**ARIES II**

In the late 80s, we embarked on the Conversion In Lieu of Procurement (CILOP) program that produced the ARIES II configuration. The plan was to cross deck the majority of the ARIES I/Deepwell systems onto “low time” P-3Cs. The low time aircraft generally had approximately 8,000 hours and less than 8,000 landings on the airframes. The systems integration was done by Naval Avionics Center Indianapolis with the conversions contracted to Lockheed Martin’s Greenville, S.C. facility. The aircraft were to all be converted and delivered by the early 90s, but ran into trouble very early. I spent nearly a year at the Lockheed facility testing systems as they were completed, and troubleshooting discrepancies. Keeping in mind the majority of the systems were to be cross decked, we ran into trouble on the existing systems wiring because Tech Pub Deficiency Reports (TPDRs) that the fleet had submitted over the years had not been incorporated into the NAC drawing package…due to cost. Since the NAC drawing package was the baseline for the conversion, wiring discrepancies that the fleet had noted years before were built into the new aircraft. Combining this fact with the challenge of integrating new systems concurrent with their development, NAC released hundreds of engineering changes that were flowed down to the Lockheed installation teams. By late 1989, it was apparent that the contract was in trouble. Lockheed and the Navy were in a pissing contest over the engineering changes, and the first two aircraft were using up most of the contract funds. The first two aircraft PR-31 and PR-32 were first in line to replace VQ-1s EP-3Bs. PR-31 was finally nearing completion by the spring of 1990. The Lockheed test crew flew the first five flights on the aircraft and returned NORDO on 4 of 5 flights. The Chief Test Pilot remarked that the AIC-37 Digital Communications Management System (DCMS) was the biggest failure he had seen in his many years of flying. Myself, my crew along with NAC, Telephonics and Lockheed engineers troubleshot the troubled ICS system and got the aircraft stable enough for a series of flights with a Navy crew. The first flight was in June or early July of 91. The pilot was LCDR Mike Lopez Allegria. I along with Tim Nagle flew the observer seats on the first few flights. Upon reporting to Greenville, LCDR L.A. remarked, I believe that antenna (an ALD-9 blade on the centerline aft of the HSC) will drag on a no flaps landing. He was also mildly concerned about the OE-320 radome on the centerline, but was convinced that the blade would be a problem. As we lifted off on the first flight, and L.A. was going through the after take off checklist, he reported he had a flap asymmetry light…. we would be testing his theory on landing. The flight was short and uneventful (we had taken hand held VHF radios onboard in case the DCMS failed). We made a no flaps landing, and sure enough scraped about a quarter inch off the end of the ALD-9 blade in question. I had my crew remove the antenna from the aircraft and we presented it to LCDR L.A. as a memento. I later took a good ass chewing for throwing away a repairable. We flew a couple of full crew flights on the aircraft out of Greenville. A few days later, the decision was made to re-position the aircraft to Pax River, but the Navy and LM were still engaged in a tussle over funds. We had left a ramp load on the aircraft. We showed up on a weekend day, loaded the aircraft and flew PR-31 out of S.C. to Patuxent River with almost no support from LM. We flew a series of test flights at Pax that were cut short by the need to get the aircraft into the fleet due to operational needs arising from Dessert Shield. We flew the aircraft into Guam just before Christmas in 1990. We still didn’t’t have reliable secure comms on the aircraft, and weren’t able to deploy it immediately. I flew out to Bahrain and Dessert Storm on an ARIES I aircraft the day hostilities began.

The contractual relationship between the Navy and LM continued to erode, and the Time and Material funds being expended to correct engineering deficiencies consumed the majority of the program funding. The result was that the first few aircraft consumed all of the funding programmed for all 12 conversions. All 12 were on deck at LM Greenville in different stages of disassembly with only 3 being on the flight line in nearly flyable condition. The Navy and LM reached an agreement to terminate the contract for convenience of the Government. Several aircraft had to be reassembled to a flying condition to be flown to NADEP Alameda to be completed at a later date. Crews flew some of these aircraft de-pressurized with no more than a wet compass, highway map and hand held radios across country. NADEP Alameda would later be closed by BRAC. Three conversions that the Sensor System Improvement Program (SSIP) was replacing the ARIES II configuration. PR-36 never flew a mission as an ARIES II, because my crews de-configured it in Waco, Texas and converted it to SSIP more than ten years after it was originally inducted into the modification cycle. The aircraft had logged less than 200 hours in more than 10 years. Pictures of these events exist (or did) at the squadron. I can scan some and send them along if they would like.

Bill Beard

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VQ-1 82 - 85, 88 - 91

NTTC Corry Station 85 - 88, 91 - 93

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