

Rotating ten feet off the water, there was an ominous and very audible bang from the rear of the aircraft. Immediately the seaplane skewed 45 degrees into the east wind, heading us at 80mph toward a frightening scene.

Extrasensory perception becomes a gift to seasoned pilots: the slightest noise, even above the drone of an engine, can be heard or felt in milliseconds. Through a career spanning over 20 years, rest assured there are going to be noises. I have heard and felt something go quite wrong with the powerplant in front of me, noticing immediately, where my passengers remained oblivious.

On this day I was only halfway through my aviation journey but with enough experience for reaction time to be instantaneous; this time there would be no hiding it from my client seated in the co-pilot seat. One can scoff at that expression of “doing things by the book” but in near every case of incident, almost all were resolved safely by resorting to this method—except this was not in the book.



A seaplane is a great way to get around the Bahamas.

After a hurricane had hit the islands, my insurance adjuster friend came to survey clientele damage. With the job complete I had elected to perform a seaplane crosswind takeoff for the departure, the lee of an island avoided rougher water further out. Split second reaction had me hit the opposite rudder pedal so hard that I broke the metal toe piece of the pedal clean in half. Nothing happened. The inhospitable, jagged rock face of the island with its torn shrubbery on a craggy apex came speeding toward us. Towering on top was an electric cable, appearing as if it were a tight-rope wire held aloft by its wooden poles that ran the length of the cay.

The approaching height of it all seemingly impossible to clear. We were headed to certain disaster at this low altitude with no directional control and mere seconds to play with. There was no choice; not enough distance remained ahead to land safely. If I pulled the power now we would have momentum enough to surely crash into the base of the rocky shoreline. I had to keep the seaplane flying, flat enough toward the solid rock, allowing it to gain valuable airspeed. Did we have enough time? When things are going horribly wrong the scene appears to take on an appearance of slow motion. Panic is no option—it becomes think, think, think. Those remaining precious seconds lasting forever, giving time to react.

In a flash of memory, I remembered the maneuver making BD Maule famous: his dramatic climb out of an aircraft hangar! I could see David’s body language shuffle awkwardly, bracing his hand on the interior windshield support that ran from the roof of the cockpit through the instrument panel, something solid to hold on to. We raced unabashed toward the land with its threatening wires above. I heard a slightly shaken “Oh Shit!” through my headset from my passenger as we came within the last few yards.

I heaved on the yoke and pumped the flap handle in that familiar movement from practice flying in tight places. The little seaplane obediently leaped skyward, like its factory name declared on its tail: “Super Rocket!” The wire whizzed just underneath and there was a very audible gulp of air coming from both occupants through their headsets.

“Damn that was a close!” David nearly shouted in excitement.

“I’m really glad I had an insurance adjuster onboard,” I replied, attempting to interject a little humour to ease the situation at hand.

“That was an amazing piece of flying Paul!” David exclaimed visibly inhaling.

“You can thank this amazing little plane for that one,” I said with conviction. “Now comes the fun part...”

“What do you mean?” he asked, facial expression becoming instantly serious, thinking all was saved and we could just go home.

“We have no rudder my friend,” I added gently, not wanting to raise further alarm. I demonstrated by showing him what happened when I pushed the rudder pedals from side to side: still nothing.

“Flying without a rudder is one thing but this aircraft is a rudder plane, that is one that you lead with your feet and follow with aileron control to co-ordinate,” I explained. “We can fly sort of straight but I’ll need rudder for the precision needed to land straight ahead, especially on water; slightly crooked and we could bury a float and cartwheel.”

“Oh crap!” came his short reply.

“We can land somewhere out here and try a fix but if it doesn’t work we could be stuck. I say we go home and use the harbour. At least we will be home and help close at hand if I screw up,” I said. I knew the only part of Nassau Harbour available to try this risky maneuver would be the large turning basin used by the cruise ships near the lighthouse entrance.



Flying a Maule with no rudder control—not in the manual.

The seaplane flew all the way back to Nassau slightly skewed to one side. It was incredibly strange to have no rudder control and this next landing was going to really test my skills. The flight home gave us time to talk about what had happened and how things can go incredibly wrong in a blink of the eye.

There seemed no point in declaring my emergency to the air traffic controllers in Nassau. They were very familiar that I was a floatplane, not landing at the airport where emergency services could be offered. Reaching the harbour, the last thing I needed were additional watercraft from the Harbour Patrol or Police Force that could impede my landing zone.

I had quite enough on my plate having to deal with the constant daily traffic of a busy commercial harbour: glass-bottomed tour boats, water-taxis, racing jet skis, government tugs, booze-cruise party boats, private yachts entering or leaving the harbour. That thin body of water presented some unique challenges for a seaplane pilot, ones eyes would have to dart in every direction, absorbing the movement of water traffic and the wake they all produced, also noting the effects of wind direction in that tight area, all the time maintaining the safe performance of the seaplane.

Here was a crucial difference from those who simply had to cope with landing on a concrete runway. Quoting a senior captain of British Airways who had flown earlier with me, “you are a lot busier in the cockpit than I am in a 747 landing at Heathrow!” A seaplane’s landing surface could be so disturbed simply from water traffic that has already cleared the area; wake, swells, tide, and wind can add untold hazards, forcing me to fly around until it settled suitable enough to safely put down on a calmer surface. Accomplishing this without a rudder was going to take a load of luck and all that I could muster from thousands of hours in the air.

Landing assured, I declared to my controller who bid me “good evening.” We were on our own from here. Circling the turning basin I could see clearly the wind lines drawing their clue of direction on the surface, favouring slightly to the northeast, a direction immediately favouring us, offering the longest portion of water to put down while praying the wind would hold us long enough in a straight line. The next visible problems became all too clear. There was a large cruise ship preparing to pull away from the wharf for its departure to Florida and those marker buoys that lined the entranceway of the channel where the ships followed the deep channel. I had to draw a mental line directly into the wind—not a degree off if I could help it—keeping free of any obstacles such as a 12-foot high ton of floating metal buoy chained to the ocean floor.

I alined the aircraft into the wind, keeping the image of my chosen runway. Down to the water we flew with one degree of flap set in. Closer and feeling confident, I applied the second notch of flap carefully, slowing the approach safely. It looked as if I would nail this first time with my feet trying in vain automatically for some rudder control that did not exist. Very near the water now and a sudden slight gust of wind slightly from one side had us careening toward a tall green buoy.

“Damn it,” I muttered, not able to control the drift. Full-power now, a go-around being my only option. “This is how we must keep trying it,” I explained to David through my headset microphone, who watched and wondered our chances without saying a word. I climbed out successfully over Paradise Island, making a left turn to set up the approach again.

Back down to the water we went, repeating the procedure for hopeful touchdown. The small seaplane this time stayed true into the wind. A quick, yet smoothly applied third degree of flap while we floated a few feet above the water, setting up the slight nose-high flare that would ensure an admired touchdown. Flying is an art form; strangely, landings in particular were not ever taught by any flight instructor or examiner during the learning phases of my own training. That short sensation of floating above the landing surface and wait, wait, wait, without moving the controls more than a fraction, waiting patiently for the surface to meet its mark and the floats or wheels. kiss the water or concrete hardly noticed by all onboard. This harbour landing today, even under these conditions, still had me strive for that effect with power now all the way off and the welcome sound of gentle slapping water against the metal floats. Success!

“Well done, very nice!” David sighed.

“More fun coming my friend, this time it’s you who will save the day!” I smiled at him.

“What now?” he asked with a furrowed brow as we taxied forwards.

“Well, we still have no way of controlling this thing. The rudders are linked to the water-rudders which

steer us on the water!”

“Oh crap!” came the familiar response in a deep Scottish brogue.



Once you're on the water, the work is not done.

“I need you to exit the plane and crawl on your knees to the back of the float to push the rudder in the direction I yell out to you.” He laughed at the idea, removing his headset and starting to exit.

“Do me a favour David,” I said as he looked back at me. “Please don’t go for a swim because I won’t be able to come back for you; it’s only about 18 inches wide down there and to make it really interesting you now have an audience of several hundred people,” I said, pointing at the large cruise ship that had cast her lines. He rolled his eyes and headed aft, smiling in confidence as we both saw the humour of this insane method of getting back to the beach near the Hilton Hotel.

“Ready,” I heard his call.

“Push full left,” I yelled out of the open window of his door. The plane obeyed and turned around.

“Straight now!” I barked another command. Straight ahead we went. David was now on all fours facing backwards, recognising that he had full control of where we were going. We taxied across the waters of Nassau Harbour much to the amazement of hundreds of passengers watching from the deck railings of their ship as she passed behind us. They must have all been asking the same question: “what the hell was that crazy man doing on all fours on the float of a taxing seaplane?”

We approached the beach head-on and I pull the mixture to shut off fuel flow. The propeller suddenly stopped as we bumped gently onto the soft sand. Ignition and master switch turned off, I could hear clearly the instrument gyros spooling down from under the panel inside my cockpit.

“Good job crew!” I called back to my balancing passenger. Carrying small articles inside the passenger side float compartment needed for that quick fix was a necessary part of bush flying, and I soon found a small length of stainless safety-wire to repair the easily spotted culprit: a broken rudder turnbuckle that now fell limp under the rear of the plane.

Temporary fix in place, we restarted the engine and with both of us back inside we taxied eastward the full length of the harbour, pulling successfully onto my wooden ramp at the restaurant base I had rented since opening the Bahamas’ first commercial seaplane operation in 1990. We smiled at each other, shaking hands in a celebration of a good save—a very spooky situation that had a good ending. The ice cold beer found just a couple yards away went down very easily. David recalled in later years retelling that story several times in many bars around the world during his career. He exclaimed with glee in broad Scottish brogue, “I nay had ter embellish that tale wee one bit!”