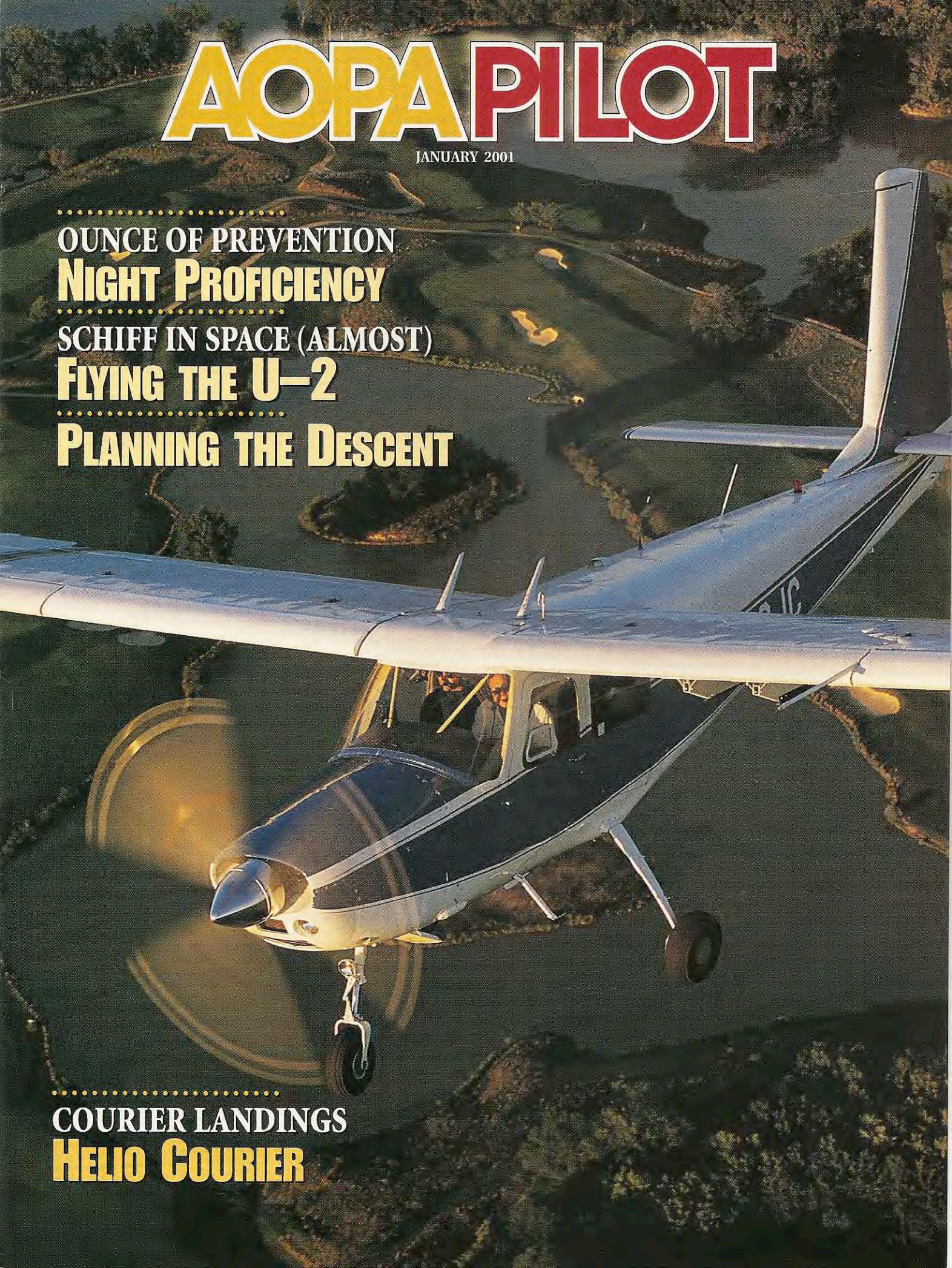
# AOPA PILOT

JANUARY 2001



OUNCE OF PREVENTION
## NIGHT PROFICIENCY

SCHIFF IN SPACE (ALMOST)
## FLYING THE U-2

## PLANNING THE DESCENT

COURIER LANDINGS
## HELIO COURIER

# Ready plane... take the plane!

## *Flying the golf profile*

Bob Mikkelson is president of Winged Vision Inc., an outfit that provides aerial video imagery for major sports events. His airplane: a Helio Courier, of course. "It's the only airplane out there that can maneuver safely at the kinds of airspeeds I need for the kind of shooting I do," Mikkelson said. "Television producers want a nice, steady shot—the kind of shot that you get from a blimp—and the Helio does a real good job of steady, slow-speed flying."

Mikkelson and his Helio do a lot of work for MetLife. When MetLife advertises at closely spaced multiple events, *Snoopy 1* and *Snoopy 2* (MetLife's blimps) sometimes can't make it to all venues, so Mikkelson gets the call.

This June, *Snoopy 1* was supposed to cover the Seniors Open Golf Tournament at the Saucon Valley Country Club in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. But fate intervened. Out in Arizona, *Snoopy 1* hit its mooring mast and suffered substantial damage. Mikkelson's phone rang, and he swung into action.

Problem was, Mark Ograbisz—his pilot—was getting married and couldn't fly the Seniors. When asked if I'd be interested in standing in for four days' worth of Helio flying, the answer was a definite yes. Soon, the groom-to-be was checking me out in the Helio.

Two days later I was helping Mikkelson install the camera pod at the Allentown-Bethlehem Airport, and climbing into the left seat for the first of six flights over the country club. Our photography would be part of ESPN's and NBC's coverage of the Seniors. Mikkelson sat in back with his joystick and other video paraphernalia. As we taxied out I saw a Gulfstream IV (N1JN), a Bombardier Challenger (N1TW), and a Cessna Citation X (N1AP). These were, of course, Jack Nicklaus', Tom Watson's, and Arnold Palmer's airplanes.

The drill was to simply circle over the country club while the golfers golfed and Mikkelson shot the action. The challenge for me was learning the course and getting used to flying at 50 knots in a 15- to 30-degree bank. You have to fly this slowly to minimize the appearance of a rotating image on the television screen.

So there I was, flying along at 18 to 20 inches of manifold pressure and 2,300 rpm, at what felt like a ridiculously slow airspeed. I spent the night before and part of the morning trying to memorize what all 18 holes would look like from the air, but the real thing doesn't look quite like the handouts given to spectators. Meanwhile, I hear cacophony through my headset. Allentown Approach is telling me about traffic. Mikkelson is saying things like "let's go to eight" or "see the cut in the trees?" And way in the background I can hear the television commentators, the applause, the director yelling at his cameramen and other staff, and an eerie whispering among what must have been the technical staff on the course. It was surreal. "You'll never think of TV sports the same after this," Mikkelson said, and he was right.

The chatter picks up.

"Roll purple," says the director, meaning a tape deck. "Five-four-three-two-one, roll Elvis (another tape deck). Standby Amber. Roll Amber. Ready, Dog (a cameraman's nickname). Dissolve, Dog."

Now I hear music that segues into a commercial.

Then it's Allentown. "November-One-Eight-Juliet-Yankee, traffic now 12 o'clock, 200 feet below you, heading north." Great. And there he is, a Cessna 310 that's also maneuvering around for a look at the tournament. I can do without sightseers, who probably are looking more at the ground than scanning the sky.

"And here at the beautiful Saucon Valley Country Club..." the announcer now says. I look down at my monitor and see that Mikkelson has framed the clubhouse.

"Ready plane...take the plane!" says the director, and our video instantly becomes part of the show.

Then there's this whispering among the technical staff on the course. *"You might like the ketchup and hot water...What do you call it, egg cream?...Clevelander...I'll put you in the belly of the beast...Look at the guy wearing seersucker...You ought to see him at night...."*

"Fleischer tight, Bob! Plane, you on eight? Take the plane" and "Get the caddy the hell out of the way," yells the director.

The whole time Mikkelson is quietly shooting the play below. He can track a drive from the tee to the fairway, or zoom into an extreme closeup of a single golf ball. He can find wayward golf balls faster than the caddies. Meanwhile, the camera mounted on a pod under the left wing stays rock-steady, in spite of any turbulence. The gyro stabilization keeps the lens pinned to the location Mikkelson has selected with the joystick on his console.

There's a ridge to the west of the country club, and by midafternoon it's throwing off turbulence. Some of the bumps make the inboard slats pop out in a sudden, slamming action. I guess the inboard portions of the wing are near the stall. It's unnerving, but I get used to it.

Now we're having trouble with our reception. Dave Steiner, our "catcher" on the ground (he aims an antenna at the airplane and catches our microwave video transmissions), complains that our picture is being affected by interference from the scads of

electrical gear surrounding him. Vertical bars are appearing on our imagery.

"I could try putting the Humbucker on it," Steiner says. A Humbucker is a brick-like object that filters out interference from nearby electrical groundings. You fit it onto a ground wire. "Yeah, try the Humbucker," Mikkelson says. Now I'm into it. "Yeah, the Humbucker," I add.

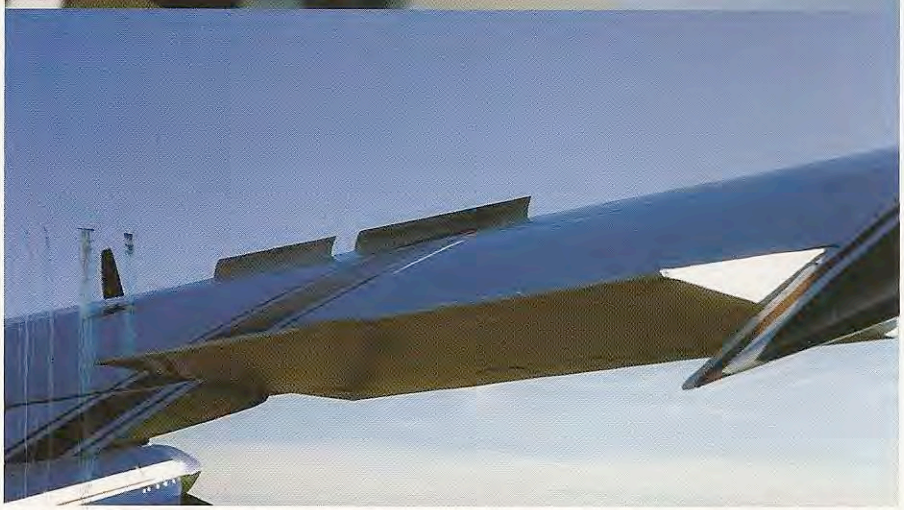
Steiner's Humbucker works, and all remains well for the rest of the four days we fly the Seniors. That night at dinner Steiner, who's been aiming at us all day, says dryly, "You made 90 circuits of the course today."

On Friday we taxi out behind N1AP; Arnie has failed to qualify and is going back home to Latrobe, Pennsylvania. By Saturday we're shooting for NBC and I know each hole of the course. By Sunday NBC is taking a lot of pictures from the Helio. That's a clue that our pictures are just as good as those from the blimps.

For the trip home from Allentown to Frederick, Maryland, we took the camera pod off its mounts (affixed to this Helio's armament hard points) and saw a 120-kt cruise. With the pod installed, we'd be doing good to see 100 kt. As usual my approaches were made at 60 to 65 kt, with half flaps. "Skyhawk-style," according to Ograbisz. I'm not yet up to the full-flap, 40-kt approaches and 200-foot landing rolls that Ograbisz, with his 700 hours in Helios, can pull off. The slats pop out as I flare—*boom-boom*—and we still land within 500 feet.

It was a great four days and a great 23 hours flying a most unique Helio Courier (one of only 19 tricycle-gear versions ever built) on a most interesting job. Oh, and Hale Irwin won.

Bob, I'm ready to go again. And don't forget to bring the Humbucker. —*TAH*



*Four independently operating slats (top left) extend at high angles of attack and give the Helio Courier its exemplary slow-speed behavior. Attaching Winged Vision Inc.'s 80-pound gyro-stabilized lens to the hard points (above) takes muscle and steady hands. Once powered up, the lens can be swiveled across a huge range of movement. Interceptors (above) act like spoilerons to assist the Helio in slow-speed turns.*