

"From a three-quarter front view, she reminded me of a whale with her round, fat nose tapering back to a slim middle and then flaring into a big tail."



NOWHERE ON EARTH does Nature provide a more breath-taking panorama of color than the Adirondacks in Autumn. A pilot finds himself peering skyward as if expecting to see the Artist responsible for this magnificent canvas. Into such a setting as this I stepped as Manager of the Boonville Airport in October, 1948.

Airplanes have always created a wide variety of emotions in me. Some I have fallen in love with at first sight and couldn't wait to get my hands on them. Others, I have disliked with equal vigor. Even after flying them, they left me cold. Recalling my first meeting with the Seabee, I find it difficult to describe my reactions. From a three-quarter front view, she reminded me of a whale with her round fat nose tapering back to a slim middle and then flaring into a big tail. I had never seen an airfoil quite as thick on a plane this size, and the pusher prop looked as if it were hung there for lack of a better place. The tires needed air, and she sat so close to the hangar floor, she gave the impression of being just too tired to move.

Oh, she was sturdy enough. Exploratory probes and pushes proved that. But even so, I mumbled, "Good grief, can anything like this really fly?" And at that instant I understood my reaction to this airplane. It had me scared! That was it. This big pile of metal and rivets was daring me to prove my ability as a pilot, and I wasn't sure I could meet her challenge.

Because of the many lakes in the area, the Seabee should be an ideal piece of equipment for our operation. Additional to frequent calls to take hunters and fishermen back into the woods, the plane was used by one of the

local businessmen to commute to his summer home on White Lake. One sunny afternoon he suggested checking me out in the "Bee."

Part of my negative attitude was caused, I am sure, by the fact that I never liked the water and could swim just enough to stay afloat. However, if I was going to do my job properly, I had to get a seaplane rating on this particular machine. Despite the fact that the pilot who was to check me out on the Seabee had but several hundred hours total time, he had an Aeronca on floats, so his experience on the water was considerable from my point of view.

During pre-flight we drained the four bulkhead compartments and, although she had been in the water quite a bit since last being drained, a surprisingly small amount of water ran out. I almost broke my neck getting the cowl open to check the oil but was pleased at the cleanliness and apparent tightness of the engine. Having heard that the Seabee was notorious for throwing oil all over herself, this was particularly encouraging.

With 50 gallons of gas in the 75-gallon tank, we climbed aboard and prepared to crank her up. Before fastening my seat belt, I made certain the back cushion was fully inflated, so I'd have something to hang onto when this bucket of bolts went to the bottom. My "Boss" pointed out the gear and flap handles and, after a final check on the propeller-reverse control in the ceiling to make sure it was locked forward, we taxied out for take-off. The wind sock was as limp as my own deflated ego. I followed through and, except for having to hold left instead of right rudder to correct for torque, all appeared normal. By the

*Although it was not a case of
"love at first sight," a landlubber
airport operator succumbed
to the charms of a sturdy amphibian.*

By MANUEL P. DONNELLY

AND ME

time I had pumped the gear enough to get the wheels up, we were climbing steadily.

Ten minutes later at White Lake we shot a few take-offs and landings. I tried a take-off from the right seat, and after aborting the first two attempts when the Bee got to porpoising till I thought we'd go under like a submarine, I managed to drag her off the water. Landing on the home airport, I tested the oleos for full travel by bouncing hard enough to jar your bridgework loose. Now, I was convinced that all the bad things I had ever heard about the Seabee were true.

During the next couple of weeks the frost burned the brilliant colors from the mountain foliage. A gradual change came over me during the same time. At the end

of each day's solo practice in the Bee, I found myself looking forward with anticipation to the following day's flight. With every stall, steep turn, take-off and landing, I found less and less fault with this strange-looking craft. On the water, I learned to master the use of her prop-reverse control as an aid in sailing and docking. The relationship between man and machine, which had started with suspicion and mistrust, developed into a partnership with each of us doing our share to obtain the desired end.

When the season's first light snow began to fall, I knew I must get the Seabee to Syracuse for repair work. I was anxious to get her back in the hangar at Boonville before heavy snow arrived. Because she was both a land and sea plane, it was legal for me to carry passengers as long as I stayed off the water. Being a firm believer that an empty airplane seat is lost advertising, I invited two potential customers to accompany me to Syracuse. The trip down was uneventful, and the work was finished by 2 p.m. A 20-mile wind was blowing as we climbed aboard for the return flight; and just as I taxied past a large group of people in front of the Air Line Terminal, the Seabee did a most unexpected thing. She weathercocked 90 degrees to the right and faced all those people head-on. Despite every combination of throttle, rudder, and brake I could think of, she refused to come around crosswind again. Every time I tried throttle to blast her around, she would merely tilt her nose on the ramp and do the prettiest curtsy you ever saw. The trust I had so painfully built up for her over the past two weeks went out the window. "This clunker is bewitched," I shouted, and, killing the switch, we sat there waiting for the wind to subside so we could taxi out to take-off.

It was snowing hard when we landed at Boonville. The questions boiled in my mind. What was the reason for such an exhibition on the ramp at Syracuse? There must be an answer; and yet, as we closed the hangar doors, I knew I would not find it until spring.

During the long winter months I ran the Seabee up once a week and went over her with a dust mop. I digested every piece of literature I could find on the Seabee, but nowhere did I see any reference to the particular problem of taxiing her in a moderate to strong wind. However, an ad for a steerable tail-wheel assembly for the "Bee" convinced me that others must have experienced this same difficulty.

About mid-winter, I unexpectedly ran into a friend of mine who had more experience with the Seabee than anyone I knew. He was greatly amused over my predicament with the "Curtsying Seabee" and explained the knack of taxiing the Bee on the ground in a strong wind. The trick, he said, was knowing just when to lock and unlock the tail wheel. His explanation was complete, and my anticipation mounted as I looked for- *(Continued on page 86)*

"... days off spent just hopping from one cool, clear lake to another. It was on these lakes that I learned the Seabee was born for the water."



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had the worst of it. When a heavy fall of snow covered the fields, the partridge sought cover underneath its blanket and so did the hares. On fine clear days they all dug themselves out and their tracks would be everywhere. How they survived I never knew, but with the coming of spring, they would all be there again, especially the hares, running around four and five at a time, jumping and carrying on "crazy as March hares"—oblivious to everything but love.

The partridges are my favorites. They have developed a degree of disdain for airplanes that is simply intriguing. One day last summer while running up our engines at the beginning of the runway at Tempelhof, we saw directly under our right wing, practically beneath number four engine, a covey of about a dozen. They paid not the slightest attention to us. We were making enough noise to scare an army of lions, yet these birds—considered one of the shyest of earth's creatures—seemed rather to enjoy it. They remained at this runup spot all day. Several of my colleagues saw and marvelled at them as I did.

I find a deep satisfaction in these two worlds so harmoniously living side by side; and in observing these activities so totally unrelated to our mechanized civilization. I feel a humble kinship with all that lives—and dies. END

The Bee And Me

(Continued from page 53)

ward to the day when I could bring this unpredictable aircraft to "heel."

By April the ice went out of the lakes and the Moose River was swollen with logs on their way to the paper mill at Lyons Falls. The frost left the ground and the sod grew firm enough to support the weight of the Seabee. Then began one of the most exciting months of my life, for during this time I really came to know and understand the most over-criticized and under-rated airplane of its day.

Having my choice of a dozen lakes within minutes of the Airport, I picked a different one each time. Over these lakes I learned that the Seabee would hold a 60-degree bank twice around without losing a foot of altitude. I learned she had the "feel" and stability of a much larger plane. Properly trimmed she would hold a constant heading with no effort, and I am convinced she would have been wonderful for instrument flying.

It was on these lakes that I learned the Seabee was born for the water. With enough power to control descent and the nose trimmed a shade high, you could just sit there until you felt the hull brushing the water, then back with the throttle and she was on. I learned you don't push the Seabee onto the "step"; you ease her on by starting with the wheel all the way back and gradually relaxing the back pressure as the speed increases, until she is skimming along on the step. Taxling and high speed turns on the step gave

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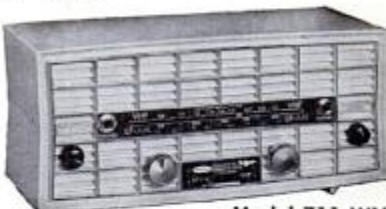
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one the sensation of riding a spirited show horse. Her response to the slightest touch of the controls was immediate and accurate. Any attempt to push her onto the step only resulted in an ever-increasing porpoising action that could be stopped only by pulling off the power and starting over again.

I learned that just because you had a large gas tank was no excuse for filling it to the top, putting four people with their duffel on board, and then expecting the airplane to perform like a Cub. Before every trip, I computed weight and balance, taking into account the length of the lake, its height above sea-level, the temperature of the day, and the expected wind condition. After that, I knew how much gas I could safely carry and what to expect from the airplane.

Sensibly loaded and operated, this plane never failed in two years to take me in and out of any reasonable spot.

Back at the airport I took advantage of 20-knot wind to practice taxiing. I was soon able to make turns without tilting her nose to the ground. One trick was to turn downwind from a crosswind position by unlocking the tail wheel and allowing the Bee to swing into the wind, while at the same time dragging the upwind brake and using full rudder with a lot of throttle. The added momentum would carry the plane through the crosswind and on around 270 degrees to the desired heading. This not only used the wind to advantage but also made a good clearing turn before taxiing off in another direction. I got an instructor to give me enough time to sign my recommendation for a check ride and received my Seaplane Rating a week later on Onondaga Lake at Syracuse.

The summers of 1949 and 1950 were ideal. Frequent trips back into the woods with the Seabee came as a welcome relief from the everyday routine of the airport and flying school. There were fishing parties to the West Canada lakes, tourists to the Old Forge on Fourth Lake, and days off spent just hopping from one cool, clear lake to another. However, business had been on the decline for some time, and the decision was made to sell the Bee. Our reluctance to let her go was proven by the fact that we asked \$1000 more than the market price, yet the first person to look at her closed the deal.

One misty fall morning I cranked up for the last time and flew her down over the Catskills to her new owner in Linden, N. J. Before leaving the airport, I turned for a last look at her. Maybe it was because the lakes and the mountains were missing, but somehow sitting there surrounded by all those other airplanes, she looked awkward, lonely, and out of place. Or maybe it was just parting from her that got me. I never had a plane I admired or trusted more.

END

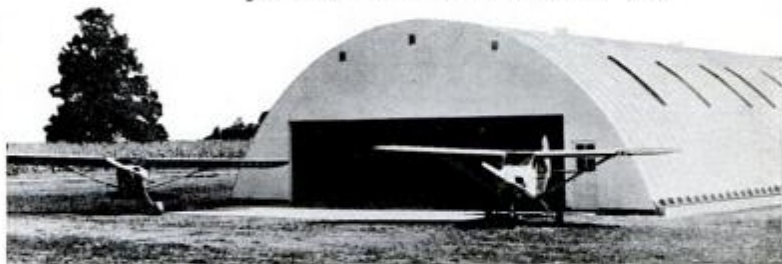
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