

Navy Retires Last EP-3E Electronic Reconnaissance Aircraft



EAST CHINA SEA (Sept. 24, 2020) An EP-3E Airborne Reconnaissance Integrated Electronic System (ARIES) II, assigned to the “World Watchers” of Fleet Air Reconnaissance Squadron 1 (VQ-1), transits over the East China Sea. (U.S. Navy photo by MC3 Andrew Langholf)

By Richard R. Burgess, Senior Editor

ARLINGTON, Va. – The Navy has retired its last EP-3E Aries II electronic reconnaissance aircraft after the type’s 45 years of service to the fleet.

In an informal Feb. 12, 2025, ceremony, at Naval Air Station Whidbey Island, Washington, Fleet Air Reconnaissance Squadron One (VQ-1), the sole remaining operator of the EP-3E, farewelled the last EP-3E. The aircraft was flown away on Feb. 13 for the last time.

The aircraft, BuNo 159893, was the last of 26 EP-3Es that

served the fleet beginning in 1970. Ten P-3A Orion patrol aircraft were converted to EP-3Es for operation by VQ-1 and VQ-1, joining two earlier EP-3B versions in service. This batch of EP-3Es were replaced beginning the 1990s by a new generation of EP-3Es converted from P-3C Orions, with ultimately 17 aircraft converted to sustain an operational fleet of 12 aircraft.

The EP-3E fleet provided multi-intelligence support to the fleets and to theater combatant commanders with near-real-time signals intelligence and full-motion video, the Naval Air Systems Command said. The aircraft was equipped with sensitive electronic receivers and high-gain dish antennas. The large crew was able to fuse the intelligence it collected with offboard intelligence and provide threat warning and situational awareness in support of suppression of enemy air defenses, anti-air warfare, anti-submarine warfare, and anti-surface warfare.

The EP-3E has been succeeded by the MQ-4C Triton high-altitude, long-endurance unmanned aerial vehicle operated by Unmanned Patrol Squadron 19.

VQ-1 has one P-3C remaining, which it used as a utility training and transport aircraft. The aircraft, BuNO 161588, will be retired in an informal ceremony to be held at NAS Whidbey Island on Feb. 20, 2025.

VQ-1 will hold its deactivation ceremony at Whidbey Island on March 28, 2025. The official date for the deactivation is March 31.