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Recommended Citation
Donald D. Cooke, Over-Water Flying and Seaplane Bases, 7 J. Air L. & Com. 480 (1936)
https://scholar.smu.edu/jalc/vol7/iss4/8

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OVER-WATER FLYING AND SEAPLANE BASES

DONALD D. COOKE*

I hoped I would get this opportunity to say something to you about water flying and seaplane bases and, in anticipation of it, have written down some things which I want to get over to you; and, with your permission, I will read them.

Water flying has been slow in developing up until recently for a lot of reasons. Ever since the beginning most of our manufacturers have never paid much attention to building or selling seaplanes. This was perfectly natural because they were interested in getting production and the land plane field has offered and no doubt will continue to offer the biggest market. In addition, a large number of our manufacturers were located in the middle west far from any water that could be used to fly off of and couldn't be expected to take much interest in or follow up that end of the market. As a consequence, when some of these airplanes were used on the water, a large percentage had mediocre performance and gave considerable trouble because they were not properly protected against corrosion, especially on salt water. Coupled with a lack of storage bases and points where fuel and oil could be obtained, these drawbacks quite effectively discouraged all but the most enthusiastic of the private flyers and the commercial operators who persisted in spite of them. The flying boat has for all practical purposes passed out of the picture with the exception of the large transport. The amphibian, however, is still with us and going strong despite the fact that practically none has been built for at least five years. The amphibians which are being operated today are expensive pieces of equipment, expensive to operate and of inferior performance but, of course, are not entirely dependent on the existence of seaplane bases although their usefulness is restricted. This in itself speaks a lot for the attraction which water flying has.

But let's see what has happened in the land plane field. The network of airlines in this country has been extended until today one can go by airliner almost anywhere a land plane can go and he can go cheaper, faster and more comfortably than he can in his own

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plane. Besides, after the weather has turned bad, he doesn't have to stay with his airplane until it clears up. The private land plane and the charter land plane have, therefore, for most people, been removed from the category of a utility. The private land ship remains as an instrument of pleasure and sport but, as such, it is reasonable to assume that it has a market which is considerably more limited than would otherwise be the case.

So the problem as I see it is to make the airplane more useful and one way to do this is to convert it to a seaplane.

Suppose we now consider what the seaplane can do for us and what we can do with the seaplane. The chief advantage which the seaplane has over the land plane is, of course, its ability to utilize safely almost any area of protected water for landing. In country where seaplanes are useable, we usually find water just where we want to land. Other advantages are its comparative safety in the event of forced landings due to weather or mechanical troubles and the fact that less skill is required to land it and take it off. No small consideration is the added pleasure and stimulation to be experienced from flying low over the water quite safely and the smoother air which is usually found there. Its disadvantages are its somewhat inferior performance, the greater maintenance required and the difficulty involved in hauling it in and out of the water.

To take full advantage of the ability of the seaplane to land where one wants to go, we must get used to the idea that it can be left safely overboard and moored in reasonably protected water. In these days of flaps, heavier wing loadings and corrosion proofing, I am confident this can be done; and if this premise is allowed, a much larger and intensely interesting field opens up for the water flyer. He can put down a mooring in a sheltered cove convenient to his summer home or he can pick one up at the nearby yacht club which, very often, offers sufficient shelter. No longer must he go only where a ramp or hangar is available. He can have his seaplane nearby when he goes off on weekend trips and he will find that, instead of putting it in a hangar and leaving it there until he is ready to go home, he will be using it every day to go fishing or call on friends or go on a picnic or to some distant island for a swim. He will be getting some real pleasure and use out of it all the time and not just while he is flying to and from his home in the city. It is not difficult to visualize a development in the use of seaplanes much along the same lines as that of the fast
motor boat. They have much in common but the seaplane would seem to have considerably more utility.

There are still other reasons why it is reasonable to expect the use of seaplanes to increase. On account of its greater safety and less skill required to fly it, it is likely to appeal strongly to the man of means and responsibility between the ages of say forty and fifty who could never be induced to go to an airport to learn to fly. He can take his seaplane and an instructor and go off where there is no one to bother him while he practices landings and take-offs. After all, this is the type of individual who can afford to buy an airplane and whom we want to get to fly and keep flying. It is not entirely sound to suppose that the present generation of young people will learn to fly today and be buying and flying their own ships tomorrow. It is more likely that the successful man of tomorrow is too busy working or hasn’t the time or the means today to learn to fly.

I have taken the seaplane as an example. The same arguments, however, apply to amphibians equally well. Of course, if we are going to leave our ships overboard, we must guard against corrosion. Most manufacturers today have developed standard corrosion proofing treatments which they will give new ships and which are quite effective. It is no longer the worry and the headache that it once was and every day these airplanes are getting better and better in that respect.

All this sounds like a sales talk but what I am trying to bring out is why and then how we should help waterflying get under way. As a matter of fact, it already is underway. During the last two years in the New York area, there has been a remarkable increase. This can be attributed largely to the construction of two bases on Manhattan Island in the East River, where it is possible to land and take on passengers and it is reasonable to expect that this increase will take on added impetus as additional facilities are made available. The construction of storage bases at strategically located points and fueling facilities pretty generally scattered around are without doubt the important need and the opportunity is open to us to proceed with such a program now under the W. P. A. Storage bases should be located in or near large cities, preferably on or in connection with the airport, and should consist of a marine railway or fixed ramp or both, landing floats, a mooring or two, hangar and dollies. The marine railway makes the best device for hauling out a seaplane and it is recommended for bases where it would be used rather regularly. On the other hand, it is not
suitable for amphibians, but if the base were adjacent to an airport, the amphibian would land on the airport. In some cases, both a ramp and marine railway would be desirable, such as when the nearest airport is far distant. In that case, amphibians as well as seaplanes could be stored at the base. If the base is located on an airport, the existing hangar facilities, of course, can be used and the combination makes it possible to change over from floats to wheels and vice versa. The base would be used for repairs, engine checks and storage for extended periods or in times of bad weather.

Bases consisting of landing floats and moorings only should be located near the center of cities and towns. They will serve to land and take on passengers and fuel. Arrangements should be made with a nearby gasoline dealer to carry fuel and supply it when called upon to do so. Such landing floats are useful to all types of boats as well as seaplanes and altogether from the town's point of view make a desirable public landing.

The Bureau has prepared a design for a marine railway, which will serve as a guide and can be modified to fit most any location. It has also prepared designs for landing floats. Both of these designs are available to sponsors. In addition, if the details of the location are available, the Bureau will make a suggested layout and consult in any other way possible.

Some progress has been made to date. In addition to the two terminals which were built in New York City with the aid of Federal funds, but which were built before the organization of the W. P. A., the City of Newark has a storage base about completed with the exception of the hangar. It includes a marine railway, landing floats, concrete apron, dollies and hangar. The City of New Bedford, Mass., has a project approved for a terminal consisting of a 75 ft. turntable ramp, landing floats and a passenger terminal building. In Maine, ten projects for landing floats in various towns have been set up and approved and they will be built this winter when labor is available. Connecticut has one and New York has one. Several projects are in the process of being set up in New York and Wisconsin. There is definite interest among the flying fraternity in getting storage bases in Buffalo, Detroit, Chicago and Seattle; and it is hoped that something real can be accomplished in those cities.