

PHOTOJOURNALIST ON PATROL

By JO1 Joshua M. Hudson





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Day 1

I sat in the air terminal at NAF Washington, D.C., waiting for my flight to NAS Jacksonville, Fla. The VP-45 *Pelicans* had graciously volunteered to sponsor my story about the patrol mission and arranged to give me a lift in a P-3C *Orion*. It was late afternoon but the sky was almost black. The radio crackled and a voice stated, “Thunderclouds are less than five miles. Be advised that we may close the flight line.”

“They aren’t going to land,” I said, frustrated.

The terminal clerk gave me a sympathetic look and replied, “I don’t know. P-3s are sturdy planes. It’s up to the pilot whether they land or not.”

The radio crackled again, “Andrews, this is LN45A. We are going to make one more pass. Request another [instrument landing system] approach to runway one-right.”

The clerk handed me the passenger manifest and said, “Looks like you got your flight. You can wait in here until it pulls up. It’s still raining pretty badly out there.”

The roar of the four 4,600-horsepower turbo-prop engines drowned out the sound of thunder. As I climbed up the ladder into the cabin, I was met by an aircrewman who showed me my parachute and gave me a personal flotation device. After a brief lesson on how to use both, he urged me to remember how to use the flotation vest but added, “I’ve never heard of anyone needing the parachute. We usually fly too low.”

Left, a VP-45 P-3C *Orion* sits silently on the ramp at NAS Jacksonville, Fla., awaiting its next operational mission.



Left, Lt. Cory Dixon outlines the operating area during the preflight brief to the crew (left to right): Ltjg. Matt Elder, Lt. Robb Connors, AW1 (AW) Mike Brooks and AW 3 Steven Lee. Below, Lt. Dixon updates the navigational fix several times each hour during the 11-hour mission.

Once in the air, I was directed to the galley—a small table for four, a coffee machine and an oven. “Are those beds?” I asked in amazement as I looked above me. The aircrewman said, “Yeah. We fly 12 to 15 hours at a time. One bunk is for a pilot and one is for a flight engineer.”

A P-3 crew may seem large, but there are just enough people to handle the mission. Three pilots share the burden of the long flights, and three aviation warfare systems operators (AW) fill sensor positions—two coordinate the acoustic mission and one acts as nonacoustic radar operator. The two flight engineers (FE) take turns sitting in the center of the cockpit to monitor all systems for the aircraft. The in-flight technician (IFT) makes any avionics repairs on the aircraft while airborne, and launches internally stored sonobuoys. The navigator/communications officer plots and maintains all flight data and coordinates communications, while the tactical coordinator (TACCO) coordinates the crew of the P-3 to employ the sensors, systems and tactics to carry out the assigned mission.

The time passed quickly while I sat in the cockpit watching the two pilots and flight engineer steer above the storm. My exhaustion didn’t set in until the wheels hit the tarmac at Jacksonville. Although I was free to get



some sleep, the pilots had postflight reports to file and the aircrewmen had to refuel and postflight the aircraft. “We fly again tomorrow at 0400,” the pilot told me. “Meet us at midnight.”

Day 2

Carrying my camera gear and a bag of snacks, I met Lieutenant Robb Connors, one of the mission pilots, out-



VP-45 was the last patrol squadron in the Atlantic Fleet to use seaplanes (SP-5B Marlin). The squadron began transition training for the Lockheed P-3A Orion in 1963, thus closing out its seaplane operations. The first VP-45 P-3A to arrive at NAS Jacksonville, left is seen taxiing in January 1964. Thirty years later, below, the Pelicans are shown flying a formation of P-3C Orions. The aircraft's longevity can be attributed in part to its adaptable airframe; the cavernous fuselage was able to incorporate new systems over the years to meet changing fleet missions.



PH1 J. F. Slaughterhaupt

side the hangar. As I threw my bags into the back of his car, he warned me that I couldn't bring a camera or tape recorder into the Tactical Support Center where the aircrew is briefed. A lot of the mission is classified, so the briefing requires a secure area.

The pilots sat in front of a large projection of the mission area, while various people gave mission details and weather reports. The AWs gathered equipment that holds the programs for the mission. It is not the P-3 itself, but the mission data tapes and programs that are classified.

As we arrived at the airplane, the FEs and IFT were already checking the plane over to ensure everything was OK to fly. The senior FE, Aviation Electrician's Mate (AE) Second Class (AW) William Gettings, was handling a glitch with the ground support equipment. The power cart needed during the preflight inspection wouldn't maintain steady power and kept tripping fuses inside the aircraft. The preflight that should have taken three hours was dragging on into four. When the plane was finally loaded and rolling down the runway, the first twinge of sunlight appeared and brightened the darkness.

After a two-hour transit to our mission area, we were off the Norfolk, Va., coast, hunting a submarine. The crew planned to drop several sonobuoys loaded with acoustic charges. The deployment of the buoys causes a pressure wave in the water, creating an active ping and

making any submarine in the vicinity show up on the acoustic sensors. The acoustic operators relay their information to the TACCO, who then directs the crew in the localization, tracking and simulated attacking of the submarine. If the sub were hostile, the crew could easily launch one of its torpedoes during the attack phase of the prosecution.

Over the area of operation, the IFT dropped the sonobuoys in the designated pattern. The TACCO gave the sensor operators the go-ahead to ping the buoys and start the echo recording, but soon it was obvious that something was wrong. "They didn't deploy," Lt. Connors sighed. "These buoys may be too old, but we still have time. Perhaps we will get them to work in a few minutes."

Two hours passed, and the crew was able to get only 30 percent of the buoys to work properly. By that time the submarine was out of the area, so the crew headed back to Jacksonville.

Lieutenant Commander Pat Bindl, the crew's mission commander, did not seem deterred by the day's flight, despite the malfunctioning buoys. AE2 Gettings, who has been flying P-3s most of his 18-year career, said, "Hey, I'm flying today and that's good enough for me. It's what I want to do." But it is obvious that the crew is not happy. They pride themselves on being at their best when



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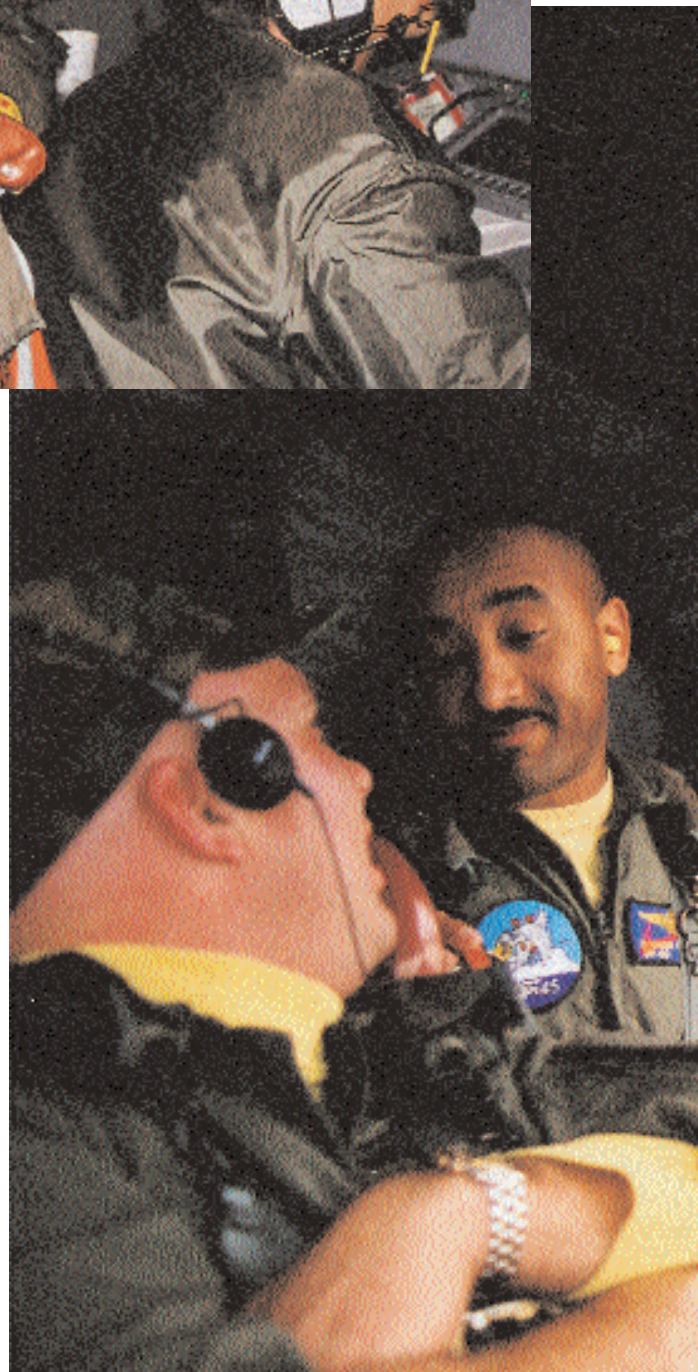
Above, LCdr. Pat Bindl overlooks acoustic operators AW1 (AW) Mike Brooks and AW3 Steven Lee as they attempt to establish contact with the buoys. Right, to lessen the tension following a buoy malfunction, Lt. Darrin Guillory makes light of the situation with AE2 (AW) William Gettings and AD2 Jerry Jordan as Lt. Robb Connors heads the Orion for home.

they fly, and it is frustrating when equipment keeps them from completing the mission.

The wheels of the aircraft rolled onto the ramp at Jacksonville around 1500—15 hours from start to finish—and I was exhausted. Gettings laughed when he saw my drooping eyelids. He is used to long flights and changing sleep habits. Crew members learn to catch naps when they can, and make the most out of the day. I was grateful that I didn't have to close down the aircraft and file the mission reports afterwards. I immediately struck out for the barracks and crawled under my pillow.

Day 3

I started out bright and early to talk to the Sailors of the command—there is more to a squadron than the aircraft. I expected to find some diversity in the way people feel about the work. I was amazed that the answer from every person I talked to—from an airman apprentice who checked in two months ago, to the retiring master chief of the command—was the same. They love being in a P-3 squadron, but hate the high stress of keeping the planes flying.



Aviation Boatswain's Mate Master Chief (AW) Alvin Lawson commented, "The living conditions are better but we work twice as hard compared to most squadrons. We have to deal with 30-year-old technology that is hard to keep in the air. We end up cannibalizing our aircraft to keep others flying, and that isn't always enough."

Commander Patrick Mills, VP-45's CO, has been flying P-3s since he earned his wings in 1982. He concedes that maintenance is a challenge. "The aircraft is old. It takes many hours to get it airborne. There is a lot of demand on the airframe. All I can say is that there are highs and lows in the Navy, and this may be a low period

right now as far as parts availability and man-hours expended per flight hour. But there is a need for our platform and mission. As long as we are continually tasked by fleet commanders to be on station with a trained crew, things will improve."

The need for parts is particularly felt in one shop. Aviation Electronics Technician First Class Carl Pence performs organizational-level maintenance on the P-3's avionics. "It will help immensely when we get new systems and wiring. The components get older and the resistors can no longer maintain specifications. That means more maintenance and documentation for us."





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Even though the plane’s maintenance is a serious issue, no one complains about the increasing role the P-3 community is playing in the world. AE2 (AW) Gettings welcomes the new challenges. “They looked at the airframes and found that we can do a whole lot more than just antisubmarine warfare (ASW). In the Balkans we fly overland reconnaissance, feeding live video from our system straight to the type commander, day or night. We use it looking for drug smugglers in the Caribbean. And that is on top of searching for subs in the North Atlantic.”

Cdr. Mills sees the P-3 as essential to the Navy’s mission. “We used to be one dimensional. We were the only ASW blue-water platform, and we were extremely good at what we did. We would go on patrol and have our way with the Russian submarines. Now, we are still the blue-water ASW platform of choice, and more. We are literally in demand by every forward-deployed warfare commander. We are the only platform that does what we do, and we are relatively unobtrusive while doing it.”

But it is not just the *Orion*’s abilities that make the squadron unique. The Command Master Chief, Aviation Ordnanceman Master Chief (AW/SW) Michael Ross, proudly stated, “I have flown in myriad platforms and been impressed by the professionalism of the people in a squadron. The greatest assets this Navy has are those kids down there in the hangar bay. Give them the right training, tools and motivation and our Sailors will perform miracles.

“People in a P-3 squadron deploy—just not on a ship,” Ross continued. “They work long hours even in their home port. Just because they aren’t on a carrier doesn’t mean they aren’t pulling their weight. But I



won’t lie to you, some people come here because it isn’t the ship.”

Being land-based isn’t everyone’s motivation for going to the P-3 community. “The big difference for me is crew integrity,” said AW1 (AW) Edward Ginder, who has spent most of his career flying HH-60 *Seahawks*. “As a helo squadron aircrewman, you could be flying with any pilot. On a P-3, you fly with the same crew. It’s a team effort to complete a mission. I need to know what the TACCO wants from me and how he does business. It takes a lot of crew coordination.”

Day 4

My trip ended much the same way as it began—sitting in a terminal waiting for a flight. With time on my hands I reflected on what I had learned about the P-3 community over the last few days. I found myself wondering how many people actually know the extent of a P-3 squadron’s capabilities—including antisubmarine and antisurface warfare, reconnaissance, airborne command and control, and the employment of Harpoon, Maverick and Standoff Land Attack missiles.

As I got back on the *Orion* for my flight home, I remembered something that Cdr. Mills said: “Anybody who doesn’t know about P-3s when they see that big old four-engine airplane out there should get it out of their mind that it is some kind of airliner. It is a very formative tactical platform—unobtrusive, but a lethal weapon.” ✈️

Special thanks to Lt. Robb Connors, a VP-45 pilot and patrol plane commander, for his assistance with this article.

VP-45 Pilot Pencils in Time for Art



Lieutenant Erich Moulder grew up enjoying both artwork and airplanes. He graduated from the U.S. Air Force Academy in 1995 and cross-commissioned into the Navy as an ensign. After serving in Training Squadrons 28, 19 and 31, he's now a P-3C *Orion* pilot in VP-45, the *Pelicans*. He says, "Though I work day to day with competitive over-achievers in the flying field, artwork allows me to fulfill my creative side. My passion is art. Creating beauty and developing my ideas give my life balance." Above, the artist sketched a P-3C launching a missile and, below, a self-portrait in the cockpit. ✈



See his website: www.jacksonville.net/~emoulder1/.