

Right on Track

By Reg P. Wydeven
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On Christmas morning in 1979, I raced up the stairs and under the tree I found one of the coolest toys of all time: a Big Trak. The Big Trak was a programmable, electronic, six-wheeled tank created by Milton Bradley. Using the keypad mounted on its back, you could program the Big Trak to drive, turn, reverse, pause or even fire its front-mounted blue photon laser.

I must have been good that year, because I got the deluxe Big Trak, which came with the trailer accessory. Using the Big Trak's keypad, you could also program the trailer to dump its payload.

My dad and I had hours and hours of fun with the Big Trak. Given a half hour or so, we could program the Big Trak to take a bag of Corn Nuts from the kitchen and deliver it to him in our family room, with the trailer dumping the bag at the foot of his easy chair. The delivery took probably another 3 or four minutes, as the Big Trak didn't travel too quickly.

While we'll concede that the Big Trak wasn't the most efficient form of delivery, my dad and I still thought it was a lot of fun. After all, what could be cooler than an automated vehicle bringing you a delicious treat? While 30 years may have gone by, awesome memories of the Big Trak came flooding back when I heard about the TacoCopter.

TacoCopter is a Silicon Valley start-up company that promises to deliver tacos via unmanned drone helicopters. You place your order for tacos using a smart phone app, and a short while later a chopper drops off your crunchy snack. The company will be starting a sister operation on the east coast dubbed LobsterCopter.

I wasn't alone in my excitement over the TacoCopter. The company quickly garnered tons of followers on Twitter and its website received 45,000 Facebook "likes." One thing I didn't "like," however, is the fact that I may have to wait another 30 years for an unmanned vehicle to deliver food to me.

One of TacoCopter's founders, MIT grad Star Simpson, insists that the concept isn't a joke. Although she does admit that the start-up is several years away from taking flight. Comedy Central star Stephen Colbert claimed, "Barack Obama is taco blocking me." The President isn't responsible for the TacoCopter being grounded, but rather the Federal Aviation Administration is.

"Current U.S. FAA regulations prevent ... using UAVs [Unmanned Aerial Vehicles, like drone helicopters] for commercial purposes at the moment," Simpson told the Huffington Post. She went on to say that, "Honestly I think it's not totally unreasonable to regulate something as potentially dangerous as having flying robots slinging tacos over people's heads."

Contrary to Stephen Colbert's suspicions, the FAA doesn't hate tacos. The agency is prohibiting UAVs from being used for commercial purposes to protect us civilians. While an awesome concept, the idea of delivering tacos by unmanned helicopters is fraught with perils, such as keeping the tacos hot, identifying the correct customer, preventing customers from stealing the copter, and traversing obstacles in an urban setting, like buildings, telephone or power lines, balconies, and birds.

If these kinks can be worked out, hopefully someday the FAA will change its stance on UAVs. If the agency eventually does, the folks at TacoCopter insist they will see their dream come to fruition. So now, I'm just left sad and disappointed, like the time I got confused on programming the correct number of degrees for a turn and accidentally drove the Big Trak down the stairs.

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