

Special Delivery

By Reg P. Wydeven
January 3, 2016

For Christmas in 1979, Santa brought me a Big Trak. This was the coolest toy ever. The Big Trak was a futuristic tank with six wheels. It was programmable and could execute over a dozen commands. Using a keypad built into the back of the tank, you could program it to drive across the room, turn corners, spin in circles and even fire its blue laser beam. The Big Trak also came with a cargo trailer that could dump its payload on command.

After practicing with it for a while, my dad and I got to be pretty good at programming the Big Trak. I remember setting it on the kitchen floor and loading a can of Pepsi Light into the trailer. We programmed it to go down the hall into the living room, drop the can of Pepsi Light by my mom on the couch, fire its laser twice, do two 360s and come back to the kitchen. Shockingly it worked and my dad and I considered it the greatest scientific accomplishment since splitting the atom.

Well it seems like Amazon is trying to one-up us.

Several times this year I've written about the exponentially expanding use of drones. When they first came on the scene, it was a bit of the Wild West. The Federal Aviation Administration quickly stepped in and began regulating the use of unmanned aircraft. The FAA began to slowly loosen the restrictions by later allowing the commercial use of drones.

But the government is moving too slowly for Amazon's tastes. The online retail juggernaut wants to employ the use of drones to deliver packages, dubbing the project 'Prime Air.' Current 'Amazon Prime' members are assured of free two-day shipping. Amazon hopes to use Prime Air to deliver packages in a mere 30 minutes.

Last month, Amazon introduced one of its delivery drone prototypes, which can carry packages weighing up to five pounds, or about a six-pack of Pepsi Light. Equipped with "sense and avoid" technology, the drones avoid potential obstacles while delivering packages. The drones are able to ascend and descend vertically and fly horizontally. They can also scan for a clear landing spot to drop off a package.

According to Amazon's website, "Prime Air has great potential to enhance the services we already provide to millions of customers by providing rapid parcel delivery that will also increase the overall safety and efficiency of the transportation system." CEO Jeff Bezos unveiled the plan to use drones two years ago, but regulatory hurdles have prevented the company from implementing them.

Amazon had been testing drones inside its Washington facility. However, the FAA has cleared the company to test drones outdoors for the purpose of "research and development and crew training." While pleased about being able to test the drones, Amazon was hoping for more freedom. The FAA imposed restrictions on the testing, including the requirement that certificated pilots must be able to see the drones, which must remain under 400 feet off the ground. Drones can only be flown during the daytime and only in clear weather conditions.

Amazon is also required to file monthly reports with the FAA outlining the number of flights conducted, how long pilots flew and any malfunctions or deviations from air traffic controllers' instructions. The retailer is hoping the tests will assure the FAA that using drones to deliver packages will be perfectly safe.

Here's hoping they're on the right Trak.

This article originally appeared in the Appleton Post-Crescent newspaper and is reprinted with the permission of Gannett Co., Inc. © 2016 McCarty Law LLP. All rights reserved.