

LEARNING TO FLY PART II: THE FIRST SOLO

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**SPECIAL: LOW-COST
SEAPLANES
FLOATPLANE FLYING
TIPS ON FLOAT CARE**

DICK BACH'S NEW SEABEE



**PILOT REPORTS:
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**THE CONTROVERSIAL
DARRYL GREENAMYER**



adventures aboard a flying floating summerhouse

**You wouldn't expect Richard Bach
to buy an ordinary airplane—
but a 1947 Republic Seabee amphibian?**

By Richard Bach

He was selling his airplane to me because he needed the money, but still there were three years of his life in the thing and he liked it and he wanted to hope that I might like it too, as if the plane were alive and he wished it happy in the world. So it was that after he saw that I could fly it safely, and after I had handed him a check, and after waiting for as long as he could stand it, Brent Brown turned to me and said, "Well, what do you think? How do you like her?"

I couldn't answer. I didn't know what to tell him. Had the plane been a Pitts or a Champ or a fiber-glass motorglider, I could have said, "Great! Wow! What a lovely airplane!" But the plane was a 1947 Republic Seabee, and the beauty in a Seabee is like the beauty way down in a woman's eye who is not a covergirl moviestar—before you see her beautiful, you must begin to know who she is.

"I can't tell, Brent. The airplane flies all right, but I'm still way behind it—it's still pretty big and strange."

Even when the weather cleared and I flew away at last from the snows of Logan, Utah, I couldn't honestly tell Brent Brown that I would ever love his airplane.

Now, nearly a hundred flying hours later, having flown the Seabee across winter America, down the coast to Florida and the Bahamas and back into spring, I can begin to answer his question. We've flown together 13,000 feet over mountains sharp as broken steel, where her engine failure could have meant some cool discomfort; we've survived some rough-water ocean takeoffs where my slow beginner's ways in seaplanes could have sent us in large pieces to the bottom. Through these hours I've come to find that the Seabee is generally worthy of trust; perhaps she's found the same is true of me. And perhaps, back in Logan, Utah, Brent Brown could call this the beginning of any real love.

Trust comes not without difficulties overcome. The Bee, for instance, is the largest airplane I've ever owned. With extended wings and droop tips, its span is nearly fifty feet. The vertical stabilizer is so high that I can't even wash the tail of the plane without a ladder to climb. Its all-up weight is just over a ton and a half—I can't push it alone even across the taxiway, and two men together can't lift the tailwheel.

Take this huge machine to Rock Springs, Wyoming, let's say, take it there and land in a 50-degree crosswind 20 gusting

30 (thanking God that the rumors about crosswind landings in Seabees aren't true), struggle it to the parking ramp (cursing the devil that the rumors about crosswind taxiings are), freeze it overnight so the oil is tar and the brakes are stone. Then try to get it flying, come dawn, by yourself. It's like coaxing a frozen mammoth to fly. A Cub or a Champ, you don't need help to get it going, but a Seabee sometimes you do.

After hurling my body like a fevered desperate snowflake against the smooth aluminum mountain of the Bee, hurling it twice and again, I was trembling on collapse and hadn't moved it a fraction of an inch. Then out of the wind came Frank Garnick, airport manager, wondering if he could help. We hitched his snowplow to the mammoth, towed it in compound low till the wheels shattered ice and turned, set a preheater in her engine compartment and a charger on her battery. Half an hour and the mammoth was a fawn, engine purring as though Rock Springs was Miami. You can't always do everything alone; a hard lesson eased by a fellow who didn't mind helping.

With a big airplane one also learns about systems, and how they work. Take the landing gear and the flaps. They all move up and down under the calm physics of the hydraulic system, which is so reliable that it requires no mechanical backup or emergency mode. So that if you squeeze the landing gear down with 20 strokes or so of the hydraulic handpump on a night landing to Runway 22 at Fort Wayne, Indiana, and touch down with the gear not quite locked, you hear this loud sound—*VAM!*—and then a moment later comes a screeching crunching roaring sound wild as freightcars slid sideways on rock.

After you shut the engine down in utter disgust, it gets quiet in the cabin, there in the middle of Runway 22, and into that quiet comes a voice, from the tower.

"Do you have a problem, Seabee six eight Kilo?"

"Yeah. I have a problem. The gear collapsed out here."

"Roger, six eight Kilo," comes the voice, pleasant as America itself, "Contact Ground Control on one two one point nine."

You listen to that, and you start to laugh.

Sure enough, just as the factory said, a wheels-up landing on concrete only shaves a sixteenth of an inch from the keel



With a Seabee, slip onto a deserted beach at nightfall, use the whole ocean for a tiedown spot. . .





Bach found his Seabee nestled in a hangar in cold, snowy Logan, Utah.

of your new Seabee. Fort Wayne Air Service was there to extend the lesson on help with big airplanes. A clevis had broken in the gear system and a mechanic there hunted me a new one.

"What do I owe you for this?"

"Nothin'."

"Free? You're an airplane mechanic and you're giving me a stranger this clevis free?"

He smiled, thinking of a price. "You're parked at our competitor's place. Next time park here."

Then Maury Miller drove me for nothing all the way back across Baer Field, where John Knight at Consolidated Airways helped me run a gear retraction test, also free of charge. It was either something about the Seabee, or about these people, or about that particular sunrise, but Fort Wayne couldn't do enough to help me out.

"Don't think of a Seabee as an airplane that can land on water," Don Kyte had told me years before. "Think of it as a boat that can fly." A boat that can fly, you don't care if it's not as fast as, say, a cross-country minié ball. The Bee trues out at around 90 mph at low cruise, 115 at high; this and patience will get you anywhere. At low cruise, the 75-gallon tank holds nearly eight hours' flying, at high cruise it's just over five.

Flying his boat over Indiana, Ohio, Pennsylvania, the captain has time to look down and notice tens and scores of little towns right on the edge of bluequiet lakes and

wide rivers, and in time he thinks of a way to make a Seabee pay for itself.

"A boat that can fly, folks, just three dollars buys you 10 full minutes aloft! It's perfectly safe, your government-licensed pilot, Captain Bach, the Air Ace, thousands of flights without a mishap, former Clipper pilot on the Hong Kong-Honolulu run, himself at the controls!"

Towns, lakes breathed away below. Sure enough. It could be done.

After 20 hours in the Bee, I began to feel gingerly at home. Every day the airplane seemed a little smaller, a bit more maneuverable, more a controllable creature than a houseboat in the sky, although the latter is the literal truth. The cabin inside is something over nine feet long, and that before opening the door into the hollow tower under the engine, that adds another three or four feet. The seats recline to make a full double bed. The Seabee Hilton, in fact, is the first flying hotel in which I've been able to stretch out full length and sleep soundly all night—a point not to miss in a machine built to spend its nights anchored in wilderness lakes.

The Seabee is fitted with three enormous doors, one right, one left, and then one bow door, four feet forward of the copilot's seat. According to the owner's manual, this door is for "docking and fishing"; it is also an excellent ventilation door for moons in Bahama waters, when otherwise the cabin overheats in direct sun.

If he's landed by a coast of rocks, or just doesn't feel like

leaving his ship, the captain can exit the cabin by any door and stretch out in the sun on the warm aluminum along the wingspar, writing or thinking or listening to the waves lap down the length of the hull.

With an alcohol stove, he can prepare hot meals on the cabin-top or within, on a galley set on the right half of the flight deck.

I had heard many a discouraging word about the Seabee's Franklin engine, which is odd in that it has a special long propellershaft and in that it is mounted backwards in the airplane, so that the prop is a pusher. In spite of the words, I've had only one brief engine problem. I noticed in cruise that the engine said "mmmmmmmmmm" on the magneto-fired spark plugs when it said "mmm-m-mmmm-mm-mmm-m" on the distributor-fired ones. I reached back into the workshop as I flew along, took out the engine troubleshooting guide, and deduced that the cause had to be distributor points gone a bit tacky. Sure enough. Next landing I removed the points, replaced them with a new set (which also fits a '57 Plymouth), and the engine said "mmmmmm" thereafter, on all sets of plugs.

According to the overhaul manual, the Franklin is good only for 600 hours between overhauls. At 250 since overhaul, mine burns two-thirds of a quart of oil per hour at normal cruise. This pleases me because there are Franklins in Seabees that throw that much oil on the vertical stabilizer and are still considered normal.

It's said that Seabees without wing-extensions are occasionally reluctant to fly. The manual admits that the stock Bee, brand new, can take up to 13,500 feet to make a high-altitude water takeoff. Not having flown the airplane without long wings, I can't comment, save to say that 68K was flown from Bear Lake, Utah, 6,000 feet above sea level, all summer long, with full passenger loads. The long wings and the tips make a difference.

One special pleasure for Seabee owners resides in a small lever overhead the pilot: the reverse pitch control for the propeller. It was installed because the Bee, unlike pon-

Ex-owner Brown reluctantly takes a last look at his airplane.



toon planes, normally approaches a dock head-on, and so has to leave by backing away tail-first. In the hands of a practiced pilot, reverse pitch makes the plane as maneuverable as a large, heavy alligator.

One can use reverse on land, too. The captain taxis into a tight space at the fuel pump, fills up, and then with everybody looking and wondering what happens next, he can yaw, back slowly out of his parking place, and be on his way.

This is hard to top, yet the plane has other and even better features. Last month I flew some 2,500 miles in the Seabee, most of it over the Intracoastal Waterway. It was the most confident secure flying I've done anywhere. Should the engine have failed, I had only to glide straight ahead, or to



Bach was still learning to cope with the big Seabee when he reached icy Wyoming. "Try coaxing a frozen mammoth to fly," he says.

turn slightly to land on the water. Horizon-wide swamps we flew over, that hadn't enough firm ground for a Cub to land, yet they were all one vast international airport for the Bee: cleared to land whenever we wished, on any runway, upwind, downwind, crosswind, no traffic reported. The airplane is not equipped for instrument flying, but under these conditions it is the best instrument airplane possible.

Following the lee shore of Cape Hatteras, the clouds lowered to 200 feet and visibility to a bit over a mile—weather one would never consider in a landplane unless he happened to be flying directly above a hundred-mile runway. In the Seabee, I was. I dropped down to 50 feet over the water, kept my thumb on the map, and pressed ahead like next year's Chris-Craft. When the visibility worsened, I dropped half flaps and slowed. When it worsened still, I decided to land, a matter of easing the throttle back and raising the nose slightly. But just before touchdown, ripples



Back in its native habitat, the Seabee docks at Lambros seaplane base in New Jersey, after sneaking in under the New York TCA.

flashing below, I saw a line of light that meant higher ceilings ahead. So we air-taxied along the water for another mile and sure enough, things got better. As I am chicken in weather, this single feature is my favorite of the Seabee's qualities.

The one dangerous aspect of the airplane, and of most amphibious aircraft, is the other face of its ability to land anywhere. I have talked to three pilots who landed Seabees on the water with the wheels down. Two of them had to swim out of the airplane as it sank upside down, the third merely had to rebuild the nose section of the plane where it was smashed violently by the sea. For this reason I taught myself to say aloud in every traffic pattern, "This is a land landing, therefore the wheels are down," and, "This is a water landing, therefore the wheels are up, checked up, left main up, right main up, tailwheel up. Because this is a water landing." I like to say the water-landing check twice before touchdown. It's being a little overcautious, but there is something about the picture of 3,200 pounds on top of me, squashing me against the sea-bottom, that I don't mind being overcautious. Then, too, aside from being the biggest, the Bee is the most expensive plane I've owned. I do not wish to look down from some rowboat, grappling with a hook for \$9,000 of my fortune. If it were a normal-priced Seabee, \$5,000 to \$7,500, maybe I wouldn't mind.

By the time I had logged 50 hours in the airplane, I had learned how to land it. Thirty hours were spent to believe that I could actually be so high in the air at the moment the

wheels first touched; the other 20 were required to discover that just because the wheels had touched didn't mean I wasn't flying the airplane as much as ever. The reason for both learnings was the same—the Seabee has such long oleo shock absorbers that the wheels drop below the plane one thinks they ought to be; they roll along the ground a few seconds after the plane is actually flying and for a few seconds before it has actually landed.

The warning is that the Seabee is a high-maintenance machine. I haven't noticed this because I enjoy working on airplanes and don't count the difference between necessary maintenance and work not really required. But here is part of a shopping list made shortly after buying the plane:

Anchor and chain	Scissor jack
Raft	Hydraulic fluid
Grease gun, grease	Brake hose
Silicon cement	Bilge pump
Silicon spray	Bicycle
Weatherstripping	Cork
ADF	

There's a story for every item there, even for the cork, which is pressed into the end of the engine compartment oil scupper, to keep black oil from spraying out on the white hull.

The propeller needs to be greased every 20 hours or so, as do wheel bearings and landing gear fittings. All this can be fun, climbing around and servicing an Alumigrp mountain.

Other elements of Bee-flying one learns only by experience. It's a delight, for instance, to taxi up from the water to a lovely virgin beach, but one had best be sure he gets above the high-water line and points the airplane back downhill before he allows it to stop rolling. If not, the captain has an hour's shovelling and messing around with jacks and old boards before his Seabee is unearthed and back in the water.

If the wingtip floats aren't sealed around the tops with silicon rubber, water pours in during crosswind water-taxiing, when the downwind float is sometimes completely underwater. Mark the trim indicator overhead for takeoff with different loads; the Bee is very much a trim airplane. Once when the trim froze at high altitude, just a little bit nose-up, I had to ease back the power till the plane flew level by itself—I didn't have the strength to manually override that trim for more than a few minutes at a time.

Somebody said that anything worthwhile is always a little bit scary. I was a little bit scared and a little bit cautious about the Bee—how do you know what happens to a summerhouse in flight until you go up and fly one? But in time the captain learns to know its strengths and its quirks, begins to discover its secrets.

One secret of the Seabee I found by chance, that I have found on no other airplane. If one happens to be cruising at 9,500 feet, at 2200 rpm with 22 inches of manifold pressure, indicating 97 mph with an outside air temperature of -5 degrees F, and if one is alone in the left seat and if one happens to sing *God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen* or another song in that frequency range, one's single voice becomes four—one becomes a kind of airborne Willie the Whale. The strange acoustics have something to do with the thin air, no doubt, and the resonance of the engine at that rpm, but the result is of more than passing interest for those captains who choose to sing only when there's no one else to hear. What other aircraft in the world offers all these features and a full quartet as well, enroute to your lake-wilderness hideaway?

I give you, dear, reader, the Seabee. □

