"LET'S TAKE THE WHEELAIR!"

POST-WAR "WONDER PLANE" HOPED TO COMBINE THE EASE AND FAMILIARITY OF DRIVING THE FAMILY SEDAN WITH FLYING AN AIRCRAFT

BY HOWARD CARTER

Cover the of the June 1944 issue of *Popular Mechanics* magazine. While WWII was raging and D-Day was set to begin, this issue hit the stands with speculation on what would be the ideal post-war private aircraft. As can be seen, the painting has some resemblance to the Wheelair 111-A but the fuselage pod is much more streamlined, the engine air duct has been eliminated and the design has retractable gear.

Okay, I will admit it up front. I have a certain fascination with "flying cars" — a relatively encompassing term that covers numerous designs that have attempted to combine the merits of the aircraft with those the automobile. Over the decades, we have seen all sorts of creations that have attempted to undertake this task and all have met with failure. In fact, the most successful of *any* flying car was Molt Taylor's Aerocar and it had a production run of just six machines with that run being stretched out over a number of years. Today, "aerial taxi" is the popular new term for these flying oddities and they are back in the news, mainly due to the increasing efficiency of electric motors combined with new technology in VTOL operations. So far, none of these "aerial taxis" have met with any form of success and they mainly seem to be a way of getting investors to part with money. As is typical of such investment "opportunities," little thought has been given on how thousands (the projected sales figures are always in the "thousands") of aerial taxis would be controlled in the crowded airspace over cities that would be their main operating points.

Going through the Challenge photo files, I have found a number of flying cars that will form the basis for future articles but when I found a file marked "Wheelair" I thought I had come across a totally unfamiliar aircraft. As readers might realize, I like doing articles on the stranger flying machines that have passed through our skies. The odder the better. Opening the Wheelair file, I quickly realized that it wasn't a flying car but that it fell into the "wonder plane" category — all those aircraft designs created to cater to returning servicemen now that the war was over. We all knew that those former military pilots wanted their own personal aircraft, didn't we? The predictions for a golden future could not have been more wrong but many of these now-forgotten aircraft are certainly worthy of articles and the Wheelair is one of them.

Just the name alone seemed to give a flying car connotation but it was actually based on the designer's name — Donald J. Wheeler. In fact, Don's creation was the Mk. 111-A variant and that certainly indicates that there might have been at least two other Wheelairs that saw completion, at least on paper.

Interior illustration from *Popular Science* of the Wheelair 111-A, this time showing the top scoop and fixed gear. As can be seen, the Wheelairs are dominating the sky of the airport in Everytown, USA. Company officials apparently reasoned that by making the fuselage much like the family sedan, it would be a flip of the coin on taking auto or aircraft out for a spin.

Not surprisingly, little seems to survive on the Wheelair 111-A (note the Roman numeral III was often used when describing the plane but the usage on the surviving drawings is 111-A). One source notes the design gained a first-place award in a 1944 issue of *Popular Science* magazine for a "plane of tomorrow." The aircraft appeared relatively sleek in drawings prepared by Don but the actual product certainly did not have that streamlined shape so popular with post-war designers. The Wheelair was of all-metal construction and sat on non-retracting tricycle landing gear. The wing, which spanned 37 feet, was of moderately high-aspect ratio and featured flaps. Two rather spindly tail booms were attached to the wing and connected to the tail surfaces. A large horizontal stabilizer mounted two vertical tails but, and here is where Don wanted to adopt some features to make flying seem like driving, there were no rudders. A car-type steering wheel (actually taken from a Mercury sedan) connected to a two-control system that eliminated rudders — something that found favor in post-war designs such as the Ercoupe.

With the 190-hp Lycoming running up, the Wheelair 111-A prepares for a test flight. All the trim on the aircraft was bright red. Note the large twin landing lights in the nose — another feature with a car-like appearance.