

This story took place in 1982. Don Kyte 2012

DOWN AND DRIFTING ON THE DELTA

by Don Kyte

As most plane owners know, more problems develop with an airplane that sits for an extended period of time than if it is flown regularly. As I was about to find out, the next most potential problem situation is to have your plane painted.

Everybody probably has one special "Dream Flight" they would like to make once in a lifetime. For me it was a fishing trip to Alaska in my own amphibian. After years of dreaming and planning, it was now about to happen.

I wanted to have my Seabee in perfect condition for the trip so arranged for a new paint job to be done during the winter, as that was about all it needed. There is a painter at my home airport, Buchanan Field, Concord Calif. with a reputation for fine work. Unfortunately, he also has a reputation for being slow and procrastinating. Since I had ten months in which to prepare the plane for the trip, his promise of three months to complete the job seemed to provide an adequate margin. How wrong I was. Even with increasing pressure from me, after nine months he hadn't even started.

In desperation, I turned to another paint shop on the field. This was owned by Navajo Aviation, who promised they would have the plane out in **one** month. Navajo is one of those rare flight operations who not only provide the friendly family atmosphere of the good old days, but actually deliver what they promise. They completed the job on schedule and even did a number of extras as well.

Since my Seabee was about ready for its annual inspection, I had hoped to have one done just before the trip. With the long delay in painting, this was now out of the question. In fact, when she came out of the paint shop, the few days that I had hoped to have to work out any bugs were eaten up adjusting the prop which had been removed for the paint job.

To spare my wife, Sharon, and our neighbors, the Lawsons, who would accompany us on this "dream trip" the long overland portion of the trip and give me a chance to shake-down the Seabee before the main event, it was decided that Sharon and the Lawsons would fly to Seattle on United where I would be waiting for them.

It looked like I wouldn't get the chance for even a short test hop before leaving for Seattle, if I was going to make my scheduled rendezvous time. The frequent run-ups and taxi test required to get the prop adjusted correctly, hadn't turned up anything. The Bee seemed as eager to get on with the trip as I was.

At the last minute, I decided to combine a test hop with a ride for Bill Gentry, who drove up just as I was preparing to leave. Bill had bought a Seabee in pieces some time ago and had been making regular visits to my Seabee during the time it had been in the paint shop. In all this time, Bill had never even had a ride in one! Such devotion deserved a ride, and if a problem, however unlikely, did develop, it would be good to have someone familiar with Seabees along. Can't imagine why this glistening beauty should have a problem though, just because she was 35 years old and had been sitting in and out of paint shops for over six months without being flown! . . . Right!

Just after take-off I noticed my airspeed indicator was reading about 50mph low. A standard Seabee should indicate between 95 and 110 in cruise and this is a "Super Seabee" with a Lycoming G0-435 which develops 260hp. The original Franklin engine was rated at 215hp. It's not uncommon for me to indicate 115mph with this engine and stock wings.

I know my Seabee well enough that I was confident I could bring it back to the airport and land it safely without a reliable airspeed indicator, but the big bays of the Sacramento Delta were under the plane by this time and I decided a water landing to attempt to clear the pitot tube would be more prudent. Besides, this would give me a chance to show Bill a water landing.

I picked out a likely looking stretch of water in what turned out to be Grizzly Bay, and made a "greaser" landing. I shut the

engine down so I could open the door to stand up and check the pitot tube located on the cabin roof.

I found it couldn't be cleared without removing it, and felt the risk of dropping a part into the bay was a greater risk than landing at Buchanan without an accurate airspeed indicator, so I climbed back in and hit the starter button...You guessed it. NOTHING!

There was not even enough juice to light the indicator lights on the panel. I was more inclined to think I had a loose battery connection than a low battery because during my many engine starts the preceding two days, the starter had turned over the big Lycoming so vigorously that I felt I could probably taxi the plane on the starter alone! All the connections that I could reach seemed tight, however.

Grizzly Bay is about 4 miles wide and 6 miles long. We were drifting at two to three knots, pushed by a moderate breeze toward the eastern shore. No one was in sight but there were some shacks here and there on the north and south shores. Since we had landed in the middle of the bay, these shacks were several miles away on either side of us, with no chance of "sailing" the Bee toward any of them.

SURELY someone would see us and come out to investigate soon, especially if we waved a white flag of some sort. I removed my undershirt and attached it to a fishing pole. Remember the Seabee had been fully packed and provisioned for a two week camping trip in Alaska for four people.

After an hour of fruitless waving, I decided more desperate measures were in order. We ignited a highway flare, but in the bright sunshine it had little effect. We decided to save the rest for darkness, if we were still stranded that long. I did have an ELT with voice capability that I had put a new battery in the day before. Buchanan Airport tower was just over a ridge west of us and Travis AFB was also nearby.

"Buchanan Tower, this is Seabee 44 Kilo, down and drifting on the Delta east of the mothball fleet with a dead battery. Please send assistance. If you read me please have an aircraft fly over and rock its wings."

A few airplanes flew by on their way to the practice area nearby, but nobody rocked their wings. After an hour of this, with the beacon going the whole time, we decided this wasn't doing any good either. Not very reassuring. If you can't get someone's attention in the heart of one of the busiest population centers, what good would the ELT do in some remote mountain pass or valley?

Even though I had checked the ELT the day before, it failed a bench check later at a radio shop. I replaced the ELT before resuming my ferry flight to Seattle.

By this time we had drifted near the eastern shore and I realized that if we drifted onto the mud flats, that either, **A**: Even if I could wade to solid ground through the mud (of unknown depth) I would ruin my good clothes and even if I did reach a house, they might not let a muddy bum in anyway. Or **B**: If a boat or seaplane did come to offer help, they wouldn't be able to reach us if we were high and dry (muddy) on some tidal flat!

To prevent either of these horrible consequences from happening, I tossed out my anchor, which held, and stopped our backward drift.

We had stopped about a mile from a group of shacks off our left wing, where a drag-line was operating. After another hour of white undershirt waving, we came to the conclusion that we were going to have to get **ourselves** out of this mess. I broke out my two-man life-raft and blew it up. I had never used this raft before (or since) and after one look at it, wondered if even two dwarfs could fit in there, let alone two slightly overstuffed men.

Bill wisely elected to take his chances with the Seabee (not everyone would consider this decision wise, but they are not Seabee owners), so in the true "code of the sea" the captain set out to battle wind and tide to get help. (Not wanting to face that other "code of the sea" about the captain going down with his ship!).

Forty-five minutes later I had somehow managed to propel my exhausted, blistered body to the pilings of the shanty town docks and climbed up to knock on a door. NO ANSWER!! In fact, no sign of life anywhere! The six or seven shacks were completely deserted and probably only used occasionally on weekends.

I then walked about a half-mile to the dredging operation and borrowed a pickup from one of the startled workmen to drive eight miles to a State Fish & Game station, and a phone.

A call to my wife. "Hi Honey, it's me!" "Oh great! You made it to Eugene!" "Well, not exactly! I've been drifting around all afternoon in the Delta!"

A few more phone calls determined that there were no boats available to bring in a battery. I did reach my good friend, and fellow Seabee owner, Jim Sorenson in Modesto, who offered to take time off from his busy workday to fly over in his Seabee to try a jump-start from his battery, but I have a 24 volt system and his is 12.

There was also some doubt that a jump-start would do the trick, since the trouble might be elsewhere. If that were the case, I would need a tow to a Marina. Hopefully, the Coast Guard could either give me a tow, or a jump-start, so I decided to give them a try.

Three more phone calls and about an hour later, the Coast Guard decided that the problem was serious enough to authorize a rescue attempt. I returned to my raft after thanking everyone on shore who had done everything they could to help me out of my situation.

The row back was worse than the one in. The wind had picked up and the muscles and blisters were sorer. Took me an hour this time, with the wind trying to carry me sideways to the mud flats as fast as I could row toward the plane.

Bill had fared quite well in my absence. He had munched on some of the food in the plane, drank some warm soft drinks and even managed to take a nap. He said it was one of the most restful afternoons he had had in a long time. See. He was pretty wise after all!

He had also determined that the battery was indeed our problem (rather than a broken cable or a short), because the battery, after its afternoon of rest, now had enough power to play the AM-FM stereo radio I had installed in the Seabee. Six months without flying occasionally to keep the battery charged, had taken its toll, as well as the many engine starts the previous day to test the prop.

Soon we could make out a boat coming slowly down the bay. The Coast Guard had been concerned about shallow water and had wisely sent an outboard skiff running ahead of the launch for the final two miles of its run to us.

The battery jump was a success and we were on our way to Buchanan. We made a friendly fly-by over the Fish & Game station that had been so helpful to us, to let them know we had made it, and a grateful wave to the U.S. Coast Guard.

Ron Sorenson (no relation to Jim), owner of Navajo Aviation, couldn't have been more helpful. He made all the services of his operation available to me and several of his people stayed late to install new batteries and make sure I was ready to go first thing the next morning. He had even offered to fly a battery over to the Bay in a Cub, and land it on a road earlier in the day, but we couldn't come up with a good way to get the battery to the plane. (Forget the raft!) He had also sent several planes overhead later to check on our progress, or lack thereof, and also kept my wife informed so she wouldn't worry. Nice people.

Once underway in the morning, the Seabee performed beautifully. We all agreed that it was a good thing the weak batteries had been discovered near home, instead of on a remote lake in Alaska. We hoped our mechanical troubles would be behind us. Alas, such was not to be, but that's the next story.

Lessons learned

First of all: Take whatever time is required to check all systems whenever your aircraft has out of action for months on end. Batteries are not necessarily in peak condition, just because they seem to turn over you engine normally. Modern batteries work quite well up till the last and give little warning before they poop completely out. Have a mechanic check them as well as your charging system.

If I'm leaving civilization it can be critical. For this reason I now put a battery charger on overnight, as a matter of course, before leaving for some remote lake.

The faulty airspeed indicator was caused by a mud-dauber building a nest inside the pitot tube. He hadn't completed the job or we wouldn't have **any** indication on the airspeed indicator. They also love to fill up your gas tank vent tubes and battery vents. These quarter-inch tubes seem like "dream homes" to these little devils.

After a paint job special care must be taken to make sure the painter hasn't left masking tape over vents and intake tubes, etcetera. These checks are pretty standard, but something I wasn't prepared for was the dust overspray that somehow partially plugged the air-filter for my vacuum instruments.

Most important! Don't rush off into the blue after major work of any kind. This is especially important for a seaplane or amphib because your next landing might not be a fully stocked and staffed airport. You might be "Down and Drifting" on some remote delta!