

Surface Warfare

MAY 2025

DIGITAL FEATURE

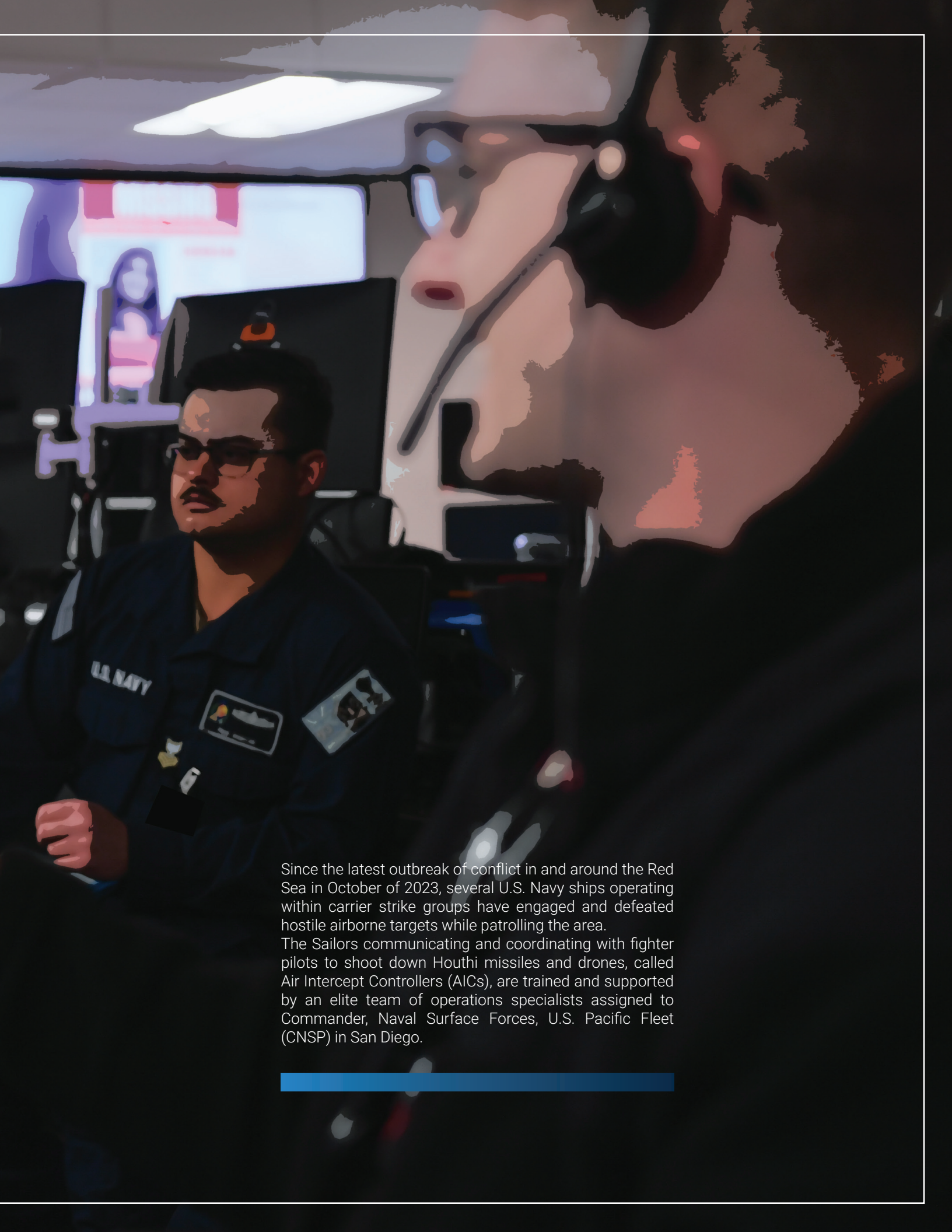


Surface Sailors Level-up, Control the Air

Story and photos by MC1 Kelby Sanders



Operations Specialist 2nd Class Natalie Towne, assigned to Arleigh Burke-class guided missile destroyer USS Pinckney (DDG 91), receives constructive feedback during an air intercept controller training simulation in the Tactical Training Group Pacific Battle Lab at Naval Base Point Loma.



Since the latest outbreak of conflict in and around the Red Sea in October of 2023, several U.S. Navy ships operating within carrier strike groups have engaged and defeated hostile airborne targets while patrolling the area.

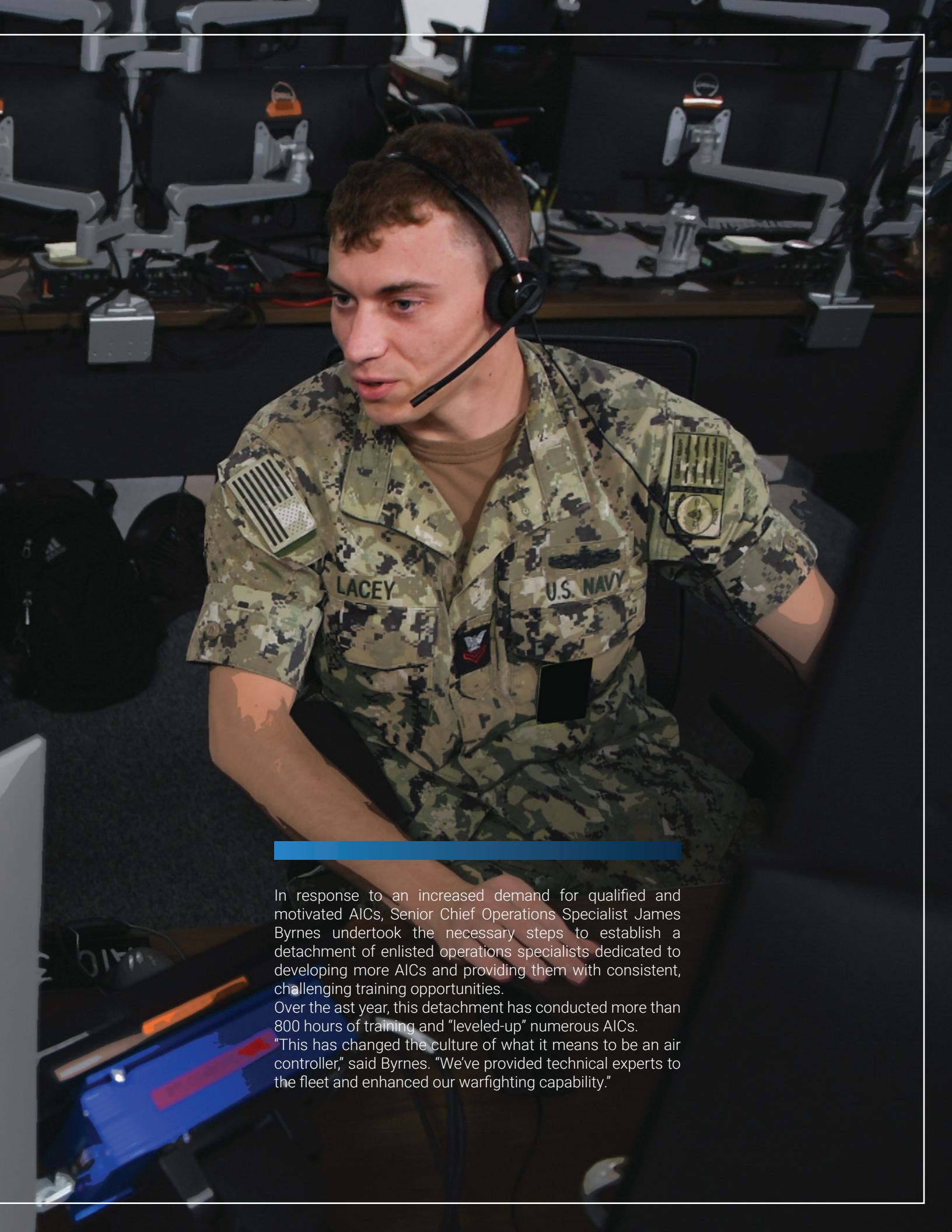
The Sailors communicating and coordinating with fighter pilots to shoot down Houthi missiles and drones, called Air Intercept Controllers (AICs), are trained and supported by an elite team of operations specialists assigned to Commander, Naval Surface Forces, U.S. Pacific Fleet (CNSF) in San Diego.



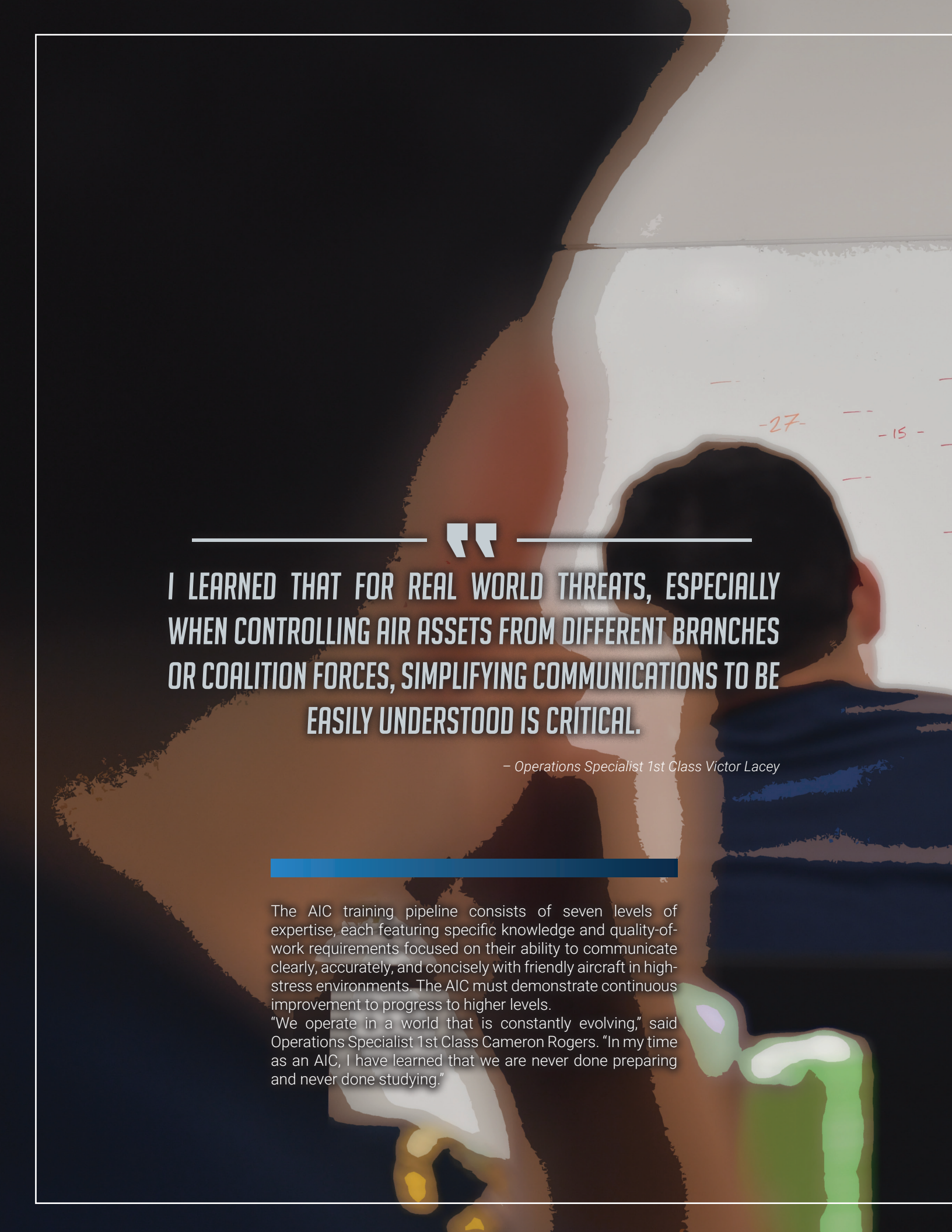
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THIS HAS CHANGED THE CULTURE OF WHAT IT MEANS TO BE AN AIR CONTROLLER,” SAID BYRNES. “WE’VE PROVIDED TECHNICAL EXPERTS TO THE FLEET AND ENHANCED OUR WARFIGHTING CAPABILITY.

– Senior Chief Operations Specialist James Byrnes



In response to an increased demand for qualified and motivated AICs, Senior Chief Operations Specialist James Byrnes undertook the necessary steps to establish a detachment of enlisted operations specialists dedicated to developing more AICs and providing them with consistent, challenging training opportunities. Over the last year, this detachment has conducted more than 800 hours of training and "leveled-up" numerous AICs. "This has changed the culture of what it means to be an air controller," said Byrnes. "We've provided technical experts to the fleet and enhanced our warfighting capability."



I LEARNED THAT FOR REAL WORLD THREATS, ESPECIALLY WHEN CONTROLLING AIR ASSETS FROM DIFFERENT BRANCHES OR COALITION FORCES, SIMPLIFYING COMMUNICATIONS TO BE EASILY UNDERSTOOD IS CRITICAL.

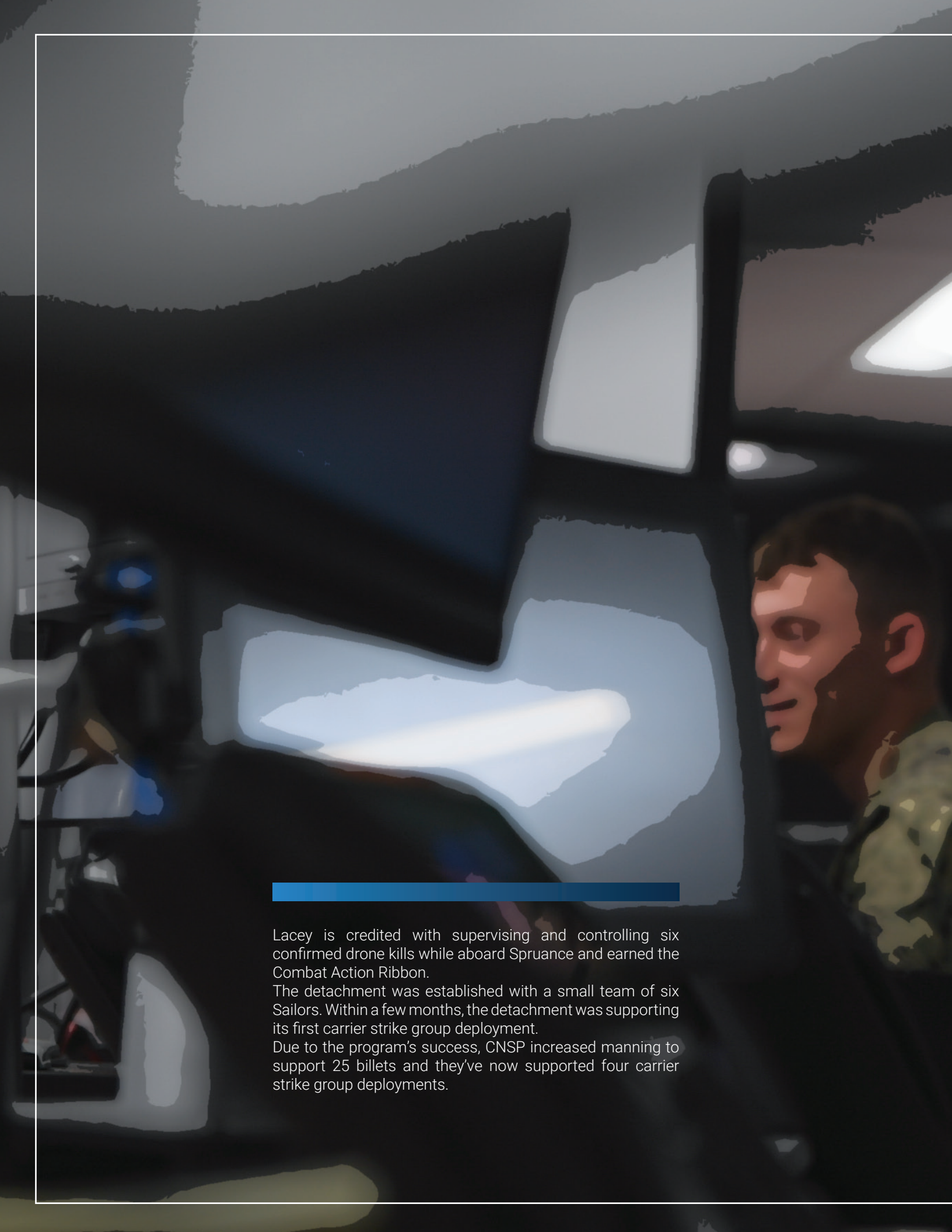
– Operations Specialist 1st Class Victor Lacey

The AIC training pipeline consists of seven levels of expertise, each featuring specific knowledge and quality-of-work requirements focused on their ability to communicate clearly, accurately, and concisely with friendly aircraft in high-stress environments. The AIC must demonstrate continuous improvement to progress to higher levels.

"We operate in a world that is constantly evolving," said Operations Specialist 1st Class Cameron Rogers. "In my time as an AIC, I have learned that we are never done preparing and never done studying."



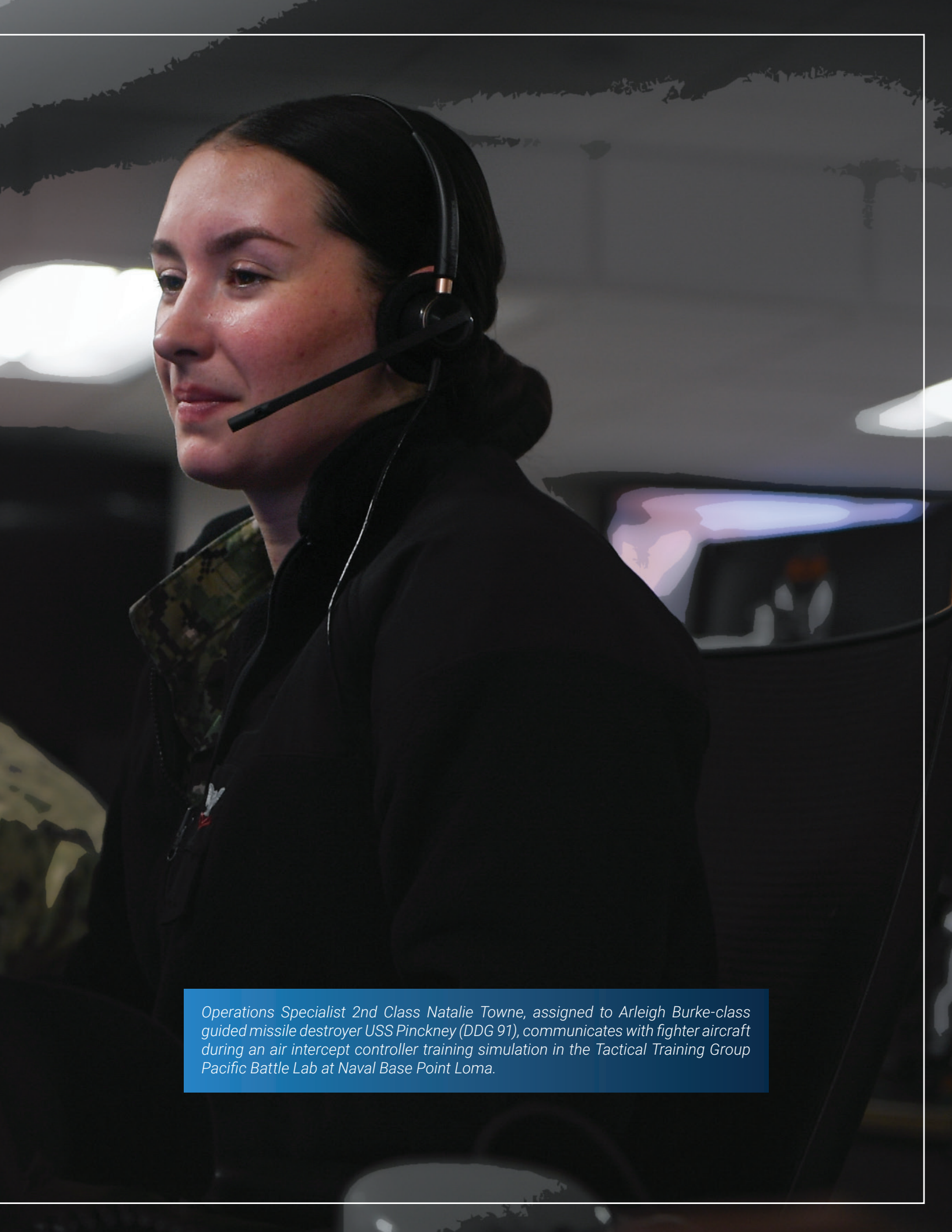
Operations Specialist 1st Class Cameron Rogers leads air intercept controller classroom training at Tactical Training Group Pacific at Naval Base Point Loma. Air intercept controllers deploy aboard various platforms to support carrier strike group operations around the globe and have played a key role in recent operations in the Red Sea.

A man in a military uniform is shown in profile, looking at a large computer monitor. The monitor displays a bright, glowing object, possibly a drone, against a dark background. The scene is dimly lit, with the primary light source being the screen. The man is wearing a camouflage uniform. The background shows the interior of a control room with various equipment and screens.

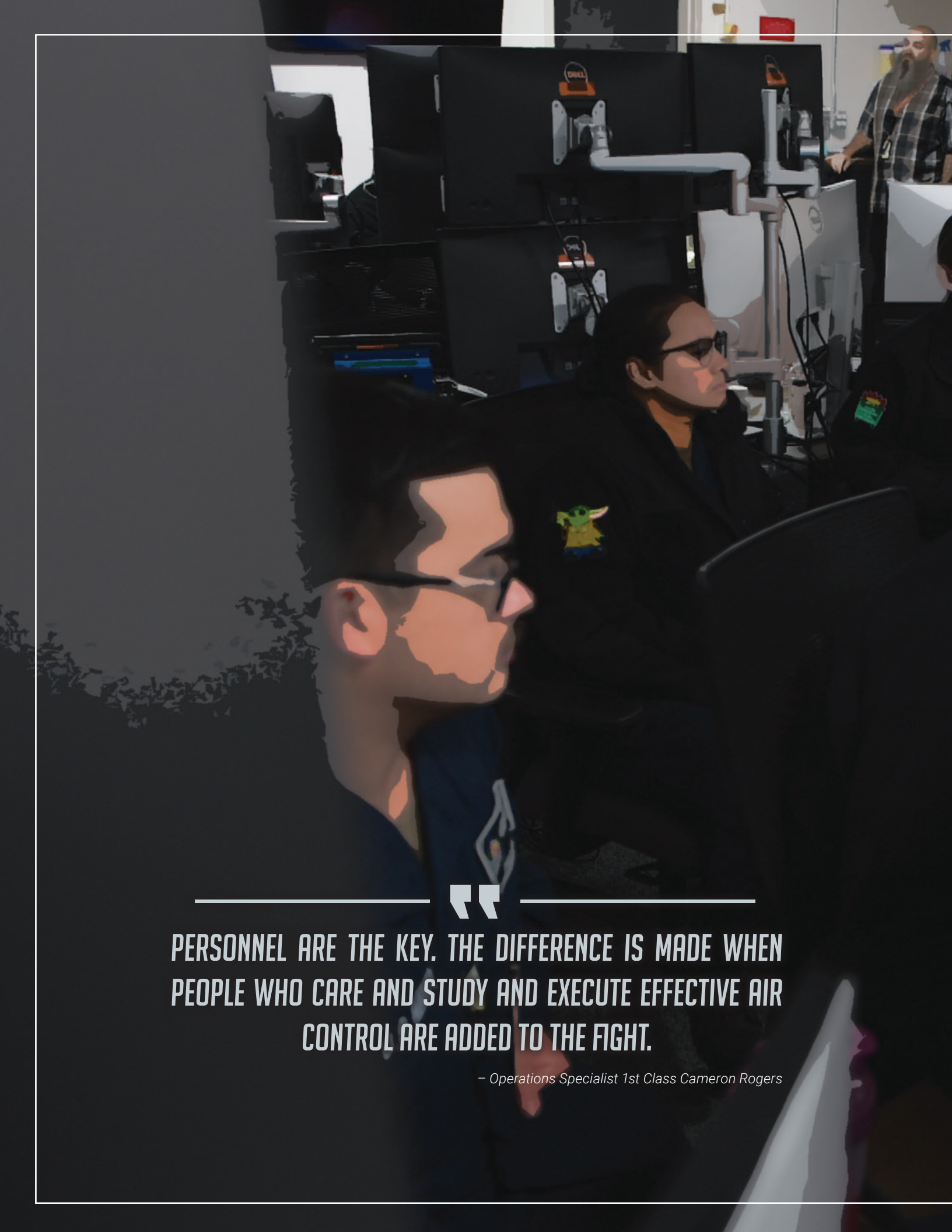
Lacey is credited with supervising and controlling six confirmed drone kills while aboard Spruance and earned the Combat Action Ribbon.

The detachment was established with a small team of six Sailors. Within a few months, the detachment was supporting its first carrier strike group deployment.

Due to the program's success, CNSP increased manning to support 25 billets and they've now supported four carrier strike group deployments.



Operations Specialist 2nd Class Natalie Towne, assigned to Arleigh Burke-class guided missile destroyer USS Pinckney (DDG 91), communicates with fighter aircraft during an air intercept controller training simulation in the Tactical Training Group Pacific Battle Lab at Naval Base Point Loma.



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— Operations Specialist 1st Class Cameron Rogers



While manning challenges persist fleetwide, CNSP remains focused on placing highly trained and motivated AICs where they're needed most. "Personnel are the key," said Rogers. "The difference is made when people who care and study and execute effective air control are added to the fight. A good air intercept controller is a force multiplier." ‡