

Hawaii May Eject US Navy Patrol Aviation

According to reports, the US Navy may be abandoning the Hawaiian Islands as a base for its new P-8A anti-submarine warfare airplane. This would end a patrol aviation presence in the islands that began in the 1930s and continues to this day.

Since the early 1960s the Navy has operated the P-3 airplane from Hawaii, first at the former NAS BARBERS POINT, and more recently from MCAS KANEOHE BAY after Barbers was closed. A hearing on the environmental impact of operating the P-8 in Hawaii is scheduled, a strange idea forced upon the Navy by the powerful “green” lobby when one considers that the P-8 is a militarized version of the Boeing 737 and that Hawaii daily operates hundreds of jet flights from HICKHAM AFB and Honolulu International Airport.

The introduction of the P-8 – due to reach the fleet beginning in 2012 and to be completed by 2019 – is problematic at best. With the last of the Reserve Patrol (VP) Squadrons due to stand down this year, the Navy will have only twelve VP squadrons left, down from a total of 39 reserve and active duty VP squadrons just 15 years ago. The steep de-emphasis on patrol aviation is due in part to the end of the Soviet Union’s submarine threat and to the sharp shift in military priorities since 2001. Aggravating the situation and a primary reason for the creation of the P-8 is the deterioration of the Navy’s P-3C fleet, which numbered approximately 288 aircraft three years ago and has shrunk to approximately 100 flyable aircraft at this date due to airframe fatigue, with some aircraft surpassing 30,000 total flight hours versus the design life of 20,000. The low-level, rough air, salt water spray operating environment of the P-3 simply eats airplanes alive.



H-16 flying boat of VP-4 in the 1930s

Officially, the Navy plans to replace its remaining P-3Cs with 108 P-8As plus approximately 50 unmanned aircraft under the Broad Area Maritime Surveillance Program. There may also be a P-8 variant to replace the EP-3E spook bird and this concept has been on-again, off again, on again until Navy observers have become dizzy. This reporter finds it highly unlikely that any number near 108 will be produced. As the latest news from Hawaii suggests, the Navy is acting upon the unspoken truth that the War on Islamofascism is siphoning away any money that will not contribute directly to defeating non-nation groups fighting asymmetric warfare. P-3s were built to track and, if so needed, stomp on Soviet submarines. After 1991 and the end of the USSR, the P-3 fleet moved more and more to overland missions in support of infantry and armor in the Middle East. While the DOD will obviously not admit it, our ASW capabilities had fallen into a state of

near total collapse just as fourth generation diesel-electric submarines with Air Independent Propulsion were proliferating world wide. The Navy tacitly admitted this when it established a new Naval Mine and Anti-submarine Warfare Command, combining two of the Navy's traditionally "orphaned" specialties. In the past several years the US Navy has continually gotten its butt kicked by diesel subs from European allies working as "adversaries" in joint operations. Most recently, a ChiCom "Song-class" boat surfaced within five miles of the USS Kitty Hawk battle group. You can count upon some US changes of command about to drop out of that one.



SP-2Hs of VP-1 at Da Nang, RVN, in 1969

The news from Hawaii is in synch with what this reporter expects to occur. Perhaps 40 P-8s will be built and it is likely that a dedicated BAMS UAV will be built at all. There will be four combat P-8 squadrons of six aircraft each (down from twelve aircraft per squadron during the Vietnam War and nine or ten today), two each at NAS WHIDBEY ISLAND, WA, and two at NAS JACKSONVILLE, FL. The other twelve aircraft will also be assigned to JAX aboard the Fleet Replacement Squadron VP-30, which currently trains all P-3 crews. Any UAV to work in conjunction with the P-8 is most likely to be a variant of something the USAF will be using, perhaps a next generation Global Hawk or Predator. Such puzzles are now being worked at the Navy's US Fleet Forces Command in Norfolk, VA.

The Navy indicates that if the Hawaiian locals refuse to accept the P-8, there may be no P-8s based there, but rather, from time to time, detachments of P-8s from WHIDBEY would land on Oahu, either at Kaneohe or Hickham.



Boeing artist's concept of the P-8A