

SPAIN



SAF

ORIONS OF SPAIN

BY MARCO BORST

In 1953 Spain signed a defense treaty with the United States government, which resulted in a restructuring of the Spanish Air Force organization and the modernization of its fleet of aircraft. The treaty was revised in 1976, allowing the United States Air Force and Navy to operate from three major airbases in Spain: Zaragoza, Torrejon and Rota. Rota, located on Spain's Atlantic coast just south of the beaches of Plaza de Castillo, has hosted U.S. Navy P-3 squadrons ever since, and has become a key location for MPA operations in the North Atlantic and Mediterranean.

Spain, herself, was already a P-3 player; she had become the fifth nation to operate the P-3 Orion when the Spanish Air Force or Ejercito del Aire, took delivery of three P-3A Orions in 1973. The aircraft were the original DELTIC configuration and were purchased to replace their aging fleet of Grumman HU-16B Albatross amphibious patrol aircraft. The Orions were assigned to 221 Escuadron of the ALA de Patrulla 22 (221 Squadron, 22nd Patrol Wing). The three Orions were former US Navy aircraft. By 1977, one of the P-3As was destroyed during a take-off accident. The remaining two Orions operated alongside the Albatrosses until 1978 when the latter were resigned.

Their maritime patrol fleet of two aircraft was enlarged the next year by four additional P-3As which were acquired through a ten year lease agreement with the U.S. Navy. The planes had been rotated out of the Navy Reserve squadrons who were receiving P-3Bs.

After more than ten years of P-3 experience, Spain started to study the options for upgrading their maritime patrol force. The four leased Orions were basic P-3A models, capable of monitoring only four sonobuoys and lacking almost any form

of electronic analysis or command and control avionics. The two Spanish-owned Orions were upgraded, but were still behind the current state-of-the-art maritime patrol and ASW capabilities. The 221 Squadron approached the Spanish Government with a request to purchase six P-3Cs.

The Spanish Government was not able to comply with 221 Squadrons' request but by mid-1986, two alternative solutions emerged. The first possibility was to buy four or five P-3As to replace the leased aircraft; the second possibility was to buy five surplus P-3Bs from the Royal Norwegian Air Force, who were expecting delivery of four new P-3C Update IIIs. A decision to buy five Norwegian Bravoes was made in 1987. The aircraft were ferried from Bodo AB in Norway to Jerez de la Frontera AB in Spain by Norwegian crews between November 1988 and September 1989.

After their arrival in Spain the P-3Bs were placed in storage for a short period, with hopes for an upgrading contract. When it became clear that the upgrading plans would be delayed by budget cuts, the aircraft were sent through SDLM at Oficinas Gerais de Material Aeronautico (OGMA) at Alverca AB in Portugal, and placed in operational status.

When the 10 year lease agreement period was coming to an end, the four Alphas were prepared for return to the U.S. Navy. But, at the same time, the Navy was retiring its P3As so the aircraft were processed through the Aircraft Maintenance and Regeneration Center at Davis Monthan AFB. From there, one was transferred to Hawkins & Powers at Greybull. Another started a new operational life as a UP-3A with the Chilean Navy last year, and a third went to the fire-fighting company, Black Hills Aviation (now Neptune, Inc.). Spain decided to retain the fourth aircraft for addition to the Spanish

P-3 Orions Operated by The Spanish Air Force
P-3A DELTIC:

BuNo	SAF#	Side #	TO SPAIN
150507	P.3-4	22-23	07-06-79
	(now Chilean Navy UP-3A #402)		
150510	P.3-5	22-24	12-12-79
	(with Hawkins & Powers, USA)		
150513	P.3-6	22-25	09-21-79
	(with Neptune, Inc., USA)		
150516	P.3-7	22-26	06-06-80
	(preserved SAF museum)		
152145	P.3-3	22-22	08-01-73
	(still in service SAF)		
152149	P.3-2	221-21	08-01-73
	(crashed 07-08-77)		
152153	P.3-1	22-21	08-01-73
	(still in service SAF)		

P-3B TAC/NAV MOD:

BuNo	SAF#	Side #	TO SPAIN
154583	P.3-8	22-31	06-07-89
156599	P.3-9	22-32	04-19-89
156600	P.3-10	22-33	11-04-88
156601	P.3-11	22-34	12-02-88
156602	P.3-12	22-35	09-06-89



Air Force Museum; after U.S. Navy approval, the purchase and transfer was completed.

The two Spanish-owned P-3As remain in service along with their five "new" P-3Bs. The old Alpha engines have recently been replaced by new Bravo (14) engines for better performance and maintenance compatibility.

By mid-1990 the Spanish government had devised an upgrade plan for their MPA fleet of seven.

The mission equipment identified for the project would combine GEC Avionics mission computers, an AQS-943 or 948 acoustic signal processor, Thorn EMI Searchwater II radar, ALR-66(V)3 ESM and a FLIR Systems Series 2000 Forward Looking Infra Red system.

Early 1992 it was announced that Spain slashed funding on the upgrade program as a part of its ongoing budget cuts. At this point, the most likely resolve will be to address each upgrade change individually as funding becomes available. The efficiency of the one-at-a-time approach may not be the most desirable, but it can certainly solve the problem, and allow Spain's Orion fleet to fit well into fulfillment of their national and international mission requirements.

Until recently, the seven Spanish Orions of 221 Squadron were based at Jerez de la Frontera AB near Cadiz and a short distance from Rota. Now the P-3 community resides in nearby Moran AB. Regular deployments are made to Son San Juan AB (Balearic Islands), Gando AB (Canaries) and Santiago de Compostela AF Detachment (NW of the Iberian Peninsula).

Although the P-3s are owned and maintained by the Air Force and have Air Force cockpit crews, the remainder of the crews are Naval personnel. Operational control of the squadron is held by the Spanish Navy's Commander of the Fleet, a relatively new function created in January 1988.

Without any doubt Spain's P-3s continue to play an important role in the NATO MPA-network. They are currently working along side of many other P-3 international operators in Operation Sharp Guard in the Adriatic Sea. They also participate in major NATO exercises with their own annual "Tapon" exercise as a highlight. During "Tapon" (developed in the Strait of Gibraltar), 221 is the host squadron for P-3s from Canada, The Netherlands, Portugal and the United States.