
The contradictions of the Seabee

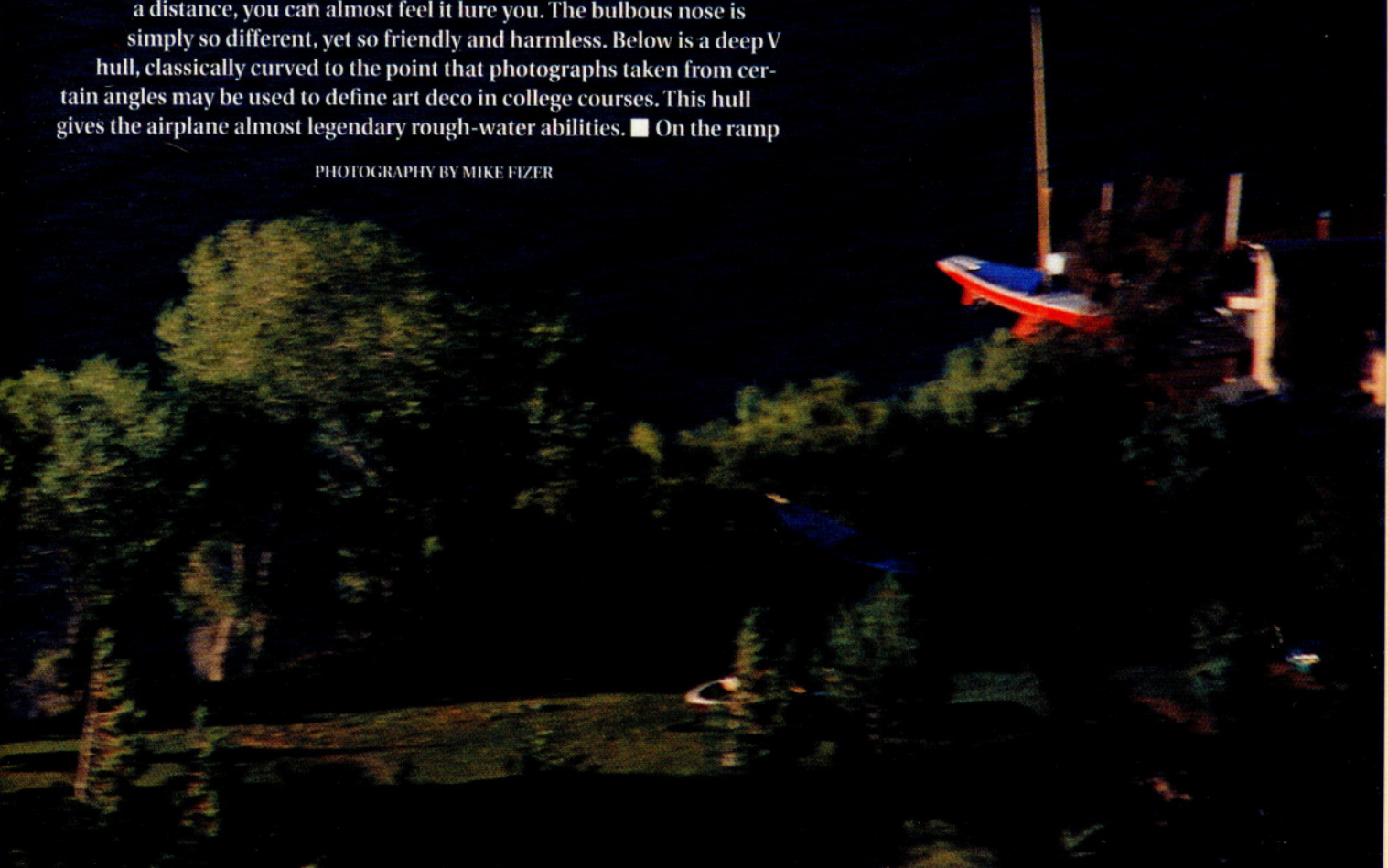


UNCONVENTIONAL, Yet Alluring

BY RICK DURDEN

You never just fly a Seabee. You herd it through the air, curse its ground handling, revel in its abilities in the water, worry about what will break next, dread the preflight, and delight in its departure from the ordinary. *Flying* is much too prosaic a word for the experience. ■ What is the Seabee? It is the pilot's version of what the shrinks call an approach-avoidance conflict. It is both ends of the magnet; it attracts and repels with almost equal power. It is ponderous controls, concerns over numerous systems in an old airplane which can strand you on a remote lake. It is the breath-holding quiet of that time between the close of the throttle and the moment when the keel starts to skim the water. It is the anticipation and realization of adventure. ■ What is the Seabee, this machine the P-47's builders designed for the post-World War II market? Republic announced a sale price of \$3,995 initially and bumped it right away to \$4,995—yet, even with further price increases, managed to lose money on every one it built. Before it could get manufacturing costs and sales price in the correct relationship, the market dried up and it didn't matter anymore. ■ Powered by a 215-horsepower Franklin engine driving a reversible pusher propeller, the Seabee weighs 3,150 pounds fully loaded. Walking toward it from a distance, you can almost feel it lure you. The bulbous nose is simply so different, yet so friendly and harmless. Below is a deep V hull, classically curved to the point that photographs taken from certain angles may be used to define art deco in college courses. This hull gives the airplane almost legendary rough-water abilities. ■ On the ramp

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MIKE FIZER



the airplane sits gently, nose up, the mains just aft of the cabin doors and the tailwheel located well forward. The tailwheel position causes you to think that the airplane will be a bear to land in a crosswind (it isn't) and torture to taxi any length of time in gusty conditions (it is). The engine sits up high, atop the fuselage, so start thinking about how you are going to get up there to check the oil.

The Seabee has all of the maintenance demands of an airplane plus those of a boat. Squared. This is an airplane that takes hours of maintenance for every hour of flight. Then consider the pre-flight. Make sure that you have a ladder, probably two quarts of oil, an Allen wrench or a bilge pump, an adjustable wrench, gloves, various screwdrivers, and no fear of heights or climbing. And, yes, you will get dirty and wet.

Inspect the exposed main gear. They simply pivot aft to stay clear of the water. They do not go into anything, so there is no drag reduction after retraction. It is

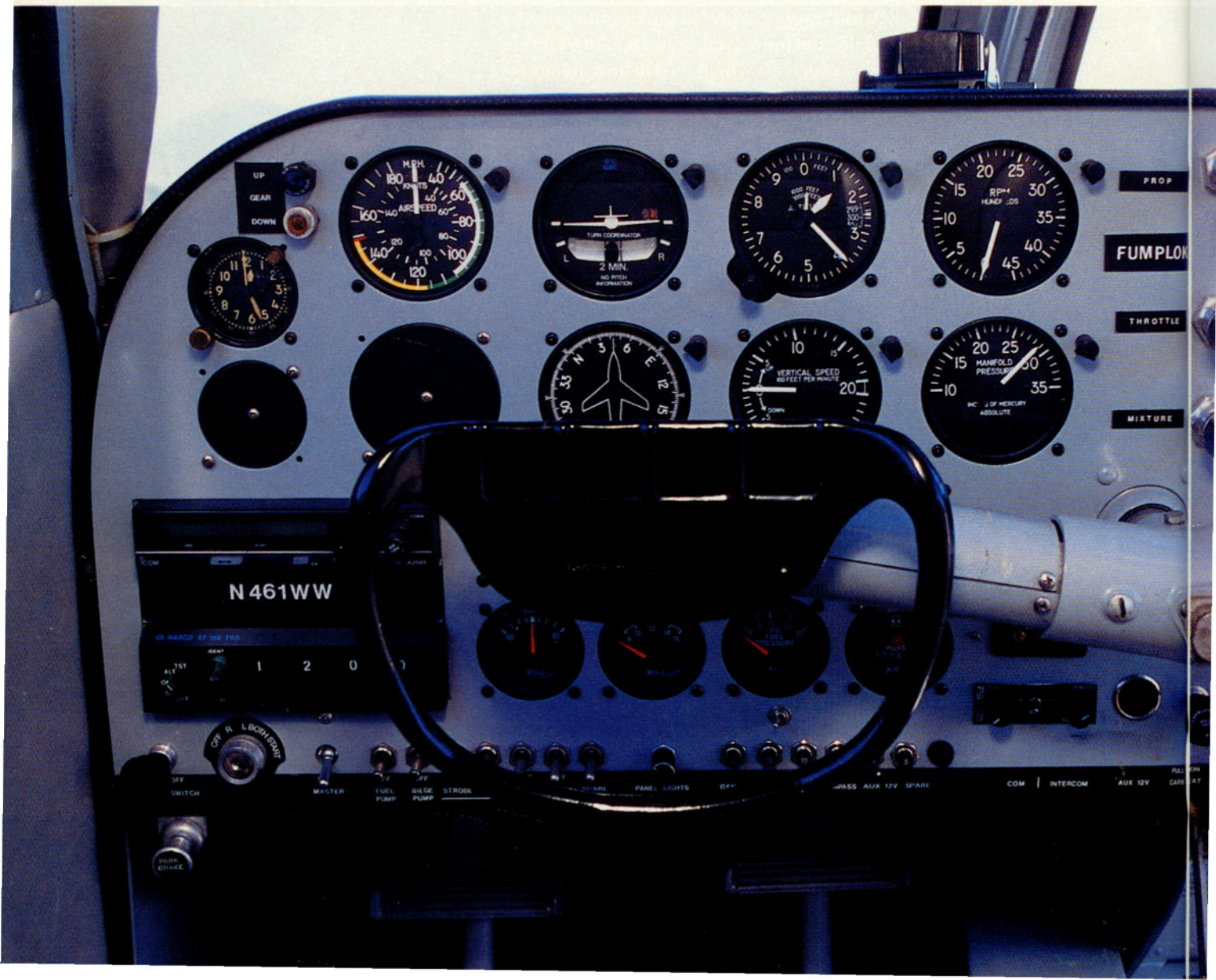
absolutely essential that you retract the gear before landing on the water. More than one Seabee has gone to the bottom without noticeable hesitation when landed, gear down, on the water. Remind yourself of one of the amphibian mantras, "This is a water landing, the landing gear is up, left main up, right main up, tailwheel up." Or, "This is a land landing, the landing gear is down, left main down, right main down, tailwheel down." Interestingly, a gear-up landing on concrete shaves about one-thirty-second of an inch off the keel.

Each wing has a sponson out near the end, used for flotation when moving slowly on the water. When operating on the water care must be taken to avoid any side load on a sponson. It will come off immediately. Remember the James Bond movie *The Man With The Golden Gun*? Agent Bond flew an absolutely stunning Seabee through some spectacular scenery in getting to the bad guy's lair. In the last several hundred frames,

the Seabee no longer had its left sponson, doubtless a pilot "oops."

Time to drain the various compartments in the hull. Once upon a time they were relatively watertight. Fifty years on, few people will leave a Seabee in the water for more than a few hours. Use the Allen wrench you brought with you to remove the series of drain plugs along the centerline of the keel. As the airplane relieves itself on the ramp, use the ladder to scale the heights of the aluminum whale and use a screwdriver to open the cowling latches.

You can easily eyeball most of the engine compartment, then check the oil and pour in some more. The old Franklin will probably need it. While it may be more efficient to simply pour the oil on the vertical stabilizer, the engine does need it for awhile before it sprays the fluid on the tail. The Franklin engine is the weak spot of a Seabee. The majority of accidents seem to be related to engine failures, so look it over care-





With enough frontal area to smash bugs by the millions, the Seabee may win the barn-door aerodynamics competition, hands down. Complementing the bulbous nose and fat corrugated wing and stabilizers, the retractable landing gear does nothing to reduce drag.

fully. While communing with the Franklin, you may want to consider the fact that a great many Seabees have been reengined with larger Lycomings.

The single fuselage fuel tank holds some 75 gallons of 80-octane fuel. Prudent owners have taken a dowel and marked it at 5-gallon increments for accurate fuel quantity measuring. No mere mortal tries to fly a Seabee in warm weather with full fuel and more than one soul aboard unless he or she has a death wish or miles and miles of water on which to run for takeoff. A loaded Seabee at high altitude on a hot day can take 3 miles to lift off the water.

The water rudder is just aft of the tailwheel. Make sure that it's attached firmly. It can, and will, come off if you touch down in the water with rudder deflection. The Seabee is remarkably maneuverable on the water; the well-designed water rudder is a part of the reason. The large tail appears to be an afterthought, attached via a boom that sweeps up from the aft end of the hull under the propeller arc.

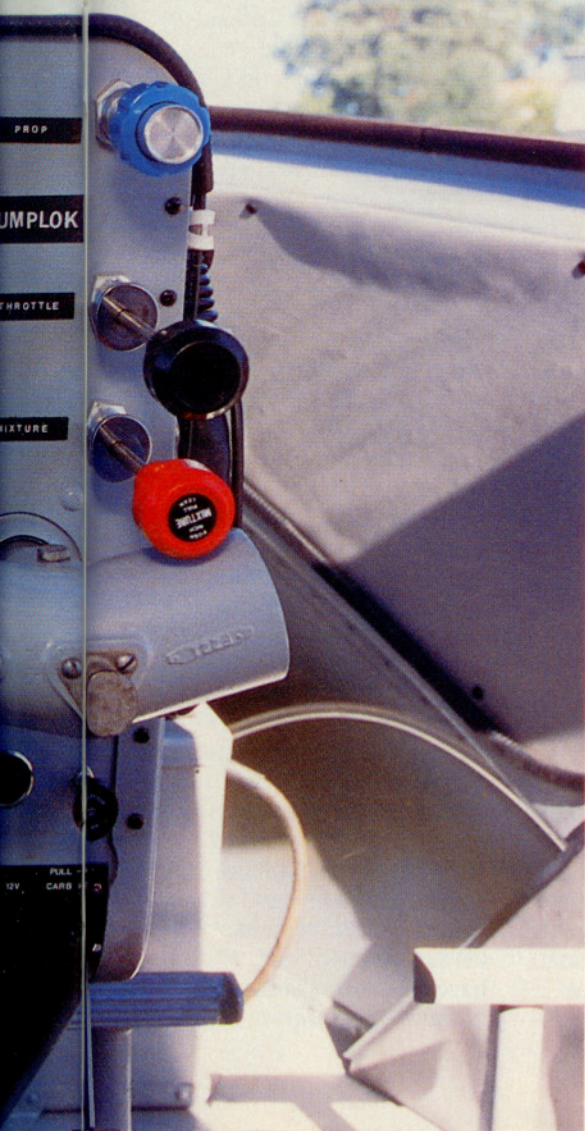
Finish inspecting the other side and replace the drain plugs. If preflighting while in the water, you'd open the hull plates and use the bilge pump to drain the various compartments. Now, climb in.

If it's a nice day, a swimsuit and deck shoes are appropriate attire. Look

around the cavernous cabin. You get the feeling that the passengers in back have room enough to dance, and you, as captain of this ocean liner, should have an engine-room telegraph for power control. Despite there being such mundane things as prop, throttle, and mixture controls, they are in the usual flying boat position—on the ceiling. Well, so is the engine. You will find the position amazingly comfortable. Visibility is nearly unequalled. The wings are behind you. There is no nose in front of the windshield. As a result, you will have to work some to detect subtle changes in pitch for the first hour or so. Don't want your copilot touching the controls? The right-side control wheel disconnects in seconds, ostensibly to allow access to the bow door, but it can be used to keep copilots humble.

After the labor of the preflight, it is pleasant to discover that startup is simple. Assuming that all is going well, the Franklin will snort and bellow shortly after you turn the appropriate switches and make the proper obsequience to the gods of internal combustion.

On a light-wind day, taxiing on land is merely demanding. In a gusty crosswind, you may fervently wish to be elsewhere. It is wise to use as little braking as possible, particularly on long taxiing endeavors, as the brakes will heat up





Wester's water wonder

One man's Seabee makes a splash

In 1992, when Walt Wester collected a faded, yet still garishly hued hulk of a Seabee—it was yellow with black stripes, for obvious reasons—he never expected it to become a showplane. Even when the restoration was complete, some three-and-a-half years later, and Wester flew it to the 1996 Watsonville, California, airshow, he didn't plan to put it on display. "I arrived at the show and was asked if I wanted to park or put the airplane on display," Wester recalls. "Parking was \$20, but if I put the airplane on display, parking was free and I got a hat and coffee mug to boot." So Wester showed his Seabee as a matter of convenience. "I didn't even stay around to the end of the show," he says. "...Two weeks later I got a plaque saying it had won best-of-show for neoclassics."

Traipse around Wester's

'Bee and it's easy to see how it bowled over the judges. While many restorers aim for historical accuracy and purity, Wester rebuilt his Seabee for fun. It was supposed to be light, clean, and useful. It is, as a result, a wonderfully honest-looking airplane with superb workmanship.

Wester is the survivor of other restorations, including a Stinson 108-3 and a Cessna 172 that he helped to turn into a taildragger. With help from Peter Breinig and Don Wallace (whose son, Don, Jr., runs WE Aerotech in Washington state, a clearinghouse of sorts for Seabee parts and knowledge), Wester set out to transform the Seabee from a moldering derelict (that had last flown in the mid-1970s) to "a flying recreational vehicle," says Wester. "I was a kid when the Seabee came out, and I thought it was a really impressive airplane. I always wanted to own one."

Wester's future 'Bee had

been through two or three other well-meaning restorers, but little had been done. One of the main attractions for Wester was the engine. "It had been properly pickled after an overhaul in about 1987, so I thought that it would be in decent shape," says Wester. "Getting parts for these old Franklins is extremely difficult."

He was heartened to see that, while most of the ferrous parts had been thoroughly rust-ravaged after sitting outside for a couple of decades, most of the aluminum was in good shape. "I just started taking it apart—got all the way down to the keel—and rebuilding it. I had to do quite a bit of metal work on the hull." It seems that someone in the distant past had tried to fix a persistent hull leak with patches of fiberglass. Wester incorporated many new items and altered the airplane extensively with STC'd and field-approved mods. Longtime Seabee pilots will probably notice the neat new panel that Wester installed, as well as a slew of other con-

venience items.

Now that the restoration is finished—Wester has put about 75 hours on the Seabee since completion—he's starting to reap the rewards. "When I started the restoration, I had dreams of taking the airplane into the Sierras and up to Canada...big, grand trips. I'll still do that, but one thing that surprises me is how I have found real treasures right under my nose," says Wester. Basing the airplane at Marin Ranch, a private strip north of the San Francisco Bay, Wester has same-day access to scores of lakes. "I used to never consider fishing at Lake Berryessa, but now I fly the Seabee up there and really enjoy myself."

So not only has Wester succeeded in bringing this charismatic old airplane back to life, he's given himself myriad reasons to enjoy its rebirth. Had the judges at Watsonville known that, Wester and his Seabee might well have taken overall best of show. —Marc E. Cook





great, fat fuselage; boat hull; two sponsons; and a fairly high-lift wing.

The Seabee sits solidly in cruise, seeming to resist displacement. While the passengers luxuriate in the big, comfortable cabin and enjoy the sight of the world slowly drifting by, they are assaulted by a decibel level with numbers well above the cruising speed. Ear protection is a must in the Seabeast.

The very high exterior noise level must be kept in mind if early some morning you decide to depart from a lake bordered by houses. You may find the residents of your favorite lake clamoring to ban seaplanes.

Enough of the negatives; you have worked hard to get the airplane this far. There's a lake ahead, so it's time to meet

On the water, the Seabee reaps the greatest rewards over its landlocked counterparts. Toss the anchor and drop in a fishing line while sitting atop the fuselage or just dangle your feet in the water on a hot day.



and fade when most needed.

Takeoff from land is a dignified event. The assemblage gathers speed gradually; the rudder, right behind the prop, is instantly effective as the power comes up. Slight forward pressure lifts the tail just a bit, and the airplane flies off at about 60 mph, flaps up. Raise the gear and accelerate to about 80 for the climb.

As you climb out, you become aware that the control response is not ever going to be described as crisp. In cruise, the Seabee accelerates to something approaching 100 mph. *Approaching* is the operative word. The Franklin, burning 13 gph, is shoving through the air a

Dr. Jekyll. You've had your visit with Mr. Hyde. Pick a large lake; plan to land in a relatively sheltered area. Watch carefully for boats. Some boaters seem to suffer complete brain fade in the presence of seaplanes, so plan to stay well clear of all watercraft. Fortunately, the Seabee will give you a big assist. Other than being noisy, it displays water manners that are nearly impeccable.

On downwind, reduce power a bit. The Seabee will slow quickly to 80 mph. Confirm that the gear is up and the aux fuel pump is on. Turn base, drop half flaps, slow to 70 mph and confirm the gear is up. On final, select full flaps, 65

mph, prop and mixture controls forward in case of a go-around, and confirm that the gear is up. Control your descent with power; you will need it. (Power off with full flaps and 60 mph, the Seabee does not glide; it plummets.)

Flare to a slightly nose-high attitude and gently close the throttle. The Seabee will reward you with a delicate hiss as the keel touches the tops of the waves, then settles onto the step, kicking out massive amounts of spray to the sides. The sensation is guaranteed to overcome every frustration you've had

in the preceding week. The hush of the idling engine is broken only by the sound of the water spraying. "Now we're a boat," to quote a good friend.

If it's summer, shut the engine off, open the three doors, toss out the anchor, and dive into the water. Or fish from the open bow door or atop the fuselage.

The most difficult part of water flying in a Seabee is making the decision to go home. Once made, close the doors, light the engine, and taxi downwind to the place from which you wish to start your takeoff run. Keep in mind that the

Seabee uses a lot of water to become airborne and may refuse if you try it with any tailwind.

As you taxi into position, check the mags and carb heat, set the trim and complete your pre-takeoff checklist. Full flaps are used for a water takeoff. Check again for boats and wakes. Take a deep breath, move the throttle from quiet to noisy, and pull the wheel all the way aft. The airplane rears up to the very nose-high attitude needed to get on the step, water sprays furiously everywhere, and you feel as if you must be going a million miles an hour.

If you are lucky enough to be in a Seabee modified with a helicopter air-speed indicator, you will observe that the spray abates and the airplane reaches the step somewhere around 15 mph. Lower the nose and hold as level an attitude as you can to maximize acceleration. You will see 20 mph, and eventually 25, then 30, 35, and finally, 40. At 41, gently lift the airplane off. It will fly, despite some notable reluctance if heavily loaded.

Once in the air, level off, accelerate, and start retracting the flaps a little at a time. After you have gone to half flaps, you will find that you are climbing and the airspeed is up around 60 or so. Once the flaps are up, it's a normal climb.

Returning for a landing on terra firma, set up as you would for a water landing, but put the feet down. The Seabee will wheel land as if on feathers, but you must remember that it is still flying, because the gear struts will compress for many, many inches before the wing has finished lifting. Full-stall landings require no more than the usual alertness demanded of any tailwheel airplane. The rudder will tame a crosswind on rollout if you are truly able to use those pedals on the floor.

On land or water, the Seabee is the anticipation and realization of adventure. To fully appreciate one, you must have a desire for adventure in your soul, along with the willingness to work for it—and the knowledge that this old amphibian can break. Flying something unconventional cannot bother you. Getting dirty and wet cannot daunt you. Knowing that the airplane is not forgiving of error or inattention and that you must hone your skills above the ordinary must attract you.

You will curse the Seabee for its foibles and love it for the same reasons.

Rick Durden, AOPA 684126, is an ATP who prefers to fly old and unconventional airplanes, balloons, and gliders.

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