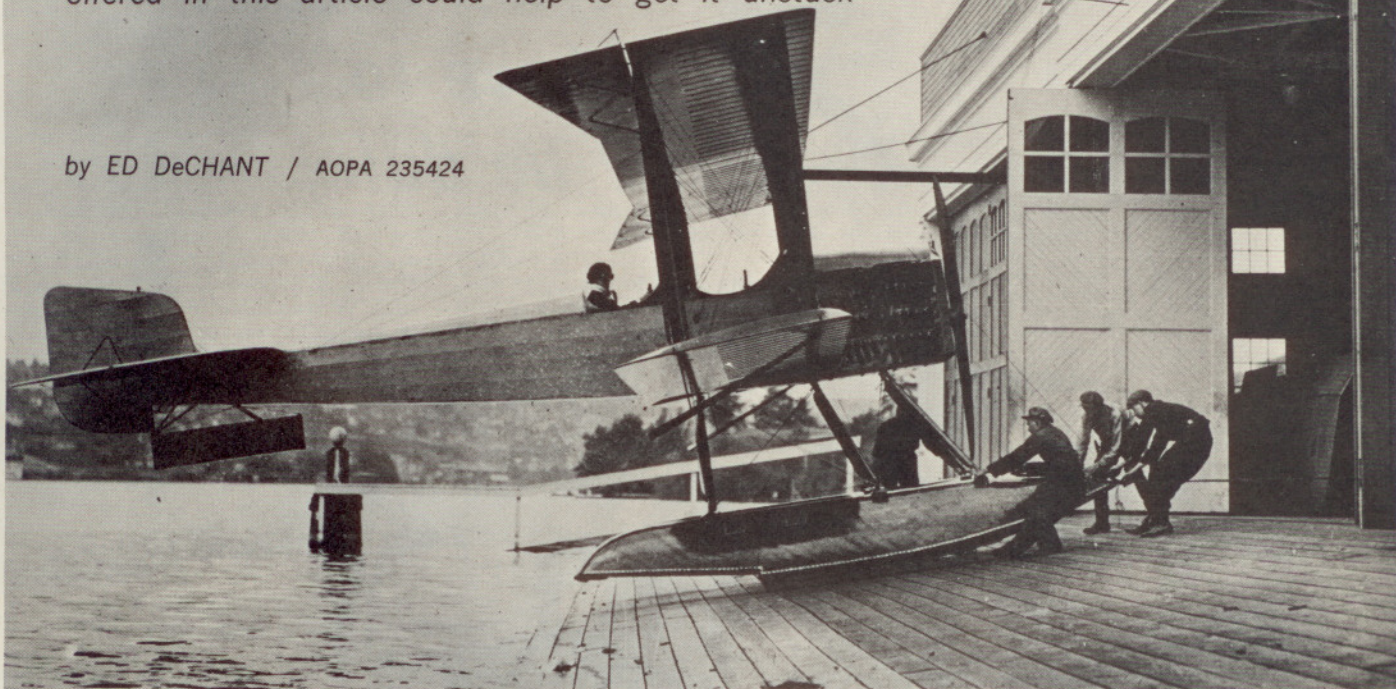


Four primary problem areas appear to have blocked the floatplane's progress in this country, but suggestions offered in this article could help to get it unstuck

by ED DeCHANT / AOPA 235424



The first of a long line of Boeing airplanes was this B&W floatplane, built in 1916. William E. Boeing elected to start with seaplanes because he believed that the numerous bodies of water available offered greater utility than the few airports of that era. Boeing photo

Picture a crisp January morning along the shores of a tranquil Louisiana lake. A station wagon pulls up and a tall thin man gets out and walks to the tailgate where he retrieves two five gallon cans. He picks up the cans and walks toward a red and white Cessna 180 floatplane tied at the boat dock. The driver of the car gets two similar cans and quickly follows.

The first man completes a preflight of the airplane as the driver hauls more equipment from the car. Then the pilot takes out a piece of paper to see if he has forgotten anything. Money, 20 gallons of extra fuel, charts, Airman's Information Manual, emergency rations, an airline ticket home, a list of possible refueling stops and everything else he'll need, to take this airplane to its new owner in Seattle, is on board.

The pilot unties the airplane, jumps on the float and climbs into the cabin while his friend bids goodbye and gently pushes the plane from the docks. The Continental engine jumps to life and the 180 heads out of the sheltered bay toward open water. In three days it will be delivered in Seattle, Wash.

Although this flight has just begun, the planning began more than seven days ago. Sectional charts, local charts and road maps had to be obtained to pinpoint suitable water landing areas. The seaplane supplement to the Airman's Information Manual and the AOPA Airport Directory would prove helpful. A local gasoline distributor was contacted to provide extra fuel (in specially sealed containers, to comply with

Federal requirements).

The route selected crosses Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and touches Southern California. There it turns northbound along the coast, through Oregon and into Washington.

Fuel for this trip would be no problem for a wheel plane but it is a considerable problem for a floatplane in most areas in the United States.

There was only one course of action that could be taken. The charts were studied to find general aviation airports located near apparently suitable water landing areas along the route. The next few days were spent in telephone conversations with airport operators to find out if the water was indeed suitable for landing (not dried up at this time of year) and if fuel could be transported from the airport to the water.

As with most seaplanes this one had no radio transmitter. An ADF was on board, along with a portable VHF receiver which would provide weather information. A few low passes over the field would be signal enough for the airport operator to leave with the fuel for the nearby lake or river.

This may sound like a rather complicated cross-country, but I haven't even scratched the surface yet in explaining the needless seaplane "dilemma."

My introduction to seaplanes came in January 1967 when I was on temporary duty for United Air Lines in Seattle, Wash. My hotel room overlooked Seattle's Lake Union and as I awaited trip assignments I could watch the many floatplanes shooting touch-and-

## The Seaplane Dilemma

goes on the lake. On my day off I took a cab to Kurtzer Flying Service to look around. After watching and listening, I decided to buy an hour of dual to see what it was like. When the ride was over I knew I'd be spending my free time in Seattle adding a seaplane rating to my ticket. I hadn't had that much fun since solo.

Andy Vagners (AOPA 192340) became my instructor. He introduced me not only to the seaplane but to the unique problems faced by pilots who prefer floats to wheels.

As he explained, areas in New York, Minnesota, Washington, Alaska and a few other states are popular seaplane centers. These are regions where commercial floatplane flying is profitable. However, in most of the United States the seaplane is an untapped field of enjoyment for those who fly light air-

planes for pleasure.

There are several reasons for the lack of active floatplane pilots and they can all be summed up in one sentence. It is impractical to own a floatplane in a non-floatplane area, the way things are set up today.

Fuel availability is one of the greatest problems. As long as you stay in the popular floatplane areas everything works out fine. Once you leave that area complications arise, such as those experienced by our friend who flew that "simple" trip from Louisiana to Washington.

But there is more to this dilemma than refueling. Some states simply do not allow seaplanes to use their waters. New Jersey is a prime example. Seaplanes are forbidden on all inland lakes in that state. Seaplane operators in New Jersey are forced to use the salty inland waterways along the coast.

Vagners told me about a problem he had a few years ago when he was flying a floatplane up the California coast to Seattle. Weather conditions were beginning to deteriorate and darkness was near, so he decided to land at Millerton

Reservoir near Fresno, Calif. After he landed and tied the plane at the local boat marina, he was approached by four park officials who advised him that it was illegal to land on the lake because it was a state recreation area. Floatplanes were considered hazardous to local boatmen and therefore banned from the lake.

Andy explained that his state allows aircraft to operate on all lakes except those kept for city water supplies. He showed them his current sectional chart, published by the Federal Government, that failed to indicate the lake was restricted. Other Government airman publications also had no mention of this lake being off limits. He said he had landed in the interest of safety, and that to leave would be dangerous because of poor flying conditions and approaching darkness.

After an extended discussion, Andy was permitted to remain overnight in a nearby motel, on the promise to leave early the next morning.

This illustrates another problem faced by the floatplane pilot, the lack of adequate published data. Federal publica-

tions do not warn pilots of local attitudes, customs and laws which might restrict seaplane activities. The AIM Seaplane Supplement lists many places no longer in use and fails to list many seaplane facilities which do exist. For example, Bedwell Harbor, B.C., Canada, is on the Bellingham Sectional. It has Customs service and aviation fuel available during the summer months. On the same sectional is a place called Manson's Landing which has 80 octane fuel. Neither is so marked on the sectional nor found in other Federal publications.

Ohio has three seaplane landing areas listed in the airport directory published by the state. The last sectional I saw made no mention of them.

Many floatplane operators feel that there is a lack of good planes, especially trainers. Kurtzer Flying Service uses 85 h.p. Taylorcraft planes equipped with electric starters as primary trainers. Andy told me that because of its efficient high-life wing the T-Craft is one of the best floatplane trainers available.

The Cessna 150 would make an excellent float trainer if it had more power. There is a conversion out which



It was in this 85 h.p. Taylorcraft that author earned his seaplane rating. The plane is one of the trainers used by Kurtzer Flying Service of Seattle, Wash.

Photo by the author



Piper Super Cruiser on Kipawa Lake, Quebec, Canada. Pilots in Canada and Alaska face less restrictions in landing on water surfaces and therefore find the floatplane more useful than do pilots in the continental United States.

Photo by the author



Float-equipped Cessna 172 is lifted from Lake Union in Seattle for overnight hanging. Lake Union, with some 24,000 aeronautical operations a year, is one of the busiest water landing areas in the country.

Photo by the author



Republic Seabee promised to win many flying amphibian converts in post-World War II era, but restrictive waterway use limitations in the United States defeated that promise. This Seabee, which lacks ground landing gear, is used in Lapland where floatplanes are common.

Photo by Clare Conley

adds 50 h.p. to the 150, however.

Cessna's wing is well-suited for floatplanes if combined with the proper power plant to give good performance. The Cessna 172, for example, is a good floatplane but flies too close to the low speed end of the performance curve to be a good trainer.

The Piper *Super Cub* is an excellent floatplane but has the training disadvantage of being a tandem-seat model. Much seaplane training is done on the water at high r.p.m. settings. The combination of water and engine noise make a side-by-side trainer desirable if only to save on the instructor's voice box.

As far as working floatplanes go, the Cessna 180 and 185 are probably two of the finest. They combine a good wing with enough power to give a good load-carrying ability, a respectable cruising speed and a reasonable operating cost.

The *Cherokee Six* promises to be a good floatplane if equipped with the proper propeller and a front-seat, 180° swinging door on each side.

Floatplanes are best if fitted with a large diameter flat-pitched propeller. Also, when docking a floatplane you approach from the downwind side, heading upwind. This could put the dock on either side of the plane. A door should be on each side of the airplane and swing a full 180° to allow pilot and passengers to walk forward on the float to deplane. Even though it has a low wing, the *Cherokee Six* has enough dihedral in the wing and sits high enough on floats to provide ample wing clearance for docking.

I'm not trying to put down the manufacturers. After all, they are in business to sell airplanes. The market favors wheel planes, so wheel planes are designed and later fitted for floats. Actually, few light aircraft have been excluded from floatplane operation. I've even seen pictures of a DC-3 on floats.

Thus far, I've presented the four major problems encountered in my seaplane flying experiences. There are local laws which restrict seaplanes, lack of landing and refueling areas, lack of current, comprehensive published data, and finally the lack and, I might add, high cost of good seaplanes. Those who regularly fly seaplanes could add many additional problems they've encountered. But how can we help lighten the burden carried by the man who wants to fly from water instead of land?

First, there is discrimination against seaplanes on many of our state and Federal tax-supported waterways. As with many poor laws, they were probably legislated by people who were only familiar with one side of the question. Or possibly they were developed years ago when people looked on pilots as daredevil barnstormers. Today's lawmakers are better acquainted with general aviation. Many of them are AOPA members and will be reading this article. We must educate those who are not familiar with general aviation and explain our side of the seaplane question.

The basic assumption is that the seaplane presents a hazard to the boater;

that they cannot coexist. This is not true. Lake Union, located in downtown Seattle, has been a popular seaplane airport for more than 42 years.

The first big burst of seaplane activity on Lake Union began in 1916 when William E. Boeing decided that he could build a better airplane than those in existence. There were few airports in those days so the first Boeing airplanes were seaplanes.

Bill Boeing started building and flying his airplanes at Lake Union. Today the lake remains one of the busiest seaplane bases in that part of the country. The FAA airport facilities guide lists a yearly average of 24,000 takeoffs and landings on the lake. There are well over 4,500 operations during peak months.

Anyone who has been to Seattle knows that it is one of the largest boating cities in the United States. One out of five families in Seattle reportedly has a boat large enough to be registered with the Coast Guard. Lake Union, being a direct link between inland lakes and Puget Sound, has everything from eight-foot dinghies to naval destroyers making daily trips across its waters. The lake is only about two miles long, and less than a mile wide. Boats and airplanes coexist very well on Lake Union.

If the laws are changed, there may be accidents involving boats and airplanes, but there is a certain amount of risk in getting out of bed. I've read that in 1961 more than 1,200 people died in automobiles hit by trains. Fatalities incurred in boating and swimming accidents for the same year were well over 6,000.

If local and state officials still fear the mixing of planes and boats, why can't some lakes have areas set aside for seaplanes? These areas could be marked with painted oil drums. Similar lanes are often provided for water skiers. If on some lakes there might be a fear of people swimming into the path of a landing seaplane, then takeoffs and landings could be restricted to at least 500 feet offshore. We have to taxi at least that far on wheels. Planes could also be restricted from approaching the shore except in designated docking areas.

The point is, if a public tax-supported lake allows unlimited horsepower in boating, why can't the flying taxpayer have just a little piece of it? We don't need much water. The average floatplane is airborne in well under 60 seconds. Today's pilot is not a barnstormer. He is trained by a Federally licensed instructor, licensed by a Federally appointed examiner, and controlled by the Federal Air Regulations.

As far as fuel is concerned, local marina owners would handle avgas if they could make a few dollars selling it.

If many people had seaplanes, they would no doubt want to convert to wheels during the winter. There are airports located next to water where this conversion could easily be done.

No one would profit more from more

seaplane bases than some of our larger American cities. Boston, New York, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, San Francisco, Chicago, Detroit and countless other cities have large downtown water areas. If the businessman could fly his seaplane from a lake near home to the city (or from city to city), I'm sure he might favor that over the high density air traffic at big city airports, landing fees and expensive, time consuming, ground transportation. Furthermore, a city couldn't invest in a cheaper downtown airport. But big city seaplane bases are not enough. We need places near our homes on which to base our planes.

Commuter seaplane airlines might even be practical in some areas. Remember the old flying boats that used to fly from New York to Europe?

As more people demand good float-equipped aircraft the manufacturers will build them and the price might even come down. Good, speedy, four-place amphibians might find a good market if the owners could get more utility out of their seaplane capabilities.

We can eliminate some of the problems concerning the published data right now. If you know of an active seaplane base, a lake that will permit seaplanes to land, a boat marina that does or will sell aviation fuel, an airport that will deliver fuel or any other helpful information, please send it to me in care of AOPA and we'll do our best to get it back to you as soon as possible. Include, if possible, the lake where landing is permitted; who (and by what authority) permits it; what area of the lake or river should be used; where fuel, if available, can be found; and telephone numbers of people to contact concerning docking, fuel, etc. It would be helpful if you would include a cutout part of the sectional chart and mark the spot precisely. Be sure to tell us what sectional it is on. Anything else you can send that might be useful to a floatplane pilot who wants to travel in his airplane will be appreciated.

Why do pilots enjoy flying seaplanes? Basically, because it's good clean fun. Many pilots' summer activities are water oriented (boating, fishing, etc.) and there are few regions in this country, with its ever-increasing number of lakes, that today's pilot won't find as convenient as an airport if he could have permission to land, refuel, and fly back home.

If you haven't flown a seaplane, buy an hour when you get the chance. I'm sure you'll be hooked just as I was. □

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#### THE AUTHOR

*An airline pilot by occupation, Ed DeChant remains a general aviation "fun pilot" in his off-duty time. He learned to fly while in college at Ohio University and served a stint as a fixed-base operator before joining United Air Lines. This is his second contribution to the PILOT.*

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