

PREPARING FOR THE FUTURE: The Royal Netherlands Navy's Maritime Patrol Group

by Marco P.J. Borst

The Maritime Patrol (MARPAT) Group of the Royal Netherlands Navy is a part of the Dutch defence organization which has been threatened with disestablishment plans several times in its existence. The most recent defence white paper foresees a major upgrade for ten of the service's thirteen Lockheed Martin P-3C-III/2 Orions. This emphasizes that the MARPAT Group's important national and international roles are recognized and to be continued for years to come.

MARPAT's Organization

The MARPAT Group was established on 1 July 1977 as the parent organization for the three squadrons at RNLNAS Valkenburg: VSQ2 (the training squadron), VSQ320 and VSQ321 (the two operational squadrons). After the RNLN's Breguet SP-13A Atlantics were phased out in 1984, all three squadrons operated the P-3C-III/2 Orion. Originally

Netherlands Naval Air Arm) led to the disestablishment of VSQ2 on 1 October 1993. VSQ321 took over responsibilities for P-3C flight training while VSQ320 remained an operational squadron. Further reorganizations consolidated the activities of VSQ321 and Opleidingen Valkenburg (OVALK - Valkenburg Training Unit) into one organization. In the new structure, which came into effect after the summer of 2000, VSQ321/OVALK is responsible for all training activities within the MARPAT Group. New pilots get their transition training to the Orion with VSQ321/OVALK after they have completed an initial training course on the Pilatus PC-7 with the RNLAF at Woensdrecht AB, followed by a twin-engine course on the Beech 200 King Air with a civilian flying school. After an initial training period all pilots, FEs, IFTs, TACCOs, NAVCOMs, sensor operators and observers receive addition-

cations. The basic training for pilots and navigators for the Maritime Helicopter Group (MARHELI) is also partly given by VSQ321/OVALK. Another major responsibility of VSQ321/OVALK is the utilization of the P-3C-III/2 flight simulators. The Operational Flight Trainer (OFT) and the Operational Tactics Trainer (OTT) are situated in the Sirius mission-support center at RNLNAS Valkenburg. The OFT is in operation for four sessions of three hours each per working day. The RNLN P-3C OFT is also being frequently used by flight crews from Spain, Portugal, Norway and Europe-deployed USN squadrons, since it is the only P-3 simulator in Europe.

The Royal Netherlands Navy currently has sixteen P-3C crews: VSQ320 has ten crews, VSQ321/OVALK can form five crews, and the MARPAT detachment at Hato AB (Curacao) has one crew which is stationed there for a period of three years. The latter is augmented by two crews from VSQ320 and/or VSQ321/OVALK on a rotational basis. To keep the instructors current, VSQ321/OVALK crews frequently take part in exercises like JMC, and rotate through the Hato and Keflavik detachments.

The Aircraft

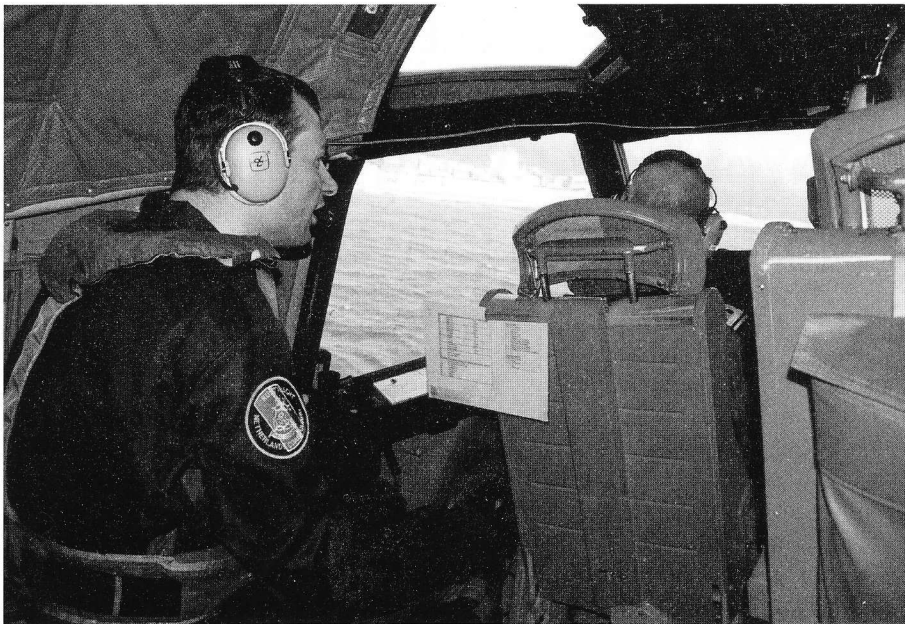
The RNLN took delivery of its first P-3C-III/2 Orion on 5 November 1981. This aircraft was flown to NAS Jacksonville and later augmented by the next three RNLN Orions. These four aircraft were used during the initial P-3 conversion training, which was given by USN's VP-30. After four crews had successfully completed the training course they ferried the first four RNLN Orions from NAS Jacksonville to RNLNAS Valkenburg in The Netherlands on 21 July 1982. Upon entering Dutch airspace the first aircraft was welcomed by the RNLN's last operational SP-2H Neptune of VSQ320 and an SP-13A Atlantic of VSQ321. These aircraft arrived over RNLNAS Valkenburg in close formation. The introduction of



A RNLN P3C-III/2 Orion taxis through the rinse rack at RNLNAS Valkenburg (Marco Borst)

the Orions were owned and maintained by VSQ320, while VSQ2 made use of these aircraft for training sorties when required. A reorganization within the Marineluchtvaartdienst (the Royal

al training with a crew, under operational circumstances. VSQ321/OVALK is also responsible for the training of ground and maintenance personnel as well as for all MARPAT Group-related technical publi-



Netherlands Customs officer onboard an Orion during a coast guard mission

the P-3C-III/2 went smoothly. From the start of the RNLN P-3 program the Dutch crews gained recognition and respect for their outstanding results during international exercises. In June 1983 a Dutch detachment of four Orions took part in exercise Ocean Safari, and booked the best results of all participating units! VSQ320 was declared fully operational in 1984. The 13th and last Orion was delivered on 14 September 1984. MARPAT established a permanent detachment at NAS Keflavik, Iceland on 18 October 1985. The single Orion stationed at this NATO base is operated in close cooperation with the USN's PATRONKEF. Currently, the USN duty patrol squadron deploys only four Orions to Keflavik so, with one aircraft, the MARPAT Group comprises 20% of the PATRONKEF Orion fleet.

The Missions

"Compare the hunt for submarines with the search for a couple of pennies on a soccer field. A tough job, but it can be done. When you know that the number of pennies on the field is smaller than before it does not mean that the search is easier. On the contrary...in fact there's more work to do in the same area." Speaking was CDR Warner Borgeld, Executive Officer of the MARPAT Group. His comment on the ongoing decrease of the number of Maritime Patrol Aircraft within NATO is clear and true. It is a fact that

the big red danger from the East is no longer considered to be our potential enemy, but nations like Iran have taken delivery of submarines based on old Soviet technology over the last few years. It is of importance to know where these submarines are; they are the proverbial needles in a haystack if you don't have an up-to-date maritime patrol platform like the P-3 Orion available. This is why NATO still needs a large MPA fleet, and anti-submarine warfare is still an important part of the workload for MPA crews. But after the end of the Cold War the maritime patrol fraternity also accepted a number of new tasks for which the Orion is an excellent platform. The Orion fleet of the MARPAT Group is no exception. Over the last few years Dutch P-3C-III/2 Orions started to conduct coast guard missions, counter drug operations and even overland-reconnaissance operations next to their traditional ASW missions.

The most important coast guard activities for the MARPAT Group are surveillance flights in support of VONNOVI 2000 (VerkeersOnderzoek Noordzee Visuele Identificatie - Traffic Investigation North Sea Visual Identification). VONNOVI 2000's goal is to collect position, course, name and type of ship and cargo, of traffic in the North Sea. For this mission the North Sea is divided into nine areas which will get attention from the Orion crew four times on every day of the week (28 missions per area). In

total VONNOVI 2000 carries out 252 coast guard missions for the MARPAT Group. The crew checks every contact with the Lloyds Register of Ships which is available on a laptop computer onboard the Orion. On every mission a police or customs officer is aboard to take down the evidence in case a ship is breaking the law.

The majority of the RNLN counter-drug operations is carried out in the Caribbean in close cooperation with US Navy and Coast Guard units. Besides that, the RNLN is responsible for the Coast Guard Netherlands Antilles and Aruba (Kustwacht NA&A). In December 2000 the crew of a MARPAT Orion located a suspicious ship 300 miles off the Curaçao coast, enroute from Colombia to an unknown destination. A US Coast Guard cutter was directed to the suspicious ship by the Orion's crew. Investigation aboard the vessel led to the discovery of a shipment of 5000 kilos of marijuana. The vessel's crew was arrested, and the ship was brought into Puerto Rico for further investigation. With this catch, the total result of RNLN and Coast Guard counter-drug operations in 2000 was 13,468 kilos of confiscated drugs.

Another interesting new mission for the MARPAT Group was the deployment of the Orion as an airborne-reconnaissance platform over land in support of NATO's operation Eagle Eye over Kosovo. Things went fast after the Orion was chosen as the most suitable platform for this mission. In November 1998 the RNLN launched a modification program for three aircraft. These were modified with the FLIR Systems, Star Safire, electro-optical sensor and a Pioneer relay system for real-time transmission of Star Safire video and photo images. Furthermore, these aircraft were equipped with missile-warning receivers and chaff/flare dispensers for self-protection. The modifications were done by the USN at NAS Patuxent River and after completion of the job and a quick training course for the first crew, the MARPAT Group successfully deployed the first Orion to NAS Sigonella on 13 February 1999. Two days later this aircraft conducted the RNLN's first overland-reconnaissance mission. Ever since, the MARPAT Group frequently deploys an Orion to NAS



Orion # 307 on the threshold of Valkenburg's runway 23 (Marco Borst)

Signonella for a period of two weeks to conduct reconnaissance missions in close cooperation with PATRON Signonella, the USN patrol squadron deployed to this Italian NATO base.

The Future

Two major decisions taken by the Dutch government in 2000 define the future of the MARPAT Group. The first decision was announced in May 2000: both the parliament and government had authorized the plans for a major update of the Orion fleet. The update program, known as Capability Upkeep Programme or CUP is very similar to the USN's Anti surface warfare Improvement Program (AIP) and the RNoAF's Update Improvement Program (UIP). This guarantees continued and extended international cooperation on the subject of maritime patrol missions. Seven P-3C-III/2 Orions will go through the full CUP, while three more aircraft will receive a simplified update. These aircraft will be utilized for coast guard and drug interdiction duties. Unfortunately the MARPAT Group will lose three of its Orions for budgetary reasons. These aircraft are offered for sale. Although the MARPAT Group currently has thirteen aircraft available, they started to operate with only ten aircraft in January 2001. This is a trial phase to find out what the operational problems and shortcomings will be after the three aircraft are phased out.

The second decision that will have much impact on the MARPAT Group is

the closing RNLNAS Valkenburg. The Dutch government has decided to reserve the ground for a new housing estate. Plans call for the MARPAT Group to leave Valkenburg in 2010. The P-3C Orions which are currently based at Valkenburg will move to RNLNAS De Kooy. The plans are written down in the "Vijfde Nota Ruimtelijke Ordening" (Fifth Memorandum Environmental Planning) issued by the government in December 2000. At RNLNAS De Kooy many improvements need to be carried out before the MARPAT can move in with its Orions. De Kooy is a helicopter base with a runway (04-22) of 3379 ft. The runway needs to be enlarged, which means that the existing railway between the cities of Alkmaar and Den Helder has to be moved. Where Valkenburg has all the accommodations and facilities for the operations of MARPAT, at De Kooy new maintenance hangars, a mission support center, training facilities, new taxiways, a longer runway, new platforms and wash facilities have to be constructed before the Orions can move in. An environmental research to the effect of increased activities at RNLNAS De Kooy still has to be carried out. Additionally, some land around the existing base has to be purchased in order to be able to enlarge the base. It is expected that modification of De Kooy will cost between 136 and 250 million Euros.

The RNLN P-3C OFT, already recognized as one of the best P-3 flightdeck simulators in the world, will be exten-

sively modified with a new hydraulic-motion system and daylight vision. These modifications will be done between September 2001 and March 2002 by CAE of Canada, the company that built the simulator. During the modification project the RNLN will make use of USN simulators. The modernization plans for the Orion fleet call for a major upgrade for the OTT, but a decision to equip it with the same mission-systems suite as the actual aircraft has not yet been taken.

CDR Fred Baarda (CO of VSQ321/OVALK) foresees a heavy workload for his squadron when the first upgraded Orions re-enter service with MARPAT. Initially two crews and a group of maintenance personnel will undergo a conversion training with VP-30 at NAS Jacksonville in 2003. Aircraft 312, the first RNLN Orion to be modified at a Lockheed Martin facility, most likely at Greenville, SC, will depart RNLNAS Valkenburg by the end of 2001. The first delivery of a CUP-modified Orion is scheduled for 2002. After completion of the first aircraft, the lead time will be around five months per aircraft which means that the CUP will be completed by the end of 2005. This also means that VSQ321/OVALK has the responsibility of keeping MARPAT crews and maintenance personnel current on two completely different types of aircraft (the P-3C-III/2 and the P-3C CUP) for a period of almost two years. After completion of the Capability Upkeep Programme, MARPAT has five years to prepare for the move to RNLNAS De Kooy.

Both the Capability Upkeep Programme and the huge investments to make RNLNAS De Kooy suitable for P-3 operations enable the MARPAT Group to continue its excellent contribution to meeting national and NATO requirements for at least another 25 years.

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