

NEW WINGS FOR THE ALBATROSS



IN317 in flight over the base

Indian Navy Tu-142s phased out

On 29 March 2016, the Indian Navy's iconic Tu-142M 'Bear-Foxtrot' long-range maritime reconnaissance (LRMR) and ASW aircraft were retired after 29 years of service with INAS 312 ('Albatross'). Having comprehensively covered the Indian Navy's long-range maritime patrol operations out of INS Rajali at Arakkonam in the state of Tamil Nadu (see Vayu VI/2014), Angad Singh of Vayu returned to this secluded air station to bid the Type farewell.

Indian Naval Air Station *Rajali* in 2017 is almost a different place compared to that in 2014. The entrance remains the same, but instead of the deafening roar of Soviet-era turboprop engines driving massive eight-bladed contra-rotating propellers, much quieter modern western CFM turbofans now create the decibels. The only Tupolevs

that loom large over the foliage on this lush base are the bleached mothballed airframes parked by the south-western end of the massive runway (arguably the longest in South Asia). Only two Tu-142Ms of INAS 312 are still active. One has already been converted to a museum exhibit on the north side of the runway and all new construction

underway is solely intended to support the eight new Boeing P-8Is that will supplant the Tu-142Ms. The capability and reliability leap from this transition does not need to be pointed out, but one cannot help but sentimentally feel that the sleepy hamlet of Arakkonam is being robbed of much of its unique character!

As is the case with most Soviet (and latterly Russian) aircraft in service with the Indian military, the Tu-142M's Achilles' Heel has always been maintenance. The impressive capabilities of these machines are fielded through a massive maintenance effort both in India and Russia. The aircraft required overhaul in Russia at approximately 1,500-hour intervals, which meant each aircraft was dispatched to the Beriev Aircraft Company in Taganrog, Russia every 5 to 7 years depending on flying intensity. It took approximately one year to complete overhaul of a single aircraft, and 21 Indian Navy Tupolevs have been overhauled during the type's 29 years of service. The last of these, IN317, was handed over to the Navy on 6 August 2014 at the Taganrog plant, before making the long journey back to Arakkonam.

With no aircraft lost to attrition since induction, and an impressive safety record of over 30,000 accident-free flying hours since the type's induction, the principal driver behind the type's retirement was the age of the aircraft and the effort required to keep them airworthy. Their operating costs were also viewed unfavourably compared to smaller aircraft such as the Il-38SDs of INAS 315 ('Stallions') or newer aircraft such as the P-8Is. With the arrival of the Boeing P-8I, it was decided that the Tu-142s would be phased out once they had been replaced one-for-one by the American aircraft. Around 2014, the MoD decided that no further Tu-142 overhauls would be sanctioned and that individual aircraft would be progressively withdrawn as they came up against their flying hour limits.

On this writer's visit to INS *Rajali* in October 2014, the squadron had three operational aircraft, four cannibalised or



IN317 takes off past the short ATC tower at INS Rajali