Model Airplane Finds Missing Man

There are a multitude of reasons in this day and age why people, both men and women, go missing - and just as many reasons why they should be found, and quickly. Recently, there was a startling example of how model airplanes, coupled with modern digital cameras, are benefiting society by making it easier, cheaper and quicker to find missing things, whether it be people or anything else, by providing a new viewpoint on our society.

In October last year, a model airplane fitted with a digital camera found a man missing near the West Texas town of Monahans, 4 months after he went missing. During that time search parties on foot and horseback had scoured the desert in an expensive and time consuming search. In just 3 sorties within one day the model airplane took 200 digital images and the search team rapidly found the body of David Lee Pettiet. The man's white trainers stood out as a minute speck in one of the photographs and drew the searchers to quickly locate him although he was surrounded by thick scrub brush.

Aerial photography is nothing new. But what is new is the ability to do it quickly and cheaply with model airplanes and without the massive expense of helicopters or fixed wing aircraft. The service used was provided by a man who had simply taken his existing hobby of radio controlled (RC) model airplanes, added the digital camera, just another piece of modern technology in his leisure arsenal, and combined the two into a useful tool which is rapidly turning into a commercial business.

There are many ways to enjoy the hobby of RC model airplanes. But aerial photography can be particularly rewarding as almost every RC airplane modeller already owns the necessary equipment. Going the cheap and cheerful route to explore what your birthday party looks like when seen from your model airplane high above - or to provide useful information on development plans for your local protest group by simply strapping an inexpensive disposable 35mm camera to the bottom of your model aeroplane, is one way. Or embedding a complete digital video system, made specifically for the job, into your model airplane setup to offer a professional service is another. Either way, the results can be quite remarkable, even amazing. When deciding where to start, there are a few things that you need to keep in mind.

If you decide to go the cheap route just for fun, strapping some sort of camera to the model airplane's wing or fuselage, there are a couple of pitfalls you will want to avoid if at all possible. Most disposable cameras do not have the ability to auto advance the film. This means that you will need to land the model airplane and advance the camera manually for each shot. While this method requires more work than others, it is by far the least expensive. Upgrading to an auto advancing 35mm camera will allow you to take pictures without landing your RC model airplane in between each photo.

Digital cameras also have limitations. Unless you are a very experienced RC model airplane pilot, using an expensive digital camera might not be the best idea if you are uncertain of your ability to land safely and reliably. If you decide to use a cheap digital camera then a lot of them have auto shut-off timers that will shut the camera off in 30-60 seconds. What this means is that you need to take a picture within that 30-60 seconds window or the camera will shut off and you will need to land your model airplane and turn the camera on again.

Using any of these cameras will require you to improvise some sort of servo attachment on your model airplane to activate the shutter button in response to your remote command. Double-sided sticky tape and zip-ties work very well for the servo, and rubber bands will suffice for attaching the camera to the fuselage. You will also need to have a RC radio that has an extra channel, such as a landing gear toggle switch, to activate the servo. Electric power for your model airplane is also useful as it gives you the option to turn the motor off while you take the shot in order to reduce vibration.

A more expensive route is to use a system specifically made for the hobby of RC model airplane flying. Various wireless packages can be found to meet your needs. Most of the packages available come with a few standard parts; a camera, wireless transmitter, and receiver. This method requires that you have the ability to record video 'in field'. A laptop computer with video inputs works very well for this. Another option is to watch the video LIVE while you are flying by using a set of virtual reality goggles. This certainly helps if you want to be selective about the shots you take - although with digital technology this hardly matters. But it does take you one step closer to every modellers dream of being up there with his model airplane!

Aerial photography and video using your RC model airplane can add more excitement to an already enjoyable hobby and even turn it into a business. So go ahead, there are some useful forums and groups on the web where you can do some more research - then get flying and snapping!

Bruce Bird makes it easy for the beginner to quickly get a grasp of the broad range of exciting activities that make up airplane modeling. To receive his FREE 5 part mini-series visit Model Airplane Secrets