

# Auto★Star

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## A different kind of hybrid – Fly and Drive

*Before rental cars – automobiles sprouted detachable airplane wings*

What would you think of starting a 1940s automobile restoration only to find out you were missing a set of wings?

You might be surprised! Several aircraft manufacturers were searching how to keep their production lines busy and any vehicle was considered possible in the optimistic days following WWII. After all, market research promised backyard heliports, an airplane in every garage and that ownership of private airplanes would be as common as automobile ownership had been in the 1930s. The manufacturers were eager to cash in on the mindset. They thought drivers and pilots returning from WWII wanted an affordable vehicle that could be driven for a local commute and be easily converted to an airplane for the longer trip.

During the late 1940s and 1950s dozens of hybrid flying cars were proposed. Many were actually built and flight tested, none successfully transitioned into mass production. Some of the more notable vehicles developed included Waldo Waterman's 1937 design called the Arrowbile. It was a hybrid

Studebaker and aircraft. There was also a vehicle designed by a relative of the steam engine inventor, by the same name, Robert Fulton, which was called the Airphibian. It was the first flying car to be certified by the Civil Aeronautics Administration, now known as the FAA. Another contender that almost made the transition to mass production was the ConvAirCar which debuted in 1947.

The idea of a flying car might sound far-fetched initially, something from the old cartoon serial, the Jetson's. However the idea is as alive today as it was sixty-five years ago. An interesting twist is that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century the technology is maturing.

Huge organizations like NASA, are thinking about how to control the new air traffic. In early 2005, CBS 60-Minutes featured a story about the folks at NASA having built something called "The Highway in the Sky." It's a traffic control computer system designed to let millions of people fly whenever they please, and take off and land from wherever they please, in their very own vehicles.

With control systems designed, the hybrids can't be



"Filler-up" A 1950 experimental flying car being fueled.

far behind. CNET News published a story in February 2006 titled, Flying car ready for takeoff? It highlights MIT's Department of Aeronautics and Astronautics design of a "personal air vehicle," a vehicle resembling an SUV with retractable wings. The vehicle called "Transition" targets medium trips of 100 to 500 miles carrying two people and luggage on a single tank gas. The Transition is one of many new technology flying cars being modeled and planned for prototype.

Start looking for a vintage flying car to restore now because when the Transition or

some other fly/drive hybrid is delivered to the market, retro 1940s test model prices will explode. Be prepared to dole out some heavy cash if you find one. They are rare, pricey and they are out there. The photo shows a local adaptation of an Ercoupe aircraft, being tested for a fly/drive model. This aircraft photographed in 1950, is still flying today.

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