism/humanitarian operation in the Zamboanga and Basilian areas once held by the Abu Sayyaf. With the rebels in retreat, the United States recently declared the communist party of the Philippines and its New Peoples Army to be a foreign terrorist organization. Recent attacks by this group has cause renewed interest in searching out the new threat. As recently as February 2003, renewed attacks by Islamic fighters and clashes with Government troops in Mindanao, Southern Philippines, prompted Philippine President Arroyo to approve another joint Anti-Terrorist Exercise with US Forces. If needed, US Navy P-3s will be at the forefront of those operations.

Elsewhere in the World

The US Navy's P-3 Orions continue to perform their Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) missions in support of NATO peacekeeping in the Persian Gulf and in the former Republic of Yugoslavia. Currently Navy P-3s are participating in enforcement of United Nation Sanctions against Iraq. Here, the P-3 are conducting Maritime Intercept Operations (MIO) to stem the flow of illegal Iraqi Oil exports.

Iraq

In the Red Sea, US Navy and International Coalition P-3s have again begun supporting the interception and inspections of commercial shipping. These operations ended over eight years ago, and were originally enacted as a result of the 1990-91 Gulf War with Iraq. With new suspicions that Iraq is violating UN imposed sanctions, the new interdiction operations were re-activated. Recent estimates suggest more than 480,000 barrels of Iraqi petroleum are smuggled out of Iraq each month. It's believed that this illicit revenue is funding Iraq's proposed development of weapons of mass destruction. In this regard, Navy P-3s are also conducting overland surveillance missions in US-designated No-Fly zones in Iraq.

Coalition P-3 operators continue to support the US and Allied multi-national Maritime Intercept Operations (MIO) in the Persian Gulf and around the Arabian Peninsula. Australian, New Zealand and Canadian P-3s have been locating and targeting Iraqi vessels to "...the point of Piracy..." claim Iraqi government officials. In December, US Navy and Allied MPA forces detected a North Korean freighter, suspected of secretly carrying a dozen Scud missiles, sailing to the Middle East. The freighter had been tracked for several weeks by US spy satellites and P-3 surveillance aircraft into the gulf region. Finally, a Spanish warship stopped the freighter approximately 600 miles south of Yemen. Coalition forces boarded the vessel and inspected its shipment of concrete, discovering 12 Scud missiles hidden underneath. In January 2003, MIO statistics for 2002 revealed that over 4995 ships had been detected, intercepted and questioned by US Navy P-3s. Of that number, over 3000 ships were boarded, 887 found to be carrying illicit cargoes, and were diverted to holding areas for further disposition. This is a sharp increase over the same operational statistics for 2001.

Allied MIO Operations

The UN-sanctioned interdiction missions, coupled with the MIO operations associated with the anti-terrorism war in Afghanistan, have combined to create the largest massing of Maritime Surveillance aircraft since World War II. Seven nations have been conducting maritime surveillance operations in the Persian Gulf, and around

the Arabian Peninsula, with additional coverage in the areas of the Northern Arabian Sea, Gulf of Aden and the area around the Horn of Africa.

Three German Atlantic BR1150 aircraft, from Naval Air Wing 3 "Graf Zeppelin" are stationed in Kenya, and have been the cornerstone of operations covering the approaches to the Horn of Africa. The German aircraft have intercepted and identified over 1500 vessels in the last year, while still maintaining ISR missions over Somalia and Yemen hunting for Al Qaida terrorists.

Operating out of Djibouti, French Atlantique 2s and Spanish P-3Bs have been providing surveillance of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. Since November 2001, the French Atlantiques have accumulated over 1600 hours conducting 240 interceptions, thus performing the bulk of the Red Sea MIO operations.

Spanish Air Force P-3Bs, having only been in the theatre since March 2002, have logged over 1200 hours and tracked 30 critical contacts of interest. A Spanish P3 was also the first SAR aircraft on scene following the bombing of the merchant vessel Linburg and was key to providing a communications relay in coordinating the rescue.

Canadian CP-140 Auroras, in addition to New Zealand P-3Ks, Dutch P-3Cs and British Mk. 2 Nimrods, have been maintaining an around-the-clock control of the Persian Gulf, Arabian Sea and Gulf of Oman. Canada has had two CP-140 Auroras in the Persian Gulf since shortly after the attacks of 9/11. They have been sweeping

the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea for unidentified merchant traffic, while searching for Taliban and Al Qaida fighters trying to escape Afghanistan by sea. One Aurora MIO mission lead to the interdiction of speedboats, and the capture of four Al Qaida combatants. In April of 2002, Canadian Auroras completed their 100th mission as part of Operation Apollo, the operational name for their part of the international response to the War on Terrorism. The Canadian Auroras remain on Op. Apollo duty today, having begun their third rotation in January 2003. They should remain there for the foreseeable future. With only two Auroras in theatre, the Canadian Forces



Dutch P-3 Orion in new colour scheme.
(Marco Borst)

crews have maintained a 98% rate of assigned missions completed.

The Royal Netherlands Navy contribution to the War on Terrorism has been a contingent of three P-3C Orion aircraft that have been participating in the International MIO missions in the Persian Gulf. In Dec 2002, The Dutch Government was asked by the United States to provide one of those P-3s for Overland Surveillance in



The North Korean cargo vessel, So San, shown just prior to being stopped and boarded during maritime interception operations (MIO), conducted by two Spanish Navy ships, the Santa Maria-class Frigate Navarra (F-85) accompanied by the replenishment ship Patino (A-14). (Spanish Defense Ministry)

Afghanistan. Operating out of the United Arab Emirates, the Dutch P-3s are the only ones in the region that are similarly equipped to US Navy Orions with Electro-optical Systems and the ability to downlink the imagery direct to ground commanders. This support effort frees up US Navy P-3s to fan out across Afghanistan in support of US Special Forces on the hunt for Al Qaida fighters and bin Laden himself.

Australia has been another contributor to the International MPA Coalition in the Persian Gulf, providing two P-3 aircraft shortly after the attacks of 9/11 despite recent tragedies of its own. In December 2002, two terrorist bombs exploded in Bali, Indonesia. The blast killed 180 people, mostly Australian travelers. In the wake of the bombings, a contingent of Royal Australian Air Force aircraft rushed to Indonesia. Three RAAF C-130 Hercules transported Australian Medical Teams to Bali and flew most of the more seriously wounded victims back to Darwin for critical medical treatment. An Australian P-3 was also dispatched to Bali, with a Consular Official and Federal Police officers, to help the Indonesian Government investigate the terror bombings. The P-3 then flew a number of less-critical patients back to Darwin. In the aftermath of the Bali bombing, the Australian Government has renewed its commitment to the United States and the war on terrorism by offering additional forces in the event of a potential new Gulf War with Iraq. Among the ships and troops offered are two RAAF P-3 Orion surveillance aircraft.

Not to leave out the contribution being made by British MR2 Nimrods, the RAF has been supporting OEF since November of 2001. Ranging from the Arabian Gulf to the North Arabian Sea, the Nimrods have been conducting MIO missions as well as overland surveillance flights in pursuit of fleeing Al Qaida Terrorists.

The Balkans

In Operation Joint Guardian over

Kosovo and Operation Deliberate Force in Bosnia, US Navy P3s are continuing to conduct intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) missions, at the request of U.S. European and NATO commanders. This in an effort to restore peace, maintain a secure environment for the safety of the populace in Kosovo, and to keep a watchful eye on the Serbians in Bosnia in support of NATO air-verification agreements there. Flying these missions since 1999, the Navy P-3s operate out of their Mediterranean – based facility at the U.S. Naval Air Station Sigonella. The P-3s fly daily surveillance missions over Bosnia and Kosovo, providing a long-range, airborne eye-in-the-sky capability for the verification commanders. The P-3s provide an all-weather, day-or-night surveillance capability. Utilizing Synthetic Aperture Radar and the Electro-Optical (Camera) System, coupled with a real-time down-link system and advanced communications suite, the Navy P-3s can down-link to ground commanders real-time video and radar images of the situation on the ground in Kosovo.

Narco-Terrorists

While the war on terrorism is waged in Afghanistan and the Philippines, US Navy P-3 continue to fight the war on drugs. Working closely with the US Coast Guard, US Customs Service and Navy Warships, P-3 Crews patrol more than 2.5 million square miles of open ocean - from the Eastern Pacific to the Caribbean Sea and the Gulf of Mexico - in search of elusive “go-fast boats” and support ships used by drug cartels or anti-government rebels which have now been reclassified as Narco Terrorists. Maritime Patrol Aircraft track vessels and aircraft suspected of smuggling contraband narcotics into the United States and other countries across the globe. Like MIO operations in the Persian Gulf, the P-3 aircraft direct Coast Guard or naval war ships to intercept the vessels and thus interdict the flow of illegal drugs. The US Navy P-3 units are also often tasked with training other

nations on counter-narcotics interdiction and MIO operations. The Navy P-3 Units usually use their participation in bi-lateral exercises, throughout Latin America and Europe, as part of their training environment.

Future ops

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. Some experts suggest that the US will need to adopt even more aggressive, new covert operations against terrorism. These new operations include large-scale expansion of maritime interdiction. The P-3 will focus prominently in these new operations with current US Navy and Coalition maritime ISR / MIO mission profiles as the model.

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.

NOTE **VPI Web Site has moved to www.vpinternational.ca**