

## THE AMAZING GIRO

Business corporations flew them to promote chewing gum, spark plugs, coal and anything else they had to sell. The Detroit News and the Des Moines Register & Tribune each had one to cover special stories; the craft were also used for archeological surveys, crop-dusting and just for fun. The 83-year-old Thomas Edison, whose helicopter experiments of half a century before had come to nothing, was treated to a special autogiro demonstration at the Newark, New Jersey, airport. After watching the machine fly as slow as 20 miles per hour and as fast as 115 miles per hour and then alight vertically without rolling a foot, the inventor patted the craft's flexible rotor and exclaimed: "That's the answer! That's the answer!"

The autogiro seemed endlessly adaptable. Once, when Pitcairn's test pilot, **James G. Ray**, was caught by a dangerous storm, he set down and motored along a highway until the storm passed and it was safe to take off again. If ever proof was needed of the craft's utility, this was it-and the public took note. The craft also won official recognition, and in April 1931, a distinguished group that included Orville Wright gathered on the South Lawn of the White House to watch President Herbert C. Hoover present the Collier Trophy to Harold Pitcairn for "the greatest achievement in aviation" -bringing la Cierva's flying windmill to the United States. As the guests looked into the sky, an autogiro piloted by **Ray** fluttered out of the blue and came to a gentle landing beside them.

Two years later, trial takeoffs were staged from the roof of the new post office in downtown Philadelphia, and the United States Department of Commerce added still more to the excitement by authorizing development of a "Roadable" autogiro that would be as much at home on the ground as in the air. In October of 1936, with **Jim Ray** at the controls, the little red machine landed in Washington, folded its rotors and putted through the streets on its steerable, engine-driven wheels.

In the midst of all the economic gloom, it was pleasant to dream that the autogiro would solve traffic jams and the grind of commuting, that it would speed up the mails, strengthen the national defense and reinvigorate business. Then on a foggy morning in December 1936, at London's Croydon Aerodrome, Juan de la Cierva boarded a Dutch airliner, bound for the Continent. The plane lumbered uncertainly down the runway, lifted into the air and crashed into a fog-shrouded row of buildings. The 41-year-old inventor of the autogiro was killed instantly.

*-EXCERPTED FROM  
THE HELICOPTERS, THE EPIC OF FLIGHT*