

Flying with 007



What have I let myself in for?

Sophia Gordon-Charnov describes a memorable first flight

When I first started dating Bruce Charnov in 2003, I thought a 'gyro' was a Greek sandwich, and when he described himself as a gyro historian, I certainly didn't know what to think. But, having read his book *From Autogyro to Gyroplane* early on, I learned of this amazing aircraft and its history, with names such as Juan de la Cierva, Harold F Pitcairn and Ken Wallis becoming familiar. And while I no longer got excited when he spoke of the other women in his life, 'Miss Champion' and 'Little Nellie', little did I think I would ever meet, much less fly with, the legendary 007 himself!

In 2005 we began filming a documentary movie of the autogyro history book on a very limited budget. A year later, however, the producer told us that he was taking a camera crew to Germany to work on a special feature dealing with the Nuremberg war crime trials. Suddenly, it became possible to piggyback onto *that* European trip with a short stopover in the UK and a day's filming for our project at Reymerston Hall.

It was only when we were on our way to London that Bruce told me he'd been in contact with Ken Wallis and asked for a very special favour – that he give me my first flight in an autogyro. After all, he reasoned, who could turn down flying with 007?

So there I was – after a good night's rest – up early at awaiting Ken's arrival at Shipdham Airfield. I had actually never even seen a real autogyro, just photos and movies, and I wasn't really prepared for the flying lawnchair that rose from the nearby Reymerston Hall and slowly made its way, descending, to the end of the runway where we waited.

As you can see from the photographs, this particular aircraft, the Wallis WA-122 Autogyro, appeared to me as a 1950s aluminum kitchen chair. Little did I admit to Ken that I was scared sh*&%\$#@. You see, I'm afraid of heights. But I was up for it, telling myself that the previous year I'd gone for a ride in a hot air balloon and survived the adventure.

Ken, always the gallant and charming RAF (Ret'd) Wing Commander, was fabulous. He outfitted me with a helmet and strapped me in the rear seat where the only place to put my hands was to hold on to Ken's jacket.

So far, so good...and then we began taking off. As we took off, the wind began to hit my face and, with the increase in elevation, the wind entered my helmet and I felt that I was taking off 'head first'.

Ken was very solicitous and asked if everything was okay. Now at that particular moment would you really say, 'Put me down?' I gave him a thumbs up and recalled the gallant English and Polish airmen that gave their lives for Britain, surely I could take a 20 minute ride!

With my head bowed, both to protect me from the wind and to keep the helmet from taking off, I began to enjoy the ride. Ken pointed out his home and the airfield and we were flying above a flock of birds.

It was a heavenly sight. I had total confidence in Ken and the early jitters left me. It's no wonder that since Icarus, man has wanted that pair of wings. And there can be no flying experience closer to that described in the ancient →



Just put this helmet on and imagine you're Bond's mistress



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This picture: Eat your heart out, Helga Brandt!

Facing page: Sorting out the helmet (centre) and getting strapped in (top)

Upper right: Ken straps in

Lower right: Ken preflights



→ Greek myth than an open-frame autogyro!

I know that Bruce is working steadily with Ron Herron on completing his Little Wing Autogyro, and he will then go to complete his flying lessons. He's declared on more than one occasion that he would like me to take lessons with him. Before my adventure with 007 and maybe the best autogyro pilot flying today, I would have scoffed at such a suggestion – now... well, let's just say that when he finally arranges for the final hours of flying instruction with Terry Brandt at the Groen Brothers Aviation Flight Center in Buckeye, Arizona, we'll want to at least consider the group rate.

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