

A Brief History of Quadrotors

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Today you can buy quadrotor drones—also known as quadcopters—of just about any kind, for just about any price. The extremely wealthy can buy gold-plated quads, and the rest of us can buy tiny plastic ones.

As companies like DJI, Parrot, 3DR, and others churn out the four-propellered aircraft, you might wonder how this particular design came to be. The first quads were piloted vehicles that date to the very beginning of rotary wing aviation in the early 20th century: the Breguet-Richet Gyroplane, the Oehmichen No. 2, and the de Bothezat helicopter (in flight, below).

Watch Video At: <https://youtu.be/oM6TqjHfC5I%20>



What we could call modern quadcopter drones, which range from sub-palm-sized to just under two feet across, and which generally have onboard cameras and other features, first emerged in the late 1990s and early 2000s as hobbyist kits. The runup to ubiquity began with the 1999 release of the “Draganflyer quad helicopter.” The original Draganflyer kit became popular among UAV researchers, and gained some public recognition after its use in the movie “Inspector Gadget.” It evolved into the first true, ready-to-fly law enforcement drone. (We should note, however, a toy quadcopter introduced in Japan a full decade before the Draganflyer. Called the “Keyence GyroSaucer II E-570,” the toy could hover for about three minutes in calm winds.)

During the mid-to-late 2000s, quads continued to grow in popularity among hobbyists. In 2010, the French company Parrot released their “AR.Drone,” the first commercially successful ready-to-fly consumer drone, and the first able to be controlled solely by a Wi-Fi connection. The drone immediately made a splash, and Parrot’s successor quads remain in demand.

In April 2015, 3D robotics released the “Solo” quadcopter, which for the first time allowed professional quality video (with an attached GoPro). Less than a year later DJI came out with the Phantom 4, boasting “computer vision” capability and machine learning to track a person, animal, or object on the ground without simply following a GPS track.

Drones will certainly become more common and will take on more roles, including, eventually, carrying people. And chances are that next time you hear a drone buzz overhead, no matter what the brand, it will probably be a quadroter.

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