

A Special Report

THE STORY OF "ORION'S GAME"

by: Bill Hobgood

October 1973, East Med....First deployment of P-3C's to the Mediterranean AOR.

SS3: TACCO, Sensor 3, unknown surface radar contact 174 at 9 miles. Not sure why I didn't get him sooner; but only paint him every other sweep or so.

TACCO: Roger; Flight, come 180....Fly To is on your display now...let me know when you have contact visual.

PPC: Roger.....stand by.....negative visual at this time. Must be pretty small. Steady 180.

SS3: Still there, TC, now 170 at 4 miles, northerly heading, less than 10kts.

TACCO: Roger....Flight, descend to 200ft. Ordnance and Flight Tech, man observer stations aft.

PPC: Holy Crap....Visual!!! Port side abeam. Surfacing sub...not US...headed toward the Battle Group. Coming hard left, stand by to mark!

TACCO: Roger, Flight....Sensor 3 check MAD operation at mark on top; Sensors 1 and 2 prepare for possible active tracking. NAV, contact report to the Battle Group in the clear...NOW!

PPC: TC....It's a Juliet...Soviet cruise missile boat!

NAV/COMM: Alpha Xray, Alpha Xray (ASW Commander aboard USS *Independence* to the north), this is Bravo Tango One Four, CERTSUB, Soviet Juliet SSG, my position on your 181 at 13 miles, target tracking northerly course, less than 10kts. I authenticate Tango Uniform.

ASW Commander: Roger, Bravo Tango 14, authentication confirmed. Target designated Hostile Track 004... approximate position Blue 1 tac 13. Be ready to do your "Orion's Game" thing should target go sinker.

Present Day

If you visit the National Museum of Naval Aviation at Naval Air Station in Pensacola, Florida you will likely come upon a large oil painting of a Patrol Squadron FORTY-FIVE P-3C aircraft turning inbound toward a surfaced Soviet Juliet class guided missile submarine. This painting, titled "Orion's Game," created on canvas by aviation artist Peter Wenman, was commissioned by the VP-45 Association and donated to the Museum following the October 2012 reunion in Mobile, AL.

I'm often asked about how all this came about...where the idea came from and how the project got started. I also had been asked by Jack Keane (our Secretary) to tell this story for publication in this newsletter, so here we go.

In late 2010, I was killing some time in my home office in front of my computer monitor and happened upon a Facebook page related to the Navy's Aviation Officers' Candidate School (AOCS) in Pensacola. While perusing that page, I noticed a post by a fellow who went to AOCS about the same time I did (1968-69). Following graduation and flight training, he did a few tours as an F-4



Aviation Artist: Peter Wenman.

Phantom pilot in WESTPAC. His post had to do with a large oil painting he had commissioned, which had just been completed by Pete Wenman. The scene of this work, titled “Dawn’s Early Light,” (see below) was of a section



“Dawn’s Early Light”

of three Phantoms during the early morning hours of August 2, 1972, returning from a mission over North Vietnam. The lead aircraft (NF 213) is piloted by the fellow who made the post, John “Bedhog” Chesire, with RIO George “T.A.” Healey in the rear seat. The scene was reconstructed from John’s memory and his flight logbook documentation.

I was just mesmerized by how cool this was...not just the beauty of the artwork but of the idea itself. While the Phantoms were stunningly handsome, I said to myself, “I’d like to have something like that...except with a sleeker, even more striking looking P-3 Orion aircraft in the painting.”

I contacted “Bedhog” via a Facebook message and asked for some additional information on the painting. He said it had taken about a year to complete and the cost was around \$3000.00 for the commissioned work. Yikes! Three Grand? Suddenly I wasn’t so charged up about having my own painting. Nevertheless, I pondered this whole P-3 painting issue over the next couple of months...couldn’t shake the thought. I even conjured up a specific scene; recalled from a mission during our 1973 Sigonella deployment. I was TACCO on Crew 13 (see below) flying LN-10 south of Crete when, during a Carrier Battle Group ASW support mission, we converted a radar contact to a Soviet sub on the surface.

At some point, I decided that, though I didn’t really need an original oil painting that bad (\$3000.00), I thought a print would be a great alternative. I looked around on the internet but only came upon the few P-3 prints, that we have all seen before, with other squadron markings. I cogitated some more and decided for sure that somehow, someday I needed to get an impressive VP-45 P-3 hanging on my office wall.

So the problem: how does one get a print? I have a number of (non-aviation) signed and numbered limited edition prints in my home and was aware that they were generally prints of an artist’s original work. Then the thought oc-



VP-45 Crew 13 in 1973 - posing in front of a Reserve P-2 (the author is standing far right).

curred to me that perhaps a bunch of VP-45 Association members would be equally interested in such a print. And if I could convince enough of them to fork over, say \$100.00, in prepayment for a print, I might be able to raise enough to pay for the artist to paint an original and do a true limited edition of slightly smaller, signed and numbered prints.

I proposed this to the officers of the Association around January 2011 and got a somewhat reserved and skeptical “go ahead” to investigate this project’s feasibility. I contacted the artist, Pete Wenman, who lives in England, and we discussed the costs of such an undertaking. He told me he would do an original oil painting, slightly smaller than “Dawn’s Early Light” (but in a wider ratio), for \$2200 - and that the cost of a limited edition run of prints would be determined by the total number of prints purchased.



Figure 1.

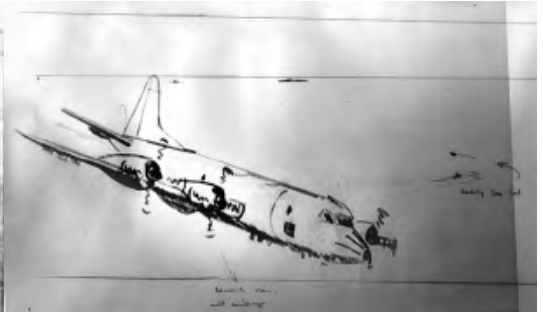


Figure 2.

My initial project feasibility estimates were that we would need to have at least 50 prints ordered and paid for in advance, at around \$100 each, plus a nominal charge to cover shipping from England and then from my home to each member who ordered a print.



Figure 3.

I worked up an email explaining and promoting the project and asked Buck Jones (then Association President) to send it out under his “signature” to all current Association members. Initial response from our members was fairly encouraging and over the next few weeks we easily surpassed the 50 pre-paid orders for prints.

Of course the thought had occurred to me: “What to do with the original painting?” My gut reaction was that I should hang it on my office wall in recognition of the project being my “brain child.” Becky, my

wife, said, “Don’t be a dummy, that idea will never fly! Why don’t you donate it to the Smithsonian?” While the previous comments are not necessarily accurate, donating the painting to the National Museum of Naval Aviation in Pensacola immediately became part of the plan.

Meanwhile, I was working with Pete Wenman, on exactly how I wanted the scene to look. I knew I wanted the vertical stabilizer with LN and the Pelican to be able to be seen and also, if possible, the red dart on the nose. Figure 1 (top-above) was his first quick-sketch. After some additional discussion, Pete came up with Figure 2 which included the submarine. This view was later refined a bit (with the aid of software) to reveal Figure 3. I still didn’t think this is what we wanted because the tail wasn’t clearly in view and the aircraft didn’t look to be maneuvering at all aggressively or really seem like it was actually engaged with the sub.

So, I got out my 40 year old Lockheed P-3 model as an aide and began playing around and photographing it at different angles.



Figure 4.

Figure 4 (previous page, bottom), which met all the visual requirements, is the angle I settled on and I sent this photo to Pete. He liked it, tweaked it a little and got to work. Figure 5 is the small scale “Color Study” which Pete generated before starting on the actual oil painting. It is partly a photo image (the background) and partly a computer generated profile of the P-3 with squadron markings added. For those of you who were Association members in 2011 you recall this version from the emailed “situation reports” I sent out.



Figure 5 (the Color Study).

By late 2011, we had enough print orders (just under 100) that we reduced the cost per print to \$85 plus ten bucks for shipping & insurance; and in the end we had about 110 orders, mostly from our members and a few other people with an interest in VP-45 or the Patrol community. We added on some extra print copies to use for presentations and future reunion door prizes and Pete Wenman wanted a few extras for his purposes.

We cut off any further orders and the total print edition was set at 145 prints. Each print was to be signed by the artist and numbered xx/145. Of note, not a single dollar of Association funds was used for this project; in fact, after everything was paid for, a few hundred dollars were left over for the Association.

Back to the painting. According to my logbook, I was flying LN-10 (BUNO 158569) that day in October of 1973...the Yom Kippur War was ongoing. We had been flying our butts off...round the clock from both Sig and Souda Bay, Crete. The scene up until then was supposed to be of LN-10. But one of our members, Mort Eckhouse, suggested that, instead, we change the side number in the painting to LN-9 to commemorate the crew of LN-9 that was lost at sea in 1964. We all agreed. Though a matter of some consternation, I had Pete use a little “artistic license” to add Harpoon missiles to the outboard wing racks. AGM-84 Harpoons were not yet operational in 1973...but they do so look cool!



Figure 6.

for us to approve. It was gorgeous! We quickly approved it and Pete had his printer execute the requested edition run of 145 copies. Each of those was hand signed and numbered in pencil by the artist. The original unframed canvas painting and the prints were securely packed and then shipped from England to Austin, Texas, where I live.

Pete and I also came up with a Certificate of Authenticity that would accompany each print. You can see this

document by clicking [HERE](#).

Once the prints (and original) finally arrived at my house in May of 2012 I was almost afraid to open the box...but I did and was immediately amazed at how incredibly handsome the original was. Likewise, the prints were very impressive, though at an image size of 28" x 14" they were smaller than the 36" x 18" original. My job was now to carefully roll each print in tissue, insert into a mailing tube and address each tube for its ultimate destination. I did all that in my kitchen (right) and home office.



Packing and Mailing Station.

“Orion’s Game” was the centerpiece of the October 2012 Reunion. We had the beautifully framed original on hand for presentation to the National Museum of



Naval Aviation. VADM Wally Massenburt USN (ret), then our Association Secretary, officiated the presentation to the Museum, passing “Orion’s Game” to Mort Eckhouse, an association member who works for the Museum. Additionally, he presented four prints (framed under glass) to the VP-45 Squadron CO, CDR Dick Vitali; for-



mer Pelican and CPRG/CPRF Commander, RADM Prindle; and to two surviving widows of the crew of LN-9 (see photos above).

A week later, Mort officially presented the original painting to CAPT Rasmussen at the Museum in Pensacola (left) where it proudly hangs today.

Unlike other aviation artwork, “Orion’s Game” will never be re-printed or re-produced for sale in any size or any fashion.

Being truly a Limited Edition, those who possess one of the original 145 prints are lucky people. My personal copy number 4/145 hangs in my office above a small couch (see photo to the right).

Of things I've accomplished in my life, being allowed to orchestrate the production of this beautiful work of art ranks pretty high...not just for its beauty and that it was a labor of love, but because of the historic squadron it represents.

For this opportunity, my thanks go mostly to the VP-45 Association Officers who (eventually) believed in me on this project and gave me plenty of leeway and artistic li-



The Author's copy of "Orion's Game" proudly hung.



Orion's Game
Pete Wenman

cense, to Pete Wenman, an amazing artist, and to all the Association members who were insightful enough to purchase this extraordinary and historic print!

Author's Note: Peter Wenman was selected to display some of his works in a Pentagon passageway in conjunction with the Pentagon Patriotic Art Exhibit. "Orion's Game" and a few other images by Peter Wenman were chosen by him to represent his work.

The image to the right is a representation of what Pete's display looks like.

