VQ-1 in Vietnam

By CAPT Sidney E. Wood, Jr., USN (Ret)

By the time I reported aboard Fleet Air Reconnaissance Squadron One (VQ-l) at NAS Atsugi, Japan in February 1965, the U.S. involvement in Vietnam was well underway and my squadron was a full-time participant in that effort, both with carrier-based EA-3Bs and land-based EC-121Ms. My predecessor as Squadron Intelligence Officer was LT Jack Mahoney, who, incidentally, had also been my predecessor in the Airborne Electronic Warfare Branch at the Naval Scientific and Technical Intelligence Center (NAVSTIC) in Washington. This time, however, we were fortunate enough to have a face-to-face turnover, which was even more fortunate for me since the pace of support for Vietnam operations was quickening on a daily basis. I had a lot of learning to do in a short two weeks.

Although Jack was the only 1630 officer assigned at the time, there were several seasoned 1350 Air Intelligence officers as well, who contributed immensely to my cram course in VQ-1 operations, not only in Vietnam support operations, but in our Peacetime Aerial Reconnaissance Program (PARPRO) and our Soviet ICBM tracking operations in the Pacific. These good men, good officers, and good friends were LTs Bob Fogg, Ron Mears, and Bill Lambden. (Fogg and Mears went on to become 1630s and both served long and fruitful careers as Naval Intelligence Specialists, as did Jack Mahoney.)

Needless to say, there were many other consummate professionals in VQ-1 as well. CDR Fred Carment was Commanding Offcer when I arrived, and I will never forget the first night that my wife Nancy, our two-year-old son, and I spent in our new house on "Police Box Road" in the town of Minami Rinkan. In what was to be one of the first of many "long days at the office,'' which concluded 13 or 14 hours after it started, the skipper insisted that he drive me home to meet my family, who had moved during day from the Yokohama VOQ.

When we arrived, mother and son were bundled like Eskimos, since Nancy had been unable to start the kerosene heater, which served as the "central heating system" for the tiny, and completely uninsulated Japanese house. The skipper spent the next two hours on his hands and knees, working on that primitive contraption until we finally got it to belch into life. Fred Carment was simply typical of the selflessness, which was always abundant in the officers and men of VQ-I. The squadron was truly a community of officers, enlisted, and their families, living and working together in a mutually supportive effort in a Japan that was a far cry from the economic superpower it has become today.

VQ-1, like most Navy commands, consisted of several "unions," that somehow managed to submerge their suspicions that only they were truly responsible for the ultimate success of the squadron and its mission. There were two aviation communities, those who flew "the aluminum overcast," the EC-121M, a converted Lockheed Super Constellation that looked like a humpbacked, pregnant dinosaur because of its monstrous upper and lower radomes and dozens of blade antennae protruding from its fuselage. When I arrived, there were four of them. They were old and so prone to breakdown that engine changes were part of the operational routine.

Then there were the 11 EA-3B "Whales," which operated from the decks of the CTF-77 carriers, when they were allowed aboard. When they were not, they cycled through Cubi Point and Danang. The Squadron maintained permanent detachments at Cubi and Danang, with EA-3B operations supported largely at the former and EC-121M at the latter. Crews rotated to and from Atsugi to their respective Dets on 30-45 day schedules, so sometimes one would not see shipmates for months because of the demands of the Vietnam deployments. Ground support personnel rotated with the aircrews to keep the aircraft flyable and the Electronic Warfare intercept equipment operating.

When I arrived in February 1965, there were about 75 officers and 500 enlisted personnel in what was already the largest air squadron in the Navy. When I left in 1968, there were about 150 officers and nearly 1500 enlisted personnel. Additional EC-121Ms and EA-3Bs from VQ-2 at Rota, Spain, along with their crews, routinely joined VQ-1 aircraft and crews in Vietnam deployments. Two additional 121s were retrieved from storage at Davis-Monthan, refurbished, and assigned to VQ-1.

With the growth in personnel strength, two additional intelligence officer billets were added to the Squadron so that the Danang Detachment could have permanent intelligence support. LTs Tom Holt (1610) and Tom Kumpf (1350) arrived a few months after I did and were rotated to Danang on a one-month-in-three basis through the duration of my tour. While we three worked the Danang EC-121M circuit, LTs Fogg, Mears, and Lambden worked the carrier Cubi EA3B circuit.

When we first inaugurated the Danang Detachment, it was with one aircraft, one crew, and multiple spare engines. The crew flew every day, seven days a week, a 10-12 hour run up and down the coast of North Vietnam, providing MIG, AAA, and SAM warnings for the Navy, Air Force, and Marine strike aircraft conducting their missions over the beach. The EA3Bs staging from Cubi, the carriers, or Danang were doing the same, scheduled for maximum time coverage on behalf of the attack aircraft over Vietnam.

Real-time warnings were based on passive Electronics and Communications Intelligence intercepts of North Vietnamese Early Warning, Height Finding, Fire Control, and Ground Control radars and associated communications. The warnings were provided by daily changing voice code words, which alerted the attack aircraft to the type and location of the threat system. The VQ-1 aircraft also provided brief spot reports of other intelligence/threat situations of immediate concern, via secure Teletype communications, to the ships at sea and to Marine and Air Force commands in South Vietnam.

The EC-121M, or "Big Look" aircraft, was limited to about 10-12,000 feet because of their extreme weight and lack of pressurization. They were major EW intelligence collectors, however, because of the capabilities of their multiple SIGINT positions, the ingenuity and innovations of Squadron engineering personnel, inspired by the inimitable Chuck Christman, in modification of the ancient equipment to make it the most accurate and productive in the air, and the professionalism and dedication of the "back enders," who squeezed every electron of capability out of those "black boxes." There will be more about those men and their invaluable contributions later.

The EA-3B had the advantage of speed and altitude, but lacked the endurance of the Connie. Their missions were normally 4-5 hours. Additionally, the "Whales," although a leviathan to the carrier skippers and air bosses, were not in the same league as the Connies. The EA-3Bs were size-limited to 4-5 intercept positions, and consequently did not have the same simultaneous scope of coverage capability as the bigger birds.

The Intelligence Officers, whether on the carriers, at Cubi or Danang, fulfilled the same functions: prebriefing and debriefing the flight crews and coordinating the postflight intelligence reports resulting from the missions. As in any situation in which there are more jobs than people, the IOs also conducted a host of non-intelligence-related functions. I was fortunate enough to fly frequently with the Big Look crews out of Danang to see firsthand the magnificent performance of the EW and Security Group officers and men who manned the positions, conducted the intercepts, recorded the take, fused the raw information into consolidated intelligence, issued the warnings, and then came "home" after a 10-12 hour mission to debrief and write a detailed post-mission EW intelligence report detailing the day's activity. Sixteen-hour days, seven days a week, were routine, as was the high quality of the performance by all hands.

When I did not fly, I served variously as admin officer, operations officer, supply officer, communications officer, construction officer (as we grew, we built our own compound on the base), and as liaison officer with the Air Force, on whose ramp we were initially tenants. During the course of our deployments, during the one plane/one crew days, we lived in wood-and-screen sided, tin roofed huts and operated out of a single container-like van on wheels. By the time I left the Squadron we occupied several two-story barracks buildings with our own operations building and mess facility.

As the Squadron grew in personnel and numbers of aircraft, so did the size of the detachments at Cubi and Danang. Toward the end of my tour, we routinely had two, sometimes three, 121s at Danang and enough personnel so that every man did not have to fly every day. With two birds, we could cover all daylight hours, and often well into the night.

I mentioned earlier that I would have more to say about the "back enders" who were the unsung heroes of the operation. The pilots, who were the aircraft commanders, were also the mission commanders, and we all willingly counted on them for the accuracy and safety of our missions, ably supported by the flight engineers, navigators, radio operators and others. But, the producers of intelligence that saved lives and produced targets for the fleet were the Electronic Warfare Officers (EWOs) and men and the Security Group officers and men who manned the intercept positions. VQ-1 was in the forefront of what is today called tactical fusion, bringing together the raw information from the 6-8 ELINT positions and a like number of COMINT positions to form correlated intelligence in near real-time, and providing it to the aircraft over the beach in the form of AAA, SAM and M1G warnings.

Perhaps it is unfair to say this in view of the many truly outstanding intelligence officers and men with whom I served in 28 years of Naval Intelligence, and perhaps it is attributed to the fact that this association occurred in a combat environment, but these men were, as a group, the finest with whom I ever served. And, the best of the best were the "mustangs," Limited Duty Officers commissioned after 8-10 years of enlisted service. Their maturity, wisdom, technical excellence, innovation, and ingenuity wrung every ounce of capability out of the obsolete equipment with which they had to operate. Similarly, their mentoring and tutoring of the young officers and enlisted sitting the various intercept positions was somewhat akin to the performance of the maestro of a symphony orchestra. It was their intelligence and inspiration that most contributed to the timeliness and accuracy of VQ-1 Electronic Warfare Intelligence reporting to the fleet. More than a few Navy, Air Force, and Marine pilots owe these men their eternal gratitude.

I left the Squadron in February 1968 to report to the Staff of Commander Seventh Fleet, having been relieved by LT Doug Sherbume. During the course of my tour, I had seen the Squadron essentially triple in size, constantly supporting three detachments in Southeast Asia. Although we neither

shot bullets nor dropped bombs, we served as "lifeguards" on many occasions, and, at Danang, we were on the receiving end of Viet Cong/NVA rocket attacks on the base, several of which caused damage to our facilities and aircraft, and, on at least one occasion, several wounded personnel. Fortunately, we never encountered any of the AAA, SAMs, or MIGs that we watched so carefully.

Shortly after I left the Squadron, we lost two aircraft, one in Danang when an EC-121M lost an engine on approach, caught a wingtip on a hangar as it veered off course, and cartwheeled across the air base. Another 121 was lost over the Sea of Japan on a PARPRO mission, shot down by North Korean MIGs 80 miles at sea. As I recall, there were no survivors from the 121 shot down and only eight or so survived the crash at Danang. Both aircraft were crewed by friends and shipmates with whom I had spent many deployments in Vietnam. These were good men who served their country well, and I am glad to pay tribute to them here.

Note: This article was written for the Naval Intelligence Professionals Quarterly magazine. The magazine asked for personnel to submit articles on their experience in providing intelligence support to the fleet during the Vietnam War.