

What is Pilot Integrity?

Reviewing the current status of the water flying industry

By John Kelly, SPA #14640

John Kelly has been a seaplane commercial operator for more than 15 years. Currently, Kelly has a commercial ATP and has in excess of 13,000 hours, of which 7,000 hours are on floats. He currently runs Shoreline Aviation, which operates 22 aircraft of which eight are amphibious seaplanes ranging in size from Cessna 185s to Caravans. Kelly requires a pilot to have 1,000 hours total time and approximately 250 hours on floats before he even considers hiring him for his seaplane operation. Once hired, the new pilot will have 25-50 hours of training in the local seaplane environment. "I am sure that we could all help to improve the overall safety statistics of float flying if we could seriously consider Kelly's comments on pilot integrity", notes SPA President J.J. Frey, who asked Kelly to write this article for Water Flying.

On August 26, 1995, at about 1 pm, the world came to an end for five people in a fiery crash on a small island off the New England coast. In those flames, we who fly seaplanes had our world also come a little bit closer to its end. Thanks to video film and satellite technology, the image of that horrendous scene was transported to living rooms all over the globe. Phone calls came in from friends in Europe, Africa and Central America all asking:

What had gone so horribly wrong?

We need to ask ourselves that same question. It would be too easy to look at that accident and shrug it off as the result of someone with too little training, trying to do something he shouldn't have been doing, in a place he shouldn't have been doing it; to say "it was one in a million event" or "it couldn't happen to me." Once again we could blame the press for distorting the facts and making our vehicle of choice the target of their slanderous exploitation. The facts argue otherwise.

In 1992, a de Havilland floatplane threading its way through an Alaskan mountain pass also met a fiery end. An experienced professional pilot was at the yoke; a Presidential Advisor and a wealthy Australian businessman were among the several fatalities. International attention once again turned in our direction. In 1994, a well-know entertainer with a strong working knowledge of seaplanes cartwheeled his Widgeon across a shallow Nantucket harbor. This time there were no fatalities; just a few cuts and bruised

egos, but the press reports traveled the global airwaves again.

These accidents were anomalies only in that they received worldwide coverage, none of it favorable toward seaplanes. On a local level, where the coverage can be just as harsh to a small segment of our pilot population, the news remains the same. In 1992 between the end of August and early December, at least five seaplanes ended up-side-down in chilly New England waters, with one fatality and many bruised egos. Between April 1994 and April 1995, FAA records show 18 seaplane accidents reported. Two were fatal, three others caused injuries to passengers and/or pilots. The record has only gotten worse. In addition to the Block Island accident, events in September 1995 may have set other undesirable records for seaplane safety; at least five seaplanes crashed in the Wisconsin/Minnesota area alone, one of the crashes was fatal; another five accidents occurred in Alaska.

It may be tempting to turn away, bury our heads and wait for this to "go away", but it is time for us to face up to the realities, as unpleasant as they are, and figure out—"what has gone so horribly wrong?" It is a sure bet that the insurance companies will be asking the question, and if the FAA isn't too busy re-organizing itself and administering "user fees", it should be asking it, too.

Since few, of these accidents are the result of mechanical failure, and the seaplane, by itself, is an inanimate object, there is only one common denominator left. As Walt Kelley says, in his classic cartoon POGO, "We have met the enemy, and he is us!" Whether novice or expert, or for that matter knowledgeable passenger, we have failed to conduct

ourselves in a manner that is above reproach, and because of that, a part of our lifestyle, and in many cases, our livelihood is deservedly threatened.

For those of us to whom the seaplane has become an integral part of our lifestyle or livelihood, it is time to determine what common elements draw us together in this activity, and which if any of those elements is responsible for the problems we now face. The seaplane is a wonderful invention, designed to make escape from the pressures of urban or suburban life easily available. It can go places inaccessible to others, with a freedom that cannot be matched in any other powered vehicle. Seaplane pilots are a breed apart, "a step above the crowd"; rugged individualists who relish the opportunity to make their own decisions, set their own destinations, and take full responsibility for their actions, without aid or device. We don't need airports, runways or windsocks. For many, not even a radio is required to go about their daily business. We have the freedom to go where we want, when we want. The freedom is the thrill.

Freedom

Freedoms, like Rights, are not inalienable. They can be granted, and they can be taken away. The cost of freedom is responsibility and accountability. We have been responsible for maintaining our right to operate our aircraft freely, and where we have failed in that responsibility, we have lost the freedom. The Seaplane Pilots Association was formed specifically to fight for those rights and freedoms. As we know all too well, the battles have been numerous and the outcomes not always in our favor. We have lost waterways and landing areas all over the globe in the name of safety or congestion. We have screamed "foul"; claimed that our rights have been violated; stated unequivocally that the decisions have been based on false perceptions. Yet we continue to provide grist for the mill of those misconceptions. We have joined the list of endangered species because, while our habitat is shrinking, we have failed to adapt to the realities of life in a global community. Our level of responsibility and accountability will be monitored and enforced.

Resistance to Authority

When I received training as a Designated Flight Examiner, I was

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taught to be alert for five attitudes or personality traits that might tip off a potentially problematic pilot. The one we need to examine is Resistance to Authority. Failure to file a flightplan is Resistance to Authority. Failure to use a checklist or a shoulder harness is Resistance to Authority. Using unapproved parts (particularly if they come out of a NAPA box) is Resistance to Authority. Doing what we want, when we know we shouldn't and figuring that we will get away with it one more time, is Resistance to Authority. Lack of conformance to a set of rules and guidelines is Resistance to Authority. Seaplane pilots are proud of their non-conformance. It could be that the very existence of a seaplane is Resistance to Authority. This may be the key to our problem.

If, in fact, we have identified part of the problem, what is the solution? Clearly, I am not advocating an end to all seaplanes, or condemning the actions of each and every seaplane pilot. Yet something must be done to control our Resistance and bring the actions of the whole group to a level of responsibility and accountability that will allow us to survive. We are still in control of our destiny, but that control is shrinking with every accident and with every headline. We have to acknowledge that the problem is deep within each of us, and not just the fault of the other guy. None of us is immune to that moment of terror when things go horribly wrong. It can happen to us, just as it happened to the other guys.

Training

Training is a good place to start. At the risk of upsetting all those two-day/six-hour seaplane ratings out there (and I have examined my share of those pilot applicants), the current training programs may meet the requirements of the FARs, but they are woefully inadequate in preparing an individual for the tremendous variety of experiences and demands he or she will encounter as a seaplane pilot. This is no big revelation. The same operators who provide the ratings, for the most part refuse to rent aircraft to their graduates, or do so only under the most controlled of circumstances. Insurance is almost unattainable for the novice seaplane pilot, should he have the capability to obtain his own aircraft. The handwriting has been on the wall all along, we are just ignoring it. If we would prefer to have the FAA stay out of this, we have to acknowledge that

the current seaplane rating is at best a learner's permit. We must develop a new curriculum that will allow a novice to gain the time and experience necessary to join the ranks as a safe and confident seaplane pilot. This is not the forum to set forth that program, but I contend that 50 hours of varied training is probably required.

Recurrency

Recurrency is another area that needs review. For those of us in non-tropical environments, seaplaning is a seasonal activity. Training facilities can and should develop programs to help get the rust off the pilot as well as the aircraft. These should be as comprehensive as local conditions allow (or demand), and not just a couple of take-offs and landings on the first good day of spring. Professional pilots, flying seaplanes for a living, logging hundreds of hours a year, are required to go through a thorough training and testing regime every 12 months and in some cases, if IFR skills are involved, every six months. I flight check our crews regularly, and even the most experienced can usually use some constructive criticism. I have yet to find perfection, particularly in myself.

Awareness

Awareness is a key ingredient in our ability. It needs additional attention in initial and recurrent stages of training. Unlike other aircraft, seaplanes routinely operate in unprepared areas. No landing strips, no windsocks, no certified clearways for approach and landings, no obstacle markings exist. Our operating areas are often surrounded by terrain which poses a greater danger than the landing environment itself. The landing surface, far from being consistent, is virtually never the same. Although swimmers, boats and other objects are readily visible from the air, the water surface and wave action itself often offers only a "best guess" scenario as to what we will encounter as we flare. It is no wonder that low time pilots have trouble getting their hands on airplanes.

Discretion

Discretion is another key ingredient. Pilots are trained from the beginning to exercise complete control over the aircraft. Fly the aircraft. Don't let it fly you! Make it do what you want it to do! On the water, this is a recipe for disaster. An experienced seaplane pilot can't make

an airplane do everything he wants through force. Discretion is required to recognize when the aircraft must be allowed to win the test of wills, and how to solve your problems in another manner. Discretion must also dictate when it is time to move on and pick another, more suitable landing site. We should stress in our teaching that we constantly must ask ourselves if we should be doing what we're doing, and that frequently the answer will be: No, not today; or No, not here, today. We must do a better job of emphasizing awareness and discretion. More than any other acquired skill, these are the abilities that allow so many of us to make it from those initial six hours of training to a level of experience that might suggest continued success.

Acknowledge Reality

We must also do a better job of acknowledging reality. Join any group of pilots (particularly seaplane pilots) over a beer and you will hear hours of stories based on how one or another of us cheated death. Our heroics are entertaining and insightful and we relish the attention we command as we relate how our superior knowledge, skill, or what have you, overcame the darkest of circumstances. We never admit fear, as we laugh in the face of danger. Reality exists in the logbook of a seaplane pilot who placed in the remarks column a very occasional AKM—Almost Killed Myself. I hired him immediately.

We need to face our mortality and pass on to each and everyone with whom we come in contact that this is a blood sport we practice. It is up to us to be responsible and accountable for every one of our actions. The failure of one of our colleagues, whether resulting in embarrassment or death, is in part our failure. We need to protect our freedom, and preserve our right to operate. Overall, our record is good. It is still more dangerous to drive to the seaplane base than to get in the seaplane. The majority of our operations are safe and successful. We do much good and provide great pleasure to many, but the perceptions of the outside world are still based on our few failures. It is not acceptable to continue to believe that we are victims of "bad press"; that we have no control over the actions of others; and that there is nothing wrong within our community. There is too much at stake, and all too clearly the enemy is us! □