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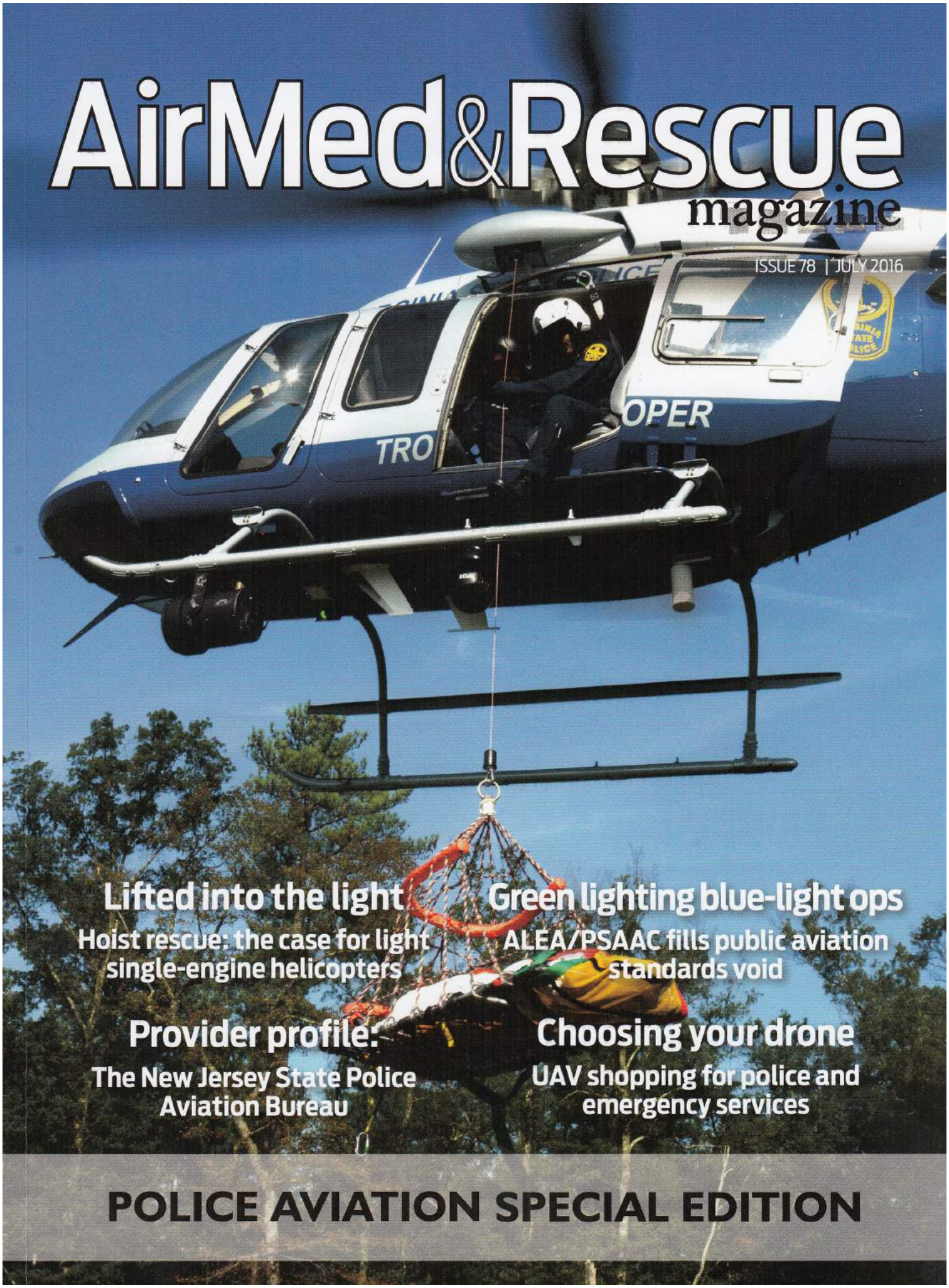

Lifted into the light

Hoist rescue: the case for light single-engine helicopters

Green lighting blue-light ops

ALEA/PSAAC fills public aviation standards void

Provider profile:

The New Jersey State Police Aviation Bureau

Choosing your drone

UAV shopping for police and emergency services

POLICE AVIATION SPECIAL EDITION

Field notes from Nicaragua

Did you hear that?

Pop...pop...pop.

There it is again. It isn't incredibly loud, but very distinctive. I heard it a few minutes before, as well.

As a pilot, any abnormal, sudden sounds while flying make the heart skip a beat. But even more so when you're a few thousand feet above the scarce jungles of northeastern Nicaragua.

I had just departed the bush airstrip of Waspam with a pregnant lady in the midst of a complicated premature delivery. She is in my back seat with a young nurse. I take a quick glance back at my delicate passengers and give a 'thumbs up'. The intermittent popping sound doesn't seem to be bothering them, but it is definitely making me nervous. The patient seems fairly stable, so I focus all of my attention, first of all, on flying the aircraft – and, second, on finding the source of the sound.

A quick glance at my engine gauges reading normally eases my mind a little. I think, "We're not falling out of the sky – so that's a good thing." My first thought is that it is an electronic problem. "Probably the avionics," I guess.

I remove my headset from my right ear, trying to isolate the source of the sound. I clearly hear it again, and not in my headset. I now focus my attention to the radios and transponder. But a quick radio check with the Puerto Cabezas control tower comes back as clear; they can also read my transponder. My next thought is an electrical failure. I can't smell anything burning, and my amperage gauge is telling me that the alternator is charging the system fine. But that doesn't calm my nerves at all. Obviously, something is not right.

I begin switching on and off all of the electrical lights with my eye on the amperage gauge and circuit breaker panel. Everything that I do checks normal. I cannot seem to initiate nor stop the popping. As my frustration mounts, I begin exploring the possibility of other nonelectric causes. Maybe the stretcher is making that noise as the patient moves around? Maybe on take-off from the bush airstrip I picked up a small branch or other object that is hitting the exterior of the airplane? A quick glance outside the aircraft, and a slight jostle of stretcher doesn't confirm those suspicions. Every pop is now an annoying reminder of the hours I will spend looking for the cause.

Clear as a bell, the tower lady clears me to land. As I turn base to final, I feel my muscles tense up as the random popping follows my landing clearance. After landing, I try to calm my frustration regarding the noise. We are on the ground. My main priority now is getting the patient safely and quickly from the aircraft to the waiting ambulance. I can investigate the problem after the patient is on her way to the hospital. The transfer goes smoothly. The nurse climbs into the back of the ambulance and tells the driver, "Vamonos." I shake her hand and thank her for the help she provided. She looks at me, smiles, and responds, "De nada, piloto." Her gaze then moves forward, and she blows a few bubbles from the gum she has been chewing throughout the whole flight. Pop...pop...pop.

AUTHOR TJ STEWART

TJ Stewart is the field director for Wings of Hope in Nicaragua. He spends his days flying medical evacuation flights for people who need emergency medical care. Many would not survive if they had to make the several hours drive over bumpy terrain or equally long boat ride down the Rio Coco River.