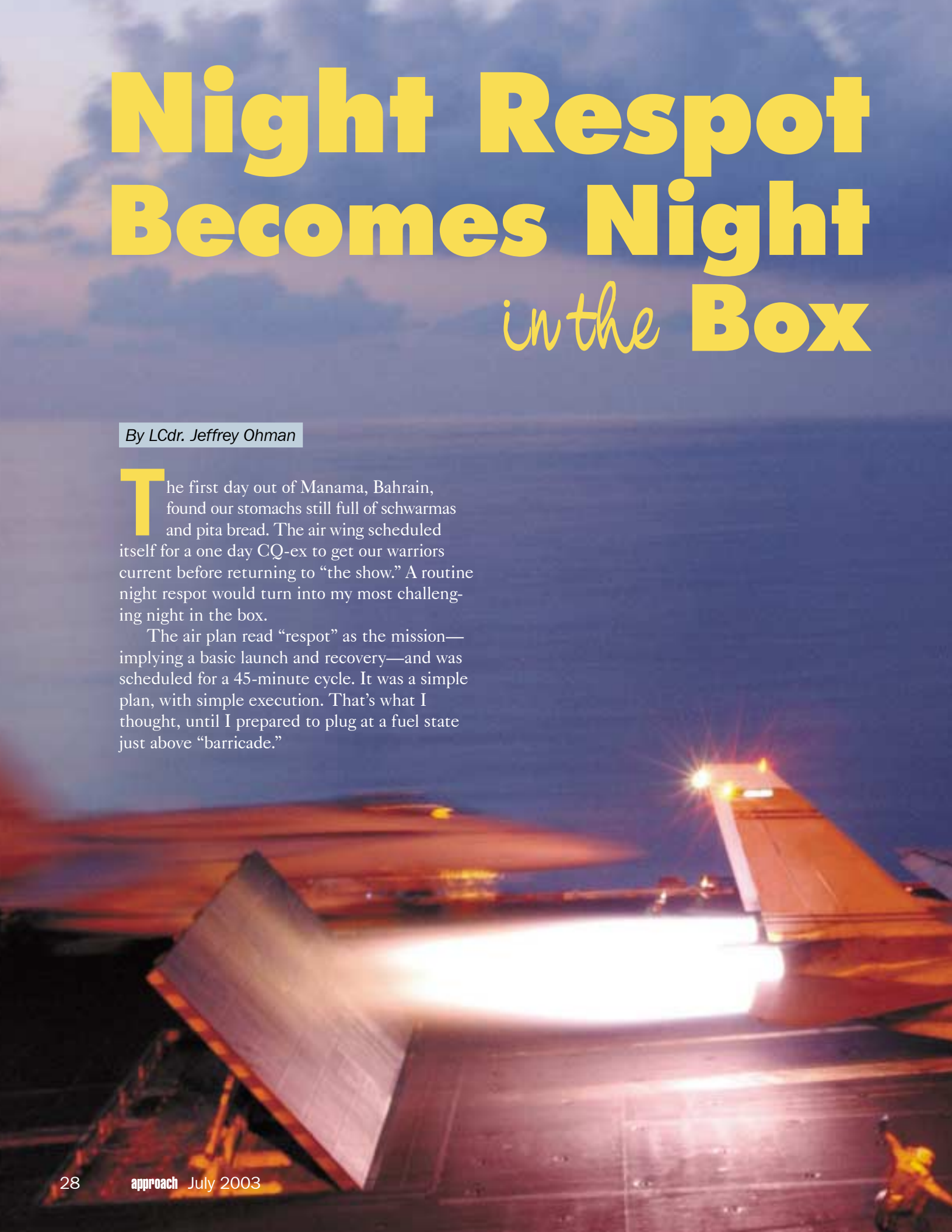
Night Respot Becomes Night in the Box

By LCdr. Jeffrey Ohman

The first day out of Manama, Bahrain, found our stomachs still full of schwarmas and pita bread. The air wing scheduled itself for a one day CQ-ex to get our warriors current before returning to "the show." A routine night respot would turn into my most challenging night in the box.

The air plan read "respot" as the mission—implying a basic launch and recovery—and was scheduled for a 45-minute cycle. It was a simple plan, with simple execution. That's what I thought, until I prepared to plug at a fuel state just above "barricade."



No packing materials in sight.

We started with a good plan, followed by a basic CV-1, Case III brief. The idea was to launch 16 airplanes, fly to the marshal stack, and recover in order. It was a clear night, with a comfortable 60-percent moon illumination. The deck was steady, and the winds true—great conditions to get back in the saddle.

Who brought the cardboard?

Our launch provided the first indication this might be more than the normal respot. I raised the gear and flaps and accelerated through 250 knots in the climb, then we felt an abnormal, light buffet. We didn't recognize anything out of the ordinary inside the airplane, including a flap-caution light that had been an up-gripe for over a month. We continued our climb to 10,000 feet.

After level off, we lowered our gear and flaps to troubleshoot. We noticed our Tomcat flew smoothly, when slowed to the on-speed dirty configuration. We then went clean and realized something was wrong. My RIO talked with our representative in CATCC to let the boat and squadron know we were troubleshooting but still planned a normal landing and clearing from the landing area.

That's an interesting shape.

The rep recommended backing up our checklist with a visual confirmation. Fortunately, our wingman was 1,000 feet below us in our marshal stack. They rendezvoused to back up our initial thought of an auxiliary-flap malfunction. Once detached, we gave CATCC and our rep an update. We chose to pull the aux-flap circuit breaker, which, in turn, raised the aux flaps for a smooth ride. Our plan was to press in the circuit breaker on our push to make sure we had a normal landing configuration.

With 10 minutes to push, we dumped fuel to place us 5,000 pounds above our max-trap fuel state. This decision was based on our short

Photo by Troy M. Latham

cycle and fuel-dump rate. I still felt good about the flight.

We commenced our descent out of 7,000 feet with a vector for our intercept to final bearing and decelerated to 225 knots. Passing 5,000 feet, we called platform, switched to our final controller, reduced our rate of descent, and checked our fuel state. I normally adjust my fuel state to 1,000 pounds over max-trap state by 12 miles. We actually stopped our dump at 1,500 pounds over, while intercepting final bearing and 1,200 feet.

We proceeded in on the final bearing; all was well for a normal recovery. At four miles out, CATCC asked if we expected any wing-sweep issues on deck, and we replied, "Negative." At three miles, we pushed over on our ACLS needles guidance. By 2.7 miles, we were directed to break out, to climb to 2,000 feet, and to turn left to the downwind.

We queried the status of our configuration when we heard the abnormal 2,000-foot directive. We were told to remain dirty because we were being sequenced to follow the last Prowler, which would push in two minutes. We still could make this work; we were looking at max-trap fuel abeam.

Add some Styrofoam peanuts.

Established on our downwind heading, we found ourselves extended to 20 DME from the ship. The next call was to climb to 5,000 feet on a vector and to switch to marshal control.

Our response was, "Understand you're remarshaling us?" The controller replied in the negative. We told the controller we were cleaning up on our climb to fall in line.

The vectors continued for 270 degrees, with a descent back to 1,200 feet. The call for us to dirty-up came early—at 15 miles. An indicator that the controllers were overwhelmed came when they made the "stay clean through 10" call, followed by a "confirm dirty" at eight miles. We remained dirty from 15 miles in.

We calculated our fuel to be tank state on the ball call at three-quarter mile. The recovery tanker quickly rendezvoused to the hawk position by the time we reached five miles. Our focus remained on the original task of recovery.

The lid starts to close.

We flew our pass to the flight deck, but the hook skipped the 3- and 4-wires. With that phase behind us, we found our tanker in a perfect hawk position. As I extended the probe, I glanced at the fuel—1,000 pounds over barricade fuel state. "This still is possible," I thought.

After a couple of practice attempts, we found our home in the basket. We were going to receive 3,000 pounds—good.

Is that the sound of packing tape?

Unfortunately, the tanker already had transferred his fuel out of the air-refueling pod. Because of this, we asked for fuel faster than they could transfer. We essentially went through three "green light" periods to pick up 2,500 pounds. After leaving the tanker, we confirmed a priority fuel state and prepared for our recovery vectors.

We calculated the fuel to be just inside priority state on the ball. We told the boat our plan was to make one approach, and, if not successful, we would accept a tight vector for one more look before again reaching tank state. We delayed our dirty-up until the base leg and intercepted glide slope and azimuth in the turning descent.

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The second tanker assumed the hawk, while we prepared for our return to the ship. With solid LSOs and 30 knots down the angle, we recovered without raising the net midcourt. An hour and 45 minutes later, our 45-minute respot was complete.

LCdr. Ohman flies with VF-2.