



MARITIME PATROL AND RECONNAISSANCE: A BRIGHT FUTURE

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Last August, Naval Aviation's senior operational commanders gathered to hone the vision for the future of Naval Aviation. They developed a blueprint for sustaining the force's warfighting viability and relevance from a total force perspective, despite constrained budgets and growing readiness demands. In this and upcoming "Flightline" columns, I will focus on the impact of warfighter conference decisions on shaping various aviation communities, beginning with our maritime patrol and reconnaissance (MPR) forces.

Discussions at the conference reflected a strong commitment to the community and recognition of the key role played by MPR aircraft for maritime dominance—specifically antisubmarine and antisurface warfare (ASW and ASUW), maritime targeting and strike—and knowledge superiority, including intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, and indication and warning missions. We have always placed a great premium on MPR capabilities. As we move toward a more fully netted force, enhanced connectivity and integration of our P-3 *Orion* and EP-3E *Aries II* aircraft will be a critical part of the total force answer for forward-deployed naval expeditionary forces.

Demand for MPR support from commanders in chief and battle group commanders has steadily increased, even as the inventory has aged. On the front lines in Sigonella, Italy; Souda Bay, Greece; Masirah off Oman; Diego Garcia, B.I.O.T.; Keflavik, Iceland; and Roosevelt Roads, P.R., this has been reflected in high utilization rates (particularly of our most modern and capable airframes and systems) and demand for a high degree of aircrew proficiency in multiple mission areas, often in a combat environment. On the flight lines at home in Brunswick, Maine; Jacksonville, Fla.; Whidbey Island, Wash.; and Kaneohe, Hawaii, the pressure created by sustaining for-

ward-deployed readiness shows up in higher than normal cannibalization rates, less than desired mission-capable rates and increased juggling of available aircraft for squadron inter-deployment operations and training.

Sustaining appropriate MPR force structure is vital, as are modernizing mission systems and determining requirements for a follow-on platform. Programs to meet these needs have been deferred in the past due to financial constraints; in retrospect, we've pushed past the optimum decision point for sustaining MPR force structure. We are pursuing an analysis of alternatives for the Multimission Maritime Aircraft (MMA) to replace legacy P-3Cs and EP-3Es, while developing an appropriate Service Life Extension Program (SLEP) as a bridge to MMA. In the interim, we are committed to several critical modernization efforts to maintain P-3 viability.

A key modernization effort for the P-3C fleet is the replacement of obsolete mission systems in older aircraft to provide a uniform Update III ASW capability. Known as the Block Modification Upgrade Program (BMUP), 25 kits are funded toward a requirement of 48, and the Chief of Naval Operations has included 7 additional kits as part of his unfunded requirements list to Congress for next year. The first BMUP aircraft delivery is on track for 2001, and the program has already begun delivering USQ-78 digital display and control processors for installation in ASUW Improvement Program (AIP) aircraft, to allow better workload sharing by the tactical crew.

AIP is a suite of subsystem upgrades that significantly improves performance in ASUW, over-the-horizon targeting and command, control, communications, computers and intelligence mission areas while increasing weapons capabilities and enhancing survivability. In Kosovo, AIP-modified P-3s clearly

demonstrated their value. The first-ever use of the Standoff Land Attack Missile by P-3s in combat was significant for the community, but overshadowed more important contributions to the fight by P-3 aircraft. Performing round-the-clock littoral surveillance and sea control missions, our MPR force kept Yugoslavian submarines and surface combatants bottled up in port throughout the conflict. In protecting the battle group from these threats, our maritime patrol forces freed carrier-based tactical aircraft to focus exclusively on power projection—an example of the type of total force solution advocated by the warfighters. The 24th AIP aircraft (of 57 funded so far) recently rolled off the production line. The requirement is for 146 P-3Cs to be upgraded to AIP.

Our small force of EP-3E electronic warfare and reconnaissance aircraft is in constant demand by the combatant commanders in chief. Forward deployed to meet critical intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance collection requirements, EP-3Es detect, interpret and report tactically significant communication and radar signals. We currently have 11 aircraft out of 12 needed to meet worldwide commitments. The 12th aircraft, undergoing a P-3C to EP-3E conversion, will be ready in 2002.

The Sensor System Improvement Program (SSIP) upgrade, designed to keep the EP-3E on the cutting edge, is fully funded. SSIP incorporates new tactical communications, electronic support measures and special signal processing and exploitation systems. Four aircraft have been modified so far; however, software and hardware problems have delayed the completion of SSIP operational testing, slowing the modification schedule, delaying operational employment of SSIP capability and putting additional stress on the force. We currently expect operational testing to be completed by the end of May, a big step to getting back on glide path for SSIP. Because installation of SSIP and follow-on upgrades will continue to place acute pressure on the remaining assets to meet worldwide commitments, we have established a requirement to procure four additional EP-3E pipeline aircraft to facilitate the modification process.

A second major EP-3 modernization effort is the Joint Signals Intelligence Avionics Family Block Modernization Program (JMOD). Three block modifications are planned to keep the EP-3E ahead of the projected threat. Block 1 includes improved on-board data handling and processing. Block 2 adds a low band subsystem and improves data fusion capability including Common Data Link, which provides crucial connectivity for network centric warfare. Block 3 adds a precision targeting system. The portion of the JMOD program occurring within the Future Years Defense Plan (FY 2001–2006) is fully funded.

Work on the Multimission Maritime Aircraft is moving forward. On March 22, the Defense Acquisition Board approved MMA for Milestone 0, the first major step in the life of an acquisition program and the green light for us to conduct a formal analysis of alternatives. All options will be considered for MMA, including a remanufactured P-3, a commercial derivative or a brand-new aircraft. PMA-290 has already begun to solicit proposals from industry. Efforts are also underway to define the right SLEP package, leveraging lessons learned in the Sustained Readiness Program, to maintain an adequate number of deployable aircraft and provide a bridge to MMA.

This issue of *Naval Aviation News* features a deck plate perspective of life in a patrol squadron. It accurately reflects the challenges faced by the professionals of the MPR community who fly and maintain an aircraft the average age of which is greater than their own. It also reflects the passion and commitment that Naval Aviators and Sailors in the community feel for the MPR mission areas—which are of enduring value to the nation—and it appropriately highlights the bright future for the maritime patrol and reconnaissance force as a continued integral part of naval expeditionary forces and Naval Aviation.



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