

Shaking Hands, High Overhead

Written by Alex Baer

Friday, 03 August 2012 17:53 - Last Updated Friday, 03 August 2012 17:59

You think things are scary now with drone aircraft, give it a few years: You may find yourself being plucked from the ground and carried aloft, or abruptly instructed by loudspeaker to shake hands with The Man, hovering silently, just overhead.

Engineers at Drexel University have a grant from the National Science Foundation to see if "dexterous limbs" can be successfully added to drones.

The "Mobile Manipulating UAVs" (Unmanned Aerial Vehicles) as they are being called, once developed, would be capable of performing "active near ground tasks."

Dr. Paul Oh, a professor at Drexel, envisions a wide range of helpful, innocuous activities: Infrastructure repair, disaster recovery, border inspection, agricultural handling, search and rescue missions...

One of the tricks will be to see if drones can interact with objects without upsetting their own applectarts in the process.

These are all interesting notions and another fascinating *sci-fi and what-if* line for scientific inquiry. Thing is: We all know how this works. Humans have this nasty habit of turning tools into weapons. How long before the truly hair-raising applications creep into the process?

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The border drone hovered silently as if frozen into the chill night air, spotlights on the man and his young daughter. Slits for the minigun ports had already parted, soundlessly.

"Papers," the loudspeaker in the drone ordered.

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The drone read the man's bio-signs as he zipped down his coat and reached inside to his pocket: *No, there were no telltale signs the man was about to take negative action.* The man withdrew his hand and presented his papers, holding them a foot up, over his head.

Arms from the drone snaked out: A robotic hand held the identity book, analyzing and cross-checking its codes. A second hand tested older magnetic strips and optical scans. A third hand read and referenced the newly-embedded chips, the fourth positioned itself nine millimeters from the man's right eye, seeking retinal review...

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Knowledge -- technology, if you like -- plows ahead first. Wisdom is always relegated to the rear end of the parade, left to sweep up whatever the frolicking ponies, horses, and elephants have left in the road.

Perhaps we should not expect much more from our species. Signs are everywhere that this is a race of leapers -- lookers only late, and last. Monkeys with car keys and credit cards, if you like.

Of course, humans can get used to almost anything, with enough repetition. We prove this often enough, too. Day in, day out.

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A bit of humor for your day: There was a sacrosanct expression deployed in the military whenever something inexplicably boneheaded was encountered -- some situation or activity that violated every possible aspect of common sense.

It was this: *"Two hundred years of tradition, unhampered by progress."*

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Some know this condition in these terms: *"There is the right way, the wrong way, and the [name of branch of service] way!"*

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Speaking of boneheaded notions: A team from Sandia National Laboratories and Northrup Grumman had earlier been considering ways to make UAVs nuclear-powered. The big draw here was allowing the drones to remain on task for months at a time with no need to refuel.

Airborne Fukushimas circling overhead? And, in a time in which we are told terrorists are sprinting around loose, desperately searching for dirty bomb materials?

Thankfully, that one appears to have been nixed. (If feeling especially paranoid today, please add: And, of course, appearance is everything.)

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When humans are faced with things that do not make sense -- things they can never hope to individually affect or control -- transition points are needed. Call them wide spots in the mental road that allow room to pivot and refocus, a way to shake the head in disbelief, then put the whole thing to bed, swept cleanly out of mind.

There is no explaining some things, after all.

Here we are again.

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<http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2012/08/120802122315.htm>

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/apr/02/us-plans-nuclear-drones>