

Frederick

Giving the Autogiro Its Place in the Sun

Record-Setter in Humble Craft Hopes for Revival

By ELIZABETH WILLIAMSON
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"Whatever happened to Andy Keech?" the skydiving Web site posting asked. Australia's former skydiving champion and freefall photographer seemed to have fallen off the earth.

No, there he is—flying over Frederick in an autogiro dubbed Woodstock that has kept Keech, 64, in the sky and in the record books. Over the past six months, he has broken a string of distance and speed records in Woodstock. He hopes to revive interest in the tiny, helicopter-like craft that bond man and sky with an intimacy usually reserved for skydivers.

"This area of aviation has dropped into the backwater for 60 years," said Keech, who lives in Northwest Washington. Peer-

made of canvas stretched over steel tubing and weighs only 520 pounds, including the motor mounted up front. Keech built the craft from a design with help from Ron Herron, a Little Rock-based aircraft builder and friend.

The model "is a creation that evolved over many years. It's much more user-friendly . . . stable and efficient than the typical" autogiro, Herron said. "I guess Andy's proven that with his escapades."

In the 1930s, autogiros with front-mounted motors were considered among the safest flying machines in the world. They were eclipsed by helicopters during World War II and largely forgotten thereafter. Today, a handful of U.S. companies and experimental builders are trying to resurrect autogiros—which store easily, are easily maneuverable and are able to

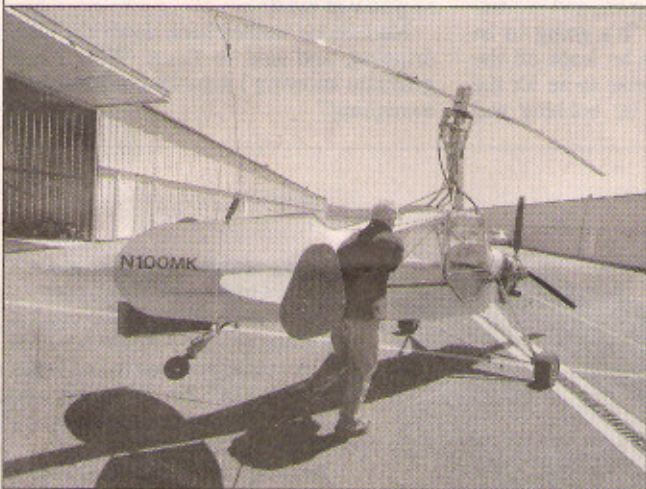
move slowly and climb rapidly—for military surveillance, traffic monitoring or spotting forest fires.

Autogiros work in harmony with existing wind, flying in a way that British autogiro builder and expert Ken Wallis likens to the spinning of a sycamore seed. It was at Wallis's manor house in England that Keech took his first autogiro flight, in 1982. "It was one of those times where you have the whole direction of your life steered by one event," Keech said.

He learned to fly at a school in Kentucky, then set out to build Woodstock.

"We designed it to do impressive things," he said.

It has. Over the past six months, Keech has broken a half-dozen records. Last week, he flew the tiny craft to a record-breaking altitude of 26,200 feet, wearing an oxygen mask and a light jacket. In October, he flew Woodstock from Frederick to Kitty Hawk, N.C., and then on to San



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ing through a thin plastic windscreen from a cockpit no bigger than a washtub, he said, "you can see beautiful, surprising things. And you think, 'No one else is seeing this right now.'"

On a breezy, azure day last week, Keech gave Woodstock a preflight once-over in the Frederick Airport hangar he shares with four other autogiro pilots. "These are the love of my life," he said of the craft. Woodstock, a vivid yellow and blue, is

MARYLAND



PHOTOS BY RICKY CARIDI—THE WASHINGTON POST

Andy Keech keeps his autogyro, Woodstock, in Frederick. "This area of aviation has dropped into the backwater for 60 years," he says.

Diego, breaking three national speed records. In February, he flew more than 900 kilometers (almost 560 miles) for the longest distance on a single tank of fuel, a nearly six-hour trip during which Keech said one of his greatest worries was "what to do if I had to go to the toilet."

In two weeks, he'll make a run at another record, trying to reach 3,000 feet in 7 minutes 7 seconds.

Keech was trained as an industrial chemist, but that held little allure compared with skydiving, a sport he'd wanted to try since World War II, when as a child he listened to radio accounts of parachute operations. He joined the army, then the only way to learn, but by the time he finished his mandatory service, recreational skydiving was in its infancy.

By 1961, Keech was Australia's national champion. He visited the United States en route to a competition in the early 1970s, with his wife, Marie, also Australian, and the couple decided to stay. To support his hobby and household, Keech worked at the Australian and New Zealand embassies in aircraft procurement.

Then came a stint as a zookeeper, in the invertebrate department of the National Zoo.

In the 1970s and early '80s, Keech published "Skies Call," a three-volume collection of his freefall photography. They're considered classics among skydivers, not least for the poetry he wrote to accompany the photos:

*Have they lived the satisfaction of
riding someone's wake
The faster speed, his dumb
surprise, then pass to overtake
The giant's hand against the chest,
the cushioned flair for air
To hover with the star and know
At last you're there.*

It wasn't age or injury that ended Keech's skydiving career; after more than 1,000 jumps, 600 of them with a camera strapped to his helmet, he says he'd done what he set out to.

These days, Keech and his fellow fliers, some of whom fly the open-air contraptions as low as the treetops, inspire their

neighbors at the airport. "They buzz around here like bees on a nice day," said Bob Henley of Glenwood, whose Cessna 172 is parked in a hangar across the way. Airplane pilots "just look down on the green," he said. Autogyro pilots "are actually part of it."

Keech prefers to extol Woodstock's technical achievements but, when pressed, describes the joy of flying alone over the earth at sunrise.

"You can see forever," he said, "the purple sides of mountains, the fog rolling off the valley and the sun skimming across."

"Neat little sights to see."

About the time Keech was toasting his record-breaking trip home from San Diego, a posting went out on the *dropzone.com* skydiving Web site: "Does anyone know if the Andrew Keech that just flew transcontinent[al] in an autogyro is the same one who was a renowned freefall photographer?"

"The very same person," came the reply.

"Wow! It's nice to know he's still up to cool stuff."