

Fire

on the Cat

By LCdr. Scott Moran

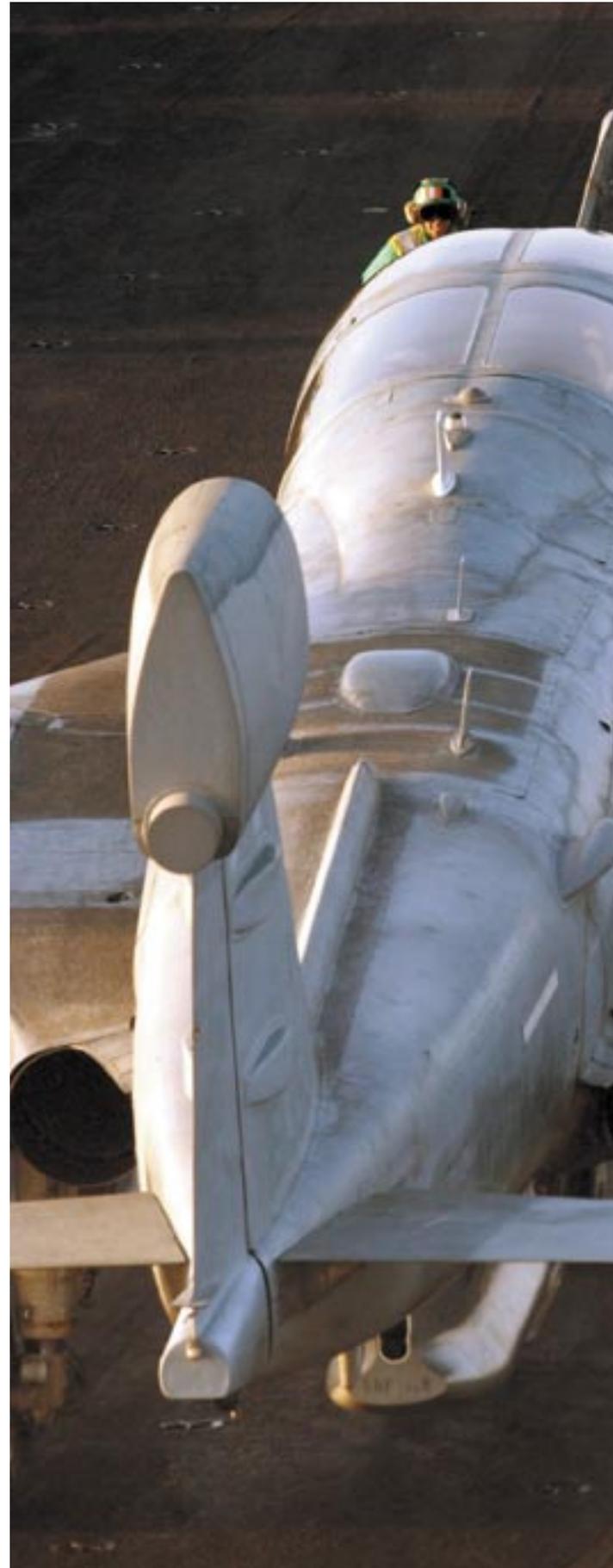
While taxiing trusty Ironclaw 504 into the cat 1 shuttle for a day cat shot, I saw, out the corner of my eye, a flashing master-caution light. I glanced at the caution panel and called to ECMO 1, “Left generator light.” At the same time, I reached down and recycled the generator switch. The caution light remained on, and ECMO 1 told the air boss we needed to spin off the cat to troubleshoot.

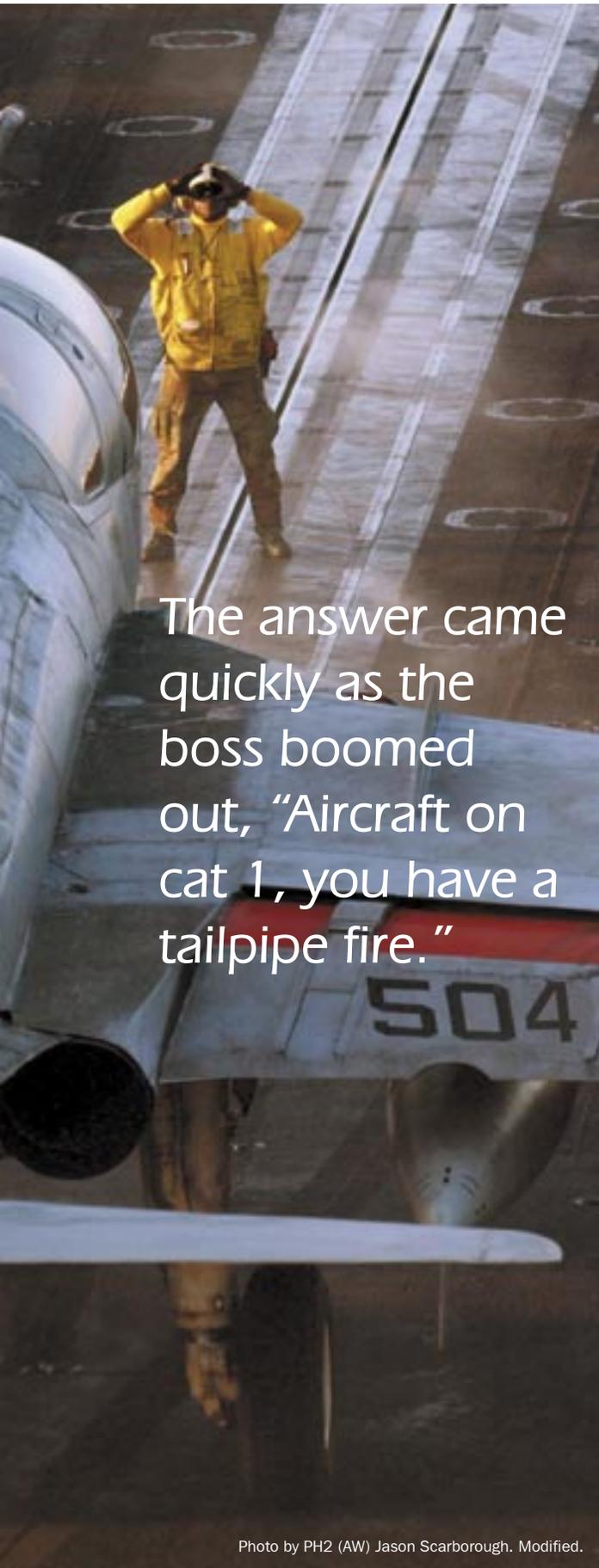
The next call was unexpected. I heard, “501, you have a left tailpipe fire.”

My wingman, 501, had been shot off cat 4 a few minutes earlier and was at least seven miles upwind. However, because of our position on the cat, I was sure the call was for us, and I immediately shut down the left engine. The pilot in 501 honored the call, as well, and immediately secured the gangbar; he fortunately stopped short of securing his left engine and firing his halon system.

Confusion reigned for a few moments as both aircraft radioed tower for clarification. The answer came quickly as the boss boomed out, “Aircraft on cat 1, you have a tailpipe fire.”

A tailpipe fire in the EA-6B usually is associated with an abnormal start; I never had heard of one occurring while taxiing. Having accomplished the emergency procedures for a tailpipe





The answer came quickly as the boss boomed out, "Aircraft on cat 1, you have a tailpipe fire."

Photo by PH2 (AW) Jason Scarborough. Modified.

fire, we elected to do some of the "Engine Fire—On Deck" procedures, even though we had no other fire indications.

I secured the gangbar and then considered securing both engines as required for an engine fire on deck. Given our position on the flight deck and my desire to maintain radio communication with tower, I chose to leave the right engine turning and to fire the halon bottle for the left engine.

All was quiet for a few seconds. I looked over and saw ECMO 1 marking pages in the PCL with his fingers for three separate emergencies: generator failure, tailpipe fire, and engine fire on deck. We assumed we were out of the woods because we had heard nothing further about our fire. In a soothing voice the boss told us to expect a pushback to elevator one for a shutdown.

I reviewed the emergency procedures during the pushback. We were edgy about sitting in the cockpit of an aircraft that had had a visual indication of a fire. The more I thought about my situation, the longer the pushback seemed to take. I tried in vain to signal someone we needed to shut down and egress as soon as possible. The process probably required only two minutes, and I was relieved when the signal finally came to shut down.

I'm still unsure if our decision-making process was sound. Shutting down and egressing from the aircraft while on the catapult would have been the most conservative course of action. But, it would have shut down cat 1 for the launch and caused confusion on the flight deck and in the tower. Without fire or temp-warning lights, I felt comfortable with our course of action. However, as time elapsed during the pushback, it didn't take long to realize staying in a burning aircraft on the flight deck was unwise.

This incident provided an excellent topic for ready-room discussions of flight-deck emergencies. It was a great example of a situation where NATOPS-emergency procedures don't exactly apply; yet, a quick judgment call was required. Although we didn't get airborne, both crews discussed the incident and gained insights into decision-making during emergencies. 🦅

LCdr. Moran flies with VAQ-136.