

YOU'LL BELIEVE A MAN CAN FLY!

by Kirk Hastings

The advertising theme for the big-budget 1978 film *Superman The Movie* starring Christopher Reeve was “You’ll Believe A Man Can Fly”. The implication was that there had never previously been a convincing film version of a man flying – in particular the Superman character – before that film came out.

Bunk! Millions of people already believed before 1978 that a man could fly -- and had since 1942! That was the year the excellent *Adventures of Captain Marvel* movie serial, starring Tom Tyler and made by Republic Pictures, came out. Anyone who has seen that serial knows what I’m talking about. The Lydecker Brothers (Howard and Theodore) did an astonishingly realistic job of convincing the audience that Captain Marvel could fly in that film, using wires and a life-sized dummy.

The Lydecker Brothers did the exact same thing with the character Rocket Man (played by Tristram Coffin) in the 1949 Republic movie serial *King of the Rocket Men*. The footage of Rocket Man looked so good, in fact, that Republic reused the footage of him flying and taking off in three other subsequent serials: *Radar Men from the Moon* (1952), *Zombies of the Stratosphere* (1952), and *Commando Cody: Sky Marshal of the Universe* (1953)!

But millions of people were already convinced before 1978 that Superman could fly too! (Certainly not from the two Superman movie serials -- *Superman*/1948 and *Atom Man vs. Superman*/1950 -- starring Kirk Alyn, which used the incredibly bad method of changing the character into an animated cartoon every time he took off.)

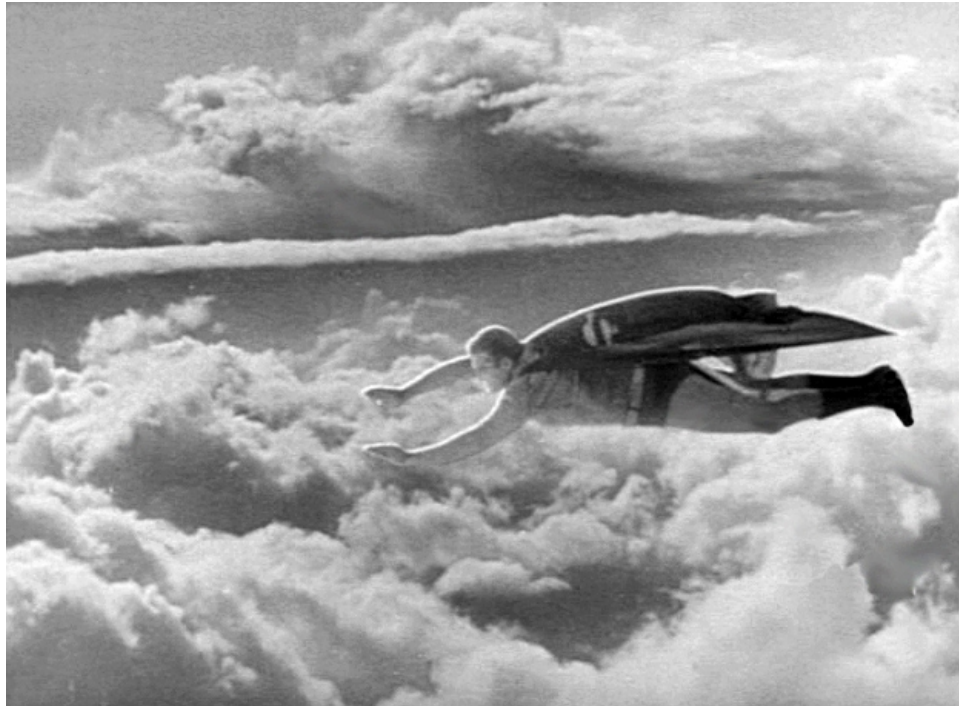
I’m talking about the 1950s syndicated television series with George Reeves!

Many people today seem to like to characterize the Reeves TV series as an outdated version of the character featuring crude, cheap special effects that were not at all convincing.

Nothing could be farther from the truth!

Of course the show reflects the older period in which it was made (the 1950s). But to say that the flying effects in the show were crude and ineffective simply because they were done a long time ago and with a relatively small amount of money is patently false. Many of the superimposed shots (with Reeves placed over different backgrounds) were state of the art for their time, especially in early television film production. Many of the other effects were borrowed from earlier productions (like *Captain Marvel* and *Rocket Men*) that were used because they worked. Tom Tyler and Tristram Coffin used the same tricks for their takeoffs and landings that Reeves did later (i.e., leaping onto a springboard or trampoline up and over the camera to take off, and jumping into frame from a ladder or other high structure to land). But Reeves didn’t just reuse those methods, he improved on them: he frequently leaped out of set-constructed windows at

full gallop to land on a mattress hidden outside the wall, something Tyler and Coffin never did. And the excellent sound effects staff of the *Superman* TV series (probably a combination of sound engineer Harry Smith and sound editor Barton Hayes in the first season) added perfect takeoff and landing sound effects to the mix. And the now-iconic “whooshing” wind sound of Superman rocketing through the air. These made for some very realistic flying sequences!



Classic shot of Reeves using a body pan to fly, with a superimposed cloud background behind him. Notice the pointed rear corner of one side of his cape. This was because a wire was attached to it there to keep the cape out relatively straight while it flapped about in the wind created by the off-camera wind machine.

Another clever innovation (born somewhat of necessity) the TV people made during the show's first season to the flying effects in *Superman* was the “body pan” that was used in later flying shots. This was after wires were tried in some early flying sequences, but the wires had an annoying habit of breaking, sending Reeves crashing to the floor. The metal pan was sculpted to fit the contour of Reeves's torso, and a pole sticking out of the rear of the rig was attached to a lever structure that would permit the off-camera set people to move Reeves around from side to side to simulate freefall flight. Reeves's Superman uniform went on overtop of the pan, which hid it from the camera. This rig made for some very realistic-looking flying shots, with either superimposed backgrounds or rear-projected backgrounds behind Reeves and a wind machine (off-camera) blowing his hair and cape about. And those great sound effects! (An extra bonus was the fact that it cost very little from the show's budget to create these kinds of live on-set effects.)



One of the early amazingly realistic flying shots created for the first season of the TV series. These kinds of shots were light years ahead of the flying effects in the two Columbia Superman movie serials, done just a couple years before this.

(Contrary to popular opinion, Thol "Si" Simonson, the special effects expert who began to work on the *Superman* series during its second season in 1953, could not have innovated the flying pan, as it was very obviously used during the show's first season in 1951 before Simonson ever came on board. Who exactly did originally design the body pan is lost to history. More than likely it was a combination of producer Robert Maxwell and/or director Tommy Carr. Simonson may very well have made some improvements to the rig when it was used again during the second season, but he wasn't around in 1951 to have come up with the original concept.)



*Two early wire takeoffs, from the episode "The Mind Machine".
That may be Reeves (or more likely a stuntman) doing the effect.*



Another fairly simple but effective flying shot from the episode "Ghost Wolf". That is possibly a stuntman, probably just standing on the floor with his arms outstretched.

FLYING PAN RIG



The flying pan rig. Notice the holes in it – more than likely these were for wires that could be threaded through the pan when needed to provide extra support and mobility. (See next picture.)



A good example of the body pan probably being used with wires strung through it. If you watch the original sequence (used in the second season episode "Stamp Day For Superman", and others) you will see Reeves's cape momentarily getting caught in the wires coming out from his hip area. (The wires are simulated here.)



A copy of Reeves's flying pan rig in the Superman Museum in Metropolis, Illinois.

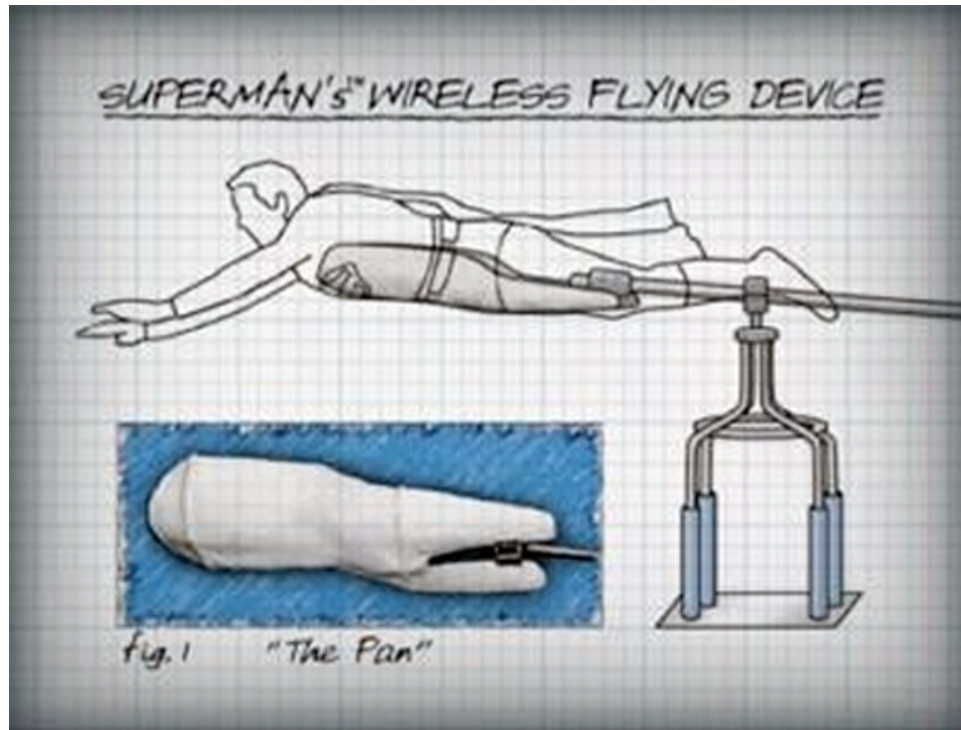


Diagram of Reeves's body pan and how it worked.

In the Christopher Reeve Superman films made starting in 1978, wires were once again used to hold Chris in the air, while moving backgrounds were superimposed behind him. But the wires in 1978 were much heavier and sturdier than the thin piano wire used in 1951, insuring that them breaking and sending Chris to the floor (as happened to Reeves in 1951) was extremely unlikely. This could be done in 1978 because, by that time, advanced technology (and a higher budget) enabled the wires holding Chris up to be photographically removed in post production.

Of course modern Superman films can now use CGI and computer technology to create totally digital Supermen, which can do pretty much anything in the air the scriptwriters want him to do. But, in this writer's opinion, those modern flying sequences totally lack the high drama that George Reeves's flying scenes did. One, because they lack the impressive sound effects that Reeves used to fly. And two, these modern Supermen don't run up to the camera and leap powerfully up into the air like Reeves did. They just kind of, uh, float up – or take off flat-footed from the ground. Where's the drama in that?

And three – we know those CGI Supermen aren't real. George Reeves was!

P.S.: For some reason, the modern movie Supermen rarely take advantage of another great trick that Reeves did frequently on the TV series that always gave audience members (us!) a tremendous thrill – bursting through solid walls, sending debris flying in every direction.

Now THAT's Super!

©Kirk Hastings



One of the most dramatic of Reeves's spectacular takeoffs, shot on the great RKO 40 Acres backlot in Culver City, CA. Many of the show's first season episodes were shot there.