

# A-3 Skywarrior: From The First Flight To The Last

by Gary Meyers

The final flight of a Douglas A-3 Skywarrior (aka, the Whale) occurred 30 June 2011, when a Raytheon flight crew in Van Nuys, Calif., flew their last remaining A-3 to NAS Pensacola for delivery to the National Museum of Naval Aviation (NMNA). Ron Woltman, Raytheon flight test operations A-3 Program Manager, piloted the aircraft. This last flight closed the final chapter of the Skywarrior's exceptional 59-year history — from its design inception in 1949 to its first flight in 1952, its deployment in 1956, to its last flight in 2011.

The Skywarrior distinguished itself in many ways over its almost six decades of service. It served for more than 34 years as a Navy aircraft, both carrier- and land-based. It also served as a corporate test bed for missile, radar and avionics aircraft for Hughes Aircraft, Cintas Corp., Thunderbird, Westinghouse and ultimately Raytheon.

The A-3 Skywarrior's original role was as bomber; the first squadrons were capable of carrying nuclear bombs or a variety of conventional bombs. These were the Heavy Attack Squadrons: VAH-1, -2, -4, -5, -6, -7, -8, -9, -10, -11 and -13. The original replacement air group training squadrons were VAH-123 and VAH-3. Later, squadrons like VQ-1 and -2 flew electronic intelligence configured ERA-3s. Other squadrons, such as VAQ-33 and -34, were used for training and special missions. VAP-61 and VAP-62 operated the heavy photographic version of the RA-3, while a few A-3s were converted for use as VIP transports for the Chief of Naval Operations and senior staff.

During the Vietnam War, specially configured EKA-3B aircraft were equipped to conduct active electronic warfare and air-to-air refueling missions. This configuration was first delivered to VAW-13 in 1967, and later, the carrier detachments were redesignated as squadrons VAQ-129, -130, -131, -132, -133, -134 and -135. During an 11-month period in the Vietnam War, the tanker version KA-3B and EKA-3B Skywarriors were credited with saving more than 380 Navy carrier-based aircraft.

The KA-3B Skywarrior continued its service in the Naval Reserves flying as tankers and pathfinders in VAK-208 and VAK-308 into the 1970s.

The A-3 proved to be a valuable and useful platform for testing the Phoenix Missile System, the avionics for the Global Hawk unmanned aircraft and F-15 radar system. Nearly 14 Skywarriors were used in this capacity from 1962 to 2011.

One of these aircraft had the distinction of being the only Skywarrior to operationally fire air-to-air missiles including the AIM-54 Phoenix, the AIM-7 Sparrow and the AIM-9 Sidewinder, while functioning as the F-14 radar test bed for Hughes Aircraft.

In 1998, a group of Whalers formed the A-3 Skywarrior Association (<http://www.a3skywarrior.com>) with Al Rankin as president. Boasting a membership

of nearly 1,000, an early goal became "Save the Whales," with the association committed to do everything possible to get as many of the remaining Skywarriors restored and into museums for permanent display. At that time, there were only seven Skywarriors in museums, but 30 more were available for similar placement. The remaining Skywarriors were in two places: in storage at Davis-Monthan AFB and at Raytheon being used for weapon platforms and avionics testing.

The A-3 association was "looking after the aircraft that had looked after them." The group saw an opportunity to actively solicit aviation museums to request A-3 Skywarriors through the NMNA at NAS Pensacola, the government controlling agency for allocating naval aircraft to museums. Recently, Castle Air Museum in California received A-3 (BuNo 144843), which is undergoing restoration, and Estrella Warbirds Museum in California also received a Skywarrior.

Mark Swisher, the association's treasurer, has quarterbacked several major projects, which resulted in Skywarriors being saved from destruction — instead, restored and put into museums.

Likewise, AFCEM/NAC Mike Glenn, USN(Ret), took on the restoration project of one of the earliest A3D-1 (BuNo 135434), which had been in the desert at Edwards AFB for decades. This A-3 was involved in the earliest flight tests and later was in the Bikini Atoll atomic bomb tests (*Operation Redwing*). Glenn and his group did an amazing job in restoring the Skywarrior to its near-original condition utilizing the facilities at

Carl Richards



An EA-3B Skywarrior departs Fort Worth, Texas to its final destination at the National Museum of Naval Aviation, NAS Pensacola, 30 Jun '11.





A special mission VQ-1 Det C World Watcher EA-3B Skywarrior launches from the waist catapult, USS Kitty Hawk (CV-63), CVW-9, c. 1985.

Edwards AFB. On 14 October 2011, the aircraft was officially dedicated to the museum at the Air Force Flight Test Center, Edwards AFB.

In 2011, there were three remaining flyable A-3s at Raytheon. On 29 April, BuNo 144825 was flown to NAS Whidbey Island to become the first aircraft display in the Whidbey Veterans Memorial Park.

On 28 June, BuNo 144867 was flown to NAS North Island to be shipped to the Pacific Aviation Museum, Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. Mike Glenn and two other ex-Whalers accompanied the transit of this Skywarrior from San Diego to Pearl Harbor on USS *BonHomme Richard* (LHD-8). Interestingly, Glenn had served his blue-water time on the aircraft carrier *Bon Homme Richard* (CVA-31).

As previously noted, on 30 June, the final flight of the Douglas A-3 Skywarrior (BuNo 144865) was made to the NMNA at NAS Pensacola to replace another Skywarrior (BuNo 135418) already on display, which in turn will be allocated to another museum.

Over the years, the A-3 Skywarrior Association members have increased the number of Skywarriors on display in



museums from about seven in 2000 to 15 as of 2011. During that period, Skywarriors have gone to museums on board *Midway* (CV-41) Museum, San Diego; at the National Security Agency, Fort Mead, Md.; and at Yanks Air Museum, Chino, Calif. However, not only has the number of Skywarriors more than doubled in museums in the last decade, but the association has also supported ongoing restoration work on all of these aircraft, as well as ensuring the displays showcase the Skywarriors in the best possible light.

The Skywarrior Association's endeavor to place as many of the remaining Skywarriors in museums is not over. Eleven A-3s remain in storage at Davis Monthan AFB, and the association is determined to get as many of



NTA-3B Skywarrior is hoisted from Kilo Pier 7, Pearl Harbor Ship Yard, Hawaii for final transfer to Ford Island, 7 Mar '12.

these to museums as possible. NMNA has a list of nearly 20 museums requesting Skywarriors for display.

From the first flight in 1952 to the last flight in 2011, the A-3 Skywarrior has an amazing list of accomplishments. The aircrews and maintenance personnel that flew and maintained this aircraft can be equally proud of their dedication to preserving the Whale for future generations to see and enjoy.

## Rota's Last Skywarrior Hitched Ride on USS Wasp

by MC2 Joseph Ebalo, USN, and MC3 Edward Kobobel, USN

Naval Station (NavSta) Rota's last EA-3B Skywarrior departed southern Spain on 5 May 2009 with the help of the crew of USS *Wasp* (LHD-1). Rota Sailors, Airmen and Spanish military members worked with *Wasp* personnel in transporting the "Whale" across the Atlantic Ocean as the ship returned to its NavSta Norfolk home port.

The Whale earned its nickname because at one time it was the heaviest aircraft on board a U.S. Navy aircraft carrier. For more than 16 years this particular Rota Whale sat on the lawn of the bachelor officer quarters (BOQ) as a memorial to the crew who flew these aircraft and played an important role during the Cold War. The Skywarrior retired from Navy service in 1991.

"The A-3 was the first jet aircraft to land at NavSta Rota in 1958, and it flew there for more than thirty years," said CDR Tom Brennan, USN(Ret), A-3 Skywarrior Association representative and project manager for the Rota A-3 move. "This is the last A-3 to leave Rota. These airplanes got me back home, so I'd like to return the favor and help this one get back home to the states, too."

The A-3 was moved from the BOQ in 2008 and sat in a hangar at Rota waiting for a ride to its final destination at the Battleship Memorial Park in Mobile, Ala. The park is located on Mobile Bay and is home to a collection of notable aircraft and museum ships including the *South Dakota*-class battleship *Alabama* (BB-60) and *Gato*-class submarine *Drum* (SS-228).

"It was a lot of work," said Brennan, a former A-3 crewman. "We spent a lot of time cleaning up the aircraft. We had to fold the wings and the tail. We also replaced the tires, and for the first time in sixteen years the aircraft sat on its own wheels."

Due to financial limitations, hiring a commercial crane to lift the large aircraft onto a normal cargo ship was not feasible. When Brennan heard that *Wasp* was making a port visit to Rota, the ship was

contacted to see if they could help. "I spoke with several people on board *Wasp*," said Brennan. "They told me they would be happy to help, and that this would be a great evolution for them."

"If *Wasp* hadn't come along, we were not sure when the right opportunity would come up again," Brennan added. "When they were raising the aircraft with *Wasp*'s boat and aircraft crane, I had butterflies in my stomach. But when it finally sat down on the elevator, I knew it was done and in the hands of flight-deck professionals, and I could finally relax."

*Wasp* off loaded the aircraft onto a barge after arrival in Norfolk. From there, the barge carried the Whale to its new home in Alabama.



USN, MCC Robert Palomares, USNR, via CHINFO



Seabees from Naval Mobile Construction Battalion 26 use a crane to lift an EA-3B Skywarrior, Naval Station Rota, Spain, 17 Jul '03.