

## **Why would you buy a Boat, they can't even Fly!**

Michael Wilton – President, FlightSimple Inc.

“It’s ok, the wire will take your weight...until it won’t, then you will fall in the lake. It usually happens once a year, hasn’t happened yet this year.”

As an introduction to the start of the float plane briefing, this line did not instill a lot of confidence in me as I gazed upon the small wire stretched tight between the nose of the Cessna 180 floats. This was going to be my most challenging “walk around” I was pretty sure. I did manage to negotiate the wire, like a team member cut from the Flying Wellendas, but it was a bit nerve wracking. I would not be so fortunate the whole week, more on that later.

The excitement of the wire walk was provided by the good people at Air Hart Aviation, a float plane training provider based out of Downtown Kelowna. I was there to spend 5 days, 2 Sorties a day, to try to build 15 hours of float time and gain a float rating in their Cessna 180. This was going to be intense, but it was exciting to see the planes tied up at the dock and a large lake just outside the boat basin.

I did immediately recognize that I might have over dressed for the May weather in Kelowna, BC. Dressed in jeans and a dress shirt, I might have looked pretty good, but it was going to be a hot day. After meeting Richard, Kyle and the team at Air Hart, I recognized that float training here had a much more laid-back style. No white shirts and epaulets, these guys wore comfortable clothing and as I found out, are always ready to dip a toe in any lake we might drop into.

As the readers will remember, I took an Underwater Egress course in preparation for this moment. That was the initial requirement, now it was time to see if I could learn to fly floats. The briefing on the dock covered everything from tying ropes, preparing the aircraft without being able to walk all the way around, how to start and taxi, but mostly safety. Having the wings hanging over the dock, no brakes available to the pilot and a spinning prop close to anyone in the area, safety is the most important aspect. The on dock training was great and helped set the stage for the next few days.

I was paired with Richard, the owner of the company and the resident Cessna 180 trainer. Air Hart also has a 172 on floats, but as we tend to see more clients with 180s and 185s, I would be concentrating on that for the training.

After some initial instruction from Richard at the dock, we fired up and taxied out. Full back pressure on the yoke to assist in keeping the plane’s nose up and reducing the wear and tear on the prop, no seatbelts, doors unlocked. This was

pretty foreign. As a dry land pilot I am used to being prepared to fly as soon as the door is closed. This is done in case of emergency and makes getting ready for a flight and a run up a bit tricky.

Every check on the run up was done from memory, then was reviewed with the check list after. No standing still to do a run up and mag check, the plane taxis at all times and the pilot needs to stay heads up to watch for logs, kayaks, boats, etc. Took a few attempts, but you get pretty good getting a flow built for this type of flying.

The first flight was a familiarization flight. We took off after learning to get the feel for “the step” and flew up the coast north out of Kelowna. Richard pointed out some landmarks to be used later and then immediately we started to prepare for the first landing.

There are two main types of landings and takeoffs. Standard and Glassy Water. Lucky for me (not), that morning was pretty glassy on the lake. The set up and flare are very subtle in glassy water landings, so it actually fit well with my primarily IFR flying. Take offs were tough and often required rocking the yoke back and forth. The suction produced by the water on the floats was remarkable.

We did a lot of shoreline flying, Richard doing his best to get my feet back engaged on the rudders. As most non-taildragger pilots know, a pilot’s rudder skills seem to degrade with time, so this was designed to get me back in the swing, keeping the ball centred and doing steep turns following the shoreline. The flying was so low by my standards, that it was both amazing and a bit unsettling. It did provide a great way to ensure the pilot stays on the rudder and we did this shoreline following as often as possible to practice the skill.

Over the next couple days, we practiced inspections passes, checking for obstacles in the water, reviewing conditions for standard or glassy water and watching out for traffic as the lake was just starting to get busy. We completed glassy and standard landings and takeoff, sailing, step taxiing and all manner of things a float pilot needs in their arsenal.

On day three, I was sent for my solo takeoffs and landings. Number 1 was ok, 2 and 3 were almost perfect, 4 was a disaster but nothing broken, 5 and 6 were getting back to better and 7 and 8 were suitable. I taxied back in and could not get the smile off my face. The whole Air Hart team was there with congratulations and handshakes. Kyle is a hugger, so I got a huge bear hug from him. It felt really good to have accomplished something so incredible.

Over the next few sorties, we explored high altitude lakes, followed a few rivers to practice the super important rudder work and flew over and to some amazing scenery.

As Friday approached, there were a couple other pilots coming in for training with limited time lines. As they were also on the 180, I volunteered to scrap my second flight on Friday and allow one of them to take it. Richard and Kyle offered up a flight in the 172 as my last float flight. I jumped at that, but it would be my ultimate downfall....right into the lake in fact.

As I stated previously, I had successfully negotiated the 180s nose wire multiple times a day for 4 straight days. Unfortunately, the 172 is much smaller and when the plane's nose dipped from my weight (guess I need to lay off the Oreos), I thought I was going in the drink. I adjusted my foot just enough to slip into the water. I was able to salvage my phone and wallet, but my ear pods went to the bottom. I was able to change prior to the flight, but there is still a lot of laughing about my "almost" perfect week at Air Hart. The dunking was followed up by a flight to a remote lake with Kyle, a great chat sitting on the floats with our feet in the water talking planes, and a great trip back to a pretty good landing in Kelowna.

My float training had come to an end. I absolutely see how this type of flying can become addictive and have heard similar things from other pilots. The freedom and beauty of float flying has not been matched so far in all the great flights I have done.

Float planes and in particular amphib airplanes, allow pilots a great deal of freedom to explore places most of us can only pass over in our aircraft. If you want the ultimate all around plane, an amphib might be the perfect aircraft and we are always happy to assist client's in locating the perfect one for them.

Might have to look at putting floats on the Mooney. Anyone interested in trying out that STC?