The Fighting Marlins Return: The Navy's Last Active-Duty P-3 Squadron Completes Its Final Deployment

Cmdr. Matthew McKerring, commanding officer of the "Fighting Marlins" of Patrol Squadron (VP) 40, is welcomed home by his family during a homecoming ceremony at Naval Air Station Whidbey Island on Oct. 9. U.S. Navy/Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Marc Cuenca

On Oct. 10, 2019, the last of nine P-3C Orion maritime patrol aircraft assigned to Patrol Squadron 40 (VP-40) returned to Naval Air Station Whidbey Island, Washington, after more than six months deployed to the other side of the world. The deployment represented the last in the Lockheed P-3 Orion for an active-duty VP squadron, ending 57 years of regular VP deployments with the Orion.

VP-40 had the honor of marking a similar milestone in 1967, when it returned from the last deployment of the Martin SP-5B Marlin flying boat, which also marked the end of the flying boat seaplane as U.S. Navy maritime patrol aircraft.

Check out the digital edition of December's *Seapower* magazine here.

VP-40 is now in transition to the Boeing P-8A Poseidon and in

a few months will join the other 11 active-duty VP squadrons flying the Poseidon, which began replacing the P-3C in overseas deployments in 2013.

Seapower received responses to questions from personnel of VP-40 shortly before the end of the deployment.

Aviation Structural Mechanic (Equipment) 3rd Class Johnathan Hay, of Patrol Squadron (VP) 40, attaches a grounding wire to a P-3C Orion aircraft during nighttime operations. U.S. Navy/Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Jakoeb Vandahlen

Cmdr. Matt McKerring, a naval aviator who commands VP-40, said his squadron deployed with nine P-3Cs and 12 combat aircrews to three sites. Split-site deployments became an occurrence more common since the end of the Cold War, when the Navy cut its active-duty operational VP squadrons from 24 to 12 and its reserve VP squadrons from 13 to two.

Split Squadron Creates Resource, Communication, Mission Challenges

When VP-40 deployed in late March, its nine P-3Cs were divided between three sites in the areas of operations in the U.S. 5th, 6th and 7th Fleets, a laydown which poses challenges for a squadron.

“The challenges of a tri-site deployment come down to three different categories: resources, communication and mission,” McKerring said. “We are manned to operate as one major hub [24-hour

operations] with two detachment locations [single maintenance shift]. This
current deployment requires us to operate two hubs and one detachment location.
This has created a strain on our Sailors and forced us to multi-qualify across
our maintenance department in order to meet mission.

VP-40’s P-3C Orion aircraft sit on the flightline. U.S. Navy/Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Jakoeb Vandahlen

“The other major resource challenge is
with the aircraft,” he said. “We are currently working with two models of
aircraft, and they are different between sites. This creates a challenge with
maintenance qualifications and aircrew experience. The major limitation from
the maintenance perspective is the parts supply. Our parts come from three
different locations and only one of [the locations] is within an hour of our
bases. This creates the logistical challenge of determining which location has
the parts and then scheduling parts supply flights in order to fix our aircraft
and get them back in the fight.”

“Communication is an even an issue for
squadrons deployed in one location, but we have three locations in three
different countries, in two different time zones,” he said. “VP-40 has a truly
global presence for this deployment. The squadron overcomes communication
issues by scheduling face-to-face engagements with written recaps, sending out
a squadron newsletter and conducting frequent video

teleconferences between sites to ensure every remains on the same page.”

McKerring said the variety of missions posed challenges.

“Just like the aircraft types, the mission types being flown are different based on location,” he said. “Maintaining proficiency among our aircrewmen in each of these mission types is difficult, and we’ve had to get creative to ensure our performance remains at the peak levels.”

Aviation Structural Mechanic 1st Class Christian Samaras, attached to VP-40, removes a panel to grease control surfaces on the tail of a P-3C Orion aircraft. U.S. Navy/Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Jakoeb Vandahlen

During the deployment, VP-40 primarily was “tasked with intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance missions, specifically providing maritime domain awareness,” McKerring said.

“Additionally, with increased tensions in the Middle East, the Fighting Marlins have provided a number of armed escorts for various U.S. and coalition assets through high-threat areas. These escort missions are in support of the International Maritime Security Construct, providing armed escort through the Strait of Hormuz and Bab-al-Mandeb. VP-40 also remains prepared at all times to perform our primary mission, which is antisubmarine warfare [ASW], should the need arise.”

ASW a Perishable Skill Among Operators

Maintaining the proficiency of acoustic sensor operators amid numerous other missions is a challenge.

McKerring said that "a predominance of ISR missions does mean that sensor operators focus mostly on electro-optical sensors, radar and ELINT [electronic intelligence]. However, our aircrews maintain ASW proficiency using simulators and Expendable Mobile ASW Training Target [EMATT] systems."

During the Cold War, VP squadrons were supported by fixed-site tactical support centers, also known as ASW operations centers.

The squadrons today are supported by mobile command centers that provide command and control, intelligence and analysis support.

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> *Cmdr. Matthew McKerring, naval aviator, commander of VP-40*

"Our community operates with Mobile Tactical Operations Center [MTOC] support now, and we could not be happier with the support provided by MTOC-10,' McKerring said. "Their OIC [officer in charge], Lt. Cmdr. Brad Merritt, integrated his team with our squadron early in our home cycle, and it has been very beneficial. By training together and then deploying together, we build relationships in addition to the technical skills required to succeed on a deployment like this."

U.S. Navy maritime patrol crews often have opportunities to operate with U.S. allies and partners. During this deployment, VP-40 worked with Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force and German Navy maritime patrol reconnaissance aircraft crews, and with ships from the United Kingdom, France and Spain.

“This is certainly the busiest, most dynamic and successful deployment of which I have been a part,” McKerring said. “This is my fifth P-3 deployment and my seventh overall. Being in command also provides a completely different perspective than from my junior officer days. My scope of awareness is certainly a lot higher.”

He said “the P-3 is one of the last unadulterated flying experiences left in military or civil aviation. Yes, there is an autopilot, but there is no fly-by-wire system. Your control inputs directly move the control surfaces. You feel one with machine as opposed to simply operating a computer system. Also, flying low is one of the greatest joys of aviation, and few fixed-wing aircraft fly lower than the P-3 at a 200-foot on-station altitude.

“Most importantly, however, is the people,” he said. “I have been a part of many squadrons during my career, but the Fighting Marlins I currently have the privilege to lead are the smartest, most professional and hardest working Sailors I have ever

seen. It is truly a humbling experience. One major part of the P-3 team we will miss on the P-8 is our flight engineers and in-flight technicians. These are enlisted Sailors that fulfill major maintenance roles on our aircraft, and they have saved me and my crew many times. I'm going to miss flying with them."

Maintainers Laud P-3 But Cite Parts, Personnel Shortages

One of VP-40's maintenance wizards is Senior Chief Aviation Machinist Mate (Air Warfare) Roy A. Cedeno, who, with 23 years in the Navy and four VP deployments under his belt, said the P-3 "is one of the strongest and most reliable aircraft I have had the pleasure to work on during my Navy career. However, the biggest challenges during the last deployment was getting good aircraft parts, and our maintainers had to work more than normal working hours because of the shortage of trained P-3 personnel. Additionally, the extremely hot temperatures strained our aircraft as well as our personnel. The outstanding group of leaders, maintainers and aircrews are making the impossible miracle of continuing flying these 50-year-old exhausted warfighter aircraft because 'we do what we do."

"It is both an honor and a challenge sundowning the mighty P-3," said Lt. William Knox, one of VP-40's patrol plane commanders. "We are the last of something truly great, and there is so much

history behind us. It truly is something special to be counted in that chapter in naval aviation history. But, as anyone who has ever been in a similar situation can attest, there is no such thing as normal, and every day is a new challenge. We have risen to the occasion and it has made us all better pilots, better officers and better Sailors because of it."

A squadron tactical coordinator, Lt. Austin Vorwald, echoed the sentiment.

"It's a huge honor for me to still be operating aircraft that have had such a long time in service," he said. "It still amazes me that something as old and as storied as the P-3 is still so capable on station. A large majority of this credit goes to the maintainers who continually troubleshoot and fix our planes though, and I'm continually humbled by the amount of hard work they put in. It's incredible to hold some small part in closing out a hugely successful aircraft."

McKerring will have that honor of leading the Fighting Marlins into the transition to the P-8A, as will approximately 70 percent of squadron personnel, those who will be with the squadron at least through August 2020.

"I'm excited to learn a new aircraft and take the things that I've learned from operating the P-3 and apply them to the P-8 to improve upon its success," Vorwald said. "Deploying as the last

active-duty P-3C squadron has given me a stack of lessons learned that I believe can in some way benefit VP-40 and hopefully MPR as a whole in the future."

"Being Skipper for the last active-duty maritime P-3 deployment is a great honor, but it is also a little sad to write one of the final chapters in the proverbial P-3 history book," McKerring said. "After 57 years and counting, the P-3 has had one of the most prodigious careers of any plane in the U.S. Navy and aviation history. This is my third tour with the Fighting Marlins, going all the way back to 2004, and I couldn't be prouder to lead this squadron, which has shaped so much of my professional career."

Although it is no longer in the regular fleet deployment cycles, the P-3 will continue for several more years to be operated by several units, including two reserve VP squadrons, VP-62 and VP-69, as well as VP-30, Special Projects Patrol Squadron 2 (VPU-2), Scientific Development Squadron 1 (VXS-1) and Air Test and Evaluation Squadron 30 (VX-30).

The EP-3E electronic reconnaissance version will continue to deploy from Naval Air St Whidbey Island with detachments of Fleet Air Reconnaissance Squadron One (VQ-1) until the MQ-4C Triton unmanned aerial vehicle is

deployed in enough numbers
with signals intelligence capability.