

# VXN-8

## The World Is Their Backyard

By JO2 Julius L. Evans

*Forty-eight hours ago, the P-3 crew was enjoying the tranquility of domestic life and the temperate climes at their home aboard NAS Patuxent River, Md. Now, their seabags are packed and stowed, the civilian scientists are strapped in at their stations, and all is secure as the personnel aboard the Orion begin an adventure that will take them to the icy continent of Antarctica.*

Oceanographic Development Squadron (VXN) Eight, commanded by Commander Gary K. Iversen and based at Patuxent River, Md., is the free world's only aviation squadron devoted solely to airborne oceanographic and geophysical surveys. Its diversified missions take the squadron's aircrewmembers to many sites not normally visited by other U.S. military aircraft.

Scientific information gathered by the squadron plays a key role in the maximum effectiveness and survivability of our naval forces, allies of the United States and civilian agencies of our government. The Naval Oceanographic Office, Bay St. Louis, Miss., provides a team of civilian scientists to VXN-8 to assist in collecting data.

Commissioned as Air Development Squadron (VX) Eight on July 1, 1967, the squadron flew C-121s and an NC-54 aircraft. The squadron conducted oceanographic and special missions, such as the early CNO projects supporting the antisubmarine warfare environmental prediction system (ASWEPS), and Project *Jenny*, which provided airborne broadcast of radio and television programs to the Vietnamese people during the Vietnam

conflict. The squadron was designated VXN-8 in January 1969 and, in 1973, replaced its C-121s and NC-54 with RP-3 aircraft.

Today, the squadron conducts airborne magnetic, geophysical, oceanographic and acoustic surveys to collect data needed to support fleet operations and Department of Defense oceanographic requirements. VXN-8 flies five aircraft, in an all-*Orion* fleet. Projects *Birdseye* and *Outpost Seascan* each use an RP-3A equipped with extensively modified navigation systems, sophisticated sensors and specialized instrumentation.

The only RP-3D in the Navy's inventory was built especially for VXN-8's Project *Magnet*. Using only nonferrous metals throughout the interior of the aircraft aft of the main cabin door, the P-3C airframe enables the sensitive vector magnetometer to perform its mission, distortion-free. Its bomb bay compartment was converted into a sixth fuel tank, increasing the operating range. Rounding out the squadron's fleet are two UP-3A training aircraft. All of VXN-8's aircraft are painted international orange and white to readily identify them as overt, nonweapon-carrying platforms, and each of the squadron's project aircraft sport an officially sanctioned cartoon character typifying its assigned mission.

The squadron is uniquely tasked with three ongoing missions from which it gets its nickname, the *World Travelers*. The Project *Magnet* aircraft hosts the cartoon character "Roadrunner," and is the only airborne source that collects worldwide geomagnetic data required for safety of navigation, antisubmarine warfare (ASW) and various scientific



The Tasmanian Devil displayed on the UP-3A is one of the sanctioned Warner Brothers cartoon characters on VXN-8 aircraft.



Pilot Ltjg. Terry A. Pickering studies charts for an upcoming mission.



Skipper Cdr. G. K. Iversen stressed the fact that VXN-8 is not just another special-missions squadron.



Project Magnet flights take place primarily at night when the earth's magnetic field is more stable.

projects.

"El Coyote" signifies Project *Outpost Seascan*, which is a worldwide project working in conjunction with ASWEPS. Seascan collects thermal and acoustic data from the oceans in order to improve environmental forecasting which is essential to the U.S. Navy's ASW program.

The Project *Birdseye* aircraft displays the "Arctic Fox." Project personnel compile accurate data concerning polar ice, and provide pinpoint mapping of the changing marginal ice zone while the aircraft surveys the Arctic Basin.

The UP-3As display the characters "Tasmanian Devil" and "Loon" and are used in logistics support missions and for training the aircrewmembers.

Since a recent reorganization of the Naval Air Force, U.S. Atlantic Fleet, VXN-8 is now recognized as the 25th active P-3 squadron instead of a special missions unit. The *World Travelers* are a fleet command under the administrative control of Commander Patrol Wings, U.S. Atlantic Fleet. The squadron is under the operational control of Commander in Chief, U.S. Atlantic Fleet and, for technical direction, tasking and resource support, it looks to Commanding Officer, Naval Oceanographic Office.

Safety is a must for the squadron, which maintains an extensive flight schedule. "The crews previously detached to conduct [operations] independently for two months. But I thought that was pushing safety of flight, considering the way we have to operate," Cdr. Iversen said.

"Since the earth's magnetic field is more stable at night, most of the flying takes place then. The preflights are

done in the early evening, the crews launch around 2000 and don't return until 0800 the next day. They continue this pattern for several cycles, with one day of rest between missions," the C.O. explained. "After three or four cycles in a row, the crew needs to get back in a regular routine; otherwise, complacency and frustration could set in.

"Now, the detachment for a crew is a maximum of six weeks. The crew on *Magnet* flights, which are always designed to be two months, swap with a fresh crew from home at the midway point of the detachment. It can become easy to cut corners if you're not careful," Cdr. Iversen added.

The *World Travelers* can't be charged with cutting corners. VXN-8 has not experienced an accident since its establishment in 1967, and the squadron celebrated its 20th birthday with more than 79,000 accident-free hours. This milestone signifies the professionalism which is characteristic of squadron personnel.

With the current authorization of 34 officers and 163 enlisted billets, the squadron forms five flight crews. They include: three pilots, two flight engineers from either the AMS, AMH, AME, AE or AD rating, two naval flight officers (one ocean project navigator and one ocean project coordinator), two enlisted utility aircrewmembers, one aviation ordnanceman, one radar operator, one radioman, and four civilian scientists. These crew members are the sole technicians of the aircraft during the mission, and every crew works like the tiny parts of an expensive wristwatch — as if they were made to work together.

"Many of the areas in which we are required to fly are so remote that there are no VP bases and, in some cases, no military bases that we can turn to if we need assistance. So the crewmembers aboard will do the full-scale maintenance on their own," Cdr. Iversen emphasized.

One of the project aircrewmembers added, "While detached on missions, if the aircraft returns in a down status, we work on it immediately," said AD1 Jamie Arazaga, VXN-8 NATOPS qualifier. "Depending upon the severity, we will work, secure to rest and return the next day to finish."

The squadron demands a lot of the people who maintain and fly the aircraft but those long hours pay off, especially for the officers. Because of the leadership roles the officers are exposed to during a tour at VXN-8, when the tour has expired, the officers leave the squadron more aware and better prepared for the responsibility that an ever-growing Navy has to offer.

"When a mission commander is a junior officer, a [lieutenant] JG or lieutenant, he is actually a mini-commanding officer for six weeks," Cdr. Iversen said. "He's responsible for the crew, aircraft and all the maintenance for the plane to be completed. That's a lot of responsibility hanging around a lieutenant's neck."

VXN-8 can be proud of its accomplishments over the past two decades. While serving the Navy in its unique missions, it turns the best pilots into the best officers, and the best enlisted aircrewmembers into natural leaders. The proof is documented. The *World Travelers* meet their challenges all over the world. ■

JOI Jim Richeson