ON FLYING FLOATS

BY

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After three and a half months in a full-length cast, the human leg is seriously short of muscle. I can testify to this fact, having broken my right tibia in a hard skydiving landing back in the early ’70s. The doctor finally judged that I could get along without the cast, but with the loss of my plaster exoskeleton, walking was more of a chore than it had been for the past quarter of a year. To call it “walking” would be an exaggeration. “Hobbling” would be a more appropriate description of my attempts to get around the office, holding on to the furniture, trying to keep my balance.

Around this time a friend of mine had gotten himself involved with a brand new seaplane operation down the river, adjacent to a canal near the Chalmette Naval Air Station. The owner had leased a couple of Cessna 180s on straight floats to get this business going.

In the beginning there was little work for these airplanes. That was not good news, since airplanes have a tendency to gobble up greats wads of cash when they sit idle. There is the matter of insurance, the amount due monthly for the lease of airplanes and land; and the inexorable march of time toward the next annual inspection, which must be performed and paid for no matter how much or how little the airplane has flown in the past year. And then there are a few other, more trivial, items such as employee salaries. These obligations all combine to

help keep the owner of a commercial aircraft operation from getting too much sleep.

This operator had hired my friend to fly on a per-hour basis. That meant that the more he flew, the more he earned, and vice versa. The line on a graph representing hours flown versus pay earned began at the intersection of the "x" and "y" axes: zero flying hours = zero pay.

My friend could see that even this marginal crumb of an aviation job would disappear if the operator went out of business, so he hooked me up with this gentleman. We agreed that I could use the planes to get my seaplane rating. Then I'd beat the bushes for students to put time on the airplanes and make us both some money, along with putting some seaplane time in my flying résumé.

So it was that one fine morning I hobbled out of my car and over to the little hut that served as an operations shack, to start my mini-career as a seaplane pilot. The guy didn't have any instructors, which was why he needed me. The plan was that I'd fly around and train myself while one of his putative charter pilots rode along to keep the insurance in effect. Another function performed by the companion pilot was to preflight the bird, since it was all I could do to clamber aboard, once the machine had been launched and tethered to a cleat on the nearby dock.

My cohort talked me through low-speed taxiing and doing the runup in the water. Then I tried a takeoff. This procedure sounded fairly simple: add throttle with the stick held firmly back to keep the toes of the floats from digging in, as the engine dragged us up onto the step. As soon as the throttle was all the

way in, I was told to reach down and rotate a little handle to retract the water rudders. What he neglected to mention was that, with the nose stuck way up into the air, the plane had a strong tendency to yaw to the left. There is some dispute about whether it is mainly slipstream swirl or something called "p" factor that makes this happen; but if you doubt the leftward-turning tendency of an American airplane under power in a nose-high attitude, you should try a few takeoffs in a 180 on floats.

To add to the merriment, try it after you've had your right leg in a cast for the last three and a half months. It becomes a matter of adding power, retracting the water rudders, then getting your right hand down on your right knee to assist in adding the huge amount of right rudder necessary to keep the beast tracking straight until it gets going fast enough to get up on the step and start scooting along the water's surface in a more or less level attitude. Letting the aircraft wander thirty degrees or so when you're in open water is one thing; but doing that when you're in a narrow canal with mud banks on either side is quite another.

Anyway, I flew around a little bit. The 180 flew about the way you'd expect a 180 to fly when it's lugging around hundreds of pounds of floats, struts, spreader bars and rigging: about like a dump truck loaded with eight cubic yards of wet river sand. Landing and step-taxiing in open water was not a problem. The pilot flying with me showed me that the bird was not going to tip over. He even showed me how to do emergency stops by purposely digging in the float tips. I don't think that's in the standard seaplane training syllabus, but it beats running into a tugboat.

On my third flight, I set up for a landing near a camp, over near where that old castle used to be, just east of the Mr. Go (also known as the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet). The approach required that I make a curving final, a touchdown at just the right spot, then immediately make a high-speed turn on the step before I let the floats settle into the drink. It worked out as I had planned it, and we came coasting up to a dock I had chosen, right in front of an unoccupied fishing camp.

The guy in the right seat looked over at me and said, "Say, that's a pretty neat approach. I never saw one like that before." All of a sudden I realized that I wasn't flying with an instructor. This guy was strictly along for the ride. He was not sitting there in a state of Zenlike readiness to pull my irons out of the fire if I should get into trouble. That was the first really scary moment I had while I was training myself in the art of seaplane flying. I resolved to fly a bit more conservatively in the future.

The other scary thing I was always trying to deal with was docking. Taxiing and even sailing were more or less predictable; but running up to a dock and trying to judge all of the variables was beyond me. The floats seemed to draw about a centimeter of water, and without dynamic response of the flight controls to a relative wind, the plane was pretty much going to let the not-relative wind and the current have their way.

The drill was that we'd set up a run toward a dock, estimating speed and direction of drift. Then we'd pull the power back a bit to get the approach speed just right. At the moment we figured we had it made, we'd pull the mixture and stop the engine, then jump down onto the float, whereupon we'd spend the next few seconds totally at the mercy of the wind and

the current, coasting in toward the dock. If we guessed wrong, we'd either charge into the dock fast enough to maybe bend the Reynolds Wrap, or drift so slowly that the wind would halt our approach before we got to our destination, making it necessary to leap back into the airplane and accomplish a fast start, a do-or-die proposition if there happened to be a crew boat approaching from astern. This operation was particularly challenging to a one-legged seaplane pilot.

If we judged it just right, we could stop the propeller, turn off the magneto switch, hop out on whatever float was nearer to the dock, grab the painter, and prepare to make a little leap onto the dock and secure the docking line to a cleat before the wind had a chance to push the plane someplace where we didn't want it to go. Most of the time, I tried to put the right side of the plane against the dock so that the more agile member of the crew could do the jumping and the tying.

But remember, the guys riding with me were not instructors. They were experienced seaplane pilots. Instead of letting me learn from making mistakes, they would invariably give me advice about when to pull the mixture.

So the day finally arrived when I was signed off to take my check ride with a guy named Leo. We flew over to a seaplane base in New Orleans east to meet the examiner. He reviewed my logbook and asked me a bunch of questions about seaplane operations. I explained about upwind and downwind turns; about how to take off and land in rough and smooth water, and how to handle glassy water conditions, which had been represented to me as one of the most dangerous situations in which a seaplane pilot could find himself.

The test went fairly well. By this time, my leg had gotten the benefit of a couple of weeks of rehabilitation, and I was starting to get around a little better, although I still couldn't push up on my right tiptoe. I was still worried about the docking, which turned out to be the last thing on the test. We set the bird down right in front of the dock, completing a short, maximum-effort landing that put us right where we were supposed to be.

I turned in toward the dock and lined up at about a 45° angle for my final approach. I reached for the mixture control. "No, no, not yet," said Leo, grabbing my hand away from the knob. We sat there for a few more seconds with the engine ticking over until he judged that we had it about right, then he pulled the knob all the way out, killing the engine. We coasted up to the dock, where a helper grabbed the rope and tied us up.

So that's how I got my seaplane rating. That afternoon around 2:00, I went out with my first student, a pilot who had never been up in a seaplane. I had something like ten hours of seaplane experience and had never once had to make the judgment call of when to pull the mixture. But I must have done something to please the seaplane gods, since I got through a little over 300 hours of flying with students in those 180 float planes without ever bending anything of any importance.

When people hear that I have 300 hours in a seaplane, they think I know something about seaplane flying. They are wrong. Although I put quite a few people through their training, we never went out when the wind was very strong. Light winds, wide canals, and low docks: that was my operational mantra. I

am a perfect example of the maxim that those who cannot do must teach.