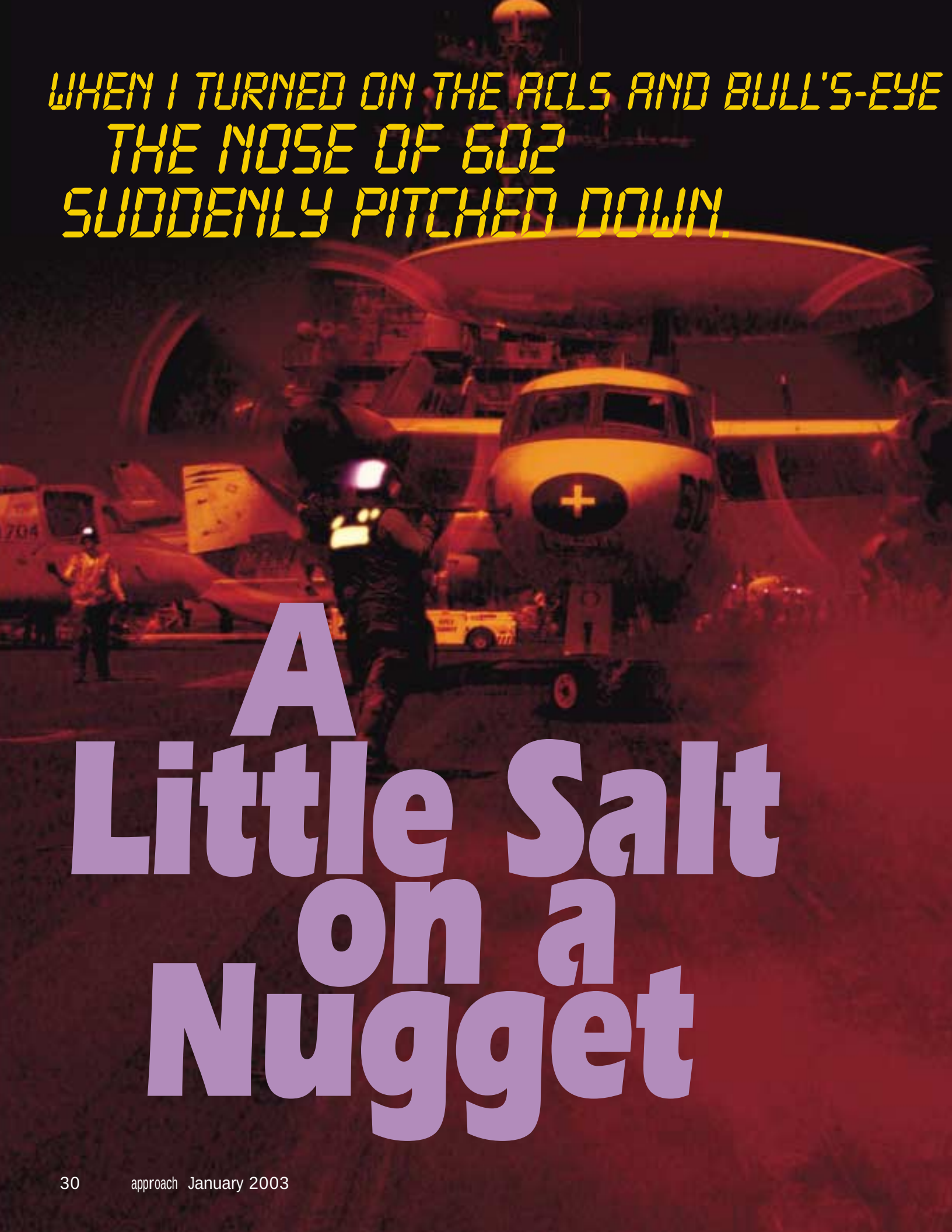
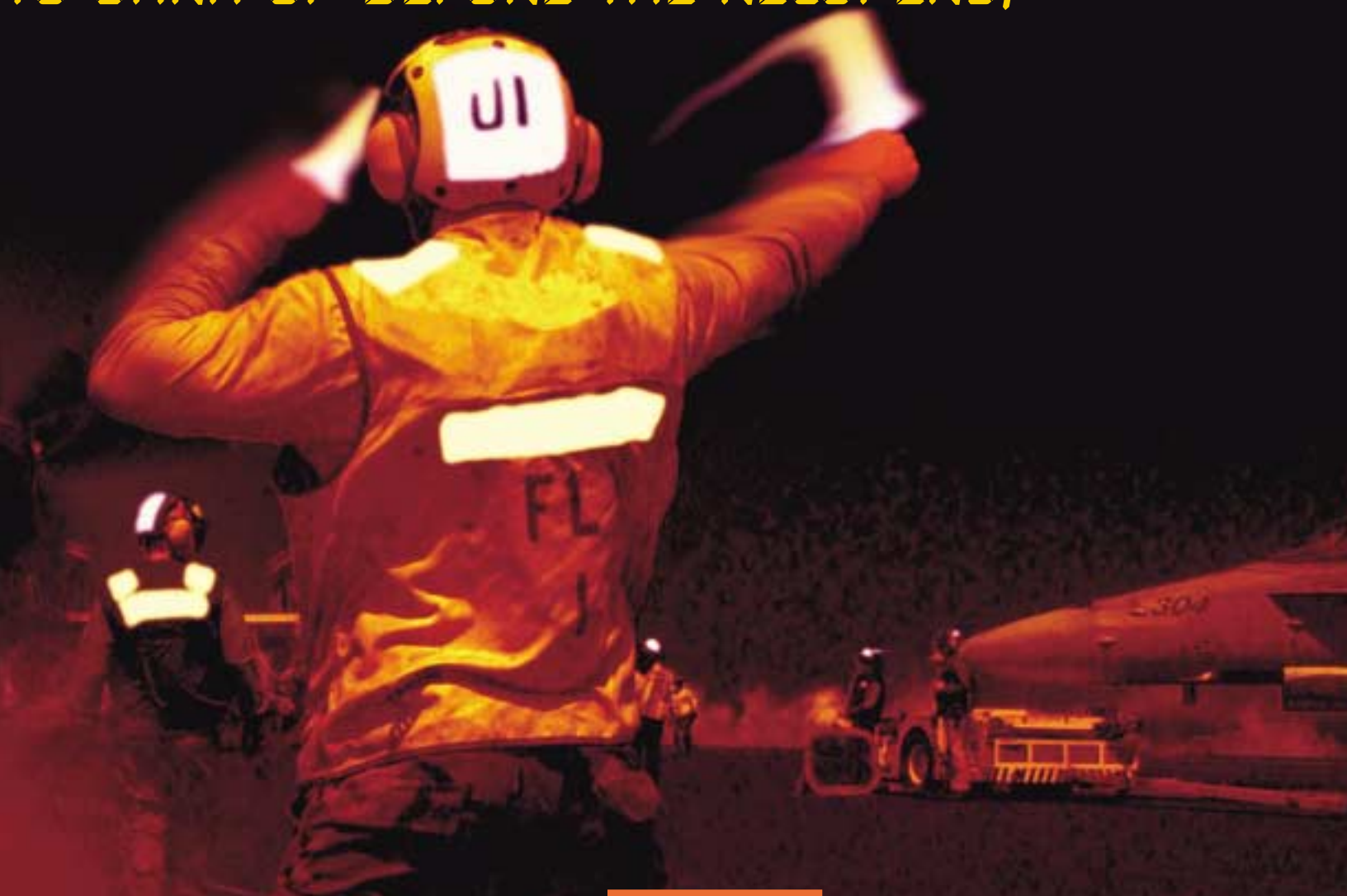


WHEN I TURNED ON THE ACLS AND BULL'S-EYE THE NOSE OF 602 SUDDENLY PITCHED DOWN.

A Little Salt on a Nugget

Photo by PHAA Joshua Karsten, Modified.

TO WARM UP BEFORE THE RECOVERY,



By Lt. Mark Freitag

We were flying in the VACAPES during the last days of JTFEX. The JFK was preparing to deploy in support of Operation Enduring Freedom. All of Air Wing Seven, the Freedom Fighters, were eager to begin our cruise. Although this would be my nugget cruise, I already had my share of interesting experiences in the Hawkeye. What happened this night topped them all.

We launched at 2300 on a dark evening for two cycles of triple-H operations. I flew with the skipper, who is always fun to fly with. The bonus is that he has seen nearly everything there is to see in a Hawkeye. Having an experienced pilot in the left seat is always a plus at night.

During triple-H ops, we normally fly with just two NFOs in the back. We were stationed

21,000 feet and orbited while looking for surface tracks around the battlegroup. The skipper let me go in the back and work on the carrier-based-AEW-training syllabus with the CICO. An hour and a half later, it was time to go forward and get ready to recover. I walked through the forward-equipment compartment to the cockpit and sat in the left seat.

When I turned on the ACLS and bull's-eye to warm up before the recovery, the nose of 602 suddenly pitched down. The skipper and I grabbed the yoke at the same time. It took a couple of seconds to stabilize the aircraft.

The CICO called on ICS, "What's going on up there?"

We asked her to stand by while we analyzed our problem. Although I was managing about 30 to 40 pounds of back-pressure on the yoke with my left arm, I had control of the aircraft. We quickly went through the control-malfunction-emergency procedures. We had lost 1,000 feet of altitude in one to two seconds.

One of the emergency procedures requires you to check a number of systems to aid in combating abnormal control forces. We tried everything but couldn't fix the problem. As a crew, we talked about our situation and tried to figure out what had happened. I was fresh out of the FRS, and I mentioned to everyone the only thing I ever had felt like this was a bungee failure in the simulator. For you non-Hawkeye aviators out there, the Hawkeye is purely artificial feel on all of our control surfaces, which are operated by hydraulics via actuators adjusted by a series of bungees.

There I was, Mr. Salty, talking about what I had felt and seen in the simulator. If I have learned anything since then, it's that simulators are not exactly like the plane.

I'm at 20,000 feet, pulling back on the yoke like it was a 30-pound dumbbell. We tried every emergency procedure that possibly could apply to this situation. We even added power, thinking it might relieve some of the yoke pressure. The skipper pulled back and forth on the yoke to determine the pressure. As he did, we noted the nose-trim indicator moved with the yoke—talk about confusing.

We have a policy in our squadron: In an emergency, the skipper wants the CAPC to do a seat swap and recover the aircraft. I knew that's exactly what the skipper was thinking. There was just one problem: If we tried that, who would keep the aircraft stable during the seat swap?

"Stoner, do you think you can recover this aboard the ship?" the skipper asked me.

I looked at him and said, "No way, sir. I can't bring this aircraft aboard the JFK tonight." I know the skipper already had figured out that part because he started working the divert options with JFK air ops. He told them the nature of our emergency and said we were diverting to Cherry Point, N.C.

The skipper was very calm on the radio, which made me feel better about our situation. I felt he had confidence in my ability to safely land. The skipper from our helo squadron also was flying that night. He talked with my skipper on the radio, stating, "Bluetail 602, we will follow you into Cherry Point until you are safe on deck." That was a good feeling, too. We squawked emergency Mode 3 and talked with the appropriate agencies.

As we set up for a long, straight-in approach to runway 32, Cherry Point approach and tower were a huge help. The skipper explained the nature of our emergency and asked for short-field arresting gear to be rigged and for a crash crew to be stationed.

We started a 1,000-foot-per-minute rate of descent at 40 miles out. At 11,000 feet, we did controllability checks, brought down the gear, and put the flaps at two-thirds, max rudder to 20, and put down the tail hook. We watched the airspeed throughout, deciding 150 knots was the safest approach speed to get on deck.

We commenced our approach to runway 32, but, to add to our troubles, I was fighting a crosswind all the way to touchdown. The crosswind, along with the constant yoke pressure I had to maintain, made it a challenging landing.

When we landed, I looked at the skipper, who had his head down. I know what he was saying to himself, "Why does this stuff always happen when I am flying with nuggets?"

We taxied 602 to the transient line and shut down. As far as diverts go, Cherry Point was awesome. The next day, our helo squadron ferried out our maintainers. It turned out the pitch-trim actuator rod had sheered off inside the actuator. The only thing keeping the rod in the actuator was the pitch-trim bungee. I asked our experienced maintenance-control officer if he ever had seen such a failure. You guessed it. His reply was no.

Lt. Freitag flies with VAW-121.