

Unidentified flying doughnut

MAYBE THE UNITED States can build a flying saucer after all. Despite last issue's "Bulletins" item ("It Came From Ohio") describing unfulfilled military plans to build a flying disk in the 1950s and 1960s, Sikorsky Aircraft Corporation has gone and made one. And it works.

"Cypher" is about 6.5 feet in diameter, weighs 250 pounds on takeoff, and can carry 50-pound payloads—so even the smallest humans would have trouble hitching a ride on this UFO. Instead, Cypher is operated remotely through a fly-by-wire system similar to that found on Comanche helicopters. It also shares the Comanche's automatic target detection system and ability to take off or land vertically. A camera mounted on top provides feedback to a pilot sitting in a control van.

The doughnut-shaped aircraft, with a top speed of 80 miles per hour and ceiling of 8,000 feet, obtains lift from two sets of rotating blades mounted in the aircraft's center.

Looking like something from *War of the Worlds*, the unmanned aerial vehicle is being developed for military surveillance, communications, and countermeasure missions, as well as civilian applications such as law enforcement, drug interception, forestry, and search-and-



Cypher struts its stuff during an army demonstration.

rescue. After 400 flight hours buzzing around Sikorsky's Florida development center, Cypher went on the road, touting its features to potential customers.

For the army, Cypher flew down streets, landed on a building, and deposited various loads. At later demonstrations it tracked man-sized targets without operator input, detected unexploded ordnance, and participated in a drug interdiction exer-

cise. For the Energy Department, the aircraft located underground tunnels in Nevada with an onboard magnetometer. (Its ability to decode underground structures gave the craft its name.)

Sikorsky is already planning to build the aircraft in different sizes, so if anyone buys into the project, Cyphers could range in size from cargo-hauling workhorses to 40-pound backpack models.

Another aerospace firm,

Tennessee-based Micro Craft, has miniaturized a saucer-shaped drone of its own. Last October it tested its hovering spy craft. About the diameter of a pizza (9 inches), it can fly inside buildings or behind enemy lines for about an hour on 200 grams of fuel. The company says the craft can be outfitted with video cameras for surveillance work or with lasers to guide missiles to their targets.

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