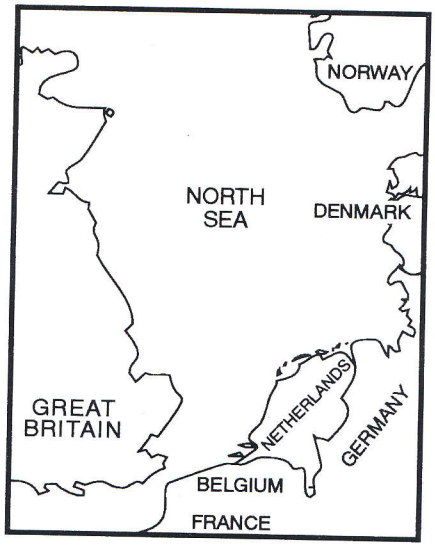
Orions of the Netherlands

BY MARCO BORST

If the Netherlands seems an unlikely candidate for an operator of a Maritime Patrol Aircraft fleet, a quick look at a map of the North Sea will make something clear. Notice that the North Sea is bordered predominantly by three countries: Great Britain, Norway and the Netherlands. No vessel can enter or exit the sea without passing the natural choke points of two of the three land masses. This factor was especially important during the Cold War era. Noticeably, all three of these countries have a fleet of aircraft dedicated to watching the maritime activity taking place on and under the water.

The Dutch "Marineluchtvaartdienst" (MLD - Naval Aviation Service) first expressed her interest in the Lockheed P-3 Orion after the disestablishment of her only aircraft carrier, the HrMs Karel Doorman, in 1968. Until then, their ASW operations had been carried out by land-based SP-2H Neptunes and carrier-based S-2F Trackers. Following the disestablishment of the Doorman, the Dutch government decided to replace the Trackers with land-based ASW aircraft. The Royal Netherlands Navy wanted to purchase the Lockheed P-3B, but a government decision in favor of nine French-built Breguet BR1150 "Atlantics" was made instead. In Dutch service, these aircraft, assigned to VSQ-321, were known as SP-13A's. The Neptunes remained in service with VSQ-320.



In 1974 the government planned to replace the Neptunes with 13 new MPA's by 1983. During their evaluation of available aircraft the British Nimrod, the second generation Atlantique and the P-3 were all considered. The British Nimrod was dropped for noise-level and operational cost reasons. The second generation Breguet Atlantique NG lost popularity after two accidents, one in 1973 and another in 1978. Both aircraft

The Dutch expanded the mission capability of number 306 (BUNO 161374) by fitting it with eight stretchers and eight passenger seats to evacuate casualties during the Gulf War. Although a second aircraft was available for this first-ever hospital configuration, the mission never transpired.

were lost because of steering problems. After the parliament approved the selection of the P-3C-II.5 Orion, the government ordered thirteen aircraft from Lockheed, through a USN FMS-program in December 1978.

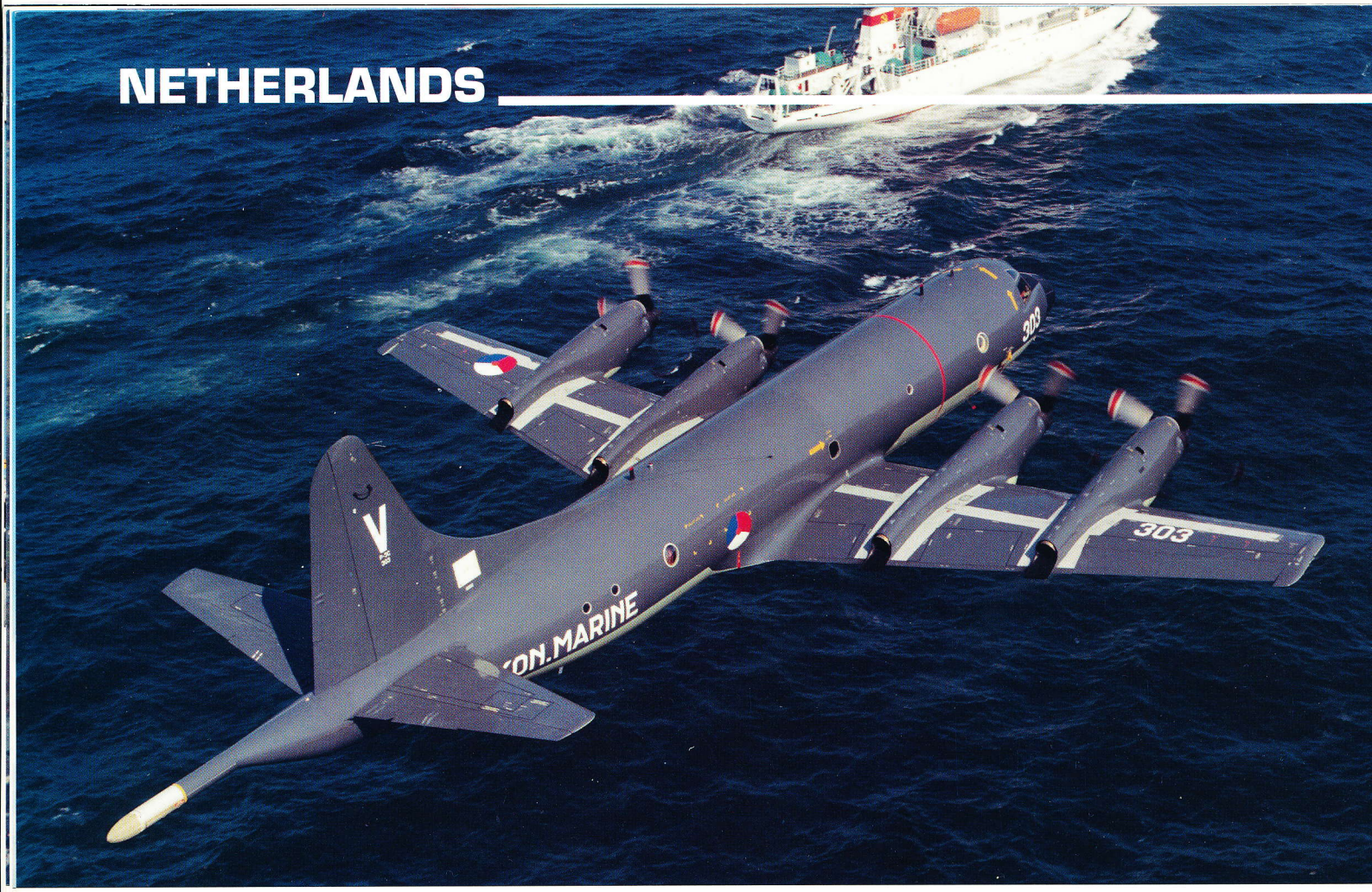
US SUPPORT DURING INTRODUCTION OF THE P-3

Not surprisingly, the Dutch asked the US Navy for their assistance during the introduction of the P-3 into the MLD-fleet. After all, the Navy was operating the world's largest P-3 fleet. Navy experts advised the Dutch on the organization of P-3 maintenance, training, support and operations. Preparing for the Orion meant a total refurbishment program for Royal Netherlands Naval Air Station Valkenburg; new workshops, hangars, a mission support center, and a new air traffic control tower were built, while the runways, taxiways and platforms were improved.


Leidsch Dagblad

A newspaper clipping shows HM Queen Beatrix visiting RNLNAS Valkenburg for a P-3 Orion briefing. Her escort is Capt J. M. Goemans, Commander of both the Maritime Patrol Group and the Naval Air Station.

NETHERLANDS



The first Dutch crew members started training with VP-30 at NAS Jacksonville in September 1981. Lockheed delivered the first MLD-Orion to the Dutch Liaison Team with VP-30 in November. After delivery of the second and third P-3C-II.5, they were ferried to RNLNAS Valkenburg on 21 July 1982 by RNLN and USN pilots. In Dutch airspace the first Orion (# 300) received an escort of the last operational SP-2H Neptune (#204) and an SP-13A Atlantic (#258).

THE FIRST STEPS

The Dutch Orions were almost immediately detached to foreign locations for participation in international exercises. One of the highlights was NATO-exercise "Ocean Safari" in June 1983. VSQ-320 detached four Orions to Lajes in the Azores (Portugal). This was also the first exercise in which Canadian CP-140 Auroras were involved. The Dutch aircraft scored the best results: 22 analyzed submarine contacts of which 19 were attacked! The USN and CAF only had 11 contacts and no attacks. The next milestone was the first contact with a Soviet submarine, by a Dutch P-3 operating from NAS Keflavik, Iceland. The thirteenth and final Dutch P-3 was delivered in September 1984. During this year VSQ-320 reached full operational status with the Orion. Technical problems with the steering system of the remaining six Atlantics (a third one was lost in 1981) caused the early retirement of the type from MLD-service by the end of 1984. The Atlantics were sold to the French Navy and VSQ-321 transitioned to the P-3, using aircraft borrowed from VSQ-320.

On 18 October 1985 one of the Dutch Orions (# 312) left Valkenburg to be permanently detached to NAS Keflavik, where it still remains. It is used primarily for participation in NATO operations.

DUTCH P-3 OPERATIONS

Tracking Soviet submarines kept the Dutch P-3s busy for over 10 years, but the aircraft were used for several other missions as well. Twice a year an Orion acts as a communications and SAR Guard platform for RNLAF F-16s enroute to low-flying exercises in Goose Bay, Canada.

During the Gulf War, P-3 No. 306 was fitted with eight stretchers and eight passenger seats, to evacuate casualties from the area if necessary. A second aircraft would have been available within

ROYAL NETHERLANDS NAVY P-3s IN SERVICE

LASC #	RNLN #	BuNo
5733	300	161368
5737	301	161369
5741	302	161370
5745	303	161371
5750	304	161372
5754	305	161373
5758	306	161374
5762	307	161375
5765	308	161376
5769	309	161377
5773	310	161378
5774	311	161379
5776	312	161380

24 hours. Several aircraft were used in support of Dutch frigates in the Gulf and the Dutch military hospital located in Jebel Ali, United Arab Emirates. Two Dutch Orions took up residence at NAS Sigonella, Italy to take over part of the NATO responsibilities of US Navy P-3s in the Mediterranean, to free them for participation in the Gulf War.

When the Cold War ended, the P-3s became available for new missions. Since 1992 Dutch Orions have been conducting Caribbean anti-narcotics operations out of Hato airfield on Curacao, Dutch Antilles. Originally known as "Operation PC3" (for Command, Control and Communications), the anti-narcotics mission is now called "Operation Fair Trade" and is conducted in close co-operation with the USN/USCG Task Force 4 and the Dutch Air Force 336 Sqn, which operates the Fokker F-27MPA Maritime.

Another newly acquired mission is the fishery-, pollution- and environmental patrol mission on behalf of the Dutch Coast Guard. These missions are usually flown over the Dutch territorial part of the North Sea. Police officers join the MLD-crews on these flights.

In July 1992, two Orions were permanently detached to NAS Sigonella for participation in the multi-national Operation Sharp Guard. They are patrolling the Adriatic Sea to maintain the UN embargo against former Yugoslavian states. Sharp Guard was the first occasion in which Dutch P-3s were ever operating with live torpedoes in their weapons bay.

In a mission similar to Sharp Guard, the Dutch are supporting NATO's Operation Support Democracy embargo of Haiti. In addition to their P-3s they have a frigate on station.

Another Dutch Caribbean tasking is the recently established operations in economic protection of the island nation of Surinam, a Dutch protectorate.

"Operation Golden Shrimp" is a fishery-patrol mission to detect illegal fishing boats. Since Surinam has no aircraft that are suitable for this mission, the Dutch government offered the Orion. Golden Shrimp, also flown out of Hato, is conducted in close operations with the Surinam National Army, Navy, Customs and Police.

The Royal Netherlands Navy has been investigating modernizing their fleet of P-3C II.5 Orions for several years. They are currently conducting a study to establish requirements for a Capabilities Upgrade Program. The CUP enhances the aircraft's Antisurface Warfare capacity, along with key areas of the acoustic suite. The Dutch are in the process of identifying specific systems and are circulating requests for information on a central computer, an imaging radar, a new acoustic processor with a 99 channel sonobuoy receiver set, an updated ESM system and multi-purpose high resolution displays. The CUP-Orion enhancement is tentatively scheduled for the 1997-2003 timeframe.

In the meantime, the Dutch are continuing with a number of avionics update projects which are essential to their international missions. These projects include new UHF/VHF radios for the communications suite, GPS for Navigation and the installation a Forward Looking Infrared system into the aircraft. They will use the FLIR Systems, Inc. AN/AAQ-22 SAFIRE thermal imaging which was originally acquired for Dutch H-14 Lynx helicopters. The SAFIRE, a gyro-stabilized, high-resolution digital thermal imager is being fitted into the existing IRDS provisioned retractor mechanism and sensor operator consoles. ★