

## **Maritime Patrol Reconnaissance Force – Flexible and Forward**

LTJG Matt Hepfinger, Patrol Squadron 26 Public Affairs

The Maritime Patrol and Reconnaissance Force (MPRF) has a long and proud history. Versatility, adaptability and professionalism have been community hallmarks since the early days of naval aviation. Providing the Navy with a reliable, long range, multi-mission capability, MPRF supports the Fleet in the pursuit of maritime domain awareness and dominance. A potent Anti-submarine Warfare (ASW) capability is vital to the MPRF role of protecting the sea base. ASW prowess is both a community tradition and the yardstick by which the MPRF trains and evaluates its crews.

The P-3 Orion earned its legendary ASW reputation during the Cold War. Its ASW suite has been steadily upgraded over the years, along with the addition and enhancement of other mission capabilities. The present day MPRF workhorse is the P-3C Aircraft Improvement Program (AIP) variant. The P-3C continues to prove its ASW worth while performing effectively in numerous other roles around the world, often operating from remote locations.

During the first half of 2010, the Tridents of Patrol Squadron 26 (VP-26) demonstrated MPRF's robust multi-mission and expeditionary capability while deployed in support of AFRICOM, CENTCOM, EUCOM and SOUTHCOM. The Tridents supported counter-piracy efforts in the CENTCOM and AFRICOM Areas of Responsibility (AOR), regional stabilization efforts in the AFRICOM AOR, NATO operations and exercises in the EUCOM AOR, and counter-narcotics and humanitarian assistance / disaster relief (HADR) efforts in the SOUTHCOM AOR. VP-26 upheld the MPRF tradition of contributing significantly to Navy forward presence, maritime domain awareness and maritime security operations in addition to supporting the Fleet.

Traditionally, MPRF squadrons often have relied on expeditionary capabilities. Establishing multiple short term and semi-permanent expeditionary detachments was an integral part of the Tridents' global deployment. In the Seychelles, VP-26 drew on its experience and the ability to work effectively with host nation officials who were adjusting to a significantly expanded U.S Armed Forces presence in their country. Knowing that the efficient flow of air traffic at Seychelles International Airport is crucial to the national economy, the Tridents assumed an essential support role for all transient military aircraft to maximize efficiency, ensure compliance with airfield regulations and maintain an effective working relationship with the host nation.

In January, VP-26 moved the AFRICOM detachment back to Djibouti where it quickly resumed operations and continued U.S. MPRF's cooperation and mutual support with the Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force and other coalition forces assigned there. Late in their deployment, VP-26 again leveraged its expeditionary capabilities – this time in SOUTHCOM – by establishing a temporary detachment in Honduras while runway maintenance was conducted at the primary MPRF operating site in El Salvador.

In Seychelles and elsewhere, VP-26 took advantage of the community's recent transition from Mobile Operational Command Centers (MOCC) to Tactical Operations Centers (TOC) and

Mobile Tactical Operations Centers (MTOC). The Tridents teamed with the highly capable MTOC unit sent forward by Commander, Task Force 67. Additionally, Operating in AFRICOM airspace presented some unique challenges. The Tridents worked closely with the MTOC, other U.S. and coalition flying units, and the 17<sup>th</sup> Air Force in establishing the 617 Airborne Operations Center, significantly improving mission effectiveness and reducing airborne risk in the AOR.

In EUCOM, VP-26 detached from its primary site in Sicily to sites all over Europe in support of NATO operations and exercises as well real world ASW contingencies. The Tridents contributed to essential international partnerships with Germany, Greece, Italy, Norway, Spain and the United Kingdom. This expeditionary capability allowed the Tridents to maximize MPRF's impact throughout the AOR in addition to supporting Operation ACTIVE ENDEAVOR in the Mediterranean.

The Tridents in SOUTHCOM primarily supported Joint Inter-Agency Task Force – South (JIATF-S) counter-narcotics operations. This involved close integration with the Coast Guard, Customs and numerous Central American partner nations. In January, VP-26 provided the initial airborne ISR coverage in response to the earthquake in Haiti. An alert Trident aircrew was launched in response to the unfolding disaster, and then joined forces with other Commander, Patrol Reconnaissance Wing ELEVEN (CPRW-11) squadrons to maintain persistent overhead coverage in support of aid and relief efforts on the ground.

Throughout their deployment, the Tridents maintained their ASW proficiency for crews in all operating locations. VP-26 supported five multi-national ASW exercises involving 25 different countries. The Tridents worked across Combatant Commands to coordinate valuable ASW combat sustainment opportunities provided by available U.S. and Allied submarines. Additionally, the Tridents had the opportunity to conduct coordinated ASW while supporting USS EISENHOWER Carrier Strike Group during its Mediterranean transit. Over the course of their deployment, the Tridents flew on nineteen different submarines from ten different countries.

In June 2010, VP-26 turned over three Task Groups and six operational sites to the War Eagles of Patrol Squadron 16. In conjunction with their subsequent redeployment, the Tridents conducted the final phase of their homeport change from Brunswick, Maine and consolidated the command at NAS Jacksonville, Florida. In Jacksonville, VP-26 joined the CPRW-11 team. Like other USN units and MPRF squadrons following a long stint forward, the Tridents paused briefly to embrace their families and unpack their bags in their new homes. With no time to lose, however, they soon kicked off preparations for their next deployment to ensure they have the leaders, training and tools to again perform the full spectrum of MPRF missions around the world. In the coming months, the Tridents will participate in exercises Valiant Shield in PACOM and Pit Stop in EUCOM as well as contributing to ongoing MPRF UAV operations.