Sikorsky Demonstrates "Spying Saucer" [article]

From: **BaDge**
Date: Wed, 11 Jun 1997 20:50:34 -0800
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posted sans permission from the June Scientific American:

Spying Saucer

Among the hundreds of experimental machines built to go where humans cannot (or should not), there have been rollers, crawlers, fliers, orbiters and undersea cruisers. Now there is a flying saucer, and it is boldly going where no flying drone has gone before. It is meandering down urban streets, peeping in windows and setting down gently on the roofs of buildings.

Appropriately enough, demonstrations of the saucer's capabilities are coinciding with the 50th anniversary of the notorious incident in Roswell, N.M. In that event, which occurred during the evening of July 2, 1947, a downed balloonlike device, part of a secret U.S. Air Force project, caused an enduring sensation when it was mistaken for a flying saucer of extraterrestrial origin. Ironically, the real flying saucer, which is called Cypher, has not yet provoked any similar episodes, partly because timely articles in the local press at some of the places where the saucer has been flown have explained its earthly origins and missions. (This article is not part of an insidious cover-up conspiracy. Honest!)

Though not otherworldly, Cypher is at least revolutionary. Built by a small team at Sikorsky Aircraft in Stratford, Conn., the two-meter-diameter flier is a rotary-wing aircraft, similar in some respects to a helicopter. Unlike a helicopter, however, the aircraft is propelled by two rigid rotors, one above the other, which spin in opposite directions. Cypher is not the first experimental vehicle to exploit this propulsion scheme, which eliminates the need for a tail rotor. But it is the first pilotless craft configured in this manner that shrouds the rotors with its fuselage.

This shrouding allows the saucer to bump into tree branches, buildings or other objects without causing a catastrophe. The 110-kilogram aircraft can stay in the air for about two and half hours, covering a range of 30 kilometers. Its diminutive rotary engine--the size and weight of a lawnmower engine--puts out an astounding 52 horsepower.

Advanced software grants the flier an unusual degree of autonomy. In tests last autumn, the saucer used software from Lockheed Martin and Northrup Grumman to find and trail a solitary soldier walking in a field. During the 25-minute flight, operators sent only two orders to the craft, according to James Cycon, who leads the project at Sikorsky. One command instructed the machine to take off; the other, issued after it had found the soldier and had followed him for a short while, told it to return.

Another notable test was carried out this past January at Fort Benning, also in Georgia. The army is looking for ways of making sure that troops are not ambushed in urban settings by snipers. At Fort Benning, where a mock town has been used to test anti-sniper concepts, the saucer cruised up and down streets only six meters wide, searching for hostile sharpshooters, and landed on the roof of one of the buildings. It looked inside some buildings by aiming a video camera through their windows. "The beauty of Cypher," Cycon says, "is that it can fly low and slow."

Cycon and company are now experimenting with new rotors and, in general, ascertaining the capabilities of their strange little saucer. "We're trying to show people what the aircraft can do," Cycon explains. "At the same time, we're trying to understand what it can do."

--Glenn Zorpette

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