

Flexibility of the mighty hunter

As the P-3 Orion begins its retirement after a long and distinguished service life, AIRCDRE Ian Pearson looks back at the many ways it has flown the flag for air power

“SO IT’S goodbye” was the headline in the March 1968 edition of RAAF News (forerunner to *Air Force News*). Subtitled “Orions replace Neptunes in fighting eleventh”, the article reported on the last No. 11 Squadron flight in a P-2E Neptune on December 19, 1967 and the dawn of the Orion era.

The P-3B Orion was due to arrive at 11SQN’s new base at Edinburgh in May 1968.

Since its introduction to service, the Lockheed P-3 Orion has delivered a versatile, long-endurance maritime and overland surveillance and response capability to the Air Force.

Larger and faster than the P-2 Neptune it replaced, the P-3 Orion has provided a more comfortable crew environment and the opportunity for capability development as technology evolved.

Ten P-3C Update II Orions replaced No. 10 Squadron’s ageing SP-2H Neptunes in 1978, while 11SQN’s P-3Bs were replaced with 10 P-3C Update II.5 Orions in 1984-85.

Three second-hand P-3Bs, redesignated as TAP-3s, also flew with 92 Wing as training aircraft between 1997 and 2004.

Although originally fielded as a land-based maritime patrol aircraft, in Air Force service the P-3’s low-profile missions – largely conducted remote from base and shrouded by confidentiality – have evolved in response to changing threats and national security requirements.

Inheriting the anti-submarine warfare role from the P-2, the Orion’s greater reach and speed put it into action in Cold War operations far from home, from the North Pacific to the North Atlantic, the Indian Ocean and elsewhere.

Flying from the US, Canada and other places as part of the Cold War operations, the P-3 located, classified and tracked Soviet attack and ballistic carrying nuclear submarines.

Similar operations were conducted

against Soviet attack submarines transiting the waters of our region.

The introduction of the P-3B, with its greater speed and reach, enabled Australia to fulfil its surveillance obligations under the 1951 Radford-Collins Agreement.

That agreement covered shared responsibility for the protection of shipping and sea lines of communication in strategically important South Pacific and Indian Ocean areas.

Similarly, when Australia’s Exclusive Economic Zone was declared in 1973, the aircraft gave Australia the capability to surveil a maritime expanse exceeding its own land territory.

The P-3’s developing capabilities have subsequently been exploited in a host of intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) operations both in the traditional maritime domain and, more recently, over land.

Commencing in 1980, Operation Estes involved P-3s in round-the-clock surveillance of Bass Strait oil rigs against an assessed terrorism threat.

Further afield, Butterworth-based Operation Gateway, which started in February 1981, is the ADF’s longest continuously active operation and has had P-3s locating and tracking submerged submarines and conducting ISR operations against a variety of targets in the area of operations.

These operations are not without hazard. P-3s, while not armed in these missions, have been engaged by small arms fire and the radars of more potent hostile weapons systems.

P-3 surveillance operations in the south-west Pacific have long fulfilled a broad diplomatic agenda.

Safeguarding the natural resources of island states, which lack the necessary assets to discharge this role, Operation Solania’s maritime surveillance by P-3s has been a tangible expression of Australia’s position as a trusted neighbour and regional partner.

Strategically, the presence of Air Force

P-3s in these patrols has also provided a counterweight to the activities of other nations exploring opportunities in the region.

Over the years, the Orion has featured in countless rescues at sea.

Prominent among these were the rescue of solo yachtswoman Isabelle Autissier, 900 nautical miles south of South Australia, in 1995, and the even more challenging rescues of yachtsmen Tony Bullimore, Thierry Dubois and Raphael Dinelli in the 1996-97 Vendee Globe solo-handed around-the-world yacht race. Each of them capsized about 1200 nautical miles south of Western Australia.

In its long service life, the P-3C has increased its capability and airframe life through continuous upgrades.

Early in the piece, the P-3C’s well-established surface surveillance capability was transformed to a maritime strike capability when the aircraft was armed with the AGM-84 Harpoon missile.

On Anzac Day in 1982 a P-3C became the first Air Force platform to fire one of these weapons when it engaged an exercise target at sea near Hawaii.

Subsequent upgrade projects have included AIR 5140, commenced in 1989 and primarily aimed at installing an advanced electronic support measures system. The multi-phase AIR 5276 program, starting in 1995, extended the life and enhanced the military capabilities of the redesignated AP-3C Orion fleet.

Along with the introduction of sophisticated electronic warfare self-protection systems and continuing upgrades to the aircraft’s electro-optics/infra-red system, continuing enhancements to the aircraft under AIR 5276 made it an effective ISR platform throughout coalition operations in the Middle East.

Between 2003 and 2012, the AP-3C won accolades for its operations over land and in maritime roles, routinely being tasked in both environments on the same sorties.

Since the P-3’s design stemmed from the Lockheed Electra passenger aircraft, no description of Air Force P-3 operations would be complete without reference to the Orion’s air mobility roles.

Over nearly 50 years since its arrival at Edinburgh, these have included countless aeromedical evacuations across the region, exploitation of the aircraft’s capability to self-deploy with its own support crew, acting as a navigation and communications platform for long transits by less capable platforms and, on occasion, exotic passenger transport tasks.

Perhaps the most unusual of these was in August 1974, when Russian musician Georgi Ermolenko, seven colleagues and an officer from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) were ferried from RAAF Base Pearce to Singapore in an 11SQN P-3B.

Unions had banned commercial flights from taking Mr Ermolenko out of Australia when he changed his mind after earlier seeking to defect to Australia.

Flying to Singapore, the 11SQN crew decided they had identified the KGB officer they were convinced would be accompanying Mr Ermolenko.

The next day the “KGB man” returned to Australia on the P-3 – he was the DFAT officer.

Throughout its service with the Air Force, the P-3s has epitomised the flexibility of air power.

While the Air Force’s AP-3Cs will continue this legacy with 10SQN until the aircraft is finally withdrawn from service, for 11SQN it’s goodbye to the Orion as the baton is passed to the P-8A Poseidon.

Ground crew and aircrew are invited to share their memories of P-3 service with AIRCDRE Ian Pearson, who is writing the history of the aircraft for a book the Air Force’s Directorate of History is planning to publish. Contact AIRCDRE Pearson via ian.pearson@defence.gov.au



RAAF News’ coverage of the Orion’s introduction to the Air Force, replacing the Neptune, in 1968.



Left: 11SQN’s Crew 1 and their AP-3C played a key role in a search and rescue operation involving two suspected irregular entry vessels off Cocos Island in May 2010. Photos: from RAAF archives



11SQN’s B Crew with their P-3B at Naval Air Station Moffett Field (near San Francisco), US, for Exercise Valiant Heritage in March 1976.



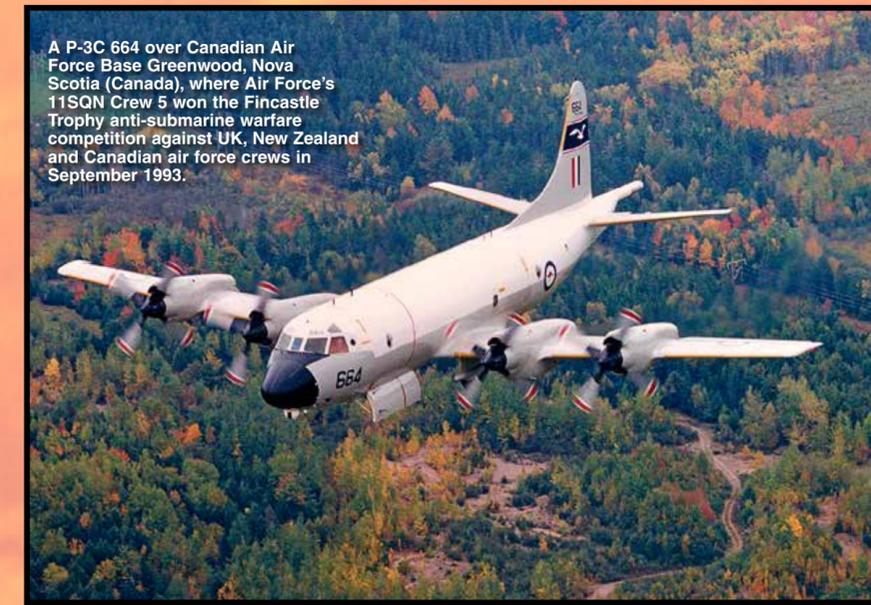
An 11SQN flight deck team in an AP-3C Orion during Operation Island Chief 2014. Photo: Peter Shomos



An ex-10SQN Lockheed Neptune maritime patrol aircraft and an AP-3C Orion participate in a flypast during the T150 Townsville Defence Force Air Show in October. Photo: CPL David Cotton



A P-3B near Koko Head, Oahu (Hawaii) shortly after the aircraft were picked up from the US in the first half of 1968.



A P-3C 664 over Canadian Air Force Base Greenwood, Nova Scotia (Canada), where Air Force’s 11SQN Crew 5 won the Fincastle Trophy anti-submarine warfare competition against UK, New Zealand and Canadian air force crews in September 1993.