

Having a Splashing Time

Float Plane Flying in Canada, by Kim Harris

When my family and I decided to take a holiday in Ontario this year, it seemed like an ideal opportunity to try a new type of flying. At first, I thought I would just get in an hour or so but then the idea of doing a complete seaplane rating took hold. After all, Canada is really the home of float flying with all that bush flying history – the De Havilland Beaver, and all that.

So, I started looking for a place to learn. Best place to look? The web. I obtained a list of float plane training establishments and narrowed it down to a few that were located in areas where we wanted to visit. I talked to a few and received a friendly and helpful response but I also had a personal recommendation from some friends in Ottawa for an outfit called Cloud Air Services Ltd. who operate from Mortimers' point on Lake Muskoka in Central Southern Ontario.

Next, what would I need in order to fly in Canada and undertake training that of necessity involves solo flying? I talked to Transport Canada. They told me that what I would normally need for just recreational flying is a Recreational Pilots Licence Validation certificate. This confirms that I have a current licence and medical based on my UK documents. However, this is insufficient for training because it cannot be endorsed with additional ratings. What I needed for this exercise was a Temporary Pilot's Licence. This is valid for ninety days from the date of issue and only one may be issued in any calendar year. I faxed my licence and medical certificate to Transport Canada and gave them credit card details for the \$35 administration fee and they faxed me the Licence the same day with the original received by post four days later. Job done. Eat your heart out CAA!

Next I talked to Dean Mortimer at Cloud Air Service. Yes, that's why it's called Mortimers' Point. It turns out that they have a history of float flying in the family going back forty years and Dean runs Cloud Air as part of their marine services business based near Port Carling. They do charter flying and float training and offer a basic course and an advanced course.

The basic course, which gets you the float endorsement to begin with, is a minimum of five hours dual and two hours solo time. Cloud Air normally use a Piper PA12-150 Super Cruiser Cub for training and a Cessna 172 is also available.

The advanced course teaches you much more in its allotted fifty hours and also checks you out on the Cessna 180 and Cessna 206 amphibian.

Transport Canada have certain specific requirements as to the content of the course including certain water conditions etc. but most of the time is spent doing landings - that is what they are called, despite being nothing to do with land!

Having arrived in Canada and spent some time in Kingston and Ottawa (well – that is where the Chipmunk lives) and then walking (honestly) in Algonquin Park, we found our way to Mortimers' point and met Dean and his family. There are generations of Mortimers here and Don Mortimer still has the same Aeronca Champion that he has been flying for the last thirty five years. They made us welcome in typical Canadian style and Adam McKittrick, my very able instructor for the next two days, got down to work.

The course started with a one and a half hour briefing on mostly two things: firstly how the floats are made and how to treat them and how they work and secondly how to determine the wind on the lake. It is here that it dawns on you just how much freedom this kind of flying is going to give you but also how much responsibility it is going to place on you as the pilot in command.

There are no windsocks, no air traffic controllers, no towers and definitely no runways. Not one. Just you, the aeroplane, the water and the wind. In the next 7.5 hours flying, we didn't use the radio once.

Next, I was introduced to my aircraft. This is a Piper PA12-150. It is officially known as a Super Cruiser Cub, but it is also known, I gather, as a “fat cub”. Instead of the 85 HP Continental of the J-3 Cub I flew a long time ago in Texas, this has a mighty (ish) 150 HP engine. It would definitely be needed to drag Adam and I out of the water.

The first job was to learn how to pump out the bilges of each compartment of the floats without falling in the lake. I rapidly learnt that this job is definitely the province of the student. They always leak a little from the flexing of the aluminium riveted joints.

Life then definitely gets interesting as you are shown how to set off from the dock. Forget all that stuff about seat belts and things before you start up. The deal is roughly this:

1. Check out aeroplane and prepare to start the engine. Mixture rich, throttle set and engine primed.
2. Climb back on to the dock and untie the aircraft, keeping careful hold of the last rope tied to the rear strut.
3. Turn the aircraft so that you can push it out without hitting anything.
4. Now the fun bit – push off from the dock, jump on to the float, park the rope somewhere that it won't get tangled in the rudder cables, scramble into the cockpit and start the engine before the aircraft drifts away and hits something.
5. Assuming that the engine starts OK (which it always did) set to 800 rpm and water taxi out to where you are going to fly.
6. Breathe a sigh of relief and start figuring out what to do next.

Now you have to remember all that stuff from the briefing about how to determine what direction the wind is coming from while doing power checks as you taxi. Now, what was it he said? Ripples downwind, calm areas of water in the lee of the land are downwind, don't trust flags, oh yes – ribbons of foam from water blowing off the tops of the waves. Can't see those from here.

I think the instructor is reading a newspaper or something judging by how much help he is giving me with trying to decide this stuff. Oh, he wants me to do it? On his own head be it.

Right, he seems happy with where I think the wind is coming from. Adam does one take off and landing and then I have to do them.

Take off first then, I guess.

Power checks complete, harnesses and hatches secure. Time to do up the seat belts and raise the water rudders.

Actually all the information from the briefing stood me in very good stead as to the theory of how to do this. The trouble is that float plane flying really is all about feel. The way you get airborne is taken in approximately three phases. Firstly, you apply full power and hold the stick back. This builds a wave under the front of the float. Secondly, get the aircraft up “on the step”. This allows the floats to plane over the water with a much reduced displacement so that the aircraft is being held up by hydrodynamic pressure more than displacement of water so that it can build up enough speed to get airborne. To get on the step, you have to push the stick forward at the right time to push the float over the wave and up on to the front of the float. Don't push too much though, otherwise the floats dig in at the front and can flip the aircraft on its nose.

Now build the speed up on the step. This is much like driving a powerboat and you can steer the aircraft if necessary by application of the air rudder. As the speed builds you pull back on the stick until you feel it unstick from the water and the speed abruptly increases. Hold the nose down to build up flying speed and climb away – great, I know how to do this bit.

You really want me to land this thing? Or should that be “water” it? Whatever.

Again, we are really not very interested in watching speeds and flying by numbers here. We are doing it by attitude and angle of attack. Perhaps the aerobatics comes in handy for this stuff after all.

The first thing is to really check that we are landing into wind and that we have enough water to land in and a place to go if we have to overshoot. Now we do a precautionary fly by to check that there are no rocks or logs in the water or other obstructions. Pick your own bit of lake.

It is time for normal downwind checks and flying a "circuit". We descend at about 1500 rpm and 80 mph and start down to the lake. As we come down to tree top level we round out and adopt the nose up attitude that is absolutely vital to the landing. Not too high, not too low. Judge when the floats are just about to touch and apply some power to float us on to the water then as we touch, cut the power and hold that stick back. Digging the nose of the floats into the water is definitely prejudicial to health and safety.

Not bad, do it again, then again, then again, etc. In fact do it a few hundred times. The great thing about this is that you really can do touch and goes. You can do them all the way up the lake for about ten miles, just touch, climb 30 feet and descend again. Oh, do watch out for boats! Don't let anyone kid you, this is just legal low flying. Only infrequently do I need to look at the ASI or the other instruments (not that there are many in a Cub). Again, it is all about feel – the right moment when to push on to the step and the right moment to apply that trickle of power.

Actually, I found the take offs more difficult than the landings. Adam and Dean tell me that you just have to keep experimenting with it to find the right spot to push over on to the step.

Well, it seems to be time for some new things. Adam is happy with the basic handling and we now have to do some glassy water landings. The trouble with glassy water – smooth and unruffled by wind or traffic – is that you really can't see where the water is. Your depth and height perception cannot be trusted below about treetop height. So, what you have to do is set up the aircraft with the right attitude and speed and feel it on. Much like landing a tailwheel aircraft where there is very poor visibility. You have to use your peripheral vision.

Well now, where do you most frequently get glassy water? On small lakes. So where next? You guessed it – small lakes. We climb out from Muskoka Lake and this half mil map appears over my shoulder from the back seat with a finger on some miniscule lakes and Adam says "take us there".

D.I.? Pah, we don't have one. Compass, all very well but it doesn't seem to be pointing where we want to go. What do we use then? Mark I eyeball. We have to navigate by sense of direction and the shape of the lakes. Suddenly I realise that this area is all lakes and trees. Thousands of the former and millions of the latter. Fortunately a railway siding and a water tower with the town's name on it helps me out and I point tentatively "over there?" Adam seems to feel that this is not too ridiculous an assessment and we miraculously find our way to these infinitesimally small lakes. Actually they are about two miles long but even the little Cub uses at least a mile for take off in expert hands, never mind mine.

More inspections of the lake later and we descend low over the trees to make the best use of our small lake for a glassy water full stop landing and take off. Now for some serious step taxiing around the corner. This is so much fun it probably shouldn't be allowed. The take off goes well and we are off back to Muskoka.

This is probably a good time to talk about the next nightmare scenario. Docking. Just when you thought you had it taped, the sadistic instructor tells you to dock on the fuel dock. This calls for fine judgement and experience. The trouble is, even if I had any of the former, I definitely don't have any of the latter. Except that I do own a motor boat and that helped significantly to avoid me making too much of an idiot of myself.

There is a major problem with handling this boat on the water. It isn't exactly a boat. It has no brakes, no reverse, and very vague steering. In anything over a breath of wind it wants to turn into wind all the time. Added to which, you can't just taxi up to the dock with the propeller turning. You have to shut the engine down at an appropriate (and safe) distance and coast into the dock at about 30 degrees angle judging the best moment to leap out of your seat on to the float and then on to the dock to tie up. Oh, right! During the course of two days, I

confess I only had to drift back out and restart once and I never hit anything so I suppose I must count myself as fortunate.

Various other peculiar things happen during the course of the training. For one things you have to do some sailing and paddling practice. So, we landed in the middle of a lake and shut down the engine. Adam handed me a paddle and said "OK, onto the front of the right hand float and practice paddling - turn us around and paddle us over *there*".

This is hard work but not too difficult but the sailing is definitely not easy. Sometimes there is just too much crosswind to be able to taxi forwards and to be able to steer by the rudders, the weathercocking tendency just can't be overcome. I discovered this when doing my solo time and the wind had got up to about 25 knots, although I did discover that it will often turn around to the left when it won't go right. So, you have to "sail" the aircraft backwards and sideways using the control surfaces as sails. I would definitely want to have more tuition and practice at this before needing to sail into a dock!

Well, after just over 5 hours training, Adam pronounced me fit to fly on my own so I was sent off to do two hours of touch and gos, approaches, dockings, etc. solo. By this time it was really "quite" windy and there was no debate as to which way the wind was blowing and also the water was getting rather more rough. However, I completed it safely and with much enjoyment and the course was completed.

Now the worst part - the paperwork! In the UK this would involve vast amounts of money and more waiting about for the bit of paper to arrive from Gatwick and no doubt that *will* be the case when I want to put the rating on my UK licence. In Canada they have a rather more pragmatic approach to these things. Dean filled in all the papers and I drove off to Muskoka airport with them to see the "approved person". He filled in the rating on my temporary licence, took a modest amount of money (\$40 CA) off me and sent me back with permission to carry passengers. All in all, this took about an hour.

Before leaving Muskoka, Jo and Tom each came up with me for a half hour flight and seemed to enjoy the experience.

I wholeheartedly recommend doing the float plane rating. It is great fun and another aspect of flying with the freedom that once probably existed here too. Now I have to do a "seamanship" written exam for the UK CAA (learn how to run up the yellow fever flag and that sort of thing) and find somewhere to fly on floats here. One thing is for sure "I'll be back" to Canada for some more.