

YourNavy



Pos eidon rises

Fla. aviators train on Navy's new surveillance aircraft

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NAVAL AIR STATION JACKSONVILLE, Fla. — The first fleet squadron has its hands on the Navy's next-generation, sub-hunting aircraft, slated to make its deployment debut late next year.

The P-8A Poseidon is a maritime surveillance and reconnaissance aircraft with distinct improvements over the P-3 Orion, which is being phased out after service that included searching for enemy subs during the Cold War.

The switch to the P-8 from the P-3 is a long-anticipated one: The older airframe has been in service

for more than 50 years, joining the Air Force's B-52 bomber in that elite category.

That long service life has created structural problems for P-3s in recent years, grounding the Navy's patrol fleet while aircraft are inspected.

But the P-8 gives new life, with improvements. Using jet engines instead of turboprops, the Poseidon can stay on station longer and with better comfort for the crew.

The first fleet P-8 arrived in Jacksonville in March, when the fleet replacement squadron for the community, Patrol Squadron 30, began to kick the tires and get trainers up to speed.

In June, VP-16 returned from its final P-3 deployment and turned in its aircraft. In July, its members started training at VP-30 in the Poseidon.

VP-16 will train with the fleet replacement squadron through the rest of the year, said Capt. Mark Stevens, VP-30's commanding officer. Next will come training, exercises and inspections in preparation for a December 2013 deployment to 7th Fleet, Stevens said.

The P-8 is expected to first pick up where the P-3 left off, with aerial reconnaissance and sub-hunting missions. But the Poseidon will take the mission to a new level when the unmanned Broad Area Maritime Surveillance — or

BAMS — aircraft joins the fleet in 2015. Working in tandem with this drone, P-8 crews will be able to extend their range even farther.

New VP squadrons will begin training on the P-8 every six months. "The second fleet squadron to transition to P-8 will be VP-5, followed by VP-45 and then the remainder of Jacksonville VP squadrons," Stevens said.

After Jacksonville, the plan is to transition the three Kaneohe Bay, Hawaii, squadrons and then finish up with the three in Whidbey Island, Wash. Details on these transitions are still being worked out, officials said.

VP-30 already trains all new P-3 crews on their way to fleet squadrons: This will continue side-by-side with the P-8 training — at least until the P-3 is phased out of the fleet by 2020.

Because of the dual mission, the command now has a new section called the P-8 Fleet Introduction Team.

The challenge for these pilots and naval flight officers has been to get up to speed quickly enough to be the training experts for the fleet squadrons.



PHOTOS BY MARK D. FARAM/STAFF

Inside the P-8 Poseidon, sonobuoy racks sit across from each other in the rear of the aircraft. Based on a Boeing 373 design, the P-8 has a lot more room inside than the P-3 Orion.