

VQ-2 Shines in Operation Iraqi Freedom

By Lieutenant (jg) Hugh N. Batten

Naval Aviation's surveillance and reconnaissance program has historically maintained a low profile. The sensitive nature of the mission has created a degree of mystery about the community. Most people had never heard of an EP-3E until April 2001 when an EP-3E Aries II of Fleet Air Reconnaissance Squadron (VQ) 1 was involved in a midair collision with a Chinese fighter. This incident and the subsequent detainment of the crew at Hainan Island received front-page coverage across the nation (see *NA News*, Sep–Oct 03). However, long before this publicity, the Navy's fleet air reconnaissance squadrons were quietly at work.

Established on 1 September 1955, the VQ-2 *Rangers* have shifted their mission focus over the years. VQ missions during the Cold War collected strategic intelligence on the former Soviet Union and its satellite states in the European theater. Yet, the geopolitical changes and computer communications revolution during the last 20 years have altered the way VQ-2 does business. The focus has shifted to providing tactical intelligence and time-critical targeting directly to fleet and component commanders around the world. As the mission changed, VQ capabilities and tactics have kept pace.

Though the P-3 airframe is old, EP-3Es are now equipped with the Sensor System Improvement Program mission avionics suite, consisting of state-of-the-art signals intelligence intercept, information management and communications technology. Manned by 24 highly trained

crew members, from a variety of cryptologic and aviation ratings, who are experts in operating and maintaining the equipment, the EP-3E brings a potent capability to intercept, exploit and disrupt the entire enemy command-control-communications-computers-intelligence architecture. "We have the right training, the right equipment and the right crew for getting the job done," stated Lieutenant Pete Salvaggio, a senior evaluator who flew extensively during Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF).

America's adversaries learned of the strength of U.S. air power from the crushing defeat of Iraqi forces in the first Gulf War and have sought to update air defense tactics. U.S. naval and Air Force aircraft subsequently faced new challenges in the Balkans Conflict. Coalition aircrews, therefore, expected to see improved techniques attempted by the Iraqi air defense units in 2003. VQ-2 was ready, bringing the lessons of the first Gulf War, the Balkans and Operation Enduring Freedom to bear on the enemy during OIF.

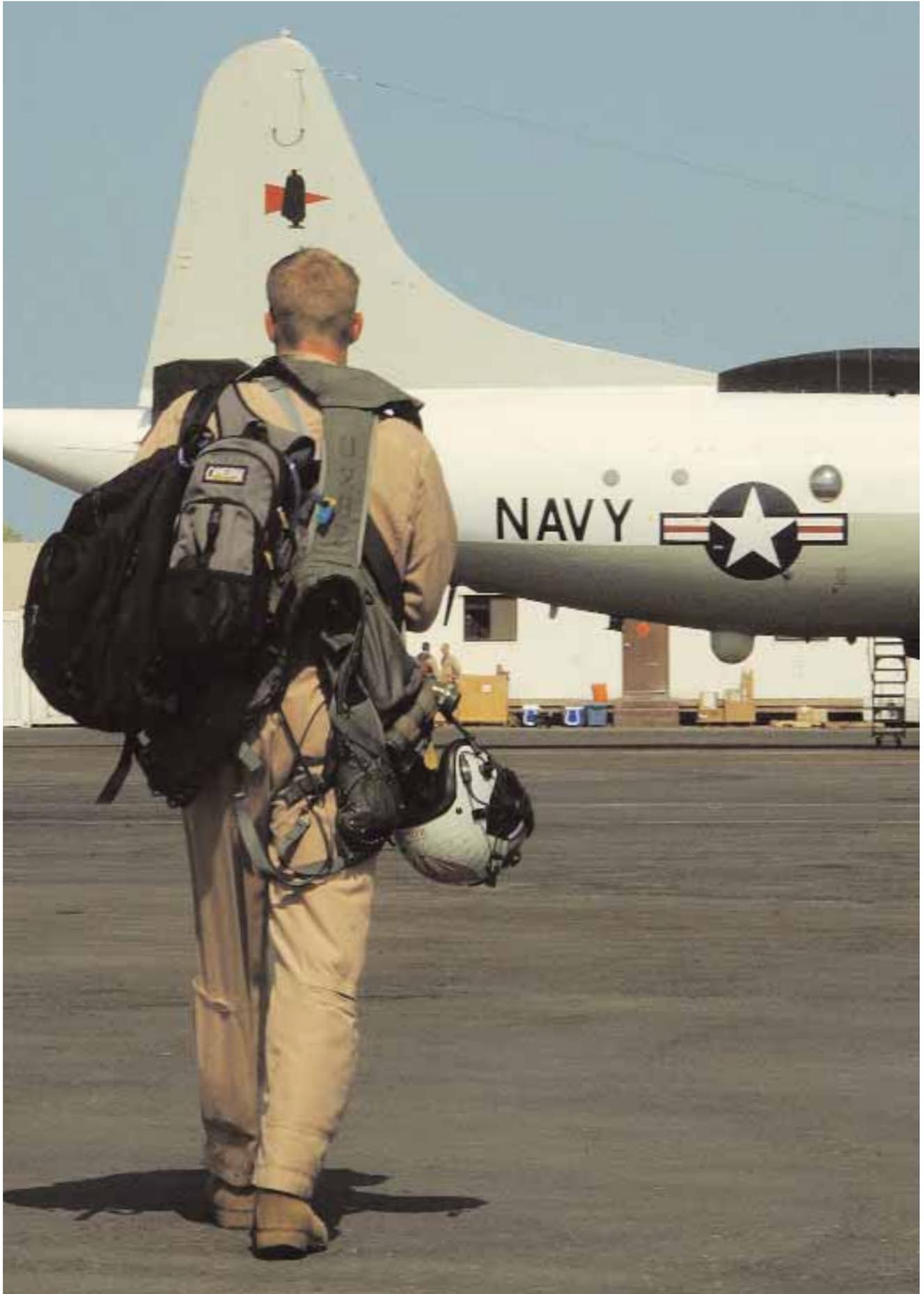
Balancing the adversaries' improvements, years of experience in Operations Northern Watch, Southern Watch, Joint Forge and Joint Guardian had

honed VQ-2's ability to gather, process and disseminate real-time threat intelligence directly to air, sea and land-based shooters. The VQ-2 combat reconnaissance crews (CRC) knew that their experience in those operations would be vital in overcoming the enemy's improved air defense techniques in Iraq. To be combat effective, VQ-2



Above, a *Rangers* EP-3E Aries II banks over water. Background, the cloaked figure in VQ-2's insignia characterizes the sensitive nature of squadron operations. Facing page, an aircrewman returns from a mission while deployed in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

continued on page 22



PH2 Michael Sandberg

would have to provide coalition shooters and decision makers with significant intelligence fast enough to beat the enemy's sensor-to-shooter process.

In the weeks leading up to the war, VQ-2 and sister squadron VQ-1, along with operators from Naval Security Group Activities (NSGA) Manama, Bahrain; Rota, Spain; and Misawa, Japan, assembled in Bahrain under Commander Task Force 57 as the Navy's airborne intelligence-surveillance-reconnaissance team. There are 10 EP-3Es in the Navy inventory, three of which were in Bahrain during the buildup for OIF. The VQ crews flew 24 hours a day, monitoring threats to the carrier battle groups in the northern Arabian Gulf and communicating threat warnings to coalition strike packages flying in Operation Southern Watch. Tensions mounted as the rhetoric of war increased. "We all knew it was just a matter of time. We knew the moment it started, we would be ready," said Lt. Salvaggio.

In the early morning hours of 19 March, the coalition launched the first strike of Tomahawk land-attack missiles into Iraq. VQ-2's CRC-1 monitored the destruction from an orbit over Kuwait. CRC-2 soon followed, providing imminent threat warnings to coalition strike packages ingressing Iraqi airspace. When the strikes began, VQ-2



Top right, a VQ-2 EP-3E flies over the bull ring at El Puerto de Santa Maria, Spain. Above, CRC-2 crew members pose with their aircraft. Right, CRC-2 pilot Lt. Bill Hammond scans the horizon. Below right, navigator Ltjg. Chris Knaus mans his station.



added suppression of enemy air defense (SEAD) to reconnaissance and threat-warning responsibilities and, as expected, the SEAD tactics quickly established air

superiority over the weakened Iraqi air defense. As the ground war began, the VQ aircrews left familiar tactics and airspace to keep pace with advancing coalition forces. Instead of orbiting in the Kuwaiti airspace directly adjacent to the Iraqi border, VQ-2 received its first "killbox" assignment on 23 March, flying overland Iraq for the first time. Unarmed and unescorted over Iraq without chaff or flares, the *Rangers* demonstrated their own brand of valor. "We were up there all by



ourselves, watching the war unfold,” explained Lt. T. C. Howery, CRC-2 aircraft/mission commander. “I’m really proud of the crew and how they performed in the face of hostilities. You can prepare yourself all you’d like, but nothing can really get you ready for the first time you encounter anti-aircraft artillery [AAA],” he added about the overland Iraq combat mission.

The launch of the ground offensive toward Baghdad compelled VQ-2 to emphasize ground support. Initially providing surface-to-air missile and AAA threat warnings to the coalition strike packages, the VQ crews quickly broadened their focus to include direct strike support and battle damage assessment for ground operations. Lieutenant Commander Andrew Johnson, a former infantryman with the 82nd Airborne Division and a VQ-2 aircraft/mission commander, reported to Camp Commando in Kuwait as the VQ/patrol liaison to the Marines. “I was basically sent in to support the 1st Marine Expeditionary Unit for the location and targeting of Iraqi enemy units,”

explained Johnson. “We had to take a mission that had never been done before by our EP-3Es and use them to supply critical information to our ground units advancing against the enemy.” As a result, new procedures for VQ direct support to ground forces were developed.

By the end of the war, VQ Detachment Southwest Asia had flown over 50 combat missions totaling over 400 hours with three different aircraft. Over 300 of these hours were spent on station. VQ adapted new tactics literally on the fly, and wrote a new chapter of joint warfare as it supported U.S. Marine Corps and Army ground forces.

The men and women of the VQ and NSGA communities understand that while the nature of their missions will rarely make them front-page news, the electronic combat information they provide is critical to the success of our forces around the globe. ✈

Ltjg. Batten is VQ-2’s Public Affairs Officer. Special thanks to LCdr. Craig Lee, Lt. Jason Wells and Ltjg. David Cooper for their assistance with this article.