

I Got Those Old Beat-Up Orion Blues

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It's not easy for a 1950s propeller airplane with grease smudges to turn heads at an airshow.



The author's Lockheed P-3C Orion in Hawaii in 2000, with Combat Aircrew One. "You can clearly see the grime and dirt, especially on the nacelle," he says. (Tracy Wilkinson)

I got a call from my squadron's operations office asking if I would mind terribly going to Fort Worth, Texas, for an airshow over the weekend. Our patrol wing gets a few requests a year for these events. This would be my first. The guys told me it was as good a deal as you can get: a weekend out of town with your crew showing off the Lockheed P-3C Orion and preaching the virtues of naval aviation. Back at the hotel, you could talk flying with pilots of the other display aircraft and enjoy the open bar.

We flew from Naval Air Station Whidbey Island in Washington state to Alliance Airport in Fort Worth, Texas, arriving mid-day, long before most of the other airplanes slated for static display had shown up. A ground crew from Naval Air Station Dallas piled out of a pickup truck and marshalled us to our parking spot on the mostly empty ramp. We put our airplane to bed and set out to enjoy the warm Texas evening. The next morning, we got up early to prepare for our airshow duties: ushering folks up the narrow, steeply pitched boarding ladder into the fuselage, answering questions, and pointing out various cool features of our submarine-hunting aircraft.

As a naval air crewman, I was passionate about my job, my crew, the airplane, and the mission we performed. We honed our skills preparing for combat with an unseen foe, and we rated ourselves among the best sub-hunters on the planet. In the Orion's rugged platform, I saw efficiency, brute power, elegance, and beauty. I knew the function of every bulge and blister, protrusion and antenna, from the blunt nose housing a powerful inverse synthetic aperture radar to the muscular clipped wings bristling with weapons pylons.

The trouble was, I didn't get the chance to explain any of this, since citizens typically walked past me and my warplane with a polite nod. Often they would point to the magnetic anomaly detector boom, a fairly sophisticated piece of submarine-tracking hardware, and call it a refueling boom. In their eyes, there was nothing too sexy about a 1950s propeller airplane covered with greasy smudges and dirty streaks caused by leaking fluids of indeterminate nature, particularly one buried among far more attractive and shinier Air Force jets. Our mighty hunter sported bare metal where paint had been worn off by flying 200 knots through sea spray at 200 feet. Its skin was wrinkled from years of hard turns tracking submarines and narco-traffickers, crewed by a motley collection of sailors in grimy flightsuits and scuffed boots. We were but warriors for the working day.

Passersby who actually climbed aboard found themselves less than impressed. The inside of the airplane looked much like the outside. All the gee-whiz stuff was turned off, and we could not discuss capabilities anyway. I discovered that unless this is your chosen profession, there is nothing that exciting about a bunch of guys bumping along in a low-and-slow airplane looking at lines on a scope. I would be bored to distraction too, especially because in the next airplane over, the Air Force guys were giving away hats, T-shirts, and popcorn.

We worked in shifts. The Texas sun warmed the fuselage, and even with every hatch open, it was hot and close for those taking their turn inside. In those rare instances when we had a lot of visitors (like when the Air Force guys ran out of T-shirts and hats), it could get really stuffy. But air crews had plenty of time to commiserate and mingle with the airshow folk. The Air Force guys were pretty relaxed. I got the sense the Navy was making me work really hard for my flight pay.

"Zapping"—sneaking your squadron sticker everywhere—is a long-standing Navy tactic. Doug, our flight engineer on this trip, was a ruthless and fearless zapper. Portable johns and airshow vehicles were just the warm-up. He managed to zap a Canadair CT-114 Tutor

belonging to the Snowbirds. I saw our sticker on the side of a C-130, on the boarding ladder of an E-3 AWACS, and on the nose gear of a B-1 bomber with a sentry stationed in front of it.

During a break, I started chatting with the crew chief of a C-17, the Air Force's newest heavy lifter. He gave me a tour of his airplane, which actually smelled like a new car. The crew rest area was clean and comfortable; the bunks had crisp sheets and wool blankets. Our P-3 rest arrangements consisted of two bunks that flipped down, or wherever you could stretch out on the floor between the electronic racks and the drafty door. I asked if I could try out a bunk, then slipped into it. There it was, inches from my face—our squadron sticker.

My friend Lance came to the show. I regaled him with tales of sono-buoys, rokeye cluster bombs, torpedoes, and the art of tracking an elusive prey that lurked in the dark ocean, and he arched his eyebrows and nodded sagely. He asked when I was leaving town. "We're flying out in a few hours," I said. His eyes widened. Turning back toward our P-3, he exclaimed, "You mean you flew here on that?" He had figured my Orion to be a museum piece. I indignantly affirmed that yes indeed, we had flown here in it, we were flying back home in it, and that we routinely flew across the Pacific Ocean in it. When he got in his car, he was still shaking his head.

It was late afternoon when we started preflighting, taking covers off and landing gear pins out. The crowd had left. The Air Force guys were staying another night, but it was Sunday and we were reservists, so we had to get the airplane home and return to our regular jobs the next morning. Because we had arrived early on Friday, we were parked deep in the stack, surrounded on three sides by larger Air Force aircraft. There was an open taxi lane behind us, but a giant KC-10 tanker was parked behind our right wing. Our wingtip would have to pass underneath its wing to get us out. Not a problem really, but engine number four, which is mounted on the wingtip, has a 13-foot propeller arc. An E-3 AWACS was parked in front of us, and the Air Force guys who had up until now paid little attention to us began taking a keen interest in our activities—notably that we looked like we were going flying.

Our auxiliary power unit kicked in. The pickup from Naval Air Station Dallas showed up and the ground crew piled out. While they and our pilots were pacing off distances around the right wingtip and doing a lot of measuring with their hands, I walked out front wearing my flight helmet and began exterior lighting and flaps checks in coordination with the flight engineer aboard the Orion. An Air Force major with really great hair asked, "So, whatcha doin', Navy?"

"We're going home. We have to get the plane back, sir." I gave hand signals to the cockpit.

"How are you getting out? Do you have a tug coming?"

I told him we intended to use reverse thrust; in essence, we were going to back out of our parking spot. "We do it all the time," I added.

The crowd was bigger and getting agitated. Checks complete, I met our pilots at the boarding ladder and told them we should get out of here.

We quickly started the engines. With one last look around, we eased the Orion into reverse thrust and started backing up. Wind and dust and empty popcorn bags started flying from everywhere, pelting the Air Force guys, who were now gesturing angrily. The big radome on the AWACS with its tail facing us started to shake wildly, and our propwash made the spoilers on top of the wings all slam open while the whole airplane shuddered. "Just keep going! Don't stop now!" said Doug. Unperturbed, the ground crew directed us back, making sure we cleared the wing, and signalling a 90-degree backward turn to the right to align us with the taxiway. Just like backing out a big ol' Winnebago.

We quickly taxied to the runway threshold and received takeoff clearance. The pilots requested a low pass, which was denied; we must have worn out our welcome. We roared down the runway and climbed into the gathering dusk, rocking our wings. We were never invited back to the Fort Worth airshow.