

Patrolling Over The Med

By
Marco P. J. Borst

It is not unusual to see a US Navy P-3 Orion taking off from an airbase on the Italian island of Sicily. Here the USN maintains a full squadron of P-3 Orions at NAS Sigonella, NATO's primary base in support of naval operations in southern Europe. Maritime Patrol Aircraft have operated from Sigonella for almost forty years, since the base was designated a Naval Air Facility on June 15, 1959. Sigonella's unique strategic location, in the Southernmost part of Europe, with the African continent just across the Mediterranean Sea, and the Strait of Gibraltar and the Suez Canal close by, places it in the centre of many international operations.

The Air Station

The name of the air station originates from the old name of the land where it is located. The area was known as Sigona Grande. When the land was divided among nobles, one section became known as The Little Sigona or Sigonella. It was already in use as an airstrip for emergency landings by German planes from the fighter base at Gerbini during World War Two. A couple of years after the war, the USN and NATO came up with plans to construct a naval air facility for operations with Lockheed P2V Neptunes. The work started in 1957; the flying operations started in the Summer of 1959 and less than twenty years later Sigonella had almost tripled in size. The facility was responsible for the support of operations of the Sixth Fleet. Responsibilities increased rapidly, and in 1981 Sigonella was recognized as a Naval Air Station. Throughout the Cold War NAS Sigonella was a primary staging point for Maritime Patrol Aircraft of most NATO allies.

Today's NAS Sigonella has about 7,000 personnel. Its air terminal is the busiest in the Mediterranean and the second most active in Europe; Ramstein AB in Germany is first, in terms of moving cargo and passengers. Since the closure of Clark AFB and NAS Subic Bay in the Philippines, the shortest route to

the Indian Ocean and Southwest Asia is through Sigonella. The air station itself is an Italian Air Force base. It is the home base for the Breguet Br1150 Atlantics of 41° Stormo and has a deployed fighter detachment in the air defence role. More than forty US Navy commands at the base include Helicopter Combat Support Squadron FOUR (HC-4) with CH-53E helicopters and PATRON Sigonella, a deployed patrol squadron operating Lockheed Martin P-3C Orions.

PATRON Sigonella

PATRON Sigonella has a Patrol Squadron deployed from the United States at all times. The squadron, from CPW5 at NAS Brunswick or CPW11 at NAS Jacksonville, operates out of Sigonella for six-month periods with nine P-3C Orions and is supported by the local Tactical Support Center (TSC) providing all the necessary support for MPA missions. The main operation is to provide maritime patrol in support of Sixth Fleet operations in the Mediterranean, Europe and Africa. Additionally, PATRON Sigonella assists

U.S. forces in the Middle East when operational requirements dictate. Tasks include battle-group support, ASW, Over-The-Horizon-Targeting, Joint Task Force exercises, real-time, overland video reconnaissance and ASUW. The latter became more important with the introduction of Maverick missiles to the P-3's standard armament, and the retirement of A-6 Intruders.

Patrol Squadron FORTY-FIVE took up residence at NAS Sigonella at the end of July 1997 for their six-month term. They took over responsibilities from Patrol Squadron EIGHT on 7 August, and remained at Sigonella until February 1998 when Patrol Squadron TWENTY-SIX moved in. The normal cycle for a patrol squadron is six months on deployment followed by a twelve-month training period at home to prepare for the next deployment of six months. PATRON Sigonella, which is under direct command of the Commander Task Force 67 in Naples, has about 350 personnel, including twelve crews.

Besides the normal maritime patrol responsibilities in the



VP-45's Commander's bird P-3C-III R Buno 158219 taxis out for another MED mission, NAS Sigonella, November 1997.

(Borst)

Mediterranean, the duty VP can be called for duty in other roles, or even in other areas. For example, two Orions are permanently equipped with a sophisticated long-range, high-resolution, computer-controlled, gyro-stabilized camera system known as Cast Glance. This Electro-Optical system enables the P-3 crew to take video and still images of subjects on the ground, and then pass them via a radio data link to a command center. Such a mission can be conducted from a safe altitude, to protect the Orion and its crew from hostile fire. These two Orions of VP-45, as well as any other VP aircraft that were, or will be, deployed to Sigonella, have been providing real-time overland aerial reconnaissance to commanders of the Stabilization Force (SFOR) on the ground in Bosnia-Herzegovina, showing them what events occur. These operations already started during the war in former Yugoslavia. Having this valuable equipment available at Sigonella means that PATRON Sigonella crews are forward deployed to other, sometimes even unusual, locations. In 1994 VP-16 sent an EOS-equipped P-3C to the African continent to locate and monitor refugee movements in and around Rwanda. On this occasion the Orion operated from Entebbe airport in Uganda.

Highlights for VP-45 1997/98 deployment to Sigonella were a successful Maverick missile shot in a littoral scenario, exercise Royal Sierra out of Gibraltar, where the new Air Deployable Delivery System - ADDS - was used to pass surveillance information to the US Navy SEALs in the

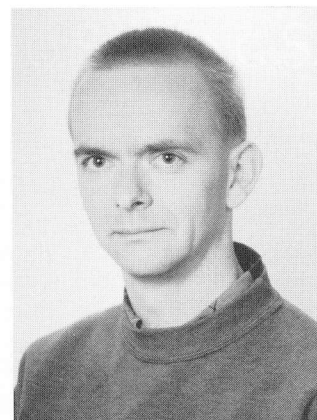
water, participation in a Romanian naval day and a local exercise with the Malta Defence Force. A sad assignment for VP-45 was the detachment to Windhoek airport in Namibia in support of SAR operations after a mid air collision of a German Air Force Tupolev Tu154 and a USAF C-141 Starlifter off the Namibian coast in September 1997. Just a few hours after the crash an Orion with five pilots, four engineers and twelve crew members departed from Sigonella for the 5,000 mile flight to Windhoek. Together with USAF units, VP-45 took part in 35 missions providing 24 hours coverage, but finding some parts of aircraft wreckage as the only result.

PATRON Sigonella Orions play key roles in both war and peacekeeping operations in the Middle East, Adriatic and Mediterranean areas. Sometimes the area of operations is even in, or around, African countries. Reserve Patrol squadrons and Maritime Patrol Aircraft from other NATO countries have assisted, and augment the duty Patrol Squadron at NAS Sigonella when necessary. All this illustrates the importance of PATRON Sigonella's presence in the Med, and it is believed that their versatile operations will continue for years to come.



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About The Author

Marco P.J. Borst made it his hobby to describe the history of the Lockheed Martin P-3 Orion. As a freelance journalist, he has visited several P-3 operating squadrons, and has written several articles on the P-3 Orion. He co-operates with Jaap Dubbeldam in the P-3 Orion Research Group. Last year, they published a booklet about the Orion in the Dutch language. However, an important part of this booklet: "P-3 Orion Aircraft Location History Report," that describes the service history of every single P-3, is written in English.

Marco Borst also established, and maintains, an informative home page about the P-3 Orion on the Internet. This page, which is frequently updated, can be found at: <http://home.wxs.nl/~p3orion/index.html> Besides a news section, and other basic information sections about the P-3 Orion, this home page provides several links to other P-3 related home pages.

CP-107 Argus Found In Mint Condition

The Royal Canadian Mint has seen fit to re-launch the Argus on a Canadian aviation series \$20.00 coin. The sterling silver (92.5%) coin has a 24-karat gold-covered cameo portrait of W. S. Longhurst, who made the first test flight of the aircraft with his crew at Cartierville, Quebec on March 28, 1957. The coin has a weight of 31 (g), diameter of 38 (mm) with a maximum mintage of 50,000 coins. On the observse side is an Effigy of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.

The coin sells from the Mint for \$57.95 plus tax, the catalogue item is #624208 and you can contact the mint toll free at 1-800-267-1871 if interested. This is a treasure for any old Argus sweats. (VPI Historian)

