



Don Marburg on the left and Doug Pierce on the right take a close look at "Joe Chileano" carefully painted on the nose of the Seabee by Joe Trilano, a University of Vermont artist. This photo was taken at the Pittsfield, Mass. Airport just prior to the trip.

# Seabee Odyssey

By Norm Petersen

*A chance remark from an interested person at the Brennand Seaplane Base during Oshkosh '84 concerning wild seaplane excursions resulted in uncovering this story. Vern Shaffer (EAA 112116, A/C 6113) of Rt. 1, Clinton, WI 53525 told of friends of his who had actually flown a Republic "Seabee" from New England to Santiago, Chile! And the trip was made in 1947! With a bit of sleuthing, the following true story has come forth from two of the three principles involved. Please remember, this saga took place over 38 years ago...*  
N.A.P.

The lure of far away places is part of a skier's make-up. The next slope will always be better than the last. And when you are a college student, nothing is impossible! To Don Marburg and Doug Pierce, students at the University of Vermont in 1947, the thought of a summer of skiing on the slopes of the Andes Mountains in Chile was almost too vivid. The

only problem was how to get there – the cheapest way!

Airline tickets were too expensive in those days and ship travel would have been too slow.

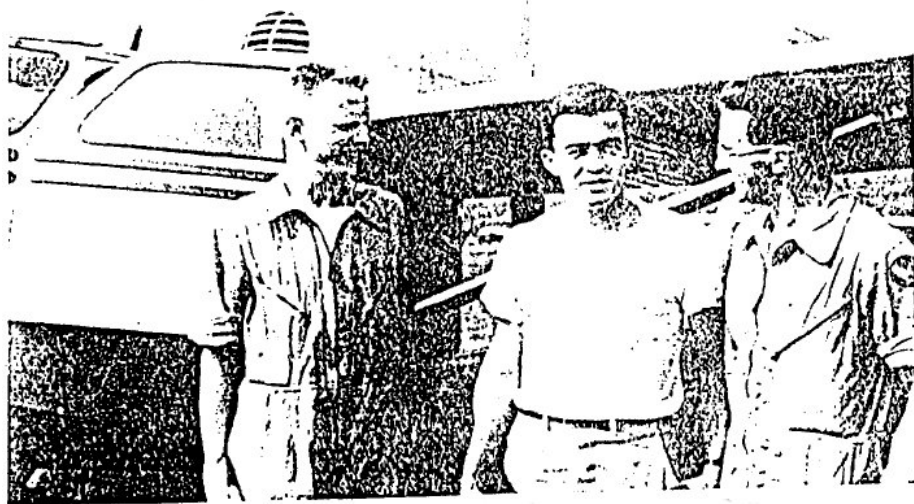
Doug Pierce, who had been a B-17 pilot in WW II, suggested the purchase of a plane and flying it to Chile! The more the subject was discussed, the better it sounded. Barring any unforeseen mishap, they could sell the airplane on arrival and then worry about getting home! As plans progressed, it was decided that an amphibian airplane would offer the best and most safety factors.

About this time, the third member of the trio had to drop out for family reasons, so Don's brother, Rolland Marburg who had just graduated from Dartmouth, was invited to join in the adventure. Although he wasn't a pilot, Rolland, nicknamed Joe – had worked on aircraft engines in the service and felt he could contribute on the mechanical details. The die was now cast.

Selling their cars and scrounging as many dollars as possible, the trio sent Doug and Don to the Republic factory in Farmingdale, Long Island, New York to pick up a brand new "Seabee" (\$4,800 in those days) and fly it up to Burlington, Vermont for a few days of familiarization flying. Before long, Doug felt comfortable with the new amphibian and the official "nose art" was carefully applied. It consisted of a little man on skis, wearing a big sombrero and aptly named, "Joe Chileano".

A large wooden box was constructed to ship skis and cold weather clothing to Santiago as there wasn't room in the plane for everything. With a gross of 3150 lbs. and an empty weight of 2100 lbs. only 1050 lbs. was available for useful load – with up to 450 lbs. used for fuel (75 gal.). This meant people and baggage had a 600 lb. allowance to work within!

Maps of the entire trip were acquired from the Geodetic Survey in Washington. Considerable time was spent getting the necessary paperwork for landing in the various



Getting ready for the big trip are the three skiers from left to right, Doug Pierce, pilot, and brothers Don and Joe Marburg, co-pilot and navigator. Note low-freq radio antenna on cabin roof.

countries along with fuel requirements, passports, visas, health certificates, police certificates and letters of credit stating they had sufficient funds to get out of the country! After many phone calls, visits and telegrams, all the paperwork was in order except permission to land in Columbia and Ecuador! These would have to come along the way as the trio could wait no longer.

Weighing all the baggage (and themselves) as the Seabee was loaded up for the trip the anxious flier were finally airborne on June 30, 1947 – taking off from Morristown, New Jersey with the first stop planned for Richmond, Virginia. Doug flew the pilot's seat while Don and Rolland would change off as co-pilot and navigator. Dead reckoning and a plain old magnetic compass were the only means of navigation along with the finger on the map. A hop from Richmond to Chapel Hill, North Carolina completed the first day's flying and the trio was housed at the Phi Delta Delta house. (oh, the joys of being I college!)

Early in the morning, Doug, Don and Rolland said goodbye to their kind friends at the University of North Carolina, cranked up the 500 cu. in. Franklin engine and headed the Seabee towards Florida. Stopping at Savannah, Georgia for fuel, an exhaust clamp was found broken. This was repaired at the next fuel stop in Tampa, Florida. In short order, the Seabee was winging towards Key West – the three occupants thinking to themselves how lucky they were to be capable of landing on water or dry land.

To assist in the over water navigation portion of the trip, a directional gyro was installed at Key West – with great expectations. It later proved to be almost useless as it precessed to false headings in no time at all.

In order to avoid Cuba, about which the boys had heard too many sad stories about fliers, the next hop would be from Key West to Cozumel, Mexico – an island off the Yucatan

Peninsula, a distance of 410 miles. This would be a maximum range flight with little reserve and, of course, headwinds would make it even worse. An alternate landing spot would be San Julian, Cuba, a Pan American emergency landing field.

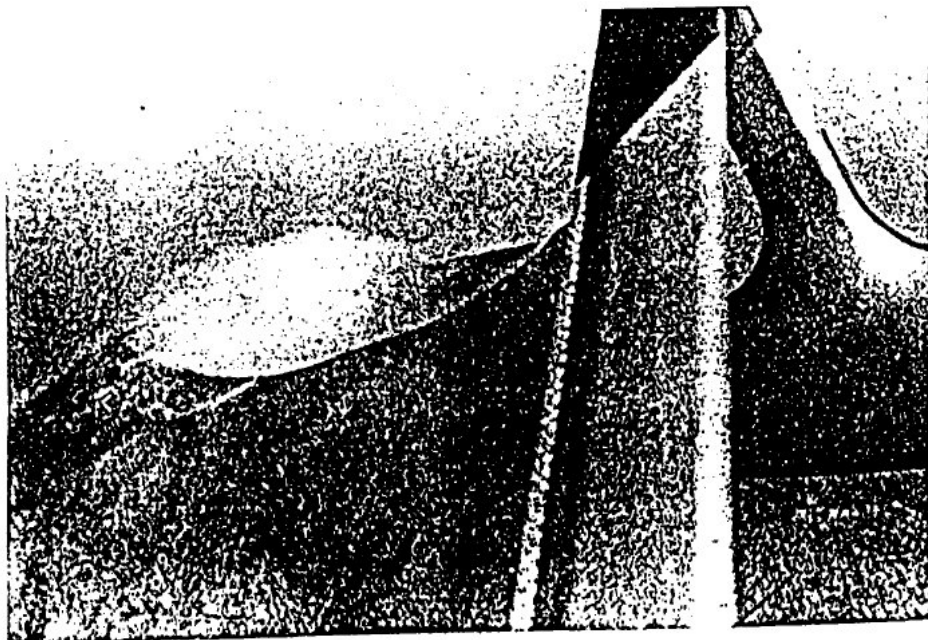
With a full load of fuel onboard, Doug Pierce lifted the Seabee into the air and headed southwest from Key West. Several storms were in the area as the Seabee flew over the warm Gulf waters, numerous heading changes had to be made around several storms. In addition, the wind was drifting the Seabee south of the intended course. The boys sighted Cuba sooner than they expected. Turning more to the west, the fuel situation was getting more critical. It became obvious that they could not make Cozumel with the

crosswind and storm detours. With the decision to land in Cuba being made for them, the trio turned the Seabee, NC6599K, towards San Julian and before long they located the field and landed. The airport manager treated the boys very well and helped to transport them to a nearby town for the night's lodging.

By morning the weather had improved and after clearances were received from the army, the police, the immigration authorities, Doug fired up the Franklin engine once again and the trio was off for Cozumel, Mexico, a flight of about 200 miles. Cruising at 500 feet over the water, they waved their wings at passing ships as the Seabee droned along, the wind pushing them off course just a small amount.

The fun began after they landed in Cozumel! It seems like the Mexicans liked to extract as much money as possible from Americans. The gas was very expensive. There were landing fees, customs officials (fees), immigration officials (fees), sanitary officials (fees) and to top it off, the arrival was on Sunday when all the fees are doubled! When all the excitement had quieted down, several "officials" were invited for a beer with the "gringos". Before the line was completed, the boys had purchased over \$45 worth of Mexican beer! It was carefully decided that Mexico would be avoided next trip!

Good weather greeted the intrepid aviators as they flew the leg from Cozumel to Belize, British Honduras. Only towards the end of the flight did the turbulence get a bit mean and toss the Seabee from one wingtip to the other. Several vertical "drops" were over 500 feet followed by 500 foot "elevator" rides up". The runway at Belize was a nice long cement ribbon right into the prevailing wind. Built during WW II, the airport was about 10 miles from town, which required a \$5.00 taxi ride. Fuel for the Seabee was only 28 cents a gallon. The trio stayed two nights waiting for



Near Rivas, Nicaragua, the Republic Seabee passes over an active volcano in the middle of a lake. The air was very turbulent according to Don Marburg.



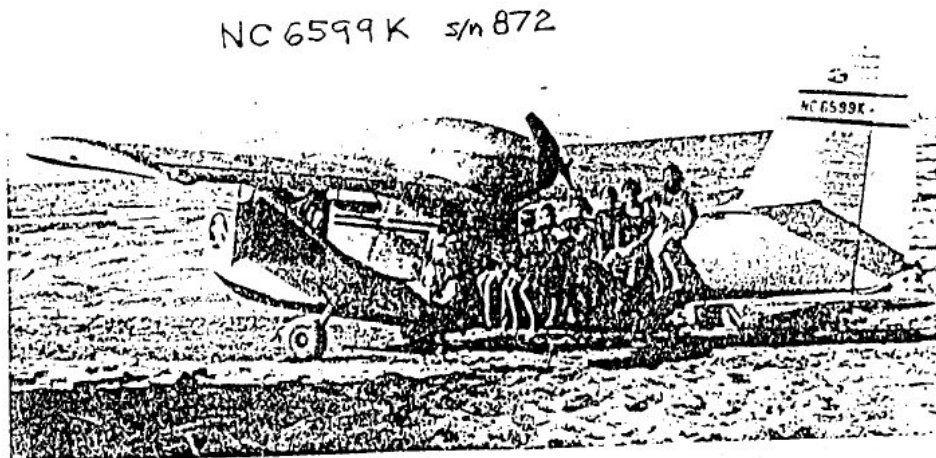
# Seabee Odyssey

the weather to improve.

A DC-3 from the Honduran airline, SAHSA, landed and the two American pilots advised the Seabee crew on the best route to Managua, Nicaragua. After settling all accounts with the local commandant, the Seabee once again was airborne across the Gulf of Honduras with the high mountains of Honduras ahead. Climbing the Seabee, Doug was able to reach 7200 feet by the time they crossed the rugged coastline, heading south across Honduras. Several thunderstorms were carefully skirted as the Seabee struggled to 8,200 feet. Several passes were negotiated with higher mountains on either side – some rather close! Three pair of eyes kept watching the fuel gauges as Managua seemed farther and farther away. Suddenly the central Honduran town of Tegucigalpa appeared directly ahead. Three heads nodded in unison. Doug headed the Seabee for the dirt runway only to get a red light from the tower!! A go-around revealed the DC-3 they had seen the day before was on final. Following the DC-3, Doug landed and taxied up to a jolly reunion.

It rained extremely hard that night as the thunderstorms rattled through the mountain passes. By morning, quiet weather had again returned, so the trio was up early, filling the Seabee's fuel tanks with 60-cent-per-gallon gas. A take off was made going "down" the sloping runway and the Seabee lifted into the air as the trio headed for Managua. The scenery was absolutely beautiful as the fliers caught their first glimpse of the Pacific Ocean.

Landing at the PAA Airfield outside of town, the trio had to go through the usual



**With both wing floats broken off, the Seabee sits on the lakeshore prior to its trip through 1½ miles of jungle, pulled by two oxen! The native children were quite excited about the whole operation.**

inspections and customs red tape. Fuel prices were back to 27 cents per gallon – much better than 60 cents! Airplane traffic was rather heavy at the field as the U.S. Army Air Corps had a B-17 down in the northeastern corner of Honduras and everyone was searching for the crash site.

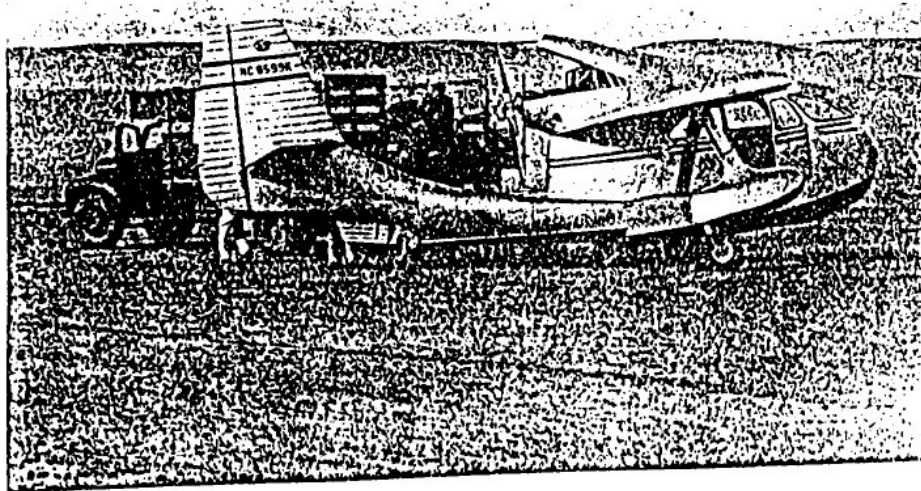
After lunch, Doug, Don and Joe once again boarded the Seabee and took off for Puntarenas, Costa Rica. Heading southeast, the splendor of Lake Nicaragua lay before them with its smoking volcano. The beautiful water looked so inviting – they decided to go for a swim! Locating a nice sand beach from the air, Doug set up for a water landing. The water turned out to be far rougher than it appeared. After several hard bumps, the Seabee slowed to a water-taxi speed. The trio considered an immediate take off but the decision was made to wait for calmer seas. Pulling up on the beautiful sand beach, everybody went for a cool swim in the crystal clear water. Nobody had told them of the

"piranha" flesh-eating fish that swam in that lake! Luckily none showed up.

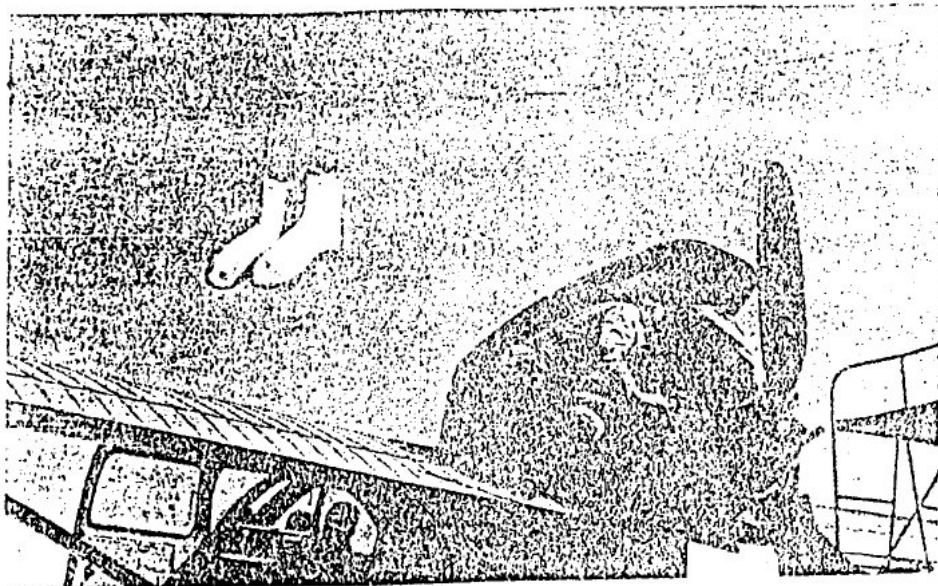
Arising at 4:00 a.m. the next morning, after spending the night in a nearby village the three fliers arrived at the plane just as it was getting light. The wind was blowing harder than ever with waves of three to four feet! Take off under such conditions would be impossible! A short distance down the shore was the mouth of a river that emptied into Lake Nicaragua. Why not taxi over to the mouth of the river and make a take off from relatively calm water?

Pushing the Seabee into the water, the engine was fired up and the taxi began. The route was 90 degrees to the swells and when the hull was on one crest, the wingtip float was on the next. When the hull slid down the wave, the float was pushed sideways against the next wave. Before long, the side loads broke the float from the wing! The immediate shore was rocky so a return to the original beach was attempted. This maneuver broke the other float which made things a bit "hairy". With Don and Joe hanging on the struts while Doug did his best to taxi to the safe beach without turning turtle, the trio was just able to get the wounded Seabee back on the sand after a severe struggle with the wind and waves. The three young adventurers were now in a predicament.

Checking over the area, Doug found a chunk of beach about 1-1/2 miles away that looked long enough for a land take off. Enlisting the help of some local people, a group of men with machetes were hired to chop a path through the underbrush while another group pulled the Seabee with a pair of huge oxen. Progressing a few feet at a time, the entire 1-1/2 mile trip was made in three days – dropping vines and trees all the way. The Seabee was positioned on the end of the 1,000 foot beach and the natives were asked how much payment for the three days of work plus the two oxen. The answer was 50 cents! The three fliers were in such a state of ecstasy with the Seabee ready



**Refueling and servicing the Seabee at Chala, Peru. Most of this fuel was 55 octane auto fuel pumped from 55-gallon drums.**



**While Don and Joe change spark plugs, man's most precious possession, a pair of clean socks, is hung on the antenna wire to dry!**

for takeoff they doubled the wages and paid the entire crew one dollar!

With the Seabee reduced in weight as much as possible, Doug used every one of the 215 hp available to lift the bird off the short sand beach and make the 20-minute flight to the nearest airport. Don and Joe left in a native canoe with the baggage and took 2-1/2 days to reach the same airport!

Contact was established with Republic Aviation back in Long Island, New York to ship two new wing floats to Panama. It was felt this would help to speed the repair process. The trio then loaded everything aboard the Seabee and took off for Costa Rica on the way to Panama (minus pontoons). Flying over Puntarenas, Costa Rica, the trio tried to spot another Seabee supposedly in the area, but no luck. The next landing for fuel was Parrita, a United Fruit Company field. After a bite to eat and refueling the plane, the boys took off for Panama amid some pretty hefty thunderstorms. Skirting around these huge cells and climbing to 10,900 feet to get over some mountains put Doug Pierce's piloting ability to the test. After a rough flight, the Seabee was landed on a grass strip across the road from an Army Air Corps field.

With a stroke of luck (genius?) one of the trio had a friend who was a general in the Air Corps in Panama. Before long the Seabee was being repaired by the army people after a long wait for the parts to come from New York. The total wait was three weeks before they were ready to head south on the rest of the trip!

After much haggling with the officials and going through miles of red tape, permission to land in Columbia was finally received. The best route would be from Panama to Buenaventura, Columbia, a hop of about 410 miles – which would be the longest flight to

date. The book said the maximum fuel load was 72 gallons. However, it was discovered that 80 gallons could be "stuffed" in – when necessary.

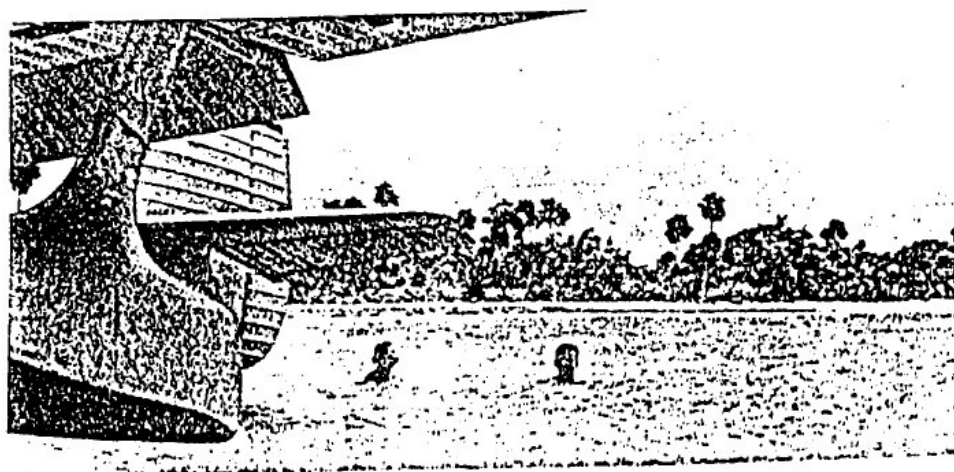
So on August 10, 1947, the trio took off just as it was beginning to get light in the eastern sky. Following the coastline in a southerly direction, Doug had to descend closer to the water to get under some clouds. Pretty soon they were on the deck! Deciding to climb for altitude the Seabee moaned and groaned its way up to 10,000 feet and continued over a solid overcast. Again, dead reckoning was the only navigation. Watching the fuel gauge closely and timing the flight, they knew their objective would soon be below. Suddenly a beautiful hole in the cloud deck appeared and below them was the city of Buenaventura! Doug made a beautiful landing in the river and

taxied up to the AVIANCA gas facility on a float in the river. Pumping in 60 gallons put the Seabee quite low in the water, but Doug was game to try a take off with such a load. After the usual greetings by the officials and a bite to eat, the Seabee was taxied into the river and a take off run was commenced. With Don and Joe "lifting" on their seats for all they were worth, Doug rocked the Seabee back and forth for nearly three miles before it came on step and "bounced" into the air from the white-capped waves!

The scenery along the Columbian coastline was quite spectacular as the Seabee headed for a military airfield at Tumaco. The beautiful weather and smooth running airplane combined to allow the trio to relax a bit. Landing at Tumaco, Doug was directed into a parking spot. The line person's eyes really bulged when Doug put the Hartzell prop in full reverse and backed the Seabee into the assigned spot!

The good weather held as the refueled Seabee took off for Esmeraldas, Ecuador where the local airport was owned by PANAGRA. The only gas available was to parties with a letter of credit from PANAGRA headquarters! Fortunately, this had been taken care of previously and the Seabee was soon filled with 54 gallons of gas – the smallest "unit" of fuel ever sold by PANAGRA!

While waiting for a weather report the next morning, a PANAGRA DC-3 came in with American pilots onboard who were most surprised to see a Seabee on the field. After a short visit, the Seabee was fired up and the trio took off for Salinas, about 200 miles down the coast. Again a landing was made at the PANAGRA airfield and the plane was refueled. Officials from the Ecuadorian Air Force checked their papers and luckily, everything was in order. Before long, Doug lifted the Seabee from the runway and turned south towards Chiclayo, Peru. The weather was perfect as the boys buzzed past several ships as they flew down the coastline. As Don says, "We were having fun!"



**Doug Pierce on the left and Don Marburg on the right taking a cool swim in Lake Nicaragua prior to the near disastrous takeoff attempt. Nobody informed them these waters were full of vicious piranha!**



**Don Marburg as he looks today, thirty eight years after the Seabee Odyssey. Don lives in Columbus, North Carolina.**

Approaching Chiclayo, it was apparent the entire Peruvian Air Force was in the pattern – there were airplanes all over the place! Dug sandwiched in between a couple of Air Force planes and landed the Seabee. The officials thought they were U.S. Air Corps! When they discovered the trio was civilians, the Seabee was directed to the civilian side of the field where it was refueled for 12 cents a gallon! And to top it off, overnight facilities were available for almost nothing.

Bright and early the next morning the Seabee was loaded up and a take off was made with Lima, Peru as the destination. The weather had turned sour and “scud running” was the order of the day. Cruising along about 500 ft. over the Pacific coastline, the engine started to miss! The rough ocean below was no place to go down and the rugged coastline was most inhospitable. Doug worked the mixture and throttle as the engine ran alternately – better and worse. The trio attempted to locate a small coastal emergency field without results. The only alternative was to try and nurse the sick Seabee into Lima. Using every trick in the book (and some learned nursing battle damaged B-17s back to England). Doug kept the Seabee Airborne and after several “eternities”, Lima, Peru showed on the horizon. The trio had covered 1600 miles from Panama in three days!

The Seabee was due for its 75-hour check so the engine and airframe were gone over carefully. The spark plugs were badly fouled from the last batch of 96 octane fuel. This was the source of the “missing” on the flight into Lima. Although new spark plugs were not available, some automobile plugs were located that ran well when installed in the Franklin engine. The local PIA mechanics were most helpful and offered tools and equipment to aid in the 75-hour inspection.

Airports to the south of Lima were rather questionable with only a few known to have

fuel available. After inquiring at the PANAGRA office, it was decided to head for Chala, Peru, with a possible stop at the small coastal town of Pisco. Not wanting to get tied up in Sunday immigration traffic (double overtime pay), the three skiers waited until Monday morning to take off and head south along the Pacific coast. A short fuel stop was made at the PANAGRA strip at Pisco. From there it was southwest along the coast to the gravel landing strip at Chalo – with a downslope at one end! Only five gallons of aviation gas was available so the Seabee was fueled with 55 octane auto gas! (An oil field workers strike was blamed for the lack of avgas.)

Thundering down the gravel runway with stones and dust flying in all directions, Doug lifted the Seabee into the air and headed for Chile, about 300 miles away. A stop was made at Mollendo only to find no fuel available, so it was off to Arica, Chile on the far northern end of the 2,800 mile long country.

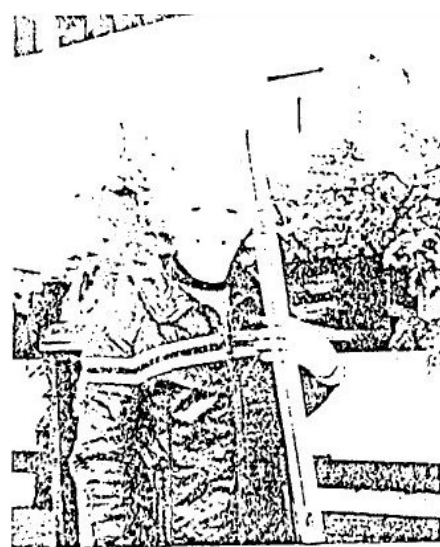
By noon, the Seabee had landed at Arica and the numerous customs officials had gone through the plane and contents with a fine-tooth comb. Following lunch, the trio once again made preparations for take off. However, the magneto on the Franklin was stone dead and only the battery ignition system would fire the engine. A local mechanic heard the engine cut out and offered to repair the engine. By evening he had the magneto in good shape and ready to go. The boys were treated especially well by the local population and in the morning, the airport officials gave them money back when the new rate of exchange was applied to the dollar! In addition, because this was the first Seabee to land in Arica, the landing fee was waved.

Taking off early in the morning, Doug headed the Seabee directly south along the Chilean coast towards Antofagasta. Before long, the engine began its all-too-familiar hit and miss routine, and a landing was made at Iquique. Again, auto plugs were the only new ones available. Replacing the plugs, the trio once again headed south, reaching Antofagasta just before dark, landing on the PANAGRA field. The next morning Don and Joe shifted the spark plugs around on the six-cylinder engine, hoping to make it run better. However, following take off in the morning, the missing persisted and after a half hour, the trio turned back to Antofagasta.

Shortly after landing, it was discovered an airliner was leaving for Santiago. Don was elected to take the plugs, points, coil and condenser to Santiago and have new ones returned to Antofagasta by plane while he waited in Santiago.

Two days later, the new spark plugs and breaker points arrived with the old coil and condenser (they had checked out okay). Doug and Joe installed the parts and made a local test flight. Everything worked fine!

Early the following morning, Doug and Joe headed south with a beautiful tailwind. Before long, they landed in Vallenar for fuel, oil and a bite to eat. With excitement beginning to show



**Current photo of Doug Pierce, pilot of the Seabee, who is still an avid skier and resides in Braintree, Massachusetts.**

in their faces, Doug and Joe made the final take-off heading for their destination, Santiago, Chile. The tailwind was better than ever and the coastline went by rapidly. Even the Seabee ran better than usual – almost like working horse heading for the barn after a day's work!

Circling the airport of Chile's capitol city. Doug and Joe were more than happy to head for the runway where Doug's landing was followed by a happy reunion with Don. They had made it!

Negotiations to sell the Seabee, the first one ever flown to Chile, were completed when a banker named Edwards bought the plane for \$6,000 plus \$1,000 to each of the trio for “delivery services”.

The ski equipment shipped to Santiago was waiting for them, so Don, Doug and Joe spent the next two weeks skiing in the Andes Mountains enjoying some of the finest skiing they had ever been privileged to partake in. In fact, it was so good that Joe Marburg stayed in Chile for a full year before returning to the states. Don and Doug had to return to their college studies so they managed a ride to Miami on a charter flight hauling race horses! As the plane couldn't haul passengers, Doug and Don were listed as “horse tenders” and made the trip to Miami for \$50.00! From there, they hitched a ride in a C-46 back to Teterboro, New Jersey.

*Today, some 38 years later, Don Marburg is retired in Columbus, North Carolina and his eyes still sparkle when he tells of the Seabee Odyssey. He readily admits it was as experience of lifetime. Doug Pierce is retired in Braintree, Massachusetts and is no longer flying. Roland (Joe) Marburg was fatally injured in an auto accident some years ago. Our thanks go to Doug and Don and also to Vern Shaffer of Clinton, Wisconsin for bringing this unusual story to our attention.*