



WaterFlying

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FLYING LIGHT IN A SEAREY



LESSONS LEARNED ON A 50TH ANNIVERSARY SOLO

By Tom Rolander

I was 5 years old when I had the first flight that I can remember. I was born in Kiomboi, Tanzania, in 1948 and my family left Africa in 1953, flying from Nairobi to Cairo on an East African Airways DC-3. That flight made an impression on me that has lasted to this day. I love everything about the experience of flight and in particular I enjoy the views from an aircraft.

During my youth I spent many hours assembling model airplanes and reading stories by authors like Antoine de Saint-Exupery and Ernest Gann. As a senior at Ballard High School in Seattle, I noticed a posting on the part-time job bulletin board for a ramp attendant at Lake Union Air Service. I pulled the notice off the bulletin board and headed to Lake Union. At Lake Union Air Service I met the owner, Henry "Hank" Reverman, introduced myself and announced that I wanted the job, that I didn't want to get paid, and that I wanted to learn how to fly! I was hired on the spot and began working eight hours on Saturday and again on Sunday in exchange for one hour of dual in an Aeronca Chief on floats.

When I began flying it took 16 hours of working on the ramp, at roughly minimum wage, to get one hour of dual instruction. That exact ratio is the same today for ramp wages, though the numbers are 10 times higher.

I soloed on June 7, 1966, four days before I graduated from high school. During the summer I got a great-paying job at the post office so I quit working at Lake Union Air Service and moved my flight training to Kurtzer's Flying Service on Lake Union. Lana Kurtzer was the "grand" seaplane flight instructor of the Pacific Northwest, well known for training countless Alaska bush pilots. Kurtzer instructed in a Taylorcraft on floats, and I transitioned later to a Cessna 172 for my PPL ASES check ride on September 6, 1966.



June 7, 2016 Age 68



June 7, 1966 Age 18

About a month before I also began to fly wheel planes, and in March 1967 was awarded the ASEL rating after a 30-minute check ride. Piece of cake!

Early in college I discovered that the airplane is likely one of the best ways ever known to get a date on campus. One of my most memorable college flying dates was when I took Maxine Waddell up a couple of times in a Taylorcraft floatplane. Her father was Jack Waddell, the Boeing 747 Chief Test Pilot. He grilled me before and after the flying dates and humored me with stories about his own flying.

About 10 years ago I learned about the FAA's Master Pilot Award from one of my formation flight instructors, Vincent Huth of Monterey, California. (The Wright Brothers Master Pilot Award is the most prestigious award the FAA issues

to pilots. The award recognizes individuals who have exhibited professionalism, skill, and aviation expertise for at least 50 years while piloting aircraft as "Master Pilots." See <https://www.faa.gov/content/masterpilot/>) This prompted me to formulate a plan to return to Seattle to celebrate the 50th anniversary of my solo flight on Lake Union.

I spent many hours in early June 2016 retraining in a seaplane to accomplish my goal. I hadn't flown a seaplane since 1969. What really struck me was the difference between flying at 18 years old and then at age 68. My reaction after my first hour of instruction: "How the hell did I do this at age 18!"

At 18 I basically was fearless with the exuberance of youth and I eagerly developed the skill set needed to fly a seaplane. At 68 I had my brain in overdrive with "what if" scenarios. My instructor, James Young of Seaplane Scenics, talked about skill set and confidence. He was quick to point out that the worst combination is a low skill set and high confidence. Those persons often end up with Darwin Awards, he noted. But, the opposite situation, high skill set and low confidence, also can be a handicap.

We focused on confidence building. I did 39 splash 'n goes with most of the training hours spent practicing docking, ramping, beaching and sailing.

The primary theme of my training



Nairobi to Cairo in 1953

from James was to always have a Plan B, an escape route in the event Plan A fails. James regaled me with several stories about his own experiences and those teaching other students. My favorite was about a student who was approaching a dock downwind with too much speed. When the student realized that he was in trouble he shouted to James, “WHAT’S PLAN B?”

Another huge discovery was the amount of watercraft on Lake Union, Lake Washington, and Lake Sammamish—sailboats, runabouts, cruisers, kayaks, sculls, paddleboards and worst of all, the personal watercraft. I had no idea they are capable of 50-60 mph and, more to the point, they would linger at my 5 or 7 o’clock position waiting for me to initiate a takeoff, then initially accelerate much faster than me whilst converging on my takeoff heading.

Of all the instructors I’ve flown with in 50 years of flying I am most indebted to James Young. He was as excited and determined for me to succeed as I was when he learned about my goal/dream of returning to Lake Union to solo a seaplane on the 50th anniversary of my first solo. I would not have succeeded without his encouragement, patience, humor and excellent instruction. The pride and joy James shared with me was clearly evident on his face as I climbed into N19752 for my momentous flight.

I did solo on Seattle’s Lake Union on June 7, 2016, 50 years to the day after my original solo flight, and on the same lake.

I beached the aircraft on a sand and gravel beach at the south end of Lake Union at the foot of the Museum of History and Industry (MOHAI), a bit south of the Kenmore Air dock. The beach is about 30 yards wide and has a concrete pier along the west side extending out into the lake. I’ll admit that I was emotionally exhausted, so I climbed into the right seat—I wanted to be a passenger for James to fly the return trip to Lake Washington and the ramping at Renton.

James got in and was meticulous as usual in preparing for departure. After starting the engine, he advanced the throttle to move off of the beach. The airplane immediately swung to the west towards the pier. Apparently, the left float stuck on the gravel beach, causing the aircraft to swing quickly to port. Before I could utter, “Whoa!” James pulled the mixture to kill the engine, turned off the mags and master, and was out the cabin door. He jumped to the beach and repositioned the aircraft to launch again.

This was a truly impressive example of a Plan B in action, and I was left with a combination of profound admiration for the skill James demonstrated and a question about my own ability to have executed a Plan B in that situation.

Now, when I am asked by a fellow pilot, “How would you compare flying a seaplane to a wheel plane?” my pulse quickens and I reply, “You have no idea how much more difficult it is to operate an aircraft on the water!” ■

YouTube Video SOLO Beaching on June 7, 2016



Leaving the same Lake Union beach 50 years later!