KELLETT'S EGG-BEATERS

HOW A SMALL COMPANY ATTEMPTED TO REVOLUTIONIZE EARLY DEVELOPMENT OF THE HELICOPTER

BY ROD SHELTON

Company officials watch Driskill lift the XR-8 into the air.

With a fire bottle at the ready, Dave Driskell prepares to start the two Continental engines located in the outboard nacelles of the XR/XH-10. The largest helicopter at the time, the plane was also innovative with its fully enclosed structure that could house ten troops, six litter patients and two attendants, or 3500-lbs of cargo.

Patent drawing for what would become the XH-8.

If there ever was a series of helicopters that deserved the term "egg-beaters" then it was the series of twin-rotor aircraft produced by the Kellett Autogiro Corporation. As the name implies, the company had built a series of autogiros that had varying degrees of success. The company was formed by W. Wallace Kellett and C. Townsend Ludington along with their brothers Rodney Kellett and Nicholas Ludington. During 1931, Kellett acquired the license building rights for the patents held by Juan de la Cierva and Harold Pitcairn's rotary wing aircraft. These were held by the Autogiro Company of America (which had previously been Pitcairn Aircraft Company, builders of a rugged series of biplanes).

Using the aircraft produced by de la Cierva and Pitcairn, the company built a very limited series of autogiros. The most numerous was the Kellett K-2 and just a dozen of those were constructed followed by four to six K-3s, which were K-2 airframes re-engined. The K-2 was evaluated by the US Army as a slow-flying forward reconnaissance machine to observe enemy troop movements. Testing revealed a marginal performance. The Continental radials (165 to 175 horsepower) on some K-2s were replaced by Kinner radials of 210-hp to create the K-3.

Even with the more powerful engine, Kellett could not catch the interest of the military but one of the aircraft did enjoy some fame. K-3 NR12615 was obtained by Adm. Richard Byrd and taken on his second Antarctic expedition of 1933/1934. However, on 28 September 1934 it crashed in Antarctica and was left at that location by the expedition. It is still there, buried under snow and ice. Two K-3s were sold to the Japanese War Office and this was at a time when new designs were allowed to be sold to foreign powers.

Company officers had watched the lack of interest in their autogiros with increasing distress and they noted that Igor Sikorsky was enjoying a great deal of success with his VS-300 helicopter. It soon became obvious that the military favored the early helicopter over the autogiro and Kellett changed directions and proposed a rather radical helicopter concept to the Army Air Force. Their 11 November 1942 proposal was for a