

Flights of Fancy

GROWING UP IN the Fifties, as I did, you couldn't help but imagine that some day you'd be going to work in a personal flying machine. These devices, showcased almost monthly in the pages of *Popular Science*, *Mechanix Illustrated* and *Popular Mechanics*, promised to banish the laws of gravity and provide us with a level of personal mobility that only the birds had known before.

I loved to fantasize what it would be like, and bought every magazine that contained a story on flying saucers, jetpacks, tiny aircraft, hovercraft or gyrocopters. I idolized the Wright Brothers and thrilled to Lindbergh's diary of his marathon flight across the Atlantic in *The Spirit of St. Louis*. For fiction, I read *The Adventures of Tom Swift Jr.*—"For Today's Science-minded Boys!" (and still have my collection). The Tom Swift books were to the junior scientists what *The Hardy Boys* stories were to the outdoorsmen of the future. Tom, if you don't know him, was the fictional adolescent son of a famous and wealthy inventor (actually the first Tom Swift, our fathers' fictional hero), and had his father's support to create any device that might stimulate a boy's imagination, from a Rocket Ship to a Giant Robot. Swift's "Diving Seacopter" (a combination helicopter/submarine) was my favorite, and later, I became fascinated with scuba diving as another way to simulate the dream of weightless flight.

Seems it was just yesterday that superconductors appeared to be the key to magnetic levitation, perhaps the purest form of flying. Only in dreams can it get any better.

Looking back on this flying fixation, I'm amazed at the hold the idea has continued to have on me over the years.

I've studied powered hang-gliders, and imagined that, finally, I'd found what I'd been looking for. However, a trip at the controls of a trainer, the pilot behind me with dual controls, spoiled it for me. He was fond of stunt flying, and the violent maneuvers he demonstrated convinced me the machine had the structural strength of a lawn chair—not something I cared to risk my life in.

Once, I tried to buy a used Bensen Gyrocopter for \$600. It had a beautiful anodized aluminum chassis fitted with a McColluch 90 hp two-stroke drone engine, but was missing its rotor and pusher prop. If you've ever seen one of these things fly (seen "Mad Max?"), you can't help but be impressed with what a high-performance machine it is. But, researching the price of the missing parts, I found the craft had a lethal tendency for the blades to tangle in-flight. A gyrocopter missing its blades was sort of like



the ad for the parachute: "Used once, never opened, slight stain, \$100."

In the Army, my childhood study of helicopters allowed me to pass the difficult written control test to become a helicopter pilot, but I flunked the hearing test (perforated eardrums from rifle practice).

I actually started college to major in aeronautical engineering, but the level of math required stopped me. I have no regrets, but I still keep waiting for someone to build the perfect affordable ultralight helicopter.

Of course, now you also know why I like motorcycles so much. What could be closer to the dream of flight over the ground than a bike; swooping and leaning, pulling itself up short and jetting away; unencapsulated, free in the breeze. You can almost forgive the guys who don't dress properly, as I once did, because they enjoy the sheer thrill of flying through the air as near to naked as possible. Maybe once they get old enough and have enough to lose, they'll simply get over it.

But, for a change of pace this month, let's let our imaginations fly, and indulge me while I fantasize about a new kind of motorcycle; a motorcycle that can fly.

The invention came to me after we'd reached Laguna Seca via Highway One last month. Now, if you haven't ridden this particular stretch of the coast, there are few roads I know that can make you feel more like a bird. Uphill, downhill, twisting and turning with thousand-foot cliffs to help visualize a bird's-eye view of Earth. Those with vertigo need not apply.

The Coast Highway is a challenge as the four-wheeled traffic creates endless chicanes and opportunities to demonstrate the

superior performance of a motorcycle. But occasionally you still get stuck behind a procession of vehicles, usually led by a ponderous motorhome.

Wouldn't it be nice to be able to simply fly over these obstructions?

Here's how it would work: The bike would carry a pair of lightweight carbon fiber wings above your head. Computers would monitor the level of the road, wind speed and the motorcycle's angle of attack. No propulsion system other than the tires would be necessary. To make an impossible pass, you'd simply accelerate to high speed, pull back on the handlebars and the wings would carry you above the rolling obstruction. Like a glider, you would be able to control your path by shifting your weight, and for really radical maneuvers, a sudden turn of your front wheel would use its gyroscopic force to get you as sideways as a motocross rider doing a crossup at the finish line. You'd be able to jump through the air and make turns at the same time. Think of the fun you could have!

Of course, as a glider, you'd slow down as you make your ascent and turns, but you'd glide smoothly down to the pavement to accelerate on the road for another flight. Dirt bikes already have the suspension for catching "serious air." The term would have a whole new meaning.

Okay, I know some part of you is saying "no way" and thinking of a dozen reasons why it can't be done. But what if we set our minds to it? Would any of us have believed, twenty or thirty years ago, how much motorcycles have evolved since then?

Did you know that Craig Vetter, the inventor of the Vetter fairing that revolutionized touring in the Seventies, is another rider with dreams of flight? Remember the Vetter Fuel Economy Runs? All you need is a legitimate prize to get the inventors in gear. Vetter is proposing that we do the same for a personal flying machine. Put up a prize of, say, \$100,000, for a machine that can fly low and slow enough not to kill you if it falls from the sky, and see what happens. My bet is that the prize would be won by a motorcyclist. What do you think?

If any of you have any ideas along these lines, I'd like to hear about them. Remember, Jules Verne didn't invent submarines, or nuclear power, he just gave the scientists the imagination to proceed.

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