

Patrol Squadrons in the Korean War

By LCdr. Rick Burgess, USN (Ret.)

Because most of the combat action of the Korean War took place over the Korean peninsula, the bulk of the Navy's aerial contribution to the war took the form of carrier-based tactical aircraft. For Navy patrol squadrons (VP), the war was fought primarily on the peripheries of the main front, mostly in sea-control and sea-denial missions, and other roles such as mine hunting.

The Korean War was one hot spot of many along the Asian landmass attracting the attention of VP squadrons in the early 1950s. The broader Cold War was in full chill. The Soviet Union had tested its first nuclear weapons in 1949, and its large submarine fleet presented a credible threat to the Navy's carrier and amphibious task forces. Also in 1949, the Communist Chinese People's Liberation Army forces had pushed the Chinese Nationalist forces off the Asian mainland across the Formosa Strait onto Formosa (now Taiwan). French colonial forces in Indochina were embattled by an increasingly strong Viet Minh force led by Ho Chi Minh. From the Bering Strait to Singapore, Navy patrol planes had much to monitor.

Although the U.S. Seventh Fleet's carrier task forces were committed to the Korean area of operations, the fleet still was charged with the protection of Formosa. The fleet was able to maintain routine surveillance of the Formosa Strait with patrol aircraft, which made it impossible for the Communist Chinese to launch a surprise invasion of the island.

In the Korean area of operations, VP squadrons participated in the blockade of North Korea, keeping merchant shipping and fishing fleets under surveillance and deterring hostile submarine activity. In addition, patrol aircraft hunted and destroyed mines, dropped flares for air strikes, and conducted weather reconnaissance and search-and-rescue operations.

At the beginning of the Korean War, Pacific Fleet VP squadrons were equipped with three heavily armed



aircraft types. Martin PBM-5/5S/5S2 *Mariners* were the only flying boats in active patrol squadrons (the P5M *Marlin* had not yet entered service.) Seaplanes were increasingly being displaced by land-based patrol bombers, such as the four-engine Consolidated *Privateer* P4Y-2/2S/2B, a holdover from WW II; and versions of the new twin-engine Lockheed *Neptune* (P2V-2/3/3W/4/5), successor to the post-WWII PV-2 *Harpoon* patrol bomber.

The Pacific Fleet was equipped with only nine VP squadrons in June 1950, having disestablished four squadrons in the first half of the year. VP squadrons were based at NAS Whidbey Island, Wash.; NAS San Diego, Calif.; and NAS Barbers Point, Hawaii. They deployed to NAF Yokosuka, Japan; NAS Sangley Point, R.P.; NAS Kodiak, Alaska; and NAS Agana, Guam. By the end of 1950, seven reserve VP squadrons were activated, five of which were assigned to the Pacific Fleet. By the end of 1951, two more active duty VP squadrons were established in the Pacific Fleet, and two more reserve squadrons were activated to augment them. NAS Alameda, Calif., and NAS Seattle, Wash., accommodated some of the new squadrons. Only one Atlantic Fleet patrol squadron, VP-7 at NAS Quonset Point, R.I., was deployed to the war zone, arriving less than one month before the truce on 30 June 1953.

When the war broke out in 1950, Fleet Air Wing

(FAW) 1 at Guam controlled squadrons deployed to the western Pacific. In July 1950 FAW-1 moved to Naha, Okinawa, to control patrols over the Formosa Strait using one land-based and one flying boat squadron. FAW-6 was established at Atsugi, Japan, to coordinate patrols in the Yellow Sea and Sea of Japan. Eventually the typical strength of FAW-6 included three land-plane squadrons and two flying boat squadrons, as well as two squadrons of Royal Air Force *Sunderland* flying boats. These command structures remained in place throughout the war, except during a short period when they were relieved by FAW-2 and FAW-14, respectively.

Only eight patrol planes—PBMs assigned to VP-46 and the squadron it was relieving, VP-47—patrolled the Far East when the North Korean invasion began, while VP-28's PB4Ys were deployed to Guam. Soon, VP-47 was regrouped and retained on deployment, VP-6's P2V-3s arrived at Johnson Air Base near Tokyo, Japan, and VP-42's PBMs staged at Iwakuni, Japan. VP-28 staged to Naha and began daily patrols of the Formosa Strait and the coast of China. Other squadrons rotated in turn, and also deployed to far-flung bases and anchorages such as Hong Kong; the Pescadores, Buckner Bay and Kadena in Okinawa; Tachikawa and Itami in Japan; and Kodiak and Shemya in the Aleutians.

Opposite, a VP-28 PB4Y-2 is superimposed over the squadron's first insignia, approved in 1948. The pirate, or *Privateer*, symbolized the type of squadron aircraft. The cartoon character holds a bomb in each hand, intent on sinking enemy ships. Below, a VP-1 P2V-5 *Neptune* leaves Atsugi, Japan, on a patrol over the Sea of Japan on 12 September 1952.

As the North Korean invasion pushed south, VP-6's *Neptunes* were used on three occasions to provide naval gunfire spotting for United Nations warships on the western coast of South Korea. The squadron's P2V-3s, armed with 20mm cannon, bombs and rockets, also launched many attacks themselves against North Korean targets along the northeast shore.

On 29 July 1950, two crews destroyed a railroad train with their rockets and guns. On 13 August, crews sank three boats and two barges engaged in minelaying near Chinnampo, and damaged two surface craft near Wonsan. One VP-6 *Neptune* was damaged in the attack. An attack on a patrol boat near Chinnampo on 16 August was fatal to another VP-6 aircraft, which ditched after taking fire. The crew was rescued by the Royal Navy cruiser HMS *Kenya*. Patrol planes were prohibited thereafter from undertaking attack missions

over Korea. VP-6 became the only patrol squadron awarded the Navy Unit Citation during the Korean War.

Patrol planes—PBMs, P2Vs and *Sunderlands*—were used extensively in mine hunting, particularly in the harbors of Inchon and Wonsan. This tedious activity required the PBMs to fly low and slow, close enough to detonate a moored mine with machine gunfire, but high enough to avoid the mine's explosion. P2Vs dropped depth charges





Opposite, a PBM *Mariner* is hoisted aboard *Curtiss* (AV 4) for servicing during the Korean War, 8 November 1950.

and illuminate the targets for the attack aircraft.

Although United Nations forces were successful in maintaining air superiority over most of the Korean peninsula, lumbering patrol aircraft had a few encounters with enemy aircraft. A VP-42 *Mariner* was damaged on 11 May 1952 by a MiG-15 fighter over the Yellow Sea, and on 31 July 1952 a VP-731 PBM was seriously damaged by gunfire from a MiG-15, which killed two crewmen and injured two others.

Flights off China and the Soviet Union, far from protective cover, were more dangerous. VP-28 P4Ys were attacked over the Formosa Strait on 26 July by an F-51 *Mustang* in North Korean markings, and on 20 September and 22 November 1950 by MiG-15s, all without result. A VP-42 PBM was lost to unknown causes in the southern Formosa Strait on 5 November. On 6 November 1951 a VP-6 P2V-3W was shot down, with no survivors, by Soviet fighters near Vladivostok. On 18 January 1953 Chinese antiaircraft batteries shot down a

to wipe out magnetic mines.

In 1951 VP squadrons were pressed into another role, this time over land, dropping illumination flares in support of air strikes. Known as Firefly missions, they helped deny the night to enemy supply movements. Admiral Arthur W. Radford suggested the use of P4Y-2 *Privateers* as flare ships to replace the more vulnerable R4D *Skytrains* in illuminating targets for Marine Corps F4U-5N *Corsair* and F7F-3N *Tigercat* night hecklers. One P4Y from VP-772 was modified for the mission and proved highly successful, and three more P4Ys from VP-772 and VP-28 were assigned as “Lamp Lighters” (later operated by successive squadrons). During a typical mission, the P4Y would rendezvous with four attack aircraft, search for truck convoys

U.S. Navy Patrol Squadrons in the Korean War

Squadron	Aircraft	Tail Code	Home Port
VP-1	P2V-3/3W/5	CD	Whidbey Island
VP-2	P2V-2/3W/4	SB	Whidbey Island
VP-4	P2V-4	SC	Barbers Point
VP-6	P2V-3/3W	BE	Barbers Point
VP-7	P2V-5	HE	Quonset Point
VP-9	P4Y-2	CB	Whidbey Island
VP-17 (VP-772)	P4Y-2/2S	BH	Seattle
VP-19 (VP-871)	P4Y-2	CH	Alameda
VP-22	P2V-3/4/5	CE	Barbers Point
VP-28	P4Y-2S	CF	Barbers Point
VP-29 (VP-812)	P2V-5	BF	Whidbey Island
VP-40	PBM-5/5S	CA	San Diego
VP-42	PBM-5/5S/5S2	SA	San Diego
VP-46	PBM-5/5S/5S2	BD	San Diego
VP-47	PBM-5	BA	Alameda
VP-48 (VP-731)	PBM-5	SF	San Diego
VP-50 (VP-892)	PBM-5/5S	SE	Alameda
VP-57 (VP-931)	P2V-2/3W/5	BI	Whidbey Island

Note: Parentheses indicate former reserve designations.

CALLED UP FOR KOREA

By Hal Andrews

NANews Technical Advisor Hal Andrews interrupted his education to join the Navy in 1944, but WW II was over before he could apply his aviation radio technician skills. He was discharged from service, attended Cornell University in his hometown of Ithaca, N.Y., and graduated with a bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering. Later, he was called to duty during the Korean War. Afterwards, he returned to Cornell and completed graduate school in aeronautical engineering. With 30 years of civilian service to the Navy before retiring in 1986, he has spent his life supporting Naval Aviation. Here, he recalls his experience working with patrol aircraft in the Korean War era.

After going to work for Boeing Aircraft Company in Seattle, Wash., in 1948, a friend and I joined the Naval Reserve at NAS Seattle. As an aviation electronics technician (AT) with Fleet Aircraft Service Squadron (FASRON) 895, weekend duty involved servicing our aircraft, as well as PV-2s and PBY-5As flown by the patrol squadrons. We also got local flights and sometimes a weekend hop to NAS Oakland, Calif., where we stayed in the barracks overnight.

In 1949 I went East and got married, then my wife and I settled in Seattle. I learned that with a mechanical engineering degree, my only path to a reserve commission was as an aviation machinist's mate (AD), so I became an AD trainee. After I



Hal Andrews as a Sailor in 1944.

reenlisted in early June 1950, our FASRON was called up in July—on two hours' notice—and briefly moved to NAS Whidbey Island, Wash. The FASRON soon returned to NAS Seattle and became an operational training unit for recalled reserves and newly formed regular squadrons that would fly P4Y-2s taken out of desert storage and returned to service. With plenty of ADs and a shortage of ATs, I switched back to my AT rating. Our squadron was beefed up with a recalled augmentation unit from Minneapolis, Minn., and we had a good radio/radar shop. We even prepared six P4Y-2s for delivery to the French in French Indochina, and supplied ferry crews for some of them.

Those of us who were called up in July 1950 were informed in mid-1951 that we would be released from active duty in less than the two-year squadron call-up period. Meanwhile, I had applied for a new program which offered commissions to college graduates on active duty. Ironically, in October I received both an offer of a commission if I accepted two years of additional active duty, and notice of my release in November.

We put the house in Seattle on the market and headed back East, arriving in western New York State for Christmas so that I could begin work in Buffalo at the Cornell Aeronautical Lab. I was part of an evaluation team assessing the design of captured North Korean-operated Russian aircraft under Air Force contract.

My brief service in the reserves proved to be another step toward a civilian engineering career in Naval Aviation.

VP-22 P2V off Swatow. A Coast Guard PBM-5G picked up the survivors but crashed on takeoff, resulting in the loss of 11 fliers, including 7 from the P2V. The survivors were rescued by a Navy ship. Further such aircraft incidents and losses occurred in the years after the Korean truce.

One daring P2V crew amazingly survived a series of eight or nine intentional overflights of the Soviet Union's Kamchatka peninsula between April and June 1952. A VP-931 P2V-3W—modified with special electronic intelligence equipment in its nose and flown by a hand-picked crew—flew in radio silence over the peninsula at 15,000 feet in search of military installations. When military sites were detected, an Air Force RB-50 flying above and behind the P2V photographed the sites. The snoopers were intercepted on two missions by Soviet MiG fighters but apparently never were fired upon. Fortunately, the recently declassified operations never required the services of the Air Force SB-17 rescue plane

assigned to the missions. This VP-931 (later VP-57) crew also performed a daring search and rescue flight in July 1953 over Vladivostok harbor for the crew of an RB-50 that was shot down by Soviet fighters. A U.S. destroyer rescued one of the crewmen.

Land-based patrol planes saw greater use than flying boats in the Korean War, proving to be more efficient. In Korea, land-based patrol planes flew 12 sorties for every 9 flown by flying boats.

As with U.S. forces in general, patrol aviation maintained a high level of presence in the Far East after the Korean War. Its operations increasingly focused on peripheral reconnaissance of the Soviet Union and China, particularly surveillance of the growing Soviet submarine force and vigilance against Chinese sabre-rattling against Formosa. ✪

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