

# VS-29 DRAGONFIRES



Text and Photos by Ted Carlson

On board the Navy's carriers, a versatile platform stands at the ready to perform a variety of missions. Flying the S-3B *Viking*, the Sea Control Squadron (VS) 29 *Dragonfires*, NAS North Island, Calif., are assigned to Carrier Air Wing 11 and operate aboard *Carl Vinson* (CVN 70). Like other VS squadrons, they form a vital part of the carrier air wing.

When it entered the fleet in 1974, "the S-3 was truly the first multimission carrier-based platform," squadron CO Commander Bruce Lindsey explained. At the time "there were light attack aircraft [A-7 *Corsair II*], medium



attack aircraft [A-6 *Intruder*] and interceptors [F-14 *Tomcat*]. The S-3 originally had three missions: antisubmarine warfare (ASW), mine warfare and surface search and control. With the end of the Cold War and the diminished submarine threat, the S-3B was deconfigured from the primary ASW role to adapt to the more contemporary surveillance and sea control mission, and the crew was reduced from four to three—a pilot, copilot/tactical coordinator and tactical coordinator.

Today, the *Viking* continues to be a versatile platform.



Lieutenant Cory Christensen said, “The S-3B has been called the ‘Swiss army knife of Naval Aviation.’ We tank, prosecute surface vessels, help develop a tactical picture for the battle group, and often flex to whatever is required.”

“We are the only organic tanker in the fleet that can refuel carrier aircraft and then recover back on board the carrier,” stated Lt. Will Reynolds. During carrier flight operations, a *Viking* equipped with an aerial refueling store stands tanking alert to assist aircraft approaching the carrier in a critical fuel state. If needed, the S-3B will

**Opposite, Sea Control Squadron 29 celebrated its 40th anniversary in 2000. The *Dragonfires* initially flew the S-2 *Tracker*, background, then transitioned to their current platform, the S-3 *Viking*, foreground.**

overfly the aircraft during its final approach in case the aircraft bolters and needs to refuel to complete the evolution. “The *Viking* is a fantastic platform for

tanking. It is stable, has tremendous endurance and maintains excellent loiter time while consuming roughly 2,800 pounds of fuel per hour,” Lt. Christensen added.

The *Viking* is also a key surface and underwater warfare platform. It can carry up to 10 weapons at a time, such as AGM-84 Harpoon and AGM-65 Maverick missiles; 500-, 1,000- and 2,000-pound bombs; Quickstrike mines; Mk 46 and Mk 50 torpedoes; and



squadrons also orchestrate battle group force protection assets, including nonorganic aircraft such as P-3C *Orions*, freeing other platforms such as F-14s and F/A-18 *Hornets* to strike over land. “The S-3B excels at flying low and slow, which it was originally designed to do,” Lt. Steve Platt emphasized. “With the higher shipping volume in today’s world, you

may have 200 different ship contacts in a single day in the Arabian Gulf. The S-3B is vital in identifying friends from foes.” The S-3B also works with P-3Cs and SH-60B/F *Seahawks* in the antisubmarine warfare role, and can drop torpedoes at a point directed by these other aircraft.

The S-3B’s electronic support (ESM) suite enables the crew to determine if there are surface-to-air missile threats in an operations area. After ESM signals are received and downloaded, emitter locations are placed on a map that can be printed out and passed along to intelligence personnel. This allows the S-3 to provide



a “very wide range of information that it can process and relay to the battle group. The data can be piggy-backed onto what the EP-3E *Aries II*, E-2C *Hawkeye* and other ships have also seen,” Lt. Bowker explained.

To prepare for the future, “Our squadron takes a proactive role in trying out new S-3 tactics,” Lt. Platt said. “We have advanced tactics for the S-3 using our weapon release parameters, and do well with our proven bombing abilities. I love doing my job and wouldn’t do anything different.”

Although the S-3B is expected to be phased out later this decade, a firm time frame has not been set. Eventually, its

roles will be performed by other platforms—surface search and control by the SH-60R *Seahawk* or the P-3C Update III antisurface warfare improvement program aircraft, and tanking by the F/A-18E/F *Super Hornet*.

Until that time comes, the *Viking* provides a flexible platform for the battle group, and the *Dragonfires* are prepared for whatever mission comes their way. ✈

Ted Carlson is a professional photographer whose work regularly appears in *Naval Aviation News*.

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Left, this view of the S-3 cockpit with Lt. Will Reynolds at the controls illustrates the *Viking’s* excellent visibility. Opposite, the patch worn by *Dragonfires* personnel reflects the squadron’s heritage. Below, VS-29 *Vikings* carrying buddy fuel stores peel off from formation with bomb bay doors open, illustrating their multimission capability.

