

## *The Sinking of the Tahoe Special*

*By Steve Lantz*



The fall and winter of 2010 –2011 was brutal in the High Sierra. Flying was almost nonexistent, especially for seaplanes. Record snows, high winds and extreme cold had kept us grounded since November. After resolving myself that there would simply be no flying until summer I was pleasantly surprised when the weather broke calm and relatively warm in January. Although Lake Tahoe never freezes, altitudes of 8000 feet or higher are required to transit the passes to get there. Seaplane pilots have found out the hard way that a landing in the winter at the lake, no matter how nice the day is, still requires the subsequent climb over the passes that can put one into freezing temperatures and the possibility of control difficulties due to ice buildup from lake water still clinging to the aircraft.

With my need to fly juices flowing I decided to fly northwest to Redding California and get some water landings in Trinity, Oroville and Shasta Lake. I crossed the Sierra on a beautiful clear, calm day with unlimited visibility, thinking how lucky I was to be sitting in my seaplane, heater going, Jimmy Buffet in the headsets and moving at Seabee speed of 100 MPH.

I had called two of my old high school buddies to see if they were interested in a little splashing. Both said yes so I landed at Redding Benton field (085) and picked them up. We

decided to fly to Shasta Lake, land at Bridge Bay Resort and have some lunch. The departure from Benton was routine and the countryside around Redding was stunningly beautiful. I climbed to 2000 feet and headed north.

Once over the lake we took a short detour to look at Shasta Dam then headed easterly toward Bridge Bay. A slight steady Northeast wind was creating six to eight inch waves on the water, conditions could not have been better. What I didn't know was that the lake had been rising about 6 inches a day and was full of debris. I committed a seaplane pilot sin by not making a pass over my landing area. To this day I do not believe I would have seen whatever I hit due to the wind wave and the cloudy water. A bass fishing tournament was going on in the area and over 500 bass boats lined the shore line and bays. I made the comment to my buddies that I would just go straight in and not disturb these guys.

The touchdown was smooth and normal, but as the aircraft settled in off the step a loud bang occurred and a hard yaw to the right got my attention. I saw the right pontoon in a trailing position nearly severed from the strut. The wing tip was in the water but still skimming the surface. In retrospect, my second mistake was to go to max power and try to lift the wing back to level and make it the 200 yards to shore. The drag from the wing was simply too much and I water taxied in tight circle, making contact with either whatever I hit the first time or more debris, damaging the wing even more. I closed the throttle, shut the engine down and ordered my buddies to get out. Let me tell you, Shasta Lake is cold in January. Both my passengers went out the right side while I was still hitting switches. By the time I was on my way out the aircraft was listing to about 30 degrees and going over fast. I decided to go out the nose door. All of us were 70 years of age or older and a swim had not been part of our planning that day. Coats, shoes, hats, sunglasses, regular glasses, wallets, cameras and cell phones, all suffered. The life jackets were still on the back seat while within 2 minutes, the plane rolled over on its back. We climbed on the inverted plane and sat on the belly as the boats and helicopters began to arrive. We were alive and uninjured, and that is still the most important part of this adventure.

In case this ever happens to you (God forbid), here are the agencies you will have the privilege of dealing with almost immediately. The local Sheriff, the US Forest Service, the Fish and Game, the EPA, the NTSB, the FAA, not to mention the resort owners and of course the news media.

After about an hour of "interviews" all interested parties started to exit the scene. My only request was to have someone tow the aircraft to shore. We were in 200 feet of water and slowly sinking. Every agency present said the same thing. "Sorry we can't be liable in the event of a fuel or oil spill", to this the EPA added that a \$10,000 fine would be levied and \$10,000 per day for each day thereafter that the spill continued. All the talk about liability

scared off the bass fisherman and I feared the aircraft was going to be left to sink. There was not a drop of fuel or oil on the surface of the lake.

I pretty much begged, groveled and waived money for a tow to shore with no avail. Unbelievable!!!!. I finally played my last card. I approached the USFS boat and told the skipper that I fly Air Attack during the fire season each year. I guess he couldn't let a fellow fire fighter's airplane sink in 200 feet of water so he towed me into about 40 feet and cut me loose. The plane settled to the bottom inverted.

You just don't know how much you miss your cell phone until it's gone. No way to call home, no way to call a taxi and no way to call my buddy and the man that helped me build the aircraft, Paul Shepherd.

Early the next morning my friend Noel Groeff picked me up in Redding in his Glasair and flew me back to my hangar in Carson City while my beautiful airplane lay on the bottom of Shasta Lake. Meanwhile Paul Shepherd had readied all our dive gear and my Zodiac boat. We knew that more damage can be done to a submerged airplane by an inexperienced or rushed recovery team than by the accident itself. We left Carson for Shasta immediately. We arrived about 1500L and I suited up and dove to take a look. The airplane had settled into soft mud on the bottom. The prop was not touching and the nose and cockpit were being held slightly off the bottom by trapped air in the belly. I had called Don Bradshaw up in Pitt Meadows for advice. I knew Don had raised several Seabees. He gave us good advice and I thank him for that. I also called Brain Robinson for his advice on the engine and reduction drive. He was very helpful and I appreciate his advice very much. We went to Paul's son's house for the night and planned our recovery of the aircraft for the next day.

For a starter we had the problem of flipping the aircraft over onto its wheels. Paul's son Alvin, an experienced diver was my dive partner. Alvin has the strength and stamina of an elephant and without him the aircraft would still be there. Alvin's son Brandon worked on the surface with Paul for the entire long day, morning till night.

I made a dive and put the gear down (at the time down was up), then we hooked a 2500# lift bag to the tail wheel and inflated it from our dive regulators. We then pulled all drain plugs and inspection ports. Once the airplane was suspended nose down we hooked two additional lift bags to the main mount through tube, one on each side. We then hooked a rope to the nose cleat and tied that off to a deserted buoy anchor block. Next we hooked the boat to the tail wheel and slowly pulled the aircraft over until it was at about a 45 degree angle. Then we added more air to the main mount lift bags, cut the anchor buoy rope and the plane rose to the surface right side up. Eight hours from the first dive the aircraft was on the beach with no salvage damage. We worked till well after dark removing the wings and tail

feathers. Thanks to the hard work of Paul, his son and grandson The Tahoe Special was on its way home early the next morning.

We pulled the propeller immediately and sent it Precision Propeller in Boise for inspection and any necessary rebuild. We pulled the engine down as much as needed and inspected, lubed and checked every moving part we thought necessary. By the next day the motor was running great. Subsequent checks with the GM engine analyzer showed no faults or damage. A compression check showed compression the same as the day the engine was installed. All radios and instruments were pulled and placed in distilled water then dried. Time will tell whether they will all survive. The upholstery so beautifully crafted by Paul Shepherd dried and is in perfect condition. The electrical system is functioning but switches and circuit breakers along with wire connectors and relays are being replaced.

Well, fellow Seabee owners, that is the end of my story for now. The Tahoe Special, Grand Champion at Oshkosh, Grand Champion at Sun & Fun and winner of many first place show awards throughout the country will fly again. My friends, I sincerely hope this never happens to any of you.